A RECOGNITION OF BEING

Exploring Native Female Identity

by

Kim Anderson

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
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Department of Adult Education, Community Development and Counselling Psychology
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
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ABSTRACT

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This thesis explores the subject of Native female identity through interviews with twelve Native women in the Toronto area. The intent is to present a positive vision of Native womanhood in response to all the negative images that have plagued Native female identity since contact with the Europeans. To build this vision, the author sought out exemplary Native women and explored the following questions with them: How have Native women resisted negative definitions of identity?; How have they constructed positive alternatives?; What is the understanding of Native womanhood that emerges?; and How does this influence the conduct of Native women in their communities?. Traditions of gender equity in Native societies, and strategies of resistance to racist and sexist definitions of Native womanhood are presented as part of a literature review. The author approaches the work from a personal standpoint; that of a Native woman seeking information about her identity.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work owes its beginnings to a woman who told me her story of abuse during some interviews I was doing for Native Child and Family Services of Toronto. In sharing her story, she triggered a desire in me to know more about Native female identity. I wanted to learn and write about a magnificent Native womanhood, with the hopes that it might help to tear down the type of abuse and disrespect that woman had endured. This work is for her, and for all that her story represents.

The vision presented in this thesis is born of the strength, power and beauty of the women who agreed to be interview participants. To these trailblazer aunties and grannies I offer thanks, both as a researcher and as a Native woman seeking answers about her identity

My parents have also assisted greatly in the production of this thesis. They gave me life and raised me in a healthy way; they are thus, the preliminary support behind all my accomplishments. As grandparents they have been invaluable, going so far as to move from Ottawa to Toronto in order to look after my son while I completed my degree. Thanks, especially, to my mom for her skill and work as a copyeditor, and to my dad for cooking many meals in order to relieve me of those duties while I was writing.

None of my work would be accomplished without the support of my partner Dave, a helper in the truest sense. His support, both financial and emotional; his interest in my research; his encouragement of my growth as a writer; and his shouldering of the greater part of our shared (domestic) work at times during the preparation of this thesis have made it possible. Thanks to Rajan and Denia for being patient with mom while she worked on weekends, and to Dave for his loving support and care of the children at those times.

As a supervisor, Sherene Razack has guided this thesis in a caring and insightful way. I wish to thank her for all she has taught me, and especially for giving me the courage to see myself as a writer. Thanks to Helen Lenskyj for her input as a second reader, and to Barbara Burnaby for inviting me to OISE and for working with me on the preliminary stages of this piece.

I wish to acknowledge Edna Manitowabi and Sylvia Maracle for their role in my life as teachers. I am grateful to both of them for taking the time to advise me on this thesis in spite of the innumerable responsibilities they carry. Thanks to Bonita Lawrence for the many discussions that have helped me to move ahead on this work, for the friendship, the book borrowing, the help with references and ideas, and the overall encouragement.

Finally, thanks to Lynn Skotnitsky for taking time out of her work to proofread my thesis when it was all finished.

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

> The role of women? I would have difficulty with the word role, actually. More and more as I get older, I see this sort of *recognition of being* as more important than role.
> (research participant)

As indicated in the sub-title, this thesis explores contemporary Native[1] female identity. I took the main title "A Recognition of Being" from the words of one of the research participants. I feel that the phrase captures what I am striving for in writing this piece: that is, a vision; a recognition of the magnificence of Native womanhood as it is understood by Native women with a strong sense of identity.

As I will discuss in the thesis, documentation of such a vision is needed in the wake of all the negative images that have plagued Native identity. I believe that identity struggles underpin the reports we read on the suicides, incarceration rates, addictions, family violence, and other social problems in Native communities. In my opinion, positive identity development is critical to our survival because it influences every aspect of community development. If we are to look at rebuilding ourselves as peoples and nations, there is a particular need to look at the question of Native female identity. Sexism and racism have encouraged a negative definition of Native womanhood which beleaguers Native female individuals and impedes the healthy development of Native communities. I have therefore decided to work on Native female identity with the hope that it will encourage a place of esteem for the women among themselves and in both mainstream and Native societies.

[1] There are many terms to describe Indigenous peoples in Canada (Aboriginal, First Nations, Native, Indian, etc.). In this paper, I have mostly used "Native" simply because it is the term most often heard in the Native community in Toronto. I sometimes use the term "Indigenous" to indicate more general or global peoples, philosophies, and perspectives.

My motivation for exploring Native female identity stems from a commitment to community, but also from a personal journey. I originally came up with the idea for this thesis when I was doing some research with Native women who were being sexually abused. As I listened to their stories, I wondered if a powerful conceptualization of Native womanhood might help to stop this kind of violence and disrespect. Would it assist these women to resist abuse? These questions fed into my personal search to define myself as a woman. How do I understand and conduct myself outside of patriarchal and sexist notions of gender? How do I get away from a notion that equality means being the same as men? As a Native woman, how do I conduct myself, and how am I to be received in the Native community?

A look at the literature available on Native women further justified the kind of piece I wanted to do. In a consultation with an "auntie"[2] about my thesis topic, we stumbled upon a gap that I would like to fulfill for myself and others. This auntie said, "You don't often see love stories. That is; when you read our stories, what is there to love about being a Native woman?" There is a need to respond to the "more tragic the better" stories that Emma Laroque speaks of (1990 xvii). Stepping aside from such stories, (which are often produced for consumption by a non-Native audience), there is a legitimate body of work that has been done to document the horrors that Native women have endured and continue to endure. Without disregard to the significant contribution this kind of work makes to break down stereotypes and oppression, it does not fully satisfy my personal need and search for alternatives. Alternately, when Maria Campbell sets out to write her biography, a friend tells her to "make it a happy book" (1973, 9). Campbell declines, saying, "I only want to say this is what it was like. This is what it is still like" (ibid.). I wanted to write a story that was neither tragic nor happy; rather, a vision of strength; the flame that burns in the midst of oppression.

[2] The use of familial terms for people who are not blood relatives is common in the Native community. It reflects an understanding of all life in terms of relationships. I will therefore sometimes refer to the women I work with as aunties, grannies, and sisters, as this denotes their roles as teachers and relations (in the Native sense). I will henceforth remove the quotation marks when referring to these "relatives".

With this vision in mind, I decided to seek out knowledge about positive conceptualizations of Native womanhood by speaking to women within and around the Toronto Native community. There are a number of Native women I know who leave me elated and inspired each time I visit with them. I wanted to explore how they had developed such a strong sense of self, how they conceived of themselves as women, and how this affects their conduct in the Native community.

Whereas the interviews were casual and conversational in nature, they focused around the following questions:

> Native women have been represented in a negative way since contact with the Europeans. This has affected both how outsiders view Native women, and how Native women view themselves. What factors have been key in the struggle to resist these impressions, as exemplified by some Native women (i.e. yourself)? How have you and other women created a positive alternative? How has this process impacted on how a Native woman conceives of herself, and on how she conducts herself in her community?

I have constructed chapters IV and V out of the findings from these questions.

While working on the interviews, I wanted some background on the way Native women operated in traditional societies[3], and Chapter II contains my findings from the literature on this subject. To provide further background, I looked at strategies of resistance to negative identity as they are found in literature by and about Native women. I composed Chapter III out of this information.

[3] I will explore my notion of tradition on pages 51-57.

In writing this thesis, I have constructed a piece that deliberately highlights the security, composure, strength, joy, and wisdom that accompanies contemporary Native womanhood. It is my hope that through this work some of our sisters, daughters, and granddaughters will begin to *recognize their being* at an earlier age. Perhaps they will someday turn the stories of addictions, abuse from men, loss of children, disrespect from society, and internalized racism into stories of women well placed and recognized among themselves and within their communities. I do not intend to suggest that Native women are responsible for the sad stories; rather, that in sharing the "love stories" of our powerful aunties, grannies and sisters, we may create alternatives and begin to effect change from within.

This work is primarily a gift to Native women. It will also add to an evolving scholarly and popular body of work that is naming the poisons that have infiltrated Native womanhood, documenting Native female paths to resistance, and defining a positive Native female identity.

METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY

INDIGENOUS APPROACH

> "A good story," another man of the West asserted, " must have a beginning that rouses interest, a succession of events that is orderly and complete, a climax that forms the story's point, and an end that leaves the mind at rest."[1]
>
> No criteria other than those quoted here show a more thorough investment of the Western mind. Get *them* - children, story-believers - *at the start; make your point* by ordering events to a definite *climax*; *then round out to completion*; descend to a rapid close - not one, for example, that puzzles or keeps them puzzling over the story, but one that *leaves the mind at rest.* In other words, to be "good" a story must be built in conformity with the ready-made idea some people -- Western adults -- have of reality, that is to say, a set of prefabricated schemata (prefabricated by whom?) they value out of habit, conservatism, and ignorance (of other ways of telling and listening to stories) (Trinh 1989, 143).

While conscious of the fact that I must struggle with my western education, I have taken steps to write this thesis in a way that will help me in my journey as I creep towards understanding and reclaiming Indigenous ways to present information.

What is required in this chapter is an explanation of the ways in which I have approached and constructed the thesis. At first, I began to do so by listing all of the methods and techniques that I used. I soon found this both inadequate and flat as a way of explaining myself, the relationship I have to this work, and the way in which it was created. At the same time, my mind kept tumbling through various concepts of Indigenous knowledge and education. I wondered how they fit the work, or how the work fit these concepts.

[1] E.P. St. John in Horne , 26 (original footnote in Trinh 1989, 143).

Castellano[3]. As this is a document produced for a Western institution, I have drawn parallels to Western theoretical and technical practices where appropriate.

The wheel in Diagram 1 is a visual interpretation of my methodology. It illuminates how the core of my approach is translated into the methods and techniques that I used in constructing the thesis. In it, I have related the Western methods of research to characteristics of Indigenous knowledge. The way the wheel is presented, certain characteristics correspond to certain methods. I ask the reader to imagine further that each ring of the wheel may move independently of the others. Whereas I have linked "qualitative research" methods with the "oral", this particular method of research may easily spin around to correspond to "relational"; likewise, "participatory research" may feasibly be linked to the "personal", the "oral", and so on.

If the reader feels that her/his reading of my methodology story is not progressing in a fittingly linear fashion, I ask her or him to slow down; to wait and see that each part may be spun into the other; to examine the relationships between the categories I have imposed; and to feast on the whole and not the parts.

The chapter is thus shaped by six characteristics Brant Castellano identified as inherent to Aboriginal knowledge. Aboriginal knowledge, she said, is:

- oral
- experiential
- personal
- relational
- collective
- spiritual

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[2] I use the term "Aboriginal" here as this is what Brant Castellano used in her talk.
[3] Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, November, 1995.

Interview with assump. of some shared culture & goals
Structure thesis around my learning and approach
Subjectivist
Choose participants from my community
Base thesis in personal journey
Relational
Personal
Share transcripts & drafts; discuss & seek direction.
Participatory
Consult with women about need for project
Collective
Experiential
Ask women about life experiences
Feminist theory
Process knowl. as part of my experience
Spiritual
Oral
Start from vision & centering place within
Speak with women
Qualitative research
Listen to dream
Interview, transcribe, code and analyze

Oral

> Here I stand, my name is Jowett.
> There's no knowledge but I know it.
> I am the Master of this college
> And what I don't know isn't knowledge.
> Attributed to B. Jowett,
> former Master of Balliol
> (in Hall 1980, 29).

> Knowledge that is transmitted orally in the cultures of Aboriginal peoples must be acknowledged as a valuable research resource along with documentary and other sources. (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1993, 2).

In seeking knowledge about Native women, I had to consider *what* that knowledge is, and *where* to look for it. As a university student, what were my options in seeking out and presenting this knowledge? What would be appropriate for a Master's thesis?

I began with a conviction that Native knowledge must come from Native peoples. For too long, there has been an acceptance of knowledge generated by non-Native "experts" about Native peoples. The knowledge from within has been ignored or not considered valid. I believe that it is from within that we must look for information about Native peoples.

I am further conscious that the intellectuals, visionaries, and leaders that uphold the web of knowledge in our communities are not necessarily writers, readers, or academics. A lot of Aboriginal knowledge is not written down, and in spite of a growing population of Native writers and academics, there is still very little literature about, and particularly *by* Native women (as I will discuss on page 24-25).

On these reflections, it seemed obvious to me that the most appropriate way to gain understanding of the subject of Native female identity was to go and speak with Native women. I

understood this to be operating within Indigenous educational practice of transmitting knowledge orally. I therefore decided to base my thesis primarily on interviews with Native women, and to support the findings with literature in the area.

As I was to base my thesis on interviews, I turned to **qualitative research** theory and methods for assistance. Drawing on techniques found in Bogdan and Biklen (1982), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Kirby and McKenna (1989), Miles and Huberman (1980) and Tesch (1990), I set out to interview the women, transcribe their interviews, code, and analyze the data. I felt this was a good way to capture and present the oral knowledge of these women so as to satisfy the requirements of a scholarly study. A further description of the research participants, the interview process, and my analytical approach to the data will be offered in the introduction to Chapter 4.

Experiential

> ...I have frequently been referred to as a "prison expert". It is always necessary for me to qualify this statement, as I am an academic expert only. My knowledge comes from books and volunteer experiences within the criminal justice system. Within my culture, this does not make me an expert. I have never spent any time in jail as a prisoner and I cannot speak to that experience (Monture-Angus 1995, 30).

The learning process in Native communities is not necessarily tied to books and institutions: in the wake of traditional education systems that include "oral histories, teaching stories, ceremonies, apprenticeships, learning games, tutoring, and tag-along teaching" (Buffalohead in Hampton 1995, 8), experiential learning is recognized as a valid educational process. Cree professor Mary Ellen Turpel asserts that "Experience means more than degrees earned through organized education" (1993, 179). In the Native community, it is understood that we learn from our own experiences, and by listening to and observing the experiences of others.

In the interviews, I asked the women to speak about experiences or people in their lives that had made an impact on their identity as Native women. In addition to gaining an education from listening to their experiences, I was, simultaneously, participating in a similar type of experiential learning process. As a Native woman seeking information from others in my community, I was interacting with people who would impact on my identity development. Through the work I have done on this thesis, I have documented the experiential learning of the research participants, and have undergone a personal experiential learning process in working through issues about my identity.

This validation of personal experience may be related to **feminist theory** and practice in terms of research. Feminists debunk the myth of "objective" research, and validate a subjective, personal, and experiential approach to a topic. It is understood that research is grounded in the perspective and experience of the researcher; that the location of the knower informs the knowledge, and that this knowledge is valid (Harding 1987; Hess and Ferree 1987; Stanley and Wise 1983; Smith 1987). As a researcher for this project, I can work from my feelings and experiences, learn from them, and present the research from this position of subjectivity, emotionality and experience. It is from my experience, therefore, that the learning process takes place, and from my experience that the research is presented. Experiential learning and research that comes from this learning is, thus, closely tied into another characteristic of Aboriginal knowledge: the personal.

Personal

> As I have come to understand it from listening to the Elders and traditional teachers, the only person I can speak about is myself. That is how the Creator made all of us.... All I have to share with you is myself, my experience and how I have come to understand that experience. That is true even when you ask me to speak on a topic that is supposedly objective, such as the law.
>
> ...We can only experience the world through that prism of the self. This is one of the basic differences between two cultures, First Nations and Canadians, that I have

> experienced. In academic writing, the rule is that authors do *not* identify their voices...The knowledge is outside the self (Monture-Angus 1995, 45).

This thesis is a personal journey for me. As a Native woman, I am interested in finding out how other Native women have gained a positive sense of identity so that I may apply it to my own life. This self-reflexive process will allow me to "double understand"[4] some of the issues involved in constructing a positive Native womanhood; I will be able to look at it from both a personal and a research perspective. The framing of the questions, the analysis of the literature and the interviews, and the presentation of the findings all come from my personal subject position; that of a Native woman seeking clarification on her identity. I acknowledge the position of Joan Scott (1991); that my personal experience is the product of history and the discourses around identity that have emerged from particular historical experiences. I hope that I have exposed enough of my personal story, my biases, and my perspective on the discourses which influence Native identity (i.e. Christianity, revival of Native tradition, feminism, patriarchy, colonization) to enable the reader to proceed with an understanding of some of the elements that shape my experience and my approach to this work.

I have taken steps to construct the paper in a manner that will elucidate my subject position. I begin by speaking about my own identity, and the search that I have undertaken to define myself as a Native woman. I move on to a literature analysis, explaining to the reader that my intent is to share the background, biases, and approach that I take to the subject of Native female identity. I show how literature supports my approach, and in doing so, lead the reader through the map of literature that was utmost in my mind as I approached the data. I discuss my findings from the data and conclude the thesis by speaking about how this information and learning process is applicable to my life.

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[4] I have heard this phrase from Elders regarding the learning process. I quote from Patricia Monture-Angus, who has also called on this phrase: "My First Nations teachers have told me that I must double understand. It is not enough to get the knowledge into my head. Instead, I must also get the knowledge to my heart so that I will live what I have learned" (1995, 38).

As discussed in the previous section, this personal approach is tied in with feminist research. In other terms, looking at the **subjective-objective continuum** (Morgan and Smircich 1980, 492), I lean to the subjective. I make no secret of the fact that I am the primary vehicle through which the research speaks. I see the validity in constructing the thesis around personal issues because it is thus clear that I make no presumptions about being "objective" :

> This phenomenologically oriented perspective challenges the idea that there can be any form of "objective" knowledge that can be specified and transmitted in a tangible form, because the knowledge thus created is often no more than an expression of the manner in which the scientist as a human being has arbitrarily imposed a personal frame of reference on the world...(Morgan and Smircich ibid, 493).

I have constructed a piece that reflects my needs, my perspectives, and my values. While aware that the personal is the basis for the thesis, I have tried to construct it in such a way that it respects the relationships that have allowed it to come into being.

Relational

> Overall, the main thrust of all Aboriginal teachings and cultural philosophy is to help people to develop internal governance... These qualities of self-discipline and internal governance result from the development of one's ability to think, to reason, to discern the truth, and to make choices which are beneficial not only to the individual, but also to all life forms both in the present and up to seven generations ahead in the future... Aboriginal teachings inform people about the impact that they have on others and on the continuum of all life (Diane Hill 1995, 32).

Relationships are fundamentally important in Aboriginal world view. We exist because, and for the relationships we hold with everything around us. Knowledge is of no use if it does not serve relationships. This is significant in terms of the motivation I carry in writing the thesis. I see this work primarily as a gift to Aboriginal women. I hope that it will strengthen the web of knowledge about Native womanhood in such a way as to support and promote healthy Native women, families, communities and nations.

My reflections on relationships factored into my choice of research participants. When I set out to do this work, I felt a need to seek out participants who are well-known for their work with Native women. I considered looking nationally for these teachers. While I was still thinking about this, I had an experience which led me to the decision to interview local women that I already knew. A researcher from Pennsylvania, in Toronto for a few weeks, phoned to ask me if she could interview me for some work she was doing on Native women. What a shock for me to be the participant, as opposed to the researcher! Although I felt very uncomfortable doing so, I began by inquiring if this researcher was Native. When she responded "No", I told her that I needed to take a look at some of her work before consenting to an interview, as I have strong feelings about the politics of representing Native peoples. The researcher gave me her references and we parted ways.

After the phone call I struggled with my feelings about the situation. Was I being unfair? Racist? About a week later I found some answers at a conference entitled "Talking on the Page: Editing Oral Aboriginal Text".[5] As I listened to the various presenters talking about the long-term periods they have spent in the communities their work is based on, I realized what I had been responding to. It was not a question of race, but one of relationship. In this delicate climate of representing Native people[6], my conclusion is that there has to be some kind of relationship, and thus accountability established between researcher and research participant. It is not enough to arrive somewhere for two weeks, gather the information, and take it away again. This would be perpetuating the kind of research that has historically been done to and about, but not within and for a community of Native people. As a result, I decided that I was better off working with people that I will have some kind of long term community relationship with. In this way, my thesis will

[5] University of Toronto, November 15-16, 1996

[6] The question of who should write about Native peoples is significant, as Native people have traditionally been represented by outsiders. I discuss this question further in the "Use of Literature" section (page 22-31).

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> He seemed to be very annoyed by my questioning. I told him I had to ask all these questions because I wanted to find out all I could (Casteneda 1968, 65).

To check on all assumptions would be to delve into the world of stupid questions. Unlike Casteneda, there were things which the participants assumed I understood because of a shared relationship in a community. I was not prepared to engage in the following type of dialogue:

> [Casteneda]: "Did you say she is a blackbird? I mean, is she a bird?"
>
> [Don Juan] "There you go again with your questions. She is a blackbird..."

As a young Native woman seeking information from aunties and grannies, I was reluctant to clarify certain concepts simply because they might be unclear to the Western mind. If someone tells you, in the context of such a relationship, that they turned into an animal for a period of time, they assume that you share their understanding about what this means. Questioning of this nature only serves to inform ignorant outsiders, and to engage in this type of cross-examination is intrusive and a violation of relationship.

Because of our relationships, the participants often made assumptions about what I knew about them. At the end of her interview, one participant said to me:

> There are some very classic examples [of the Native female role in a contemporary urban context] that I don't have to give you, I think, because I think you live them. I think our involvement in [Native community agency] fulfills in us a need, the desire to contribute to our community.

This participant did not speak directly to examples of Native female conduct in the urban community as she assumed it is something I already understand by virtue of my community involvement. She further assumed that I was able to draw on knowledge about Native female

responsibilities from watching her participation in the community we share. The fact that I know and work with all the women I interviewed therefore impacted on what was shared, how it was shared, and the assumptions we made about one and other. Because of the nature of our relationships, we had some common ground and understandings from which the emerging knowledge was constructed.

Of course, there are many things that I do not share with the participants. Unlike all of the women I interviewed, I am a person of mixed race heritage, and I have never lived in a rural Native community[7]. I have not had the same struggles with racism that many of them described, nor have I been a direct victim of residential schools, the child welfare system, or other devastating state policies. I have not had the privilege to grow up around older Native people, nor have I had like access to their knowledge. I am younger than most of the participants; hence my conceptualization of them as aunties or grannies.

Our common ground lies in our mutual participation in the contemporary Native community in and around Toronto. In spite of my mixed background and removal from Native peoples as a child, I feel I now work as a *relation* in that community, where I share some history and a great deal of the commitment to the future.

Collective

> I do not claim to, nor attempt to, speak for all First Nations women. In fact, there is really no such thing as having the complete or final word when one is part of a community driven by the dialogue of oral tradition...One speaks only as another voice in an ongoing cycle of conversation (Turpel 1993, 179).

No individual owns knowledge, and I believe this thesis is the property not only of the women who were interviewed, but of their teachers, and the teachers before them as well. By the

[7] I consider myself to be living and working within an urban Native community (located within Toronto).

same token it is also the property of the women and men it will influence in the future. As a writer my job is to transport the knowledge; yet my perspective brushes and marks it as it moves along.

As such, the women represented here are neither research objects, nor subjects, but participants. This stands in defiance of the tendency to study Native peoples without any reverence to their needs or input. Because of this tendency, I tried to make this project as inclusive of the participants as possible. I began by asking Native women in the community, first, if they felt a need to explore such a topic. When I got to the interviews, I explained my reasons for doing the work, and asked for feedback. Each participant has been provided with a copy of the thesis proposal, and a pilot paper that I had written on Native female identity. Each participant received their transcript and was invited to change, delete, or modify anything they chose. As part of the ethical review process, each participant was made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Finally, each participant received a draft copy of the thesis, and was invited to share comments and suggestions.

I look upon the women who participated in this study as advisors and supervisors. Some have played that role more directly, meeting with me to give me feedback at various points. In addition to this, I sought out an Aboriginal woman (Edna Manitowabi) to be an official member of my thesis committee.[8] I have further consulted with Sylvia Maracle on the nature of the thesis, and she has reviewed it thoroughly and made suggestions. In including Native women in all stages of the construction of this thesis, from conception to final approval, I hoped to build collaborative research.[9]

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[8] Unfortunately, Edna is assigned the role of "non-voting member" by the Institute, as she is not OISE faculty, nor is she a member of the School of Graduate Studies. It should be noted that the degrees she holds are highly recognized within Aboriginal (Midewiwin) knowledge systems.

[9] Kirby and McKenna suggest some of the methods I have used to include collaborators (1989, 73).

In terms of western methodology, this collaborative approach could be seen as "**participatory research**":

> The determinants of participation in participatory research are three fold:
>
> 1. People's role in setting the agenda of inquiry,
> 2. People's participation in the data collection and analysis, and
> 3. People's control over the use of outcome and the whole process.
>
> Practice shows that different combinations of the three determinants have been employed. (Tandon 1988, 13)

Although I would not label this purely a participatory research project, it works within the philosophies therein; that the work must in some way come from, and also serve the people it is based on.[10] In terms of participatory research combining the activities of "research, education and action" (Hall 1993, xiv), it is my hope that this thesis educates not only myself, but also the women who have been involved in it as we work through these ideas in the interviews and conversations we share. The fact that we can share dialogue about these issues will hopefully lead to change:

> If there is any one methodological feature that distinguishes participatory research from other social research, it is dialogue. Through dialogue people come together and participate in all crucial aspects of investigation and collective action. This cannot be achieved through the exercise of merely answering questions in a conventional questionnaire or a formalized interview, because these techniques do not allow the respondent to speak in a full voice. Problems facing the poor and the powerless must be understood in the hearts and the guts as well as in the heads, and the people with the problems must talk to each other as whole persons with feelings and commitment as well as facts. (Park 1993, 12).

[10] It should be noted that these philosophies do not always result in equality in practice. Again, the relationship of the researcher to the interview participants is strategic. If the researcher comes from a dominant group, and the participant from a marginalized group, power dynamics will be inherent no matter what the technique. In the context of this thesis I hoped to avoid that pitfall as I see my interview participants as powerful teachers, and myself as a student within the community we share. I have also given the participants the opportunity to request changes to the text. Given their demonstrated ability to "speak up", I am confident they will make requests for changes as they feel necessary.

I hope that the research participants will share some of the ideas that we have explored with other Native women, and that some action in terms of the development of positive self-esteem and further resistance to negative images results.

Spiritual

> Aboriginal epistemology is grounded in the self, the spirit, the unknown. Understanding the universe must be grounded in the spirit...Ultimately it was in the self that Aboriginal people discovered great resources for coming to grips with life's mysteries. It was in the self that the richest source of information could be found by delving into the metaphysical and the nature and origin of knowledge. Aboriginal epistemology speaks of pondering great mysteries that lie no further than the self (Ermine 1995, 108).

In accordance with the assertion that "...traditional education from the moment of conception to beyond the moment of death, was learning the true nature of one's spirit" (Cajete 1994, 43), this work is the manifestation of both a personal and spiritual journey. Writing this thesis has been more than a mental, emotional or physical exercise. It has been a spiritual process that began in the "Centering Place", as described by Cajete:

> The Centering Place is where the soul and intention of the vision are formed. This is the place where the "soul of the dream is honoured". The intention is guided and energized by one's more innermost conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings (1994, 69-70).

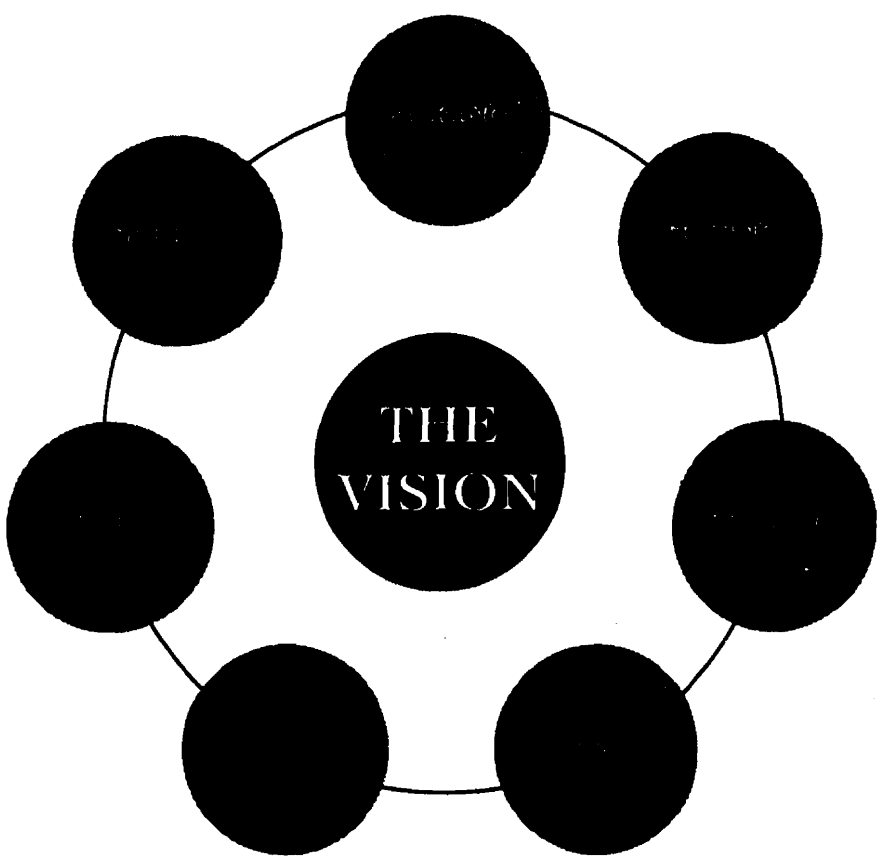
Reclaiming a lost heritage is definitely a spiritual experience. To do so one must look within, and to the spirit world. Through this subjective approach I have looked for answers to the outer reality around Native female identity. Willie Ermine describes this process as Aboriginal epistemology:

> ...Aboriginal people were on a valid search for subjective inner knowledge in order to arrive at insights into existence. What Aboriginals found in the exploration of the self became the basis of continued personal development and of Aboriginal epistemology....individuals and society can be transformed by identifying and reaffirming learning processes based on subjective experiences and introspection (1995, 102).

From the "Centering Place" within; from my initial motivation, I am progressing around Cajete's "Rings of Indigenous Visioning" (71): asking, seeking, making, having, sharing, celebrating, and being (see Diagram 2). I began by *asking*, and forming the question within myself, and from my experiences. I *sought* out the information that I knew I was missing; I did so through my relationships with other Native women. I *made*, or formed this information into something which was comprehensible and useful to me. I leave the thesis at the *having* stage; I am still learning about the vision and creation I have explored in this work, and about my responsibilities therein. I hope to do something with this work whereby the *sharing* can take place; where it can assist with the "life and spirit of the community" (Cajete 1994, 73). Then I will be ready to *celebrate*, and "*be*"; to find myself fully open to the illumination of the Centering Place (ibid.).

THE SPIRITUAL ECOLOGY OF INDIGENOUS EDUCATION

The Connected Rings of Indigenous Visioning



methodology

a recognition of being

I believe that we are at times provided with knowledge and guidance from the spirit world, and that one of the ways this occurs is through dream. I shall therefore conclude with a dream that I received part way through the writing of this thesis.

In my dream, I was participating in a woman's ritual of some sort. The women engaged in this ritual had to pass through an area that was like quicksand. This passing pulled and twisted us, and demanded that we use all our strength to not go under. Although I knew this passage was part of the ritual that was ultimately good for me, I went into it with fear and dread. I was with a friend, and felt that it was important that I pass through it for her.

The ritual took place in a city lot. Next to it there was an apartment building which was boarded up and separated off with a high fence. I was aware that men were not supposed to be party to this ritual, and so I kept looking out to see if there were men around. In a moment, I saw someone looking through one of the windows in the apartment building that had not been boarded up. I knew this man was harmful to my friend, that he had hurt her in some way, and that he intended to do so again.

I started yelling at this man, chiding him for how he had been abusive. I told him that, in spite of his abuses, our strength as women would prevail. He replied, "if you are so strong, come over here, then". I told him that I wasn't going to do that, because I knew he would beat me up; that rather than put myself in a position of jeopardy, I was going to walk away from him.

When I woke up from this dream, I knew that I was in some way being encouraged to continue with my thesis and my work with and for Native women. The dream assured me that I can be helpful to women who have been or are being abused. I understood from this dream that we are given things as women that are painful (such as childbirth), but that these things ultimately lend themselves to our strength and wisdom. I further recognized that women were *not* given

dominance or abuse from men as part of their life teachings, and that we do not have to prove our strength by engaging in battle with abusive men on their ramshackle turf. As Native women, we have been given ways of understanding, processing, and living this knowledge. I leave the reader to make whatever other conclusions s/he may devise from the dream.

USE OF LITERATURE

In addition to working this thesis out of interviews with Native women, I have used literature to help prepare the reader for the data analysis, and to support my findings.

I have tried as much as possible to reference literature written *by* Native women[11]. This is in response to the recurring position on the part of Native writers that Native peoples have been over-represented, misrepresented and appropriated on the page by outsiders (Acoose 1995 ch. 2; Damm 1993, 11; Laroque 1990, xvi.-xvii.; Maracle in Kelly 1994, 82; Lutz 1991, 4; Young-Ing 1993, 181). This has been a problem in particular for Native women as they have been represented in historical records, where they have either been erased, distorted, or subjected to the "princess-squaw" perversion under the pens of white men (Albers and Medicine 1983, 1-5; Allen 1986, 4, 42, 246; Klein and Ackerman 1995, 3-8; Green 1992, 14-16; Mankiller and Wallis 1993, 19).[12]

The decision to focus on literature by Native women is based in a resistance to the practice whereby non-Native people have always been the "experts" on Native people. Patricia Monture-Angus makes a valid point about how this occurs in the field of law:

> The great majority of Aboriginal law courses are offered by non-Aboriginal scholars who have developed an expertise in the area of Aboriginal rights as they are understood in Canadian law. I have often wondered how women professors would respond to the

[11] I have used some fiction and poetry in this work as it is a significant proportion of the published material by Native women. The greater part of my references are, however, essays, scholarly works, autobiography, and interviews.
[12] I will discuss this further in the section on "The Construction of a Negative Identity" (pages 42-51).

> suggestion that men can, could, and should teach courses about law and feminism. It is so apparent that this would create quite a controversy. But when non-Aboriginal people teach courses on Aboriginal people and how Canadian law is applied to our lives, this is somehow unrecognizable controversy (1995, 60).

It is true that we are so accustomed to accepting the opinions, studies, and research on Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people that we don't question this research. Often this is seen as more valid, somehow, than the words of Aboriginal people. I try to imagine a women's studies department filled with male faculty and fueled by men's writing. It is time to let Native people speak for themselves.

In spite of this position, I see the need for allies, and I believe that an analysis of what has happened to Native peoples in Canada is something that belongs to all Canadians. Lee Maracle discerns a need for non-Native people to write about Native people, but she makes it clear that it must be framed within the non-Native subject position:

> I hope some white people start making that [anti-racist] climb and start writing about the epidemics from the point of view of the person who watched us die. I hope they write about the effect that racism has had on them. I hope we're through with the kinds of novels that focus on writing about us from a distance and not about themselves from within their racial context, a white supremacist context. (1994, in Kelly 87).

Although this approach may be more easily accomplished in a work of fiction, it raises the question of "objectivity" in scholarship once again. This is useful for the reader who wanders into "Native Studies". As such a person, it was necessary for me to question: Who wrote this?; What were their values?; What was their understanding of women?; What was their relationship to Native people? These are not easy questions to answer[13], particularly in scholarly work where there is an expectation that the author remain hidden from the text[14].

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[13] I have indicated in the bibliography of the thesis whether the author is Native by inserting his or her nation. This is to affirm the validity of Native writers, and to assist the reader with an understanding of where the writer(s) are coming from, geographically and culturally. I apologize in advance if I have not recognized or have mis-named any of the Native authors. The spelling of nations may differ as I have tried to follow the particular spelling and definition that each author has used to describe him/ herself.

I called on a few factors to assist me in this task. In drawing on anthropological and historical works, I tried to use literature written within the last twenty-five years. I had been warned that, up until the 1960's most of what was written about Native women was framed within the princess-squaw mindset (Bataille and Sands, 1991, in preface). I looked for indications in the texts I was using that the authors were taking a definite stand against patriarchy, and that they displayed some consciousness of the genocide that state and church policies inflicted on Native peoples. I looked for contradictions in the texts that would indicate biases or impositions on the part of the authors. I considered the time period of the studies, and wondered how the cultures being written about had adopted and were manifesting internalized sexism or racism.

A good example of my approach to the literature is found in my analysis of Ruth Landes' *Ojibwa Woman* (1938). Although this book was originally written in 1938, (and therefore, not fitting with my criteria for more recent material), I felt I needed to look at it. Seven of the twelve research participants for my thesis are Ojibway, and there is very little written about Ojibway women.

A strong indication that this is not a reliable read came from Ojibway Elder and Professor Edna Manitowabi, who scoffed when I asked her about the work, and said that she "does not go near it" with her Aboriginal Women's Studies students. By this point, I had read enough of the book to have developed my own doubts. I was reading it in search of evidence of traditional gender equity and Ojibway understanding of women. Some of the information in the work was useful in this vein, but there were contradictory passages throughout. While many of Landes' findings concur with the arguments regarding gender equity in traditional Native societies: that divorce was common (85), that women deserted men from abusive marriages (100-103), that

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[14] Patricia Monture-Angus writes about this experience, and how it is in contradiction to Indigenous knowledge systems: "Once I wrote a piece on First Nations women and the violence many of us have experienced. When it came back from the editor, he had removed all of the pieces of "my" story and the "I's". He had created an academic piece for me and I think he felt very good because in his mind he had somehow elevated the status of my work. For me, I felt violated; the "me" had been stripped from my work... In my culture, not speaking from the "me" is a violation. The only true knowledge that I can have is that which is learned from what I have experienced. For First Nations, the rule is that all knowledge is what I have learned about the self (1995, 45).

women hunted and doctored as men did (135), that women acted as warriors (144) and shamans (158), that widows could support themselves rather than remarrying (168), Landes seems to seek out and present contradictory information to prove that Ojibway women were as oppressed, or more oppressed that non-Native women at the time. This contradictory evidence may be due to a few factors. It is possible that Landes was, in fact, recording the influx of Western patriarchal practices as they began to creep into Native society; that the contradictions in her book are therefore reflective of changing worldviews as one culture moved in on the other. It is, moreover, quite likely that Landes was interpreting Ojibway society from a Western patriarchal framework, and that she therefore misunderstood some of the practices she witnessed.

When I consider the work in terms of author agenda, it seems to me that Landes' was determined to show how the Ojibway women were oppressed with comparison to Ojibway men. Landes explains that the puberty ceremony for boys and girls is the difference between "a striving for broader horizons" for the male and a "conscious withdrawal from her malignant self" for the female (5). She tells horrible stories of rape (31-35), drunken sex orgies involving alcohol (49) (a definite link to ugly behaviour learned from the colonizer), and how women and children are shamed as a result of illegitimate children (46). She attempts to prove that Ojibway women's work is not as valued as men's work (131). She concludes:

> ... If men are considered inheritors of the culture's wealth, women are the dispossessed and underprivileged; if men are the material selected arbitrarily to be the finest medium for the expression of Ojibwa ideas, women are second-rate, or perhaps reserve material (177).

I am not certain that, traditionally, Native societies achieved an uncomplicated and complete gender equity. Yet, upon studying traditions of gender equity for this paper, and in talking to Ojibway women, I can conclude that the kind of patriarchy described by Landes in *Ojibwa Woman*

is undoubtedly more of a reflection of her culture than that of the Ojibwa culture she purports to represent.

Finally, in consideration of the significance of relationships as explained on pages 14-18 of this chapter, I am skeptical when I read that Landes' analysis is the result of several *months* of [field] work in the Ojibway community (vii). How does this compare to a lifetime of lived experience?

Although I have advocated the use of Native writers over non-Native writers, I must stress that the existence of internalized sexism and racism must be considered when reading the works of Native writers as well. Somer Brodribb has demonstrated that contemporary Native views can often be contradictory with regards to the traditional status of women (1984, 91-92). One must therefore also exercise judgment when using the work of Native women. I have used many autobiographical works for this thesis, and will draw on a few examples here to show how I encountered this problem.

I was grateful to find the biography of Verna Patronella Johnson, an Ojibwa woman who has had a significant impact on my (Toronto) Native community. Yet in using this material, I needed to find a way to navigate through some of Johnson's comments, including the following:

> All those old Indians thought that a woman was only good for hard work and having babies. Women don't have any rights whatever, to handle money, to own property, to make decisions. They are completely dominated by the man (1977 in Vanderburgh, 96).
>
> In our old tradition, women had no value at all. An Ojibwa man could divorce his wife simply by putting her out and making a public statement that he was no longer married to her (ibid 161-162).
>
> They [Ojibwa men] have very definite ideas on women's place. It has changed since I was a young wife, but actually after I got married I was a possession. Not a partner, but a possession! He owned me. And when we had company I wasn't to talk to them or anything, unless I had permission from him to express my opinions. Women didn't know

> anything! And women didn't know how to handle money! Indian men never gave their wives an allowance because they figured women didn't know anything about handling money (ibid 162). [15]

My initial response was to interpret such comments as reflective of an author and a culture that is heavily burdened by Christianity, as is evident by the references to the church that prevail throughout the book. If these situations of abuse and dominance sound familiar, it is because they are embedded within the sexism that is so commonly known to the mainstream. They contradict many of the findings I made when exploring other literature about gender equity in traditional Native societies. In terms of internalized sexism, I say "You've come a long way baby" to the Native men who have strayed from the understanding of women as property owners and decision makers in both the public and the private (including divorce).

As this is a biography, constructed by Rosamund Vanderbugh, the text is further confounded by pat, dichotomous notions of identity (Native/White) and interpretations of Johnson's struggle for liberation. When Johnson leaves her husband and seeks employment in the city, this is explained by Vanderburgh as an expression of the "white" part of Johnson's mixed heritage (in opposition to the Native part, which would entail staying on the reserve to play mother and housewife) (ibid, 217-219). Alternatively read, I have used this book as an example of resistance on the part of a Native woman who is reclaiming traditional responsibilities of nurturer, caregiver, and activist.

Another clear example of internalized colonial attitudes is the autobiography of Mourning Dove (1990). According to Mourning Dove:

> It is an accepted fact that the woman in Indian life was never up to standards equal to those of a man. Whether this originated during the caveman period or was a natural

[15] I wish to note that these remarks do not reflect the greater experience of Johnson, who rose above her oppression to become a powerful player in both her reserve community and in the Native community of Toronto.

> consequence of the greater strength of the man, I leave the reader to decide (Mourning Dove and Miller 1990, 34).

Indeed, the reader has some decisions to make. Many of the findings in this autobiography would point to an oppression of the Okanagan woman: that she was the slave and drudge of the household (60-69); that illegitimate children were expected to lead an unhappy life (75); that women were considered "contaminated" during pregnancy and childbirth (101, 118). A closer look will also indicate that women had great strength and respect in traditional society, and that this was eroded by the church. The text is useful when the reader can begin to see how Mourning Dove has internalized many attitudes of the colonizer Christians. When talking about the public whipping of adulterous women -- a practice brought in by fanatical Christian chiefs -- Mourning Dove concludes that stopping this punishment had a bad effect: "women got too free" (112).

The footnotes in this text show that not all women were as accepting of this kind of behaviour; Mourning Dove's mother was operating in a very different fashion. She leaves the community, with her husband and children, because of the whipping practice of the "church police" (tribesmen appointed by early Jesuits to maintain strict adherence to Catholic doctrine and Victorian morals) (215). When we read of Mourning Dove's mother trapping and digging for roots in a time of famine in the absence of her father (162), refusing to accept her allotment for land (183), and being critical of children reading the Westerners' books (186), we know that some women were able to draw on tradition in a way that resisted the colonizer's imposed sexist role for women.

Finally, the editor of this autobiography assists by cautioning that Mourning Dove's work is steeped in Catholicism (xxix-xxxi). He states that many "traditional" Native traits were invented (based in the military, and Judeo-Christian) to please a white audience (xxxiv). I was further alerted to the many contradictions in this work when I compared it with the depiction of gender

equity in Plateau cultures as described by Lillian Ackerman (1995; 1987). With these precautions, I have used some of the material in Mourning Dove's autobiography.

Another genre of literature that I needed to approach with caution were anthologies of interviews by Native women and Elders. I was interested in using material from anthologies, as it seemed to me an appropriate way to access the words of Native women directly. To show how this can be problematic, I will discuss two specific anthologies here: *Wisdom's Daughters: Conversations with Women Elders of Native America* (Wall 1993) and *Messengers of the Wind: Native American Women Tell Their Life Stories* (Katz 1995). My concerns address the areas of relationship, research methodology, and editing techniques.

I will begin by noting that the editors of both of these collections are non-Native. This is problematic insofar as Native people have identified that they have difficulties in accessing publishing grants and opportunities (Young-Ing 1993). In terms of voice, one wonders how a collection about women (*Wisdom's Daughters*) can go unquestioned when edited by a man. These concerns aside, I would like to focus on the approach taken by these editors.

Whereas some might interpret Steve Wall's enthusiasm for the wisdom of Native women as a positive affirmation of an ally, it turned sour on me as I glanced through his preface. I felt violated by Wall's explanation of himself as a "journeyer, a crosser of boundaries":

> In my crossing of two boundaries at once, the gulf between man and woman and the boundary from white to red, I have finally traversed frontiers from which there is no return, for I have learned, much to my surprise, more about being male than being female and more of what it means to be white than Indian (xii)[17].

[17] Perhaps, to Wall's credit, he admits to learning more about his own subject position than that of Native women. Yet who gains, and why should it be a surprise to him that the process of writing this book is more about his self-discovery?

What better example of a modern day colonial process could there be? The white, male "journeyer" seeks to cross the "frontier" as represented by Native women. He sets out, he states, "looking for secrets" (ibid.). Colonial exotica springs to mind, the erotic therein corroborated by a description in the preceding section of an experience where he is sexually aroused by the mystical workings of an elder. The "secrets", which turn out to be "open, freely given truth", he finds transforming. Note that, in true colonial style, the transformation made available through engaging with Native peoples is ultimately to the benefit of his white, male self . The shameless manifest destiny of this editor is apparent in his final comments:

> Now the work continues. I find myself off the Andes seeking the way of the condor among the indigenous people of South America. More journeys to make, more boundaries to cross (xiii).

To this I would add: *More cultures to appropriate, more "Others" to consume*[18].

My concerns with *Messengers of the Wind: Native American Women Tell Their Life Stories* (Katz 1995) -- already lurking because of the issues previously mentioned -- were heightened during a workshop I attended with Menominee poet, Chrystos[19]. In offering advice to younger poets, Chrystos told us: "Be very careful about who you allow to interview you". I listened intently, and even more so when she then began to talk about her experience with Jane Katz by way of example! Chrystos, one of the interviewees in Katz's *Messengers of the Wind*, told us that she spent "about five hours" talking with Katz about politics, involvement with Native people in the

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[18] This "eating the Other" syndrome (hooks 1992, 21-39) is prevalent in a lot of writing about Native peoples, and has been a factor in my decisions about what to avoid in terms of literature. For example, in the author biography of *Women of the Apache Nation* (Stockel 1991) we read that the author has been "fascinated with Apache culture since her youth". We flip to the forward, written by someone named "Dan Thrapp". It describes how the (white) author was at first shunned by the Apache women she wanted to interview, but how she overcame this. Thrapp describes a scene from Stockel's concluding chapter in which she dons a shawl and participates in a traditional Apache dance. She states "At long last, I felt part of the ancient, sacred ceremony", to which Thrapp adds:

> Finally, she *was* Apache. The triumph of her study, the conclusion of her research, the end of her pilgrimage. She had *arrived* -- and the account of it all is in this remarkable book. (emphasis added) (xv).

At this point, I shut the book and returned it to the shelf.

[19] sponsored by "Native Women in the Arts" and held at First Nations House, University of Toronto, March 22, 1997.

prisons, and other issues which she considers critical. She was therefore displeased to find, (when she first saw the material in the already published book), that Katz had given emphasis to the short part of the interview in which Chrystos spoke of her family and the dysfunction therein. Chrystos added: "Don't you notice how all of the women in the book kind of sound the same?" This made me wonder how Katz had edited the words of these women, and for whom was this done? What stereotypes does the book engage in and perpetuate?

Steeped as I am in an awareness of the ethical responsibility to share transcripts; to allow interviewees to edit, change or add material to their words; and to show the participants what will be written about them prior to publication, I was shocked that this academic and editor had published without adhering to any of these principles[20]: Chrystos had not seen this material prior to publication. This knowledge made me question the validity of some of the text. As is clear in the case of Chrystos, the words in this book may not represent exactly what the participant wished to convey. I must therefore be aware that the published material that I am using may be considered an insignificant, unnecessary or inappropriate part of an interview on the part of the participants.

The reader will note that I have used the Wall and Katz anthologies, and that I have used many other texts that may raise questions similar to those that have been discussed in this section. I would like to point out that the kind of critical analysis applied to the texts mentioned here must be applied to all texts used in this thesis, including those texts which have served as principal references. As an editor and a writer, I am further aware that this work must necessarily represent my biases and attitudes. I have taken precautions to include the interview participants as much as possible, but my interpretation of the literature goes unchecked by the authors I have

[20] My expectation with regard to these principles is based in feminist research theory and practices. As is evident in this case, the principles I refer to are not universal in academic (or popular) research.

used.[21] I would like to conclude this chapter, therefore, by reminding the reader of her or his responsibility.

READER RESPONSE-ABILITY

As a precaution against this work contributing to further mis-representation of Native peoples, I ask that the reader consider their "Response-Ability." I am indebted to Ojibway poet and professor Kimberly Blaeser for introducing me to this concept. In her presentation at the conference "Talking on the Page: Editing Oral Aboriginal Text"[22], Blaeser talked about the reader's responsibility to respond to the text. She pointed out that the way any text is read depends on the ability of the reader to respond to it. She related this to traditional oral practices in Native cultures, where it is assumed that the listener has as much a part in the creation of the story as the teller. In this way, the listener also carries responsibility for the knowledge that is transmitted.

I see the value in this concept because one of the goals of this thesis is to create alternatives to the negative stereotypes of Native women as they have appeared in print. I have a job to do in writing a text that hopefully will deconstruct some of these stereotypes, but the reader also has a job in this regard. Before she or he engages in the text, I ask of them: What is your ability to respond to literature written about (and by) Native women? What kind of education and experience do you bring to this text? This is not to suggest that the reader needs to be well versed in Native women's issues before approaching the work. It demands, simply, that the reader examine his or her own assumptions, and approach the text accordingly.

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[21] In chapter three I provide the reader with a sense of my subject position, biases, and approaches to assist with a critical reading of my work.
[22] University of Toronto, November 15-16, 1996

Paula Gunn Allen provides an example of discrepancy in the ability of the reader to respond. She offers a traditional story as told by a Keres man, and then presents two different interpretations of it: one from a mainstream feminist perspective and an alternative from a "feminist-tribal interpretation" (1986, 234-240). In the first interpretation, the women in the story seem greatly oppressed, in the latter, the story is clearly a demonstration of the central role that women play in tribal life. The location of the reader thus shapes the interpretation of the story greatly, and in this case can foster ideas about the place of Native women that are unfounded.

When I was doing the preliminary round of interviews for this thesis, one of the women made a comment about her "text" that serves as another example here. She had just told me a lengthy story of how she received her "Indian name"[23]. She had been in a tipi where the spirits had visited, and she compared it to a shaking tent ceremony. When she finished her story she said, "...but you would never tell that story to a white person, because they would say 'Oh, it was just the wind,' or whatever." In saying this, she acknowledged that I had the ability to respond to her story, but that others may not. It may be that she felt that the ability of the "white" mind to respond to her story is limited by a general rejection of belief in the spirits, the intrusion of science and empirical thinking, and ethnocentrism. In any case, it is apparent that she feels this story would be mis-understood regardless of presentation.

I would not ask that anyone suspend their own frame of reference. I merely caution the reader to acknowledge their personal ability to respond, and ask that they resist the temptation to "claim" the text.

From here, we can move together through the material.

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[23] In many Native traditions, individuals receive an "Indian name" as well as an English name. The Indian name, given in their Native language, reflects a role, responsibilities, and an identity for that person. It is who the person is in spirit.

BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

BACKGROUND & APPROACH

I have argued in the previous chapter that it is important for the reader to consider the position of the writer in terms of the writer's personal experience, worldview, and approach to the subject of their writing. This will inevitably help the reader with their response-ability; in having a sense of who the writer is as well as considering their own background as reader, s/he will be more prepared to actively engage with the text. I have further indicated that according to Indigenous educational processes, knowledge is characterized by the personal. With these deliberations, I feel it is necessary to begin with an explanation of my background and of my primary understanding of issues involved in Native female identity formation.

This chapter begins with a brief description of my personal life insofar as it has influenced my approach to the subject of Native female identity. I then discuss the necessity for positive Native identity, with a focus on the damage created to Native female identity through negative images. I assert my belief that work on Native identity must include looking to the past and tradition, and I talk about how I see the role of tradition and culture in this regard. With the assumption that Native people must look to the past to build the future, I conclude the chapter with what I found when I went looking in the literature for evidence of gender equity and traditional Native female roles. I discuss how this knowledge of traditional roles can contribute to positive Native female identity.

In going through this chapter, the reader hopefully will get a sense of what was on my mind as I approached, organized and analyzed the interviews.

PERSONAL JOURNEY

My motivation to study Native female identity is embedded in a personal journey. Like many Native people, I struggle with my identity. I currently define myself as a Cree/Metis woman; this the result of a painful and difficult process.[1] Although I may rest comfortably with this label indefinitely, my self-identity is continually evolving, and it is this search that drives my thesis.

So who am I?

My mother is a white woman of predominantly English Protestant ancestry, raised in Vancouver in an upper-middle class family that is several generations Canadian. My father's parents were both of mixed Cree and Scottish ancestry[2]. He was raised in a working class family in Portage la Prairie, Manitoba. My parents met and married in Ghana, and then raised my brother and me in a white middle class neighbourhood in a rural area outside of Ottawa.

As a child, I acknowledged the fact that "my dad is an Indian" without ever really thinking about what that meant. I went to a country school where everyone was white. People of non-Euro-Canadian, non-Christian races and cultures were marginal to our thinking. I transferred to the city for high school but there was similarly no acknowledgment or consciousness of race and culture in that setting. In my early school and community experience, therefore, I had no contact with Native people other than with my father's extended family (the two siblings who lived in town and the others who made periodic visits from western Canada).

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[1] Identity language is complex and constantly changing for Native peoples because it is so politically and emotionally loaded. I have chosen to use the combined Cree/ Metis label for a number of reasons. I am Metis as my father is of the Metis people in Manitoba. I am also Metis in the sense that I am a mixed blood person, and I wish to acknowledge my mother's non-Native tradition. I further define myself as Cree as I believe it important to signify the tribal and national foundations of one's Native ancestry.

[2] My family also has some French and Saulteaux ancestors.

I was 19 and living in Montreal when, one day, I found myself sobbing irrepressibly after getting into an argument with one of my university classmates about the Native characters in *The Diviners* (Laurence 1974). I was as surprised as my classmate to discover this eruption of profound sadness from within. This incident marked the beginning of a recognition that there were issues about my identity I needed to resolve. I began by sharing this sadness with my brother, and over the course of the following year we both began to seek out Native people through community organizations in Toronto (where we had moved).

I have now lived in Toronto for thirteen years, and in that time I have shaped a consciousness of myself as a Native person through my involvement in the Native community here. I have come to recognize and appreciate the beauty and wisdom of Native culture and tradition; I have embraced much of this as my own in a conscious act of reclaiming what was stripped away over several generations from my father's family. This could be interpreted as an act of resistance against the product of assimilation I had become: an urban, middle class individual steeped in Euro-Canadian culture, and dispossessed of my Native heritage, history, language and culture.

Dealing with my class privilege has been a difficult part of reclaiming my Native heritage in the sense that it separates me from many Native people in terms of lived experience[3]. In thinking about how I landed where I did, I was struck by a quote from Mary Crow Dog. She writes about the reasons behind her grandmother's decision to keep Sioux language and culture from the children, illuminating the way in which class articulates with decisions around identity:

> She thought it was helping me by not teaching me Indian ways. Her being staunch Catholic also had something to do with it. The Missionaries had always been repeating over and over again: "*You must kill the Indian in order to save the man*". This was part of trying to escape the hard life. The missions, going to Church, dressing and behaving like a wasicun -- that for her was the key which would magically unlock the door leading to

[3] The dialogue in Johnson et. al. (1993) provides an interesting example of Native and non-Native women trying to deal with feelings around class and their upward mobility.

> the good life, the white life with a white painted cottage, and a carpet on the floor, a shiny car in the garage, and an industrious, necktie-wearing husband who was not a wino (1990, 23).

Many of the former generations resolved to abandon their "Indian ways" and identity in order to find a way out of the poverty and racism that Native peoples experience (Barbara-Helen Hill 1995, 12; Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra 1989, 18). For Crow Dog, this strategy did not work, as she says, "it would not change the shape of my cheekbones, or the slant of my eyes, the colour of my hair, or the feelings inside me" (ibid., 23). For people of mixed ancestry, and the succeeding generations completely removed from a Native context, class mobility may be more accessible.[4]

There are many factors at work in determining the life paths of Native individuals. Like Crow Dog's Grandmother, my parents and grandparents worked hard and made decisions in order to secure a good life for me, for which I am always mindful and thankful. I am also mindful that they were not, for instance, among the equally loving, hardworking, and skillful parents and grandparents for whom assimilation policies had crushing effects; most notably, their children were stolen and placed in foster homes and residential schools[5]. Because of such policies, systemic racism, and an overall direction on the part of Euro-Canada to *kill the Indian*, many individuals, families and communities have been robbed not only of their culture, but also of their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being for generations to come. I have come to realize that, although I can do without the shiny car and the necktie-wearing husband, I am grateful that I do not have a lived experience of racism, poverty, abuse, or family breakdown. This is something that no Native person need have inherited.

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[4] I would add that gender also factors into class mobility, as it has in my immediate family: the men of my father's generation (and, by extension, their children) have been more successful at moving into the middle classes.

[5] For history and analysis of the effects of the child welfare system on Native people see Johnson 1983; McKenzie and Hudson 1985; and Monture 1995, 191-215. The effects of residential school are well documented in Assembly of First Nations 1994; Hill (Barbara-Helen) (1995) 21-28, Haig-Brown 1988; Jaine 1993.

Whereas our life situations may differ dramatically, what I share with all Native peoples is a history determined by state sanctioned assimilationist policies and genocidal attack. In spite of the smooth path that I have been given, I share the need to reclaim my Native heritage. In finding solace, acceptance and solidarity among the urban Native population I have found my place among a large community of people engaged in a healing process that revolves around reclaiming and defining a Native identity[6].

Until recently, my approach to gender was on a separate course from my struggle with race and culture. My consciousness of the oppression of women came at puberty, a time when I began to recognize and experience threats of sexual harassment and violence from men. Rather than the sadness I felt about race, my primary emotions around gender were those of anger and fear. It was the anger that gradually drove me to become more analytical about the oppressive experiences of women in general.

I have begun to think about Native womanhood in recent years for a number of reasons. First, in the process of embracing Native culture and community, I have been troubled by the sexism that is as alive in "Indian country" as it is elsewhere. In light of the many positive aspects of Native culture, how is it that women are generally so poorly situated within their societies? My community work in child welfare has further provided me a glimpse of the kind of dire situations that many Native women face; the struggles that are reflected in the statistics placing Native women at the bottom of the Canadian socio-economic hierarchy.[7]

Whereas these inequities exist for Native women, I have discovered in the course of exploring my own race and gender that there is a great strength in Native womanhood that exists

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[6] At the same time, as a person of mixed blood ancestry, I must seek ways to honour and nourish the Euro-Canadian person that I also am.

[7] Along with many other Native women, this statistic does not reflect my situation. I concur with Satzewich and Wotherspoon (1993) that the experiences of Native people are multifaceted (100), and that the interaction between class, gender and race with regards to Aboriginal peoples warrants further research (264).

in spite of the oppression. I can see that Native culture and tradition has many answers for gender equity, and that many Native people are already operating in this manner.

Finally, the learning and inspiration I take from Native tradition has intensified recently as a result of becoming a mother. This distinctly female experience has led me to reflect on the way in which Native culture maintains separate teachings, responsibilities and roles for women and men. My discovery of the "ideology of motherhood"[8] in Native cultures has coincided with my own current experience, and has given me strength and vision in that regard. I will speak to this, and to the impact overall of my findings on my personal life in the concluding chapter.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF A NEGATIVE IDENTITY

By way of offering a glimpse at my personal identity search, I have already introduced the reader to some core issues around Native female identity. When people are dispossessed of their culture (and thus an understanding of who they are), a gap emerges. People become confused; and whereas some Native people have maintained a strong and secure understanding of themselves founded in Native culture and tradition, many find themselves in a state of wandering and wondering, scrambling to put pieces of themselves in place. The social ills that can result from this struggle factor into the reports we hear about suicides, incarceration rates, addictions, family violence, child abuse and other problems. Upon considering all of the related problems, it is easy to conclude that identity impacts on every aspect of Native community development.

The devastation linked to identity confusion is the result of a twofold process: (1) people are dispossessed of their culture; (2) this gap is then stuffed with negative images and with cultural values and institutions that encourage the people to see themselves in the most hateful way. I will begin by looking at the construction of a negative Native female identity through images

[8] A term used by Fiske 1993.

and stereotypes, and then address the impact of colonizer cultural values and institutions on traditions of gender equity.

Images and Stereotypes

> The needs of Native people for safety, belonging, and feeling good about themselves are denied because of the negative stereotypes that are prevalent. These negative images are perpetuated in history books, movies, religious paintings of "savages and pagans" and the racist remarks -- both obvious and elusive. These messages impact our thinking and self-concept and our identity as Native people. We question our original forms of existence and the entire form of existence enters a state of "anomie" (Barbara-Helen Hill 1995, 11).

In her book, *Shaking the Rattle: Healing the Trauma of Colonization* (1995), Barbara-Helen Hill clearly demonstrates how negative self-concept can result in internalized racism, which then spreads like a disease through Native communities (45). Native people begin to doubt the validity of existence of their people, and thus themselves. This results in self-destructive behaviours.

What is the effect of negative images on Native women? Janice Acoose speaks about her encounters with these images through the school system:

> ...I learned to passively accept and internalize the easy squaw, Indian-whore, dirty Indian, and drunken Indian stereotypes that subsequently imprisoned me, and all Indigenous peoples, regardless of our historical, economic, cultural, spiritual, political, and geographical differences... I shamefully turned away from my history and cultural roots, becoming, to a certain extent, what was encouraged by the ideological collusiveness of textbooks, and the ignorant comments and peer pressure from non-Indigenous students (1995, 9).

Joanne Arnott (1995, 76), Beth Brant (1994, 113, 119-10), Maria Campbell (1973, 47, 90), Janet Campbell Hale (1993, 139-140), Beatrice Culleton (1983, 48-49), Paula Gunn Allen (1986, 48-49), Lee Maracle (1996, 14-19), and Anna Lee Walters (199, 5) also provide accounts of how they or other Native women have fostered destructive and hateful attitudes towards themselves at one time as a result of internalized racism. It is important to note that the racism these women face is

laced with another sickness: sexism. How have these two destructive forces been woven together into popular imagery, and what is the impact?

Pathology of a Negative Native Female Image

Since contact, Native female identity has been subjected to the sexist and racist interpretations of the colonizer. The Native female image was consistently constructed to serve the needs of the time.

Cherokee scholar Rayna Green has documented the creation of the "Indian Queen" as an interpretive tool in the discovery of the "New World":

> Artists, explorers, writers and political leaders found the Indian as they cast about for some symbol with which to identity this earthly, frightening, and beautiful paradise... (1984, 19).

At first, the Native woman is politically symbolic. She is useful as a metaphor for the "wealth and danger of the New World" while embodying the virtues of classical Europe (ibid.):

> Thus the Indian woman began her symbolic life as a Mother figure -- exotic, powerful, dangerous, and beautiful -- and as a representative both of American liberty and European classical virtue (ibid.).

By degrees, the Native woman becomes more sexualized, and the "Indian Princess" is born. As is evident by studying colonial attitudes around the world, the imperial male mind saw Indigenous women from the beginning as the virgin frontier, the pure border waiting to be crossed (McClintock, 1995, 5). The enormous popularity of the Princess thus lies within her erotic appeal for the covetous imperial male wishing to claim the "new" territory.

The equation of Indigenous woman with virgin land, open for consumption, has created a Native female archetype which, as Elizabeth Cook-Lynn points out, is then "used for the colonizer's pleasure and profit" (1996, 145). The "Mother Earth" metaphor is twisted to perpetuate the female as receptacle; it encourages the erasure of Indigenous maleness in order to position Indigenous women as "the willing and cooperating recipient of the colonist's seed" and the "lone repositor of culture" (ibid., 147).

It is important to note that the erotic appeal to conquer the "new" territory/female persists to this day. This is pointed out by Haunani-Kay Trask in her discussion about the prostitution of Hawaiian culture via tourism:

> Above all, Hawaii is "she", the Western image of the Native "female" in her magical allure. And if luck prevails, some of "her" will rub off on you, the visitor.
>
> This fictional Hawaii comes out of the depths of Western sexual sickness which demands a dark, sin-free Native for instant gratification between imperialist wars (180).

Trask concludes: "...Hawaii, like a lovely woman, is there for the taking.(194).

One need only to glance at posters of Walt Disney's *Pocahontas* to be confronted with another contemporary example of this archetype. We see a voluptuous, yet innocent looking Native (but not too Native) "girl", soon to be crossed by an adventurous young white male. This story has been told again and again throughout North American his-story. Likewise, the second most popular Native female in his-story is Sacajewea: the Native woman who led Lewis and Clarke into the interior of the continent. Whereas it may be possible to interpret characters like Pocahontas, Sacajewea and Nancy Ward as strong Native women who exemplify the respected position of women of their traditions (Brant 1994 83-103; Kidwell 1992), the mainstream

interpretation and subsequent message is clear: Native women (and by association, the land) are "easy, available, and willing" for the white man (Cook-Lynn 1996, 106).[9]

As with other colonial his-stories, once Indigenous peoples began to resist the colonial processes, the archetypes changed. Indigenous women worldwide became symbols of the soiled underbelly of the troublesome colonies (McClintock 1995). In the Americas, the squaw emerged.

Carol Douglas Sparks traces the evolution of princess-to-squaw in colonizer accounts of the Navajo (1995). The virgin-princess, so commonly found in white male adventurer records of the nineteenth century, is soon transformed. Whereas the princess held erotic appeal for the covetous imperial male wishing to claim the "new" territory, the squaw drudge further justifies the conquest of an uncivilized terrain:

> ...Americans found squaw drudges far more comfortable than these outspoken and powerful women, whose presence defied colonial rationalizations. Not only could the squaw be pitied, but her very existence justified American intrusion into her land and society. (Sparks, 147).

In addition to assisting with the ideology and imagery that Native peoples were savages in need of "civilization", the squaw drudge offered a counterpart to the princess; and thus an opportunity for the colonizer to impose a dichotomous world view that could be used to their advantage. Janice Acoose writes about how the binary opposites of "good" and "bad" were applied:

> In the historical context, Indigenous women were stereotyped as good when european[10] interests were furthered by some sort of liaison. Before a so-called "good" christian whiteman could have relations with an "Indian" woman, however, she had to be elevated

[9] This stereotype of Native woman as frontier is perpetuated in contemporary writing, as I have demonstrated in my critique of Wall (page 31-32). See also Somer Brodribb's criticism of *Daughters of the Country* (1968) in Brodribb 1984, 93.

[10] The use of small case lettering here and elsewhere is intentional on the part of Acoose.

> beyond an ordinary Indigenous woman's status. In the most historical references, such Indian women were thus accorded the status of royalty (1995, 43).
>
> The bad Indigenous woman, or squaw (the shadowy lustful archetype) provided justification for imperialistic expansion and the subsequent explorers', fur traders', and christian missionaries' specific agendas (ibid., 44).

The "aiding and abetting" position (Cook-Lynn 1996, 107) earned Native women their royal status. In order to gain this status they needed to turn away from their culture and tradition, as is evident in Rayna Green's discussion of Indian folk-heroes:

> If she wishes to be called a Princess, she must save or give aid to white men. The only good Indian -- male or female, Squanto, Pocahontas, Sacagewea, Cochise, the Little Mohee or the Indian Doctor --rescues and helps white men....
>
> ...To be "good" she must defy her own people, exile herself from them, become white, and perhaps suffer death (1984, 0).

Elizabeth Cook-Lynn shows how this myth-making further impacts on the way Native women's responsibilities to community are perceived :

> ...her "aiding and abetting" of the enemy goes unpunished and suggests, instead, that her status in the world, that is, her eventual marriage to the white man, is her reward. This kind of popular story about Indian women is said to be historical and legendary, illuminating at least one kind of relationship that the white man has wished to establish with the Native peoples of this land through their women. On the other hand, it is the kind of story which attempts to structure a new reality for Indian women, one in which they have no responsibility, no role in continuing tribal lifeway, and it becomes an allegory of her isolation from duty. She need not concern herself about the condition of her people (1996, 107).

This stereotype eats away at the Native female responsibility to ensure that tribal cultures are passed from one generation to the next. The Native woman is rewarded for assimilation; for alienating herself from her people, and for alienating future generations from the tribal culture.

The uncooperative squaw figure also brings the Native female image one step closer to the overtly sexual. In the tradition of the virgin-whore construct, the squaw offers a useful contrast to the princess:

> But who becomes the white man's sexual partner? It cannot be the Princess, for she is sacred. Her sexuality can be hinted at but never realized. The Princesses' darker twin, the Squaw, must serve the other side of the image, and again, relationships with males determine what the image will be. In the case of the Squaw, the presence of open sexuality converts the image to a negative one. White men cannot share sex with the Indian Princess, but once they do so with a real Indian woman, she cannot follow the required love-and-rescue pattern. She does what white men want for money or lust (Green 1984, 1).

Sexism and racism are thus inherent in the way the his-story and meta-narratives of the Americas have been recorded. The patriarchal viewpoint of the white male colonizer has left a legacy of misinformation in which Native women and their significant contributions to Native society are either ignored or portrayed according to archetypes that suit the conquerors (Bataille and Sands 1984, vii-viii; Green 1992 13-19; Peers 1996; Riley 1984, RCAP 1996, 18; Wittstock 1980, 209). Moreover, the princess/squaw dichotomy continues to plague Native female existence in both historical and popular accounts (Albers 1983, 1-5; Allen 1986, 4, 46; Klein and Ackerman 1995, 3-8, Green 1992, 14-16; Mankiller and Wallis 93, 19).

This negative imagery has a direct impact on contemporary Native women's lives. Janice Acoose asserts that the presence of such images in contemporary Canadian literature condones violence against Native women (1995, 71). Emma Laroque also links negative stereotypes to violence against Native women:

> I believe there is a direct relationship between racist/sexist stereotypes and violence against Native women and girls. The dehumanizing portrayal of the "squaw" and the over-sexualization of Native females such as in Walt Disney's *Pocahontas* surely render all Native female persons vulnerable (1996, 1).

Paula Gunn Allen attributes violence against Native women *within* the Native community to negative stereotyping:

> ...American popular media have depicted American Indian men as bloodthirsty savages devoted to treating women cruelly. While traditional Indian men seldom did any such thing -- and in fact among most tribes abuse of women was simply unthinkable, as was abuse of children or the aged -- the lie about "usual" male Indian behaviour seems to have taken root and now bears its brutal and bitter fruit (19).

Lee Maracle asserts that Native femininity is erased by racist dogma, and that this view of Native women is then internalized by Native men (1996: 20-22; 56-61). In Maracle's analysis, colonization results in the negation of Native female sexuality (ibid., 26). She states:

> ... it is nearly impossible for Native men to cherish the femininity of Native women. They have grown up in a world in which there is no such thing as dark-skinned femininity. There is only dark-skinned sensuality (ibid., 56).

Racist images become internalized to the extent that Native men hold white women in a place of higher esteem (ibid., 57). This is evident in the following description of the "white ideal":

> The white ideal, "flowing golden hair... [the] lovely white face...pale skin, thin lips, and gorgeous big blue eyes" became the standard for goodness, virtue, and beauty, while "all native girls became undesirable" and associated with oppression (Acoose, quoting Howard Adams (1975), 66).

Racist stereotypes not only create racism, they are fundamental in keeping racist and sexist systems in place. Patricia Hill-Collins has written about how this operates in the case of Black women:

> These controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism and poverty appear to be natural, normal and an inevitable part of everyday life.
>
> Even when the political and economic conditions that originally generated controlling images disappear, such images prove remarkably tenacious because they not only keep Black women oppressed, but are key in maintaining interlocking systems of race, class and gender oppression (1990, 68).

Hill-Collins' conclusions apply to Native women, as confirmed by Janice Acoose:

> Stereotypic images also function as sentinels that guard and protect the white eurocanadian-christian-patriarchy (and now to a limited extent the same kind of matriarchy) against any threatening disturbances that might upset the status quo (1995, 55).

> In order to maintain power, the english-canadian patriarchy perpetuates stereotypical representations of Indigenous women. These representations subsequently function as ideological constructs which encourage justification of gender and cultural imbalance (ibid., 57).

The need for positive alternatives to the negative stereotypes of Native women is clearly significant for the health and well-being of Native women. In terms of internal self-esteem, and towards offsetting external threats of violence and sexism, it is critical. In turn, a counterattack on these images is the beginning of a process in which larger systems of oppression may be unraveled. How can this process be set in motion?

Hill Collins argues that Black women must resist and construct a different knowledge of the self as a matter of survival (1990, 95). I believe that in the case of Native women, the process of self-definition towards survival includes three steps: resist, *resurrect*[11], and construct. Native women must look to the past to create the future. Sylvia Maracle illuminates this concept by framing identity construction in the following way:

> In trying to walk a traditional path there are four lifelong questions we ask ourselves: Who am I? In order to answer that I have to know: Where have I come from? And once I know where I come from, I have to know: Where am I going? And once I know where I am going, I need to know: What is my responsibility? We ask ourselves these questions and every time we think we know the answer to one, it changes all the other answers (in Brant Castellano and Hill 1995, 46).

[11] My use of the term "resurrect" does not imply (as is often the case in the representation of Native peoples) that Native culture and tradition are dead. I use the term with the understanding that, although elements of traditional gender equity have found their way into contemporary Native societies, we are, by and large, living in dark times in this regard.

I would therefore like to proceed with Maracle's second question with a look to the past. As Native women, we are aware that we have come through a dark time in terms of our identity. What preceded this period? How can we resurrect pieces of our past that will help us to see where we are going?

ROLE OF CULTURE AND TRADITION

> Throughout history, but especially within the twentieth century, there has been a tendency for both Indian people and especially their white neighbours to associate "Indianness" with the past. Fostered in part by anthropologists, many of whom were eager to investigate what they described as "traditional Indian culture," untainted by white contact, the concept of such an Indian world, "pure and unchanged since time immemorial" has emerged as part of the popular concept about the history of tribal people. Indeed, today many Indian people look back on their forefathers of the past two centuries as living in a golden age, when they existed apart from the nefarious influences of the whites, at time in which they followed a lifestyle that had made few changes throughout the centuries.
>
> Such thinking probably fosters a rightful pride in one's tribal past, but it also possesses some inherent dangers (Edmunds 1985, 4).

When Native people call on the past to define themselves, they run the risk of romanticizing or essentializing their heritage. I recognize the dangers of claiming a quintessential Native culture based in the past, and contend that many Native people are clear that "tradition" is something that is constantly changing. I am in agreement with Leslie Marmon Silko:

> I understand now that human communities are living beings that continue to change; while there may be a concept of the "traditional Indian" or "traditional Laguna Pueblo person," no such being has ever existed. All along there have been changes; for the ancient people any notions of "tradition" necessarily included the notion of making do with whatever was available, of adaptation for survival (1996, 200).

In looking to the past, I do not, therefore, seek to lodge myself in the golden age of the Indians. I am aware that, in my thirst for a positive definition of Native womanhood which I can personally

adopt, I run the risk of presenting unproblematic notions of culture and tradition. I am mindful of the words of Emma Laroque:

> ...in response to the negation and falsification of our histories and cultures, some have been pushed to cultural romanticism, even perhaps cultural self-righteousness. But, incidentally, nobody on earth has ever romanticized their culture to such mythic proportions (cowboys moving west and killing Indians being equated with moral and human progress) as white North Americans (1990, xxii)

.

As Laroque indicates, we are drawn to interpretations of the past (and present) that suit our personal or political purposes. Where does this leave "tradition" and "culture"? This discussion is even more problematic in an academic context, where post-modern theory asks us to interrogate how these things have been constructed, and why.

I simply maintain that there are ways and worldviews that are distinct to Indigenous people in spite of, and because of, colonization and a continuous process of change. When we say "tradition" in the Native community, we are referring to values, philosophies, and lifestyles that pre-date Euro-Canadian culture, but also to those ways which are being created in resistance to it. Because we have a history of being erased, negated, and denied as peoples with a distinct heritage, the adoption of "tradition" is strategic in our struggle to survive. I am conscious that, in writing this thesis, I become a player in the ongoing production of tradition. How have I done this?

As Haunani-Kay Trask has pointed out, I find it worthwhile to focus on values and symbols that have persisted over the generations (1993). I look to the past, and learn mechanisms for survival in the present, and towards the future. I believe that many answers to the devastation we suffer from the patriarchy, racism, individualism, and lack of respect for the environment in contemporary society may be found by considering the stories of Native people more attuned to pre-contact lifestyles. The stories will help us survive:

> Many times when I was a young girl, I was fortunate to hear my grandmother tell of the lives and deeds of our grandfathers, grandmothers, and other people of our clan. I listened to these stories, but I really did not know their worth. "What good are these tales in today's world?" asked many people, never realizing that the Ojibway tales teach a philosophy for living. They tell of the purity of man and nature and keeping them in balance." (Broker 1983, 8).

In addition to looking at the values, symbols and philosophies of "traditional" Native societies; (that is to say, cultures with a limited grounding in Euro-Canadian worldviews), I believe there is something to be gained from looking at the lifestyles and societal structures of these peoples. This can be critical in terms of reclaiming a positive Native female identity:

> ...[in] many programs for recovery and survival, traditional ways are being offered to the Native woman as a lifeline. She need not become a practising member of her people's ancient faith to benefit from these programs, but she gains self-esteem from seeing how her ancestral women functioned actively in their religions, governments, clan systems, and marriages (Kasee 1995, 85).

By gaining an understanding how these societies operated, we may begin to conceptualize, construct, and actualize a world that is free of patriarchy. The strength of this vision for Native women is that it is founded in something which is our own. This is key, given that Native peoples have been dispossessed of nearly everything that was once theirs. At the same time, (as will be explored in the subsequent sections), threads of gender equity remain in Native communities, providing a foundation to build on.

Native women are aware that "tradition" is something that must be interpreted and applied in a way that supports their struggle against patriarchy:

> ...as women we must be circumspect in our recall of tradition. We must ask ourselves whether and to what extent tradition is liberating to us as women. We must ask ourselves wherein lies (lie) our source(s) of empowerment. We know enough about human history that we cannot assume that all Aboriginal traditions universally respected and honoured women. (And is "respect" and "honour" all that we can ask for?) It should not be assumed, even in those original societies that were structured along matriarchal lines, that matriarchies necessarily prevented men from oppressing women. There are indications of male violence and sexism in some Aboriginal societies prior to European

> contact[12], and certainly after contact. But, at the same time, culture is not immutable, and tradition cannot be expected to be always of value or relevant in our times. As Native women, we are faced with very difficult and painful choices, but, nonetheless, we are challenged to change, create, and embrace "traditions" consistent with contemporary and international human rights standards. (Laroque 1996, 14).

As Beatrice Medicine has indicated, what is interpreted as "tradition" can be used by Native men to build and maintain the sexism they have adopted from the colonizer. She states that "male orientation in the revitalized Native belief structure is strong", as is evident in the way some men have reactivated ritualistic systems such as the Sun Dance and Uwipi to assume male importance (1983, 70). We must, therefore, adopt a critical use of culture and tradition that applies to our lives.

This critical approach might be interpreted as a selective process:

> ...it is important to note that the process or retraditionalization that Aboriginal women are advocating is a *selective* process: in a sense, women are reinventing Aboriginal culture, through selection of traditions which they perceive as valuable in contemporary life....In this process, certain traditional values might not be considered worthy of revival. For example, Aboriginal women insist that the tradition of non-interference[13] is inappropriate in cases of violence against women, which have reached alarming rates in Aboriginal communities[14]. Moreover, they suggest that if the tradition of gender equality were followed, violence against women would not occur[15] (Wasteneys 1994, 75).

I would argue that, rather than excluding certain values, we must be mindful about the way in which we interpret those values, and then construct our lives around them. We must also think about how values interact. To use the above example of violence against women: it is clear that traditional values condemning violence against women would invoke some kind of intervention, and that therefore the principle of non-interference would have no application in this situation.

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[12] Laroque writes "Many early European observations as well as original Indian legends (e.g. Cree Wehsehkehcha stories I grew up with) point to pre-contact existence of male violence and sexism against women" (in footnote, ibid., 17).
[13] "See Ross (1992) for further discussion on the ethic of non-interference. Ross observes that there is wide variation in the degree to which Aboriginal communities adhere to this ethic" (Wasteneys' note, ibid.).
[14] "In a 1989 study by the Ontario Native Women's Association, 80% of Aboriginal women respondents claimed to be victims of family violence, compared to 10% for Canadian Women as a whole " (Wasteneys' note, ibid.).
[15] RCAP 1993, 11.

The application of Native traditions towards constructing a more equitable society is very much at the core of this thesis. In the concluding chapter, I will explore how I have applied the knowledge from this process to my own life.

Acknowledgment of Different Traditions

It is important to address how, as Native people, we make use of the multiple Indigenous traditions across the Americas. Beatrice Medicine argues that Native identity must be founded within the individual's tribal tradition. I agree with her statement:

> ...it is difficult and dangerous to generalize about a single ideology for Indigenous women due to the tribal distinctions and differences. One must specify tribal group and tribal values in order to understand accurately the belief systems and values that give directives (1983a, 66).

I do not advocate a "Pan-Indian" approach, but I believe there are benefits to examining and borrowing tradition from one Indigenous nation to the next. Whereas the nations that existed here before contact were as different as the various European nations at the time, they likewise shared many basic characteristics:

> For although our traditions are as diverse as the tribes who practices and live within them, they are all earth-based and wilderness-centered; all are "animalistic," polytheistic, concerned with sacred or nonpolitical power, and incorporate patterns that many in the western world identify as profane (Gunn Allen 1986, 78).

Native societies shared fundamental values and lifestyles that were in contrast with the worldviews that dominated Europe at the time. With regards to women, the differences are strategic towards a dismantling of patriarchy:

> The tribes see women variously, but they do not question the power of femininity. Sometimes they see women as fearful, sometimes peaceful, sometimes omnipotent and

> omniscient, but they never portray women as mindless, helpless, simple or oppressed (Gunn Allen 1986, 44).

I feel that the different ways in which Indigenous nations honoured their women are worthy of study in terms of the goals of this paper, as they have the potential to bolster a positive identity for women of all the Indigenous nations.

Other similarities between Indigenous nations also factor in here. After contact, Indigenous nations of the Americas began to share a new kind of culture: colonial oppression. They were met with the same strategies of genocide and assimilation; from outright slaughter, to forced relocation, to attacks on their family, community and social structures through the schools and the church, to the removal of their economic and political systems:

> Perhaps the prevailing ideological base that pertains to all tribal women is the adaptation mode to another, and dominant society (Medicine 1983, 70).

Because of the shared history of colonization, similar strategies of resistance have evolved. Sharing and solidarity among the Native nations goes a long way towards the survival and reconstruction of Native peoples and their identities.

Like the braid of sweetgrass that has made its way into Native cultures across the continent, Pan-Indian symbols, ceremonies and practices can be powerful tools for reclaiming an Indigenous world. I am sure that some of the nations using sweetgrass have not done so since time immemorial. Others may have adopted it from neighbouring cultures prior to contact, or perhaps after. We have all borrowed from brother and sister nations in the course of Indigenous history and development, and I believe it is effective to continue to do so.

It is with this in mind that I turn to various Indigenous nations to look at traditions of gender equity. In the following section I will address the way in which Native traditions were replaced with colonizer ideas and institutions with the intent to create a subordinate position for Native women. In looking at the positive traditions of the past, I hope to generate ideas that we may borrow for a more equitable future.

TRADITIONS OF GENDER EQUITY

An extensive body of literature has been produced to indicate that, traditionally, gender equity existed in Native societies. I will briefly highlight some of the similarities here in order to show that Native women of many nations have a rich history to build on, uncover and resurrect.

Economic Power and Control of Property

If women in contemporary society are oppressed by poverty and a lack of control over economic resources, conversely women's role in traditional Native economies allowed them autonomy and status within their communities. In general, the division of labour was gendered, with men working outside the community as hunters and warriors, and women within in the areas of childcare, agriculture, food preparation, and housing (Shoemaker 1995, 5)[16].

The women's role of agriculturist and food provider for many Native cultures was recognized for the critical role it played in the community, and thus women's work was held in high esteem. This has been widely recognized in studies of the Iroquois:

[16] There was some flexibility in terms of the gendered division of labour; women were evidently capable of providing for themselves in the absence of a man (Landes 1938; Mourning Dove 1990). The presence of Native women warriors in a number of societies has also been noted (Buchanan 1986; Hungry Wolf 1980, 59; Landes 1938; Medicine 1983).

> There was nothing of "only a housewife" about the Iroquois woman. Just as the women of Central America and West Africa are the entrepreneurs in the market economy and the handlers of the family finances, the stable unit of the Iroquois was the cooperating women in the fields, wherein lay the strength of the tribe (Mathur 1971, 11-16).

In examining the gendered division of labour among the Chippewa, where men provided raw animal tissue through hunting and women converted these resources into food, Henry Sharpe concludes: "The finished product is what leads to status, influence, and reputation. Rotting flesh, poorly dried meat, or raw hides gain a man little" (Sharp 1995, 58).

Women were responsible in many cases for food distribution, providing them control over one of the communities' most precious resources (Brown, J.K. 1990, 19-194; Devens 1992, 12; Kidwell 1995, 118; Knack 1995, 150). This was reflected in a more general sense in terms of the control they had over the products of their labour, as is evident among the Blackfoot:

> Because the tipi was a product of women's labour, the very roof over a man's head was not his but his woman's property (Kehoe 1995, 114-116).

Beverly Hungry Wolf confirms that, in the event of a marriage break-up among the Blackfoot, the tipi always belonged to the woman (1980, 15). Women in traditional Sioux society also owned the lodge and the furnishings in it (Powers 1986, 82; White Plume in Reyner 1991, 69).

The control that Native women exercised over the products of their labour is also evident in the fact that women often acted as traders, both for their own goods and for those of their families (Buffaloehead 1983, 40; Eldersveld Murphy 1995, 78). Ownership of economic resources and claims to wealth were thus more equitable in terms of gender. In Plateau societies, both men and women were completely independent in owning personal property, and neither husband or wife could claim the property of the other (Ackerman 1995, 83 - 84).

Carol Douglas Sparks has pointed out that Navajo women women enjoyed economic power through control of vast herds of sheep (Sparks 1995, 138). Some of these women wove exquisite blankets, and through this work were also able to garner economic power (ibid.). Emmi Whitehorse, a contemporary Navajo artist states:

> In my family, the female owned everything. They owned the land and the sheep. They nurtured and carried the family (in Katz 1995, 56).

Land ownership was also attributed to the women among the Iroquois (Rothenburg 1980, 68). Joy Bilharz states "Because women were horticulturalists, their more intensive use of land established their rights to it. In this context, men merely cleared the land for them" (1995, 10). This authority of the women over the land was even enshrined in the Great Law of the Iroquois:

> The Great Law of Peace of the Confederacy, formed in the fifteenth century, clearly stated who owned the land: "Women shall be considered the progenitors of the Nation. They shall own the land and soil" (Baskin 198, 43).

In terms of the power accorded to Iroquois women by virtue of their relationship to the land, Baskin concludes: Because of this right of ownership, women held the upper hand economically" (ibid.).

Even when traditional economies began to be replaced by the capitalist system, some groups of Native women managed to maintain control of the household economy. Among the Tlingit, it is noteworthy that "The husband's earnings are wholly turned over to his wife. She is, therefore, the banker of the household. If he desires to make a purchase, he must appeal to her to get her consent." (Klein 1995, 35).

In spite of some instances where adjustment to moneyed economy benefited Native women to some extent (Bilharz 1995, 110-111), the changes brought on by the capitalist economy

inevitably brought about a diminished status and autonomy for Native women. Carol Devens talks about how the fur trade changed the labour of Native women in such a way that their power was eroded. She writes:

> European merchandise replaced items whose manufacture had previously constituted some of women's most important productive activities.
>
> ... as women's relationship to the disposal of hides and furs changed, the significance of their direct contribution to the community welfare diminished (1992, 16-17).

Women could no longer be in control of their goods and labour as they had been in the past. The shifting economic systems set the wheels in motion for gender inequity:

> The economy was shifting away from a preoccupation with subsistence to production-for-exchange; and with it the production relations between the sexes had altered. The overall prosperity concealed an erosion of women's position through her being increasingly circumscribed to a few tasks related to processing and domestic production. On the other hand, men were increasingly free to pursue wealth (Alan Klein 1983, 156).

The move towards gender inequity via changing economic systems is corroborated in a study of the Cree of Northern Ontario:

> The notion that men be primary wage earners and senior partners in their families developed among them as a result of European influence. Yet, in most families that continued trapping in the bush, considerable autonomy remained with the women. The flexible complementarity of gender roles traditionally enjoyed in Cree families became eroded after women's unpaid work in the home became less valued than work outside the home. (Blythe and McGuire 1996, 136).

Rosemary Brown comes to similar conclusions in her examination of the changes to traditional Cree economy brought on by oil and gas exploitation. She states that these changes have undermined traditional egalitarian relationships based on economic roles (Brown 1996, 156).

One of the strategies of assimilation was "to turn Native men into industrious, republican farmers and women into chaste, orderly housewives" (Purdue 1995, 91). This turned many

traditional labour roles upside down, upsetting in the process the balance and equity that existed among genders:

> Washington's instructions did not bode well for Cherokee women. Directly addressing Cherokee men, the President implied that animal husbandry and farming were male responsibilities in a "civilized" society. Spinning, weaving, and sewing were women's work. Such expectations threatened the traditional division of labour in Cherokee society and whatever remnants of female autonomy remained (Purdue ibid., 93).

The change in traditional agricultural systems ultimately led to the loss of power for Native women economically, and ideologically:

> Missionaries insisted that women's sphere was the home and that Indian men should take up farming. When accomplished, this change would not only take away women's economic independence leaving them as dependent as white women; it also tore at the very fabric of the culture, which held that women, who produced life, were the only appropriate group to bring life from the soil. Despite resistance, Indian land, of which women had been the keepers for the nation, was often divided up among Indian men as "heads of the family". Representative tribal governments modeled after that of the United States, disenfranchised women (Wagner 1988, 1).

Men and women have always had separate spheres of labour in Indigenous societies. The interpretation and practice of labour division according to gender, however, changed dramatically as a result of contact. Traditionally, men and women had their separate spheres where they managed their own affairs, and thus the labour of women was not overseen or dominated by men (Buffaloehead 1983, 40; Knack 1995, 149;). Women's labour was equally valued (Deloria in Medicine 1983, 69; Flaherty in RCAP 1996, 19-0). As Kaaren Olsen, a modern day trapper sums up:

> ...Relationships with one another were based on equality, and the divisions of labour were based on practical needs. Because women are reproducers as well as producers, their labour consisted mainly of work at the home. It was the men who procured the necessary items which were then turned into food, shelter or clothing. While the lines of division were not necessarily rigid, they became more so when their economic base was destroyed by the colonial powers who had other plans for the Native people. (Olsen 1989, 55).

The devaluation of women's work in Native societies, the loss of power associated with economic role, and the loss of autonomy for women in their work are the legacy of colonization.

Role in Politics

> "Where are your women?"
>
> The speaker is Attakullakulla, a Cherokee chief renowned for his shrewd and effective diplomacy. He has come to negotiate a treaty with the whites. Among his delegation are women "as famous in war, as powerful in the council." ...
>
> ...Implicit in the chief's question, "Where are your women?" the Cherokee hear, "Where is your balance? What is your intent?" They see the balance is absent and are wary of the white man's motives. They intuit the mentality of destruction.
>
> I turn to my own time. I look at the Congress, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission... to the hierarchies of my church, my university, my city, my children's school. "Where are your women?" I ask (Awiakta, 1993, 9).

The traditional political role of women in some Native societies is well known. The Iroquois, for example, are the subject of a significant amount of research and documentation that demonstrates the powerful position of women in Iroquoian political life (Spittal 1990). In traditional Iroquois government, women hold political authority by choosing and deposing the chiefs:

> Since clan descent was matrilineal, chieftainships were owned and controlled by matrons of certain families and the appointment of a sachem (chief) was determined by that matron in meeting with other clan women (Baskin 198, 43).

Women had further avenues to voice their opinions in political matters in Iroquois society:

> ...women often addressed councils; their opinion was asked and heeded. When tribal or village decisions had to be made, both men and women attended a meeting. Though the chiefs normally did the public speaking, women at times stepped up and, by their authority as owners of the land and their concern for the future of their children, took an active part in telling sachems what they should do (Baskin ibid.).

Iroquois women also spoke to outsiders, as is evident in their role in negotiating some treaties (Wagner 1988, 220). The traditional Iroquois woman's political voice, thus, is strong:

> The ultimate decision with a clan comes from the clan mother. Whatever the clan mother decides, goes. (Sundown Hallet in Wall 1993, 15).

Other Native societies had political systems which ensured the participation and influence of women. The Cherokee had women's councils whereby women had a direct input into political decisions (Awiakta 1993, 38, 119; Gunn Allen 1986, 36; Mankiller and Wallis 1993, 19). In Plateau societies there were female as well as male chiefs, and the wives of male chiefs served as advisors, or as chiefs in the case of an absence or death (Ackerman 1995, 88-9). This has also been documented about the Algonkian (Grumet 1980, 49) and the Sioux (Reyner 1991, 5).

Where formal political systems to include women's voice in politics were lacking, women had authority through the influence they exercised on their male partners. Bet-te Paul, a Maliseet, states:

> ...the elder women were the ones to hold places in council and to guide the men. We had chiefs, but the elder women were behind the men; they were listened to; held in high respect (in Silman 1987, 226).

Lee Guemple discusses how indirect influence of the women exists in Inuit society:

> When other males are not present, wives discuss issues of public concern openly with their husbands. In my experience, husbands take seriously the opinions of their wives, perhaps for the reason that they can best articulate the collective opinion of the women of the community...
>
> Men ignore such expressions of opinion at some peril. Men of importance in an Eskimo community maintain a demeanor of dignity and pride -- one easily shattered when struck by ridicule. In public gatherings, where numbers provide protection from immediate reprisal, women, especially older women, are likely to anonymously voice remarks to the assembled body concerning the stupidity of policy decisions;...Position in the age hierarchy protects old women from recrimination and retaliation so that they are in a position to insinuate the "women's vote" into what would otherwise be an all-male "caucus" (Guemple, 5).

The indirect influence has also been noted among the Blackfoot (Hungry Wolf 1980) and the Sioux (Powers 1986).

However their role in politics manifested itself traditionally, any political influence that Native women had was doomed after the implementation of Euro-Western political systems. In spite of the maintenance of traditional politics by some sectors of society, societies such as the Iroquois would inevitably experience the loss of power for women as they were forced to adapt to a Western elective political system (Baskin 198, 46; Rothenburg 1980, 81). In Canada, the Indian Act was introduced[17]. This legislation stripped Native women of a number of rights, among them a political voice:

> the Indian Act of 1876 assigned fewer fundamental rights to women than to men. Most noticeably, in 1869 women were denied the right of full political participation in band affairs. Unlike men, women could neither hold electoral office nor vote for male representatives. Neither could women speak at public meetings (Fiske 1993, 20). (footnotes omitted)

Both Canadian and American governments adopted law and policy that recognized men as the sole political actors in Native communities. Patricia Albers discusses the impact of this among the Sioux:

> The area where Sioux women lost the most ground was in the political dealings between their communities and the federal government. In the pre-reservation era, Sioux women played an active role in the affairs of their bands and villages. They were empowered with the authority to police community gatherings. They held formal roles in supervising the distribution of meat from collective hunts. And finally, they had institutionalized mechanisms for making their interests known in the meetings of the tiyotipi, or the soldier's lodge. But all this changed in the reservation setting because of the federal government's discriminatory practice of dealing only with Sioux men in matters of community-wide concern (Albers 1983, 191).

[17] For more information on the impact of the Indian Act on the lives of Native women see Faith et. al. 1990; Jamieson 1978 and 1986; and Silman 1987.

Native women moved from an active participation in the management of community affairs to a trivialized contribution that held no power. This was done deliberately by the state, and in accordance with the devalued position of women in Western society:

> ...Indigenous women's political powers (including and especially the freedom to exercise control over their bodies and relations with others) were almost completely eradicated while their energies were channeled into less threatening activities, such as ladies' auxiliary groups, church rituals (marriage, baptism, confession, communion, confirmations, and funerals), as well as far less important social activities such as church sponsored teas, bake sales, and bazaars (Acoose 1995, 47).

Spiritual Power Of Women

The significance of women in Native spiritual tradition is apparent in the role of women in many Native creation stories, and in Native stories where women bring spiritual tradition to the culture. The Iroquois attribute the beginnings of the earth to a female rather than a male (Baskin 198, 4; Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra 1989, 8). Among the Sioux, White Buffalo Woman is recognized as the culture bearer, as she brought the sacred pipe, and thus elemental ritual and ceremony to the Sioux people (Medicine 1987, 166; Powers 1990, 36). Paula Gunn Allen has explored the centrality of female spiritual figures in a number of Native traditions, including the Keres Pueblo, the Hopi, the Navajo, the Lakota and the Abanaki. She concludes:

> Certainly, there is reason to believe that many American Indian tribes thought that the primary potency in the universe was female, and that understanding authorizes all tribal activities, religious or social. (1986, 6).

Native women are thus interpreted as the source of a great deal of spiritual knowledge and practice by those who follow non-Christian ways. This contrasts sharply with the understanding of spiritual tradition that was imported from Europe.

Women in many Native cultures acted in the role of shamans and medicine people (Ackerman, 91; Guemple, 6; Kidwell 1978, 119; Klein, 36; Knack, 150; Grumet 1980, 53). When

they did not act directly as shamans, Native women often played critical roles in sponsoring and supporting ceremonies:

> The Blackfoot Sun Dance is a more obvious manifestation of the superior spiritual power of women: the Sun Dance ceremony is led by a woman and cannot be held if no woman is willing to undertake the arduous fasting and heavy responsibility of the Holy Woman role (Kehoe 1995, 116).

Whereas the woman's role in working with the Blackfoot medicine man might be misinterpreted as subordinate, her spiritual power is recognized as critical to the spiritual life of the people :

> Women are seen as the intermediary or means through which power has been granted to humans. This crucial role appears in medicine bundle openings: only a woman should unwrap and re-wrap a holy bundle. She hands the powerful objects inside to a male celebrant. It is important to note that the woman sits quietly behind the man and to European eyes seems to be a servant. The Blackfoot see the woman as more powerful than the man, who dares not handle the bundle entire and alone (Kehoe 1995, 116).

Ojibway Elder Art Solomon also refers to women as the intermediary between man and the Creator (1990, 35). Women in traditional Native societies were thus often recognized to have innate spiritual power, as in the case of the Blackfoot:

> Women are believed to have more innate power than men, because they are born with power to reproduce both the human and the material components of the world. (Kehoe 1995, 120).

This innate power is connected to the female ability to produce life. The woman's role as creator and intermediary between spirit life and life on earth is evident in certain traditional ceremonies. The Sweat Lodge is symbolic of the mother's womb (Williams 1992, 102); it is a place where spiritual renewal can take place. Some women say that they do not participate in all aspects of the Sun Dance because of their inherent spiritual power:

> When a woman chooses to go into the Sun Dance, she never has to do the vision quest or go to the sweat lodge or anything like that because she already...each time she gives birth she has that near-death experience...
>
> They say the medicine people have certain requirements, near-death experience. Some even have out-of-body experiences. Go into the spirit world and they have the constant communication with the spirits. But the woman does this each time she gives birth. It's a near-death experience. (Laverdure in Wall, 109-110).

As with birth, menstruation was traditionally perceived as a spiritually charged occurrence. The idea that menstrual taboos, common among Native cultures, were in some way a denigration of the woman's status as "impure" and inferior has been disputed (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988, 14). Many Native women confer that the menstrual period was one in which Native women exerted a phenomenal amount of power which precludes them from taking part in ceremonies (Arnott 1995, 96, Gunn Allen, 46-47; Medicine 1987, 169; Sooktis in Wall, 57). This belief holds true among traditional thinkers to this day:

> Women are far, far ahead of men. It's quite hard to understand, but when you start living in the Native culture, you will. You are like Mother Earth, who once a year in the spring, washes herself down the river to the ocean. Everything...all debris is washed away. Same thing with a woman, except it's every month. It's the power you have. You cannot enter a lodge or a spiritual gathering because you will kill all the prayers and offerings in there. You are more powerful than all of it, and if you come in you can't fool the spirits. At Sundances, if a woman in her time comes near the lodge, the singers and dancers know. I have to tell the older women to tell the younger ones not to stay around if they are like that. It's not because we don't like them, it's the power they have. They're way ahead of me." (George Kehewin in Meili 1991,15).

Taboos for menstruating women allowed women in some cultures control over certain functions of their societies, as exemplified in this description of the Pomo:

> The fact of this form of extraordinary power gave women a certain secular power in the sense of controlling the group's activities. If a number of women were menstruating simultaneously, there could be literally no hunting, fishing, ceremonial dancing, gambling or war. The captain and other professional men such as hunt or fishing leaders had to design their tasks around their women's periods (Patterson, 140).

Contact with Europeans translated this recognition of power into the interpretation that women are contaminated during menstruation (Allen 1986, 46-47; Amberston 1991, 5-53).

Ceremonies around menstruation were replaced with -- at best -- no recognition of this passage; at worst, menstruation "rites of passage" based in shame and sin. This is evident in the description of what this girl learned from the nuns in residential school:

> Marguerite's first period was not a time of celebration but rather an experience that brought on isolation and shame. Like all of the other young women, Marguerite had not been prepared for the change. When it occurred each girl was taken from the larger dormitory for a few days and give a rag for cleaning herself -- nothing was explained (Klugie 1982, 40).

The decline in Native women's spiritual role as a result of Christianity was profound. Male-gendered creators displaced the primacy of the female as Creator (Gunn Allen 1986, 41), and women were cast into the troublesome role of Eve:

> With the coming of the Christian missionaries, the women of my people lost our status as equals. A new faith was forced upon us, and in that faith we women were forever condemned because of some biblical woman named Eve! We were made to feel somehow responsible for the loss of everlasting happiness. (Hungry Wolf 1996, 78).

In this new role, women became objects of aggression and anger that they had not previously known:

> With Christianization a great deal of anger was directed towards women. Women were identified as responsible for any unpleasantness, insecurity, or danger that the members of society, especially the men, found themselves in. A great deal of energy was directed towards controlling women and they became the legitimate brunt of hostility -- both of their own self-loathing, and of men's loathing and mistrust (Anderson 1991, 165).

Whereas such negative feelings may have been directed elsewhere prior to contact (Anderson, ibid.), the Native woman as Eve took on a new role as the incarnation of evil. This contributed significantly to the loss of power she endured in Native societies:

> The most important effect on spiritual understanding was that female spirits, such as Eve in premodern Christian teachings, became understood as evil. The missionaries insisted that all Native religious practices were the work of the devil. These teachings

> were enhanced by the tendency to turn power destructively inward in oppressed cultures. However, the fact that the primary healing spirits were female must have also been a factor in the reversal of traditional values... The decline of feminine spirituality was paralleled by a rapid decline in the sociopolitical role and status of women (Paper 1990, 17).

Eleanor Leacock concurs that the church played the role of "... introducing the repression and exploitation of women as sexual objects, as reproducers, and as producers and alienating converts from those who resisted indoctrination" (1980, 18). The impact of this new role was felt in every aspect of Native women's community lives, as is evident in this study of the Carrier:

> Christian proselytizing eroded women's sources of autonomy and authority. As clan-based trade and exchange disintegrated, women lost opportunities for trading independently among themselves....Women were hampered even in their efforts to be indirectly included in community affairs. For, not only did priests explicitly forbid women a public voice in church or village affairs, they also ridiculed and berated men who took guidance from women (Fiske 1996, 179).

The exclusion of women from positions of authority *within* the church further contributed to community systems in which Native women were excluded from power:

> In Canada and elsewhere, missionaries of the Catholic Church have sought to impose a theocratic order designed to augment the priests' power. To this end they have established local political hierarchies that explicitly excluded women and that were empowered to uphold Catholic notions of patriarchy. (Fiske ibid., 169).

In the face of the tremendous amount of influence that the Catholic church has in community life, Saskatchewan Metis women aptly summarize the role for Native women in the newcomer's spiritual tradition:

> "Church is run by priests and men, women get to put the flowers on the altar" (Poelzer 1986, 33).

Marriage, Divorce and Family Life

A woman's right to make choices regarding marriage and divorce is apparent in a number of traditional societies. The concept that women and children are the property of men was foreign to many Native cultures (Green 1992, 38). For a Native woman, marriage did not necessarily mean deferring control to her husband.

A woman's autonomy in marriage was more pronounced in matrilocal societies, among them the Navajo, the Seminoles, the Cherokee, and the Iroquois. The central position of the woman in the family was maintained by living with their own kin. This contrasts with what we know in traditional western society, where the "head" of the family is male:

> The man joined the wife's family basically to ensure the survival of that family. In other words, he sort of became the workhorse. He would haul the wood, and chop the firewood; he'd take care of the sheep too (Whitehorse (Navajo) in Katz 1995, 57).

Women could be protected by their families in matrilocal arrangements, and abuses from men were swiftly dealt with. This is exemplified in the following description of the Iroquois:

> ...the wife never becomes entirely under the control of her husband. Her kindred have a prior right, and can use that right to separate her from him or to protect her from him, should he mistreat her. The brother who would not rally to the help of his sister would become a by-word among his clan (Fletcher in Wagner 1989, 5).

In spite of the fact that marriages were arranged in some cultures, a woman was not necessarily forced to take a man she did not want in marriage (Kidwell 1995, 119; Guemple 1995, 3). Divorce was uncomplicated, commonplace, and often initiated by the man or the woman (Albers 1983, 191; Buffaloehead 1983, 4; Guemple 1995, 3; Knack 1995, 149; Sattler 1995; Sharp 1995, 54). This description of the Navajo exemplifies the woman's ability to make decisions about her marriage, including divorce:

> Divorce is easy for both men and women in the Navajo way. The woman "put the man's saddle outside the hogan" and he gets the message. If the man wishes a divorce, it is said, "He went out to round up the horses and he never came back." A woman keeps the children within her extended family, and the man returns to his family of origin until he marries again and moves to his wife's new hogan (Sparks 1995, 160).

Divorce did not necessarily result in the devolution of a woman's economic status. Ackerman states that, among the Plateau peoples:

> Divorce did not result in economic deprivation for either party. Both had the choice of moving in with their consanguineal kin or living independently. A woman was well able to support herself and her children with the food she gathered, some of which could be traded for meat and fish (1995, 86).

Katherine Osbourne documents a change from the traditional Ute culture, where "An abandoned or widowed woman was never left destitute for she was part of a larger group with whom she could exchange labour" (1995, 158-159). With the colonizers systems of marriage, women were relegated to a dependent position with regards to property as a result of lands allotment legislation (ibid.).

Motherhood was an affirmation of a woman's power and her central role in many Native societies. This stemmed from the reverence for their innate power to bring life:

> Pre-Conquest American Indian women valued their role as vitalizers. Through their own bodies they could bring vital beings into the world -- a miraculous power whose potency does not diminish with industrial sophistication or time. They were mothers, and that word did not imply slaves, drudges, drones, who are required to live only for others rather than for themselves as it does so tragically for many modern women. The ancient ones were empowered by their certain knowledge that the power to make life is the source of all power and that no other power can gainsay it (Gunn Allen 1986, 7).

Gunn Allen emphasizes that motherhood and the power accorded to it was something that belonged to all women, regardless of whether they biologically produced children or not:

> ...childbearing meant empowerment. It was the passport to maturity and inclusion in woman-culture. An important point is that women who did not have children because of constitutional, personal, or Spirit-directed disinclination had other ways to experience Spirit instruction and stabilization, to exercise power, and to be mothers (ibid., 51)
>
> Maternity was a concept that went far beyond the simple biological sense of the word. It was the prepotent power, the basic right to control and distribute goods, because it was the primary means of producing them (ibid., 55).

Motherhood was used as an ideology that extended to all women, regardless of whether they produced children themselves. Whether it was used metaphorically or literally, this approach to motherhood accorded women a central place within their communities.

The power accorded to women by virtue of this vision of motherhood extended not only to the family, but to community and nation, as described by Jeannette Armstrong:

> The role of Aboriginal women in the health of family systems from one generation to the next was one of immense power. The immensity of the responsibility of bearer of life and nourisher of all generations is just becoming clear in its relationship to all societal functioning. (1996, ix).

Because of their capacity for motherhood, Iroquois women were considered the "progenitors of the nation", and were therefore accorded land ownership (Bilharz 1995, 102). The traditional conceptualization of motherhood as a governing role continues to be called upon by contemporary Carrier women in their efforts to influence community politics (Fiske 1992 & 1993). With European contact, however, the political implications of motherhood have greatly diminished, to the point where it is not possible for Carrier women to overcome political subordination via this ideology (Fiske 1993).

Support for (biological) mothers within the family unit has also been devastated by colonization. In an article about the criminalization of single, destitute mothers, Elizabeth Cook-Lynn points to the devaluation of traditional values:

> In prior days, while childbearing was considered women's business, it was not thought to be separated from the natural and ethical responsibilities of males. Therefore, men who caused stress in the community or risk to the survival of the tribe by dishonouring women were held accountable by the people. They could not carry the sacred pipe, nor could they hold positions of status. They were often physically attacked by the woman's male relatives and driven from tribal life. These particular controls in tribal society often no longer apply. In many tribal communities, such men who are known to degrade women and abandon children, now hold positions of power, even sometimes sitting at the tribal council tables. They are directors of tribal council programs, and they often participate unmolested in sacred ceremonies...
>
> Such contradictions may occur, some suggest, because the historical influence of Christian religions and Anglo law in Native communities has made it possible for individuals to abandon long-held views concerning marriage patterns and tribal arrangements for childbearing and parental responsibilities. Interracial marriages and illicit sexual relationships, denied the sanction of the tribes and families, often ignore the particular responsibilities prescribed for both males and females in traditional societies. Failures in these duties were dealt swift and severe punishment, but seldom was male honouring matters of marriage and sex abandoned as routinely as it is today. Young women, while held accountable for their actions, were seldom the only ones condemned in matters of this kind, as they are today (1996, 115-116).

With the loss of traditional responsibilities to mothers and an honouring of their position, Native women have in many cases become oppressed by a role that was once a great source of strength and power. Colonizer values encourage men to participate in this oppression.

Overall, the role of women within the Native family came under attack with the onset of European values and attitudes. This attack was, moreover, fundamental to the conquest strategy. Missionaries were given the assignment to change family structure as part of their project to convert Native peoples:

> ...essential to LeJeune's entire program was the introduction of European family structure, with male authority, female fidelity, and the elimination of the right to divorce... LeJeune's account of his problems, successes, and failures in introducing hierarchical principles into the ordering of interpersonal relations among the Montagnais-Naskapi affords a clear record of the personal autonomy that was central to the structure and ethics of their society -- an autonomy that applied as fully to women as to men (Leacock 1980, 8).

The intent was to breakdown extended family and clan systems, considered by the missionaries to be "a degraded state, 'the outcome of looseness of morals and absence of social restraint'" (Fiske 1996, 171). The state considered it necessary to destroy these systems in order to succeed in instilling patriarchy:

> The fourth objective [to achieving hierarchical patriarchies] requires that the clan structure be replaced in fact, if not in theory, by the nuclear family. By this ploy, the women clan heads are replaced by elected male officials and the psychic net that is formed and maintained by the nature of non-authoritarian gynecentricity grounded in respect for diversity of gods and people is thoroughly rent (Gunn Allen 1986, 4).

The destruction wrought on the family was thus achieved through a direct attack on women's authority and autonomy in marriage, divorce and family life:

> It was through the attack on the power of Aboriginal women that the disempowerment of our peoples has been achieved, in a dehumanizing process that is one of the cruelest on the face of this earth. In the attack on the core family system, in the direct attack on the role of Aboriginal woman, the disintegration of our peoples towards genocide has been achieved (Armstrong 1996, x).

The effect on Native communities has been devastating. Mary Crow Dog talks about the destruction of the Sioux extended family unit, (the tiyospaye):

> And so the government tore the tiyospaye apart and forced the Sioux into the kind of relationship now called the "nuclear family"; forced upon each couple their individually owned allotment of land, trying to teach them "the benefits of wholesome selfishness without which higher civilization is impossible"...The civilizers did a good job on us, especially among the half breeds, using the stick and carrot method, until now there is neither tiyospaye -- nor a white style nuclear family, just Indian kids without parents (1990, 13-14).

The destruction of the family system was therefore strategic in the destruction of the nations. Mohawk midwife and activist Katsi Cook simply states "the nuclear family is the moral equivalent of nuclear power" (in Green 198, 17).

The new family role proposed by church and state for Native women was confined to the patriarchal ideals of wife and mother. "Field matrons" were sent to Native communities to civilize and "educate" Native women (Emmerich 1991). Schools were complicit in this mission. Their purpose was to prepare Native females for the domestic role that was expected of white women at the time (Fiske 1996; Wittstock 1980, 214). If ever Native women were drudges and slaves, it was in these institutions:

> The routine at St. Francis was dreary. Six a.m., kneeling in church for an hour or so; seven o'clock, breakfast, eight o'clock, scrub the floor, peel spuds, make classes. We had to mop the dining room twice every day and scrub the tables. If you were caught taking a rest, doodling on a bench with a fingernail or a knife, or just rapping, the nun would come up with a dish towel and just slap it across your face, saying, "You're not supposed to be talking, you're supposed to be working!" (Crow Dog and Erdoes 1990, 34).

From their traditional positions as autonomous, respected members of extended families, Native women were directed by the colonizer to assume the status of property; servant to the patriarch.

Sex and Sexuality

The double standard around sexual freedom as it is applied to men vs. women was not known to many Native societies. Chastity and fidelity were valued in many cultures; in the case of the Sioux, men's virginity was equally as important as women's (Powers 1986, 74, 88). In those cultures where sexual freedom was condoned, both men and women controlled their own pre and post-marital activities. Of the Laguna Pueblo, Leslie Marmon Silko says:

> Sexual inhibition did not begin until the Christian missionaries arrived. For the old-time people, marriage was about teamwork and social relationships, not about sexual excitement. In the days before the Puritans came, marriage did not mean an end to sex with people other than your spouse. Women were just as likely as men to have a *si'ash*, or lover (996, 67).

Sexual freedom was equally accorded to men and women in a number of nations of the Great Lakes region (Brant Castellano 1989, 46; Brodribb 1984, 87-88; Devens 1992, 125). Missionaries were horrified by these attitudes. They remarked, in particular, on the sexual conduct of the women:

> ...Jesuit Superior Lalemant commented on the same 'problem' of meetings between men and women initiated equally by either sex. He expressed disgust at the 'libertinage to which the girls and women here abandon themselves' noting, in common with Sagard, that 'the girls boast of seeking the young men' (Anderson 1991, 78).

Many Native societies were thus devoid of the patriarchal/Christian attitudes that dictate a woman's expression of sexuality to be more shame-based than a man's.

The social stigma that is attached to a woman's expression of sexuality was notably absent for some Native societies. While excessive sexual activity was deplored for both sexes among the Navajo, women who engaged in premarital sexual activity did not suffer social stigma (Shepardson 1995, 168). This has also been documented about the Cherokee:

> Premarital sexual freedom among the Cherokee extended to some degree to the postmarital state. While adultery constituted grounds for divorce, neither sex had recourse to any greater sanction for this transgression (Sattler 1995, 222).

Children born out of wedlock were also free of the stigma that has characterized this "illegitimate" status in Western society (Gunn Allen 1986, 49-50). Women were therefore not oppressed by these situations. Leslie Marmon Silko asserts: "New life was so precious that pregnancy was always appropriate, and pregnancy before marriage was celebrated as a good sign" (1996, 67-68). In spite of the extensive presence of Christianity in Native communities, traditional interpretations about pregnancy "out-of wedlock" can be traced into contemporary Native societies, as exemplified in this statement:

> There's no shame if someone gets pregnant. No shame. That's the difference between us and those people out there, the way we were brought up...

> So who cares what the man is! We have clans and we go by the mother. There's no bastards in this world. Whatever we are, that's what our children are. If there were six different children and six different fathers, that wouldn't matter...
>
> ...It doesn't matter if a couple lives together and does not get married. We didn't place an importance on pregnancy. If we get pregnant, we are. If we don't, we aren't. To non-Indians, it's such a big deal. To us, we take it with a grain of salt (Hallet Sundown (Seneca) in Wall 1993, 146-147).

Marla Powers also points out that there is no shame in "illegitimacy" in contemporary Sioux culture (1986, 57).

In terms of childbearing, Valerie Mathes asserts that Native women had control over their bodies by practising birth control:

> This situation was particularly apparent because of the often noticed fact that Indian families had only two or three children whereas white families had thirteen or fourteen. Indian women could, under certain circumstances, prevent sexual intercourse. A Chippewa woman, if she wanted to avoid sex with her husband, simply left the tent and moved to a menstrual hut. Furthermore, in almost all tribes a woman did not have to have intercourse during menstruation (Mathes 1975, 133).

Homosexuality was accepted in many Native societies (Brant 1994, 58-59; Crow Dog 1990, 158; Gunn Allen 1986, 196-199; Barbara-Helen Hill 1995, 70). As this was so, women were more free to express themselves according to their sexual preference. Leslie Marmon Silko says:

> Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, a man could dress as a woman and work with the women and even marry a man without any fanfare. Likewise, a woman was free to dress like a man, to hunt and go to war with the men, and to marry a woman. In the old Pueblo worldview, we are all a mixture of male and female, and this sexual identity is changing constantly (1996, 67).

The presence of the bedarche, though not necessarily linked to homosexuality, indicates the willingness to accept partnerships outside of the male/female construct:

> Roles... such as the "bedarche", which was socially sanctioned at various levels in at least 33 tribes, involved a woman's thorough shift to the male social and occupational

> role sometimes accompanied by homosexual marriage or sexual relationships (Laframboise and Heyle 1990, 459).

With European contact, homosexuality, the open sexuality of women, and the acceptance of children out of wedlock was immediately under attack. Women's sexuality became shame-based and subject to punishment. This arrival at this position is powerfully depicted in a scene where Jane Willis, herself an "illegitimate" Cree child, watches the village priest hold court to condemn two "sinners" who have conceived out of wedlock. He castigates the couple in front of a packed church audience as a means of instilling shame. When the baby is eventually stillborn, he remarks:

> "It was God's punishment to this sinful woman that her child be born dead. And the child, without the cleansing of its sins by baptism, is doomed to eternal hell for the sins of its mother" (Willis 1973, 99).

In spite of the fact that the father in this case is otherwise married (and the mother not), the sins of sexual expression fall on woman and child; a concept which contributes greatly to the oppression of both.

Violence Against Women

Although some studies contend that violence against women existed in early Native societies (see Brodribb 1984, 89; and Maltz and Archambault 1995, 47-48), there are also indications that it was notably absent in many cultures. In writing about the presence of violence in contemporary Native communities, Sylvia Maracle says:

> The roots of Aboriginal family violence stretch across the oceans-- they are not indigenous to our way of life. Our Elders tell us that incidents of violence -- be they sexual, mental, emotional, or spiritual -- were rare and swiftly dealt with in our communities prior to contact with Europeans (1993, 1)

Partricia Monture-Angus asserts that "violence and abuse (including political exclusions) against women was not tolerated in most Aboriginal societies" (1995, 175). She cites the journal of Mary Jemison, a white woman who spent 68 years among the Iroquois:

> "From all history and tradition it would appear that neither seduction, prostitution, nor rape, was known in the calendar of this rude savage, until the females were contaminated by the embrace of civilized man. And it is a remarkable fact that among the great number of women and girls who have been taken prisoners by the Indians during the last two centuries... not a single instance is on record or has ever found currency in the great stock of gossip and story which civilized society is prone to circulate, that a female prisoner has ever been ill-treated, abused, or her modesty insulted, by an Indian, with reference to her sex" (ibid., 186).

This absence of violence in Iroquois society was perplexing to the patriarchal settler society:

> The virtual absence of rape by Indian men , commented upon by many 18th and 19th century Indians and non-Indians alike, was a behavior difficult to comprehend in a European tradition which legalized both marital rape and wife beating (Wagner 1989, 5).

For the Sioux, wife battering was considered a blight on the community:

> In the pre-reservation society of the Lakota tiyospaye, wife battering was an extremely rare occurrence. It was viewed as behaviour contrary to Lakota values and was thought of as the breaking of social law. Wife battering disrupted the harmony of the people and the camp. As a result, it was very seriously looked down on (Lynn Plume in Reyner 1991, 68-69).

When violence occurred, there were systems to deal with it. Among the Plateau peoples, "violence was considered shameful " (Ackerman 1995, 86). Lillian Ackerman outlines the punishment for those involved in rape:

> Rape occurred in traditional Plateau societies, though informants insisted that it was an unusual crime and was not condoned. Two narratives of the punishment of rapists were collected in the field. Both involved turning the man over to a group of women who physically molested him and publicly humiliated him. He was then ejected by the village (ibid., 87).

This is similar to the punishment that existed traditionally among the Sioux:

> Once a man battered his wife, she was free to make him leave her lodge if they lived among her tiyospaye... From then on he could never marry again. Brothers were obliged by social law to retaliate by speaking to him, beating him, or even killing him. If the couple lived among the man's relatives, his parents were obligated to get her away and return her to her tiyospaye.
>
> In a situation in which a household had been broken because of abuse, it was not known as a divorced family as it is today. It was known as a broken household, and the woman was viewed as honorable for having self-respect in leaving the destructive relationship behind.
>
> A man who battered his wife was considered irrational and thus could no longer lead a war party, a hunt, or participate in either....The wife batterer could no longer own a pipe. ... A man who killed his wife was thought to be not Lakota anymore.... His name would never be spoken again. He would cease to exist (Lynn Plume in Reyner 1991, 71).

Colonization brought with it epidemic violence against Native women and children. This was achieved in part through state policies, as violence was instilled in children who were placed in residential schools and abusive foster homes (Maracle 1993, 1,4; MacDonald 1993, 5). Many women see violence in Native communities as the outcome of stripping men of autonomy and dignity (Jaimes 1991, 325; Powers 1986, 173). The practices of the state have stripped Native men of their ability to "provide and protect":

> When they took our kids away and the women were yelling and screaming, the men, who were supposed to be the protectors, had to stand and watch it happen... These men felt helpless and frustrated, and because they couldn't take it out on white people, because of the guns, or whatever, the frustration and anger was turned on someone weaker (unidentified male in Anderson 1993, 1).

Frustration and rage met alcohol, which created conditions for unprecedented violence (White Hill in Reyner 1991, 7). Traditional ways were replaced with an internalized violence, assisted by alcohol and drugs:

> As traditional ways continued to erode, our people became lost to the bottle, drugs and solvents. Addictions contributed to the downward spiral of learned violent behaviour. We saw violence all around us -- it became part of our day-to-day interactions. We questioned our own self-worth as a people and began to internalize the anger, bitterness, resentment and poor self-esteem. More and more often, what we sought was

> to block out the pain. This situation was coupled with being poor and unable to participate in the social and cultural fabric of our community. There came a generation who had learned violence well and practised it as a way of life (Maracle 1993, 4).

As I have demonstrated throughout this section, the destruction in Native communities (as displayed by violence in this case) is the result of a stripping away of Native culture, and then stuffing the gap with negative teachings, values, attitudes, and behaviours. This is assisted by poverty, addictions, and disempowerment.

APPLICATION OF GENDER EQUITY EVIDENCE

In this section I have tried to highlight some of the documentation of gender equity in a number of Indigenous societies. I do not propose that there is such a thing as a utopian society in which unfettered equality exists. What I conclude is that traditional Indigenous societies were generally more equitable for women in a number of areas, and that over the centuries, this equity was eroded by European contact.

Exploring these themes is a way of answering the question "where have I come from?" The Native woman may thus associate herself with Indigenous tradition in which she had a place of esteem. She may begin to analyze how this changed, and think about how she may apply this past to her current life, and that of the generations to come.

STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

In spite of all the attempts to annihilate Native culture and the understanding of women therein, many Native women have been successful in resisting an imposed role and identity. What has allowed Native women to resist, resurrect, and construct an identity that does not comply with the colonizer's determination to define a Native woman's place?

In this section I will offer a look at some of the strategies of resistance I have found in literature, with the intention of sharing with the reader my preliminary understanding of Native female resistance to negative definitions of their being. This is a four part discussion: What has assisted Native women in their resistance?; What actions or attitudes have they engaged in as part of their resistance?; What identity do they maintain or adopt that provides alternatives to the negative stereotypes?; and How is this manifested in the role they play in their communities?

This section is thus a continuation of the questions posed by Sylvia Maracle: where have I come from?; where am I going?; and once I get there, what are my responsibilities? By looking at the way women have resisted, we can build on traditions of resistance. We can see where we are going in terms of alternative identities that may be adopted. Then, it becomes clear that we have responsibilities in this regard, and we can see how some of these responsibilities are carried out.

FOUNDATIONS OF RESISTANCE

What has assisted Native women to take a position of resistance?

Strong Female Role Models

Role models are abundant in the writings of many Native women. Usually these role models are older women who guide by example, and in this way support the younger women in their struggles against racism and sexism. Often these women are (blood) relatives or are

conceived of as relatives in terms of the role they play.[1] There are, therefore, many grandmothers that surface in the works of Native women; the most well-known, perhaps, being Maria Campbell's "Cheechum" (1973). This (great) grandmother is an anomaly in Campbell's family and community in that she resists not only the government, but also the church and its undisputed power over the people . She has an acute understanding of the destructive processes that colonization has put in place. In one scene, she whips Maria for adopting an attitude of internalized racism. She tells her about the in-fighting in Metis history, and explains to her :

> "The white man saw that that was a more powerful weapon than anything else with which to beat the Halfbreeds, and he used it and still does today. Already they are using it on you. They try to make you hate your people" (1973, 47).

Cheechum is not afraid to confront the men around her. In the midst of the drunken violence that takes over one of the community gatherings, Cheechum leads the women to lock the men in the basement. Campbell states, "When they tried to climb out Cheechum would hit them on the head with her cane" (52).[2]

Strong women are prominent in a number of other autobiographical works, as described by Beth Brant. Citing the works of Minnie Freeman (1978), Ruby Slipperjack (1987, 1992), Alice French (1976, 1991), Ignatia Broker (1983), Maria Campbell (1973), Lee Maracle (1976), Madeline Katt [Theriault] (1992), Florence Davidson (in Blackman 1982), Gertrude Bonnin [Zitkala-Sa] (1921), and Verna Johnson (1977), Brant states:

> Deep connections with our female Elders and ancestors is another truth that we witness. Grandmothers, aunties, all abound in our writing. This respect for a female wisdom is manifested in our lives, therefore, in our writing (1994, 12).

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[1] The use of familial terms for non-blood relatives is common in the Native community. It often denotes a relationship of sharing, teaching and learning, and guidance.

[2] For a more comprehensive description of Cheechum and the other strong female role models in *Halfbreed*, see Acoose 1995, 93-98).

This is evident as well in fiction writing, such as Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* (1993). Grandmother figures shape this novel and the lives of the young females in it. They present alternatives to dependence and oppression for Native women, as in the example of Old Nora, who, upon the death of her husband, sets out to live in the bush with her daughters so that they won't be dependent "on some man" (96).

In the assertion of their power, many of these grandmothers display an omnipotence that makes a strong impression on the consciousness of the young female. Anna Lee Walters remembers her Otoe Grandmother as tough, strong, self-sufficient, and "a believer" (1992, 197-200). She describes her in the following way:

> There were many facets to her that I found quite miraculous. She was able to wrestle snakes from the trees and sweep them out of the house, and work like a man bailing hay in the barn. At times she was more stubborn than a mule, summing up her feelings with one word, saying "Humph!" through a closed mouth and pursed lips. Other times, she expressed sensitivity and tenderness like no other person I've even known (ibid., 49).

Leslie Marmon Silko depicts her grandmother as "unafraid of anything in the hills" and "the horsewoman who would ride any bronco" (1996, 17). This woman could move in and out of what western society has known as the male purview:

> My Grandma Lily had been a Ford Model A mechanic when she was a teenager. I remember when I was young she was always fixing broken lamps and appliances. She was small and wiry, but she could lift her weight in rolled roofing or boxes of nails. When she was seventy-five, she was still repairing washing machines in my uncle's coin-operated laundry (ibid., 66).

Silko sees her grandmother within the context of the "strong, sturdy women" whom were most admired "in the old days" (ibid., 66).

Role models allow Native women to resist non-factual historical and literary stereotypes. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn cites her role models as women who had a place in her life directly, in opposition to popular characters like Sacajewea and Pocahontas; the "heroines whose virtues have been extolled by whites" (1996, 100). For Cook-Lynn, role models are often women who have resisted assimilation:

> Now and again when I think about this I am moved to try to say something about the women who have influenced me, and most often they are not people who have gained reputations through the white man's history, nor are they even those women of the newer generations who, since the turn of the century, have achieved intellectual status. I have a tendency to speak more often of the women who tended my childhood, though they usually did not seek success in modern school systems, nor did they even speak the English language (1996, 100).

Cook- Lynn bases her resistance in the example of preceding generations of Native women who, (unlike Sacajewea and Pocahontas) have resisted colonial processes throughout history (ibid., 103).

In addition to being role models, older Native women provide a sanctum against the negative influences of the outside world. Among these older women, the young Native female may learn alternatives to negative behaviours encouraged by mainstream policies. They can ground themselves in Native culture in order to protect them from the pressures outside. Lee Maracle writes:

> In our grannies' kitchens, where the scent of wood smoke and sumptuous meals cooked over a thousand fires lingered in the unpainted walls and cupboards, that is where I learned the laws which enabled me to love my children. In my granny's kitchen, the sweet smells and gentle words soothed the aches and pains of a six-year old growing up in a schizophrenic situation (1996, 68).

As teachers, the grandmothers are able to instill a strong, positive sense of identity in the younger women, which allows them to resist and move on. Mary Elizabeth Thunder demonstrates how a grandmother figure in her life helped in this way:

> For me Grandma Grace was like a keyhole through which a woman who was angry and dissatisfied with life (me) could receive glimpses of beauty and grace. She helped me to access a cellular memory that could bring me to a state of knowing. This knowing, or remembrance of *"what a woman is"* helped me to let go of rage and despair, shame and anger, and begin to walk the path of *gratefulness and beauty of life"*. (1995, xii).

Grandma Grace replaces the negative stereotypes with an understanding of self that is distinctly female, and in so doing is strategic in helping this young woman access a positive Native female identity.

Connection With Other Native People

Many Native women credit their strong sense of identity to interaction with other Native people. Wilma Mankiller documents the development of her identity through involvement at the Indian (friendship) centre, and in particular, through the awakening of her political consciousness as a result of her involvement at Alcatraz (1993, 186-205). Maria Campbell finds a healthy self-identity through the companionship of other Native people and her involvement in Native organizations (1973, 157). Anna Lee Walters also finds "healing" in the companionship of "Indian people who had no doubts about their identity or mine" (1992, 53). Regarding her interaction with Native people in Santa Fe, Walters writes "Hundreds of miles from Oklahoma, I had come home." (53). In her search for "home", and an identity therein, Janet Campbell Hale speaks of having a place in an "inter-tribal urban Indian community" (Hale 1993, 186).

Leslie Marmon Silko demonstrates how the solidarity of a community can be a source of strength and identity. She describes a scene in which she witnesses all the members of a Yaqui village leave their houses simultaneously to attend a ceremony for someone who has recently died. In observing this, she remarks:

> To be a people, to be part of a village, is the dimension of human identity that anthropology understands least, because this sense of home, of the people one comes

> from, is an intangible quality, not easily understood by American-born Europeans (1996, 90).

Identity is nurtured within a community of people, be they urban or rural. Whereas the link to land is critical to Native people (as I will explore in the next section), the link to community members sets the conditions for resistance, and allows continuity in the face of displacement from traditional lands:

> The Yaquis may have had to leave behind their Sonoran mountain strongholds, but they did not leave behind their consciousness of their identity as Yaquis, a people, as a community. This is where their power as a culture lies: with this shared consciousness of being part of a living community that continues on and on, beyond the death of one or even of many, that continues on the riverbanks of the Santa Cruz after the mountains have been left behind (Marmon Silko ibid., 90).

Community solidarity founded in enforced change or hardships can also nourish Native identity. This solidarity engenders resistance to assimilation, and an affirmation of being a Native person. In the Northwest coastal village in Lee Maracle's *Ravensong* (1993), the villagers work together to take on a flu epidemic, to put out a deadly fire, and to administer justice to an abuser who is shot by his wife. This collective manner of dealing with hardships highlights a community spirit which leads the protagonist to the conclusion that she can not have a relationship with a white boy from across the bridge. The community spirit, arising in part from a history of hardship, feeds her sense of identity. When turned down, the protagonist's suitor asks her: "Is it because I'm white?". She reflects on everything the community has been through and responds, "No...It's because you aren't Indian."(1993, 185).

Native women make connections among themselves as a further means of resisting negative impositions on their identity. In an article about an Ojibwe women's gathering, Renee Senogles states:

> Women need each other for the continuation of the culture. Women need each other to not feel crazy in this society that disempowers and demeans them. Women need each other for affirmation of their individual and collective reality (Senogles 1993, 21).

Wilma Mankiller writes about the strength she received from meeting regularly with a group of women in Lou Trudell's kitchen. She says:

> We talked about many subjects. We discussed our children, the emerging women's movement, the role of Native American women, Indigenous rights, the environment, and politics...
>
> ...None of us was quite sure where we where we were headed, but we all knew that there was no turning back. The outward foundations of our lives had already crumbled, and we had to move on.

Meeting with other women was a consciousness raising activity for Mankiller and her friends. It moved them closer to defining themselves and their work as Native women. In Mankiller's case, the shift was from non-autonomous housewife to Principal Chief of the Cherokee nation.

Connection to the Land

Native women gain strength and a sense of themselves through identification with the land. This is evident in the writings of Native women, as Beth Brant indicates:

> From Pauline Johnson to Margaret Sam Cromerty, Native women write about the land, the land, the land. The land that brought us into our existence, the land that houses the bones of our ancestors, the land that was stolen, the land that withers without our love and care. This land that calls us in our dreams and visions, this land that bleeds and cries, this land that runs through our bodies (1994, 14).

Many Native women situate and define their personal existence within the land:

> I know that without my land and my people I am not alive. I am simply flesh waiting to die (Armstrong 1997, 17).

As described by Leslie Marmon Silko, land *is* identity:

> The landscape sits in the center of Pueblo belief and identity. Any narratives about the Pueblo people necessarily give a great deal of attention and detail to all aspects of a landscape. For this reason, the Pueblo have always been extremely reluctant to relinquish their land for dams or highways (1996, 43).

Land offers a way of seeing oneself, of understanding oneself, and of learning about oneself. It offers an identity to Native women, and the means by which that identity may be continually shaped:

> We have been taught by Elders and Traditional People that one cannot answer the question "Who am I?" until one knows where s/he comes from...You have to go out and be with your first teacher, your mother, the earth. You have to take off those other clothes, those other glasses that you put on to present yourself to the "other" world, and see what it is that we had (Skonaganleh:ra (Sylvia Maracle) in Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra 1989, 18).

In their explorations of life history and issues of identity, Native women often write about the relationship they had to the land in their childhood (Campbell 1973; Campbell Hale 1993; Marmon Silko 1996; Mourning Dove 1990). Those that have strayed from the land feel a need to rekindle that relationship, and thus reclaim the Indigenous education that is found within. Haunani-Kay Trask sees her relationship with the land as an integral part of her identity formation and her place within her nation :

> To know my history, I had to put away my books and return to the land. I had to plant taro in the earth before I could understand the inseparable bond between people and 'aina. I had to feel again the spirits of nature and take gifts of plants and fish to the ancient altars. (Trask 1993, 154).

Janice Acoose begins her chapter entitled "Reclaiming Myself" by describing a return visit to her family homelands (1995, 17-18). This return to *place* as well as to people is apparently significant in directing her struggle against the part of her person that was "heavily indoctrinated by the power of white european canada's many christian patriarchal institutions"[3] (ibid., 19).

[3] The absence of capitalization of the proper nouns in this passage is intentional on the part of Acoose.

A visit to the Montana battleground where the cavalry caught Chief Joseph is significant to Janet Campbell Hale in terms of identity formation. This visit promotes a strong sense of identity with her paternal grandmother. The place allows her to feel a direct connection:

> The cold reached my bones, yet I stood in the snow and felt myself being in that place, that sacred place. I saw how pitifully close lay the mountains of Canada. I felt the biting cold. I was with those people, was part of them. I felt the presence of my grandmother there as though two parts of her met each other that day; the ghost of the girl she was in 1877 (and that part of her will remain forever in that place) and the part of her that lives on in me, in inherited memories of her, in my blood and in my spirit (1993, 158).

At the end of the book, Campbell Hale returns to the reservation of her childhood as part of a circling back on her identity. She brings her daughter with her in an attempt to forge the multi-generational connection to the land:

> Now that she has an interest in such things, now that she's grown, I thought, I should take her home with me. Show her where I used to live...Maybe even something of the feeling for the land. She'll remember now (ibid., 170).

Campbell implies a displacement from the land when she comments that the reservation will never be her home, that she is "estranged from the land" (ibid., 185); but at the same time, she connotes a connection to place through this description of the landscape:

> When I first left the West, I dreamed of mountains for weeks -- maybe longer. the air is crisp and clean, and the colors are intensely vivid -- yellow wheat, blue sky, many shades of green grass, shrubs and trees -- even the plains, near-black plowed earth seems intense, deep and rich...
>
> Almost anywhere in the West would seem like this to me, I suppose. But I'm not just anywhere -- not at all -- I'm home (ibid., 70).

The association with land-as-female is evident in the thinking of many Native women. In connecting with the land, Native women are able to connect with the female sense of themselves. This assists in the verification of their Native female identity, as explained by Edna Manitowabi:

> When those old women and those old men said "You have to go home to your mother," I took it literally. I tried to figure out what they meant. At first I thought they meant my biological mother, but she died when I was twenty-one. Then I thought maybe they wanted me to go back to the reserve. Later on I figured out that it had to do with the Earth. It was when I started to ask myself questions about woman, that's when I realized I had to find it from the earth. "Go home to your mother. You need to be with your mother." Those words clicked.
>
> When I connected to the earth, it was like a mirror, like seeing myself. And when I saw a crane or a bulldozer digging into the Earth it was like a form of rape. I just felt like that machine was scarring me. I began to realize that Earth is Woman and what happens to woman happens also to her. And she's feeling that...As a woman comes into her own spirit she finds that Spirit within her and she begins to stand up. I'm just coming to that. It's like I talked about all along, but it's only now that I've really come to understand it. (in Brant Castellano and Hill 1995, 245).

The association of earth as female assists some Native women to locate the responsibilities inherent in their Native female identity. Beverly Hungry Wolf writes:

> From my Native ancestors I inherited a special closeness to the land. They treated the Earth like a mother... The Earth is thought of as Mother because she provides all that we need, and she is deeply revered. Traditionally our people have great respect for women because women create life.
>
> ...The Earth as Mother has nurtured all people, in the same way that I as mother have nurtured my own children. This knowledge is part of that special closeness I felt for nature (Hungry Wolf 1996 in Miller and Chuchryk, 77).

Connection with the land for a Native women is therefore significant in terms of being able to resist, to stand up against the outside forces, and to define her role in relation to her community.

Storytelling

Storytelling is central to Native resistance and the preservation of Native culture. For Leslie Marmon Silko, stories define identity:

> ...the stories were valuable because they taught us how we were the people we believed we were. The myth, the web of memories and ideas that create an identity, is part of oneself. This sense of identity was intimately linked with the surrounding terrain, to the landscape that has often played a significant role in a story or the outcome of a conflict (1996, 43).

Marilou Awiakta also speaks of story, land and people being integrated in terms of creating an identity (1993, 154). Story is central to Awiakta's personal identity and the worldview she expresses through the writing of *Selu: Seeking the Corn Mother's Wisdom* (1993). The story of corn is woven throughout this book in an effort to recapture Indigenous knowledge and apply it to modern day life. Through the story of corn, Awiakta shapes her identity.

Stories are important in that they protect Native people from negative influences of the outside world. Leslie Marmon Silko describe how storytelling allows Native people to maintain familial and ancestral connections.

> When I was a child at Kawaik, in the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico, the old folks used to tell us to listen and to remember the stories that tell us who we are as a people. The old folks said the stories themselves had the power to protect us and even to heal us because the stories are alive; the stories are our ancestors. In the very telling of the stories, the spirits of our beloved ancestors and family become present with us (Marmon Silko 1996, 152).

Paula Gunn Allen asserts that stories provide a means to resist destruction and assimilation:

> Since the coming of the Anglo-Europeans beginning in the fifteenth century, the fragile web of identity that long held tribal people secure has gradually been weakened and torn. But the oral tradition has prevented the complete destruction of the web, the ultimate disruption of tribal ways. The oral tradition is vital; it heals itself and the tribal web by adapting to the flow of the present while never relinquishing its connection to the past. (Gunn Allen 1986, 45).

The ability to return to traditional stories is critical for Native people seeking a sense of identity founded within Native culture:

> Through a mutual learning experience for the storyteller and the listener, the teachings of our way of life are shared. Our cultural beliefs, value system, warnings and advice

> because of the experience of our history are imprinted upon listeners who may then carry them forward into the practical use of their everyday lives.
>
> Our cultural rebirth happened as it was supposed to happen, because of our members who searched for their identities and their meanings, and or storytellers who were available to share with them what information had been preserved up to that point (Jacko 1992).

The teachings within traditional stories also provide the foundation for a strong Native female identity. The respect accorded to Native women in many traditional stories can assist Native women in retaining an understanding of their power. In the section on traditions of gender equity, I referred to several creation stories that are female centered (page 65). Stories like the White Buffalo Calf Woman story reinforce the value of Native women in their societies:

> In male-dominated cultures (Judaism, for example), the law-giver is male. However, in Lakota culture, the rituals, ceremonies and behaviour codes of the "good Red Road" were brought from Wakan Tanka (The Great Mystery) by a woman -- the White Buffalo Calf Woman (Peterson in Reyner 1991, 83).

Leslie Marmon Silko indicates that a positive sense of herself as a woman is based in, and maintained by traditional stories:

> But the old-time people always say, remember the stories, the stories will help you be strong. So all these years I have depended on Kochininako and the stories of her adventures.
>
> Kochininako is beautiful because she has the courage to act in times of great peril, and her triumph is achieved by her sensuality, not through violence and destruction. For these qualities of the spirit, Yellow Woman and all women are beautiful (1996, 71-72).

Marilou Awiakta explains how a story of her mother's helped her to survive alienation and the dispossession of a significant female experience. Her mother had told her stories about traditional birth practices, highlighting the importance of burying the baby's placenta in the earth (1993, 156). These stories prove invaluable to her upon the birth of her first child. Awiakta gives

birth in the sanitized environment of the hospital, which prevents her from touching her baby for the first three days. She finds herself completely alienated; distanced from experiencing new motherhood, until she remembers her mother's story.

> I sat on the bed in my room and looked through cracked venetian blinds at the concrete parking lot blaring in the June sun. Had I really had a baby? My breasts hurt with milk. Otherwise, for all I knew, I might have had a tumor taken out. I stared at the parking lot, feeling boxed in, bereft. I couldn't find any strands of the web to connect me to being a mother.
>
> Then my mother's birth story came back to me. "The truth doesn't change." Somewhere under the concrete was Mother Earth. Despite the weight of hospital rules, I *was* a mother. My heart eased. Finally, a nurse brought my baby, packaged in a blanket...My husband came and we went home to the family circle, where love began mending rents in our web of life, especially mine (157).

The strand of Awiakta's mother's story allows her to maintain and reconnect to an identity and worldview that is distinctly Native and distinctly female. Such stories can be applied to the most modern contexts, thereby allowing women to resist negative images and situations that they are under pressure to accept.

ACTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF RESISTANCE

What actions or attitudes have Native women engaged in as part of their resistance?

Recognizing Negative Stereotypes

A preliminary step in resisting a negative and imposed identity is the recognition of stereotypes and images that are false. Many Native women talk about beginning with a deconstruction of the negative images that they encountered in their primary and secondary school education. They recognized that the images they were fed at these schools were a source of shame and the beginning of a sense of inferiority (Johnson in Vanderburgh 1977; Turner in Secretary of State 1975, 112; Willis 1973, 199). Some of these women rebelled against the false

images immediately. Anna Lee Walters writes about her early attraction to books, and the subsequent rage she experienced upon discovering the lies that are printed about Native people. She states: "I literally turned against books and the educational system (1993, 52). Theresa Johnson Ortiz talks about how she rejected participating in the perpetuation of negative stereotypes:

> The nuns told me to be an Indian in the school play. I was told to supplicate myself: get on my knees in gratitude before the founder of their order. My salvation was her reward; she had saved me from my barbaric and evil ways. I was chosen because I was an Indian. I was to re-enact the subjugation of my people. Their way of teaching perpetuated cultural genocide, the removal of our Indianness, demoralization and condemnation.
>
> I didn't perform in that school play nor did I offer a reason for not doing so. The words that would have expressed my feelings of shame, powerlessness, and utter loneliness were not mine to share. They were unknown to me (Theresa Johnson Ortiz in Hlodan 1993).

Ortiz is able to reject negative stereotypes while still developing the ability to name what is wrong with them.

Many women do not the confront negative stereotypes of their schooling until they are older:

> In school when I learned about the savage Iroquois and how they slaughtered the brave pioneers and priests, I made no connection between the text books and the Mohawks of which I was one. But at university, people began to ask questions about my Indianness and I realized that I had been socialized into an identity that totally ignored my heritage and history. This was the beginning of my conscious efforts to sort out what it means to me to be an Indian in modern society (Brant Castellano in Secretary of State 1975, 82).

Janice Acoose says that she did not have the "political consciousness or strength of spirit" (1995, 29) to allow her to challenge the racist assumptions of her high school education. By the time she went to university, however, she had gained sufficient strength from the voices of other Indigenous peoples to challenge one of her professors (ibid., 30-31). Mi'kmaq poet Rita Joe's

consciousness of the racism in history surfaced when her children began to criticize their high school history books (Rita Joe in Kelusultiek 1994, 51).

Speaking Up

When confronted with these insulting stereotypes, many Native women take steps to respond. In an incident where her friends are called squaws, Rita Joe speaks back to the racist perpetrator of the remark. She does this in spite of the fact that she can "pass" for a white woman:

> We stopped dead. "Who are you calling 'squaw'?" I asked.
>
> One of the boys -- a big guy, he looked like a college kid -- answered, "Not you. The one in the middle."
>
> Before he had even finished speaking, I swung my purse at him. "If you're calling my friend a squaw, we're all squaws, because we're all Native," I said. Oh, we let him have it (1996, 62).

Anna Lee Walters tells a story about how she responded to the "squaw" label in school:

> There was a pale boy with watery blue eyes under thick glasses who tormented me in junior high school. He called me squaw. I didn't know what it meant exactly, but I did know the implications were not good. Inevitably there was a confrontation. It happened during speech class when the teacher asked a question. I raised my hand to reply. Behind me, I hear him say to everyone else, "Let the squaw answer." Everyone heard. I stood up and turned toward him. The room became silent. Everyone looked at me. The teacher didn't move. I walked slowly to that boy, telling myself to be calm, and lifted my right hand back as far as it would go and slapped him with the outrage of several years of torment. I recollect a red hand print over his freckles that stayed on his face for a few minutes (1992, 211).

This response marks a turning point for Walters. She begins to drop away from school and become a troublesome student. It is a milestone in her journey of resistance.

Joanne Arnott offers a "Speak Out" exercise which she encourages people to use as a tool for "unlearning racism". She calls it "... a tool for educating people, a platform for people

targeted for oppression to speak *and be heard*" (1995, 75-76). As part of this process, she suggests covering three points:

1. What I want you to know about me and my people.
2. What I never want to hear again.
3. What I expect from you as my allies (ibid.).

In an attempt to encourage both Native and non-Native people to speak out against racism she states:

> We all learn the same racist crap and we all need to stop perpetuating it on ourselves, on one another and on the young people. Participating in the diminishing of ourselves and of others is how we have learned to survive. It takes conscious effort, storming and weeping and courageous collaboration to turn things around. There are many things that each one of us can do, actions large and small can be taken, alone, together. Heal old wounds, demand the fullness of life. Listen carefully. Speak out, for example (ibid. 80).

Writing as Resistance

Like speaking out, writing about negative stereotypes provides a means of both denouncing racist images and fostering more positive ones. As Julia Emberley has explored, Native women's writing can be read for "a critique of sexism, racism, colonialism, and economic exploitation as well as for its mark of cultural, and not essential, differences" (1993, 19).

Many Native women begin writing out of a need to respond to negative images of Native people. Rita Joe says she began writing in her thirties in response to the lies that negative stereotypes and negation of Native history in white man's texts (1996, 96). She states:

> I call my words a chisel, carving an image. Our image has been knocked down for too long by the old histories and old chronicles...When I wrote my second book, and into my third, I analyzed my history and my talk. I wasn't afraid any longer; I didn't give a damn what the historians said about us (ibid. 129).

Emma Laroque began writing with a similar motivation:

> As soon as I knew what writing was in grade eight, I wanted to do it. And mostly I think it came from a profound need to self-express because there was so much about our history and about our lives that, I quickly learned, has been disregarded, infantalized, and falsified. I think I had this missionary zeal to tell about our humanity because Indianness was so dehumanized and Métis-ness didn't even exist (in Lutz 1991, 181).

For Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, writing was a natural response to the oppression she began to sense as a child:

> Wanting to write comes out of that deprivation, though, for we eventually have to ask, what happens to a reasonably intelligent child who sees him or herself excluded from a world which is related and recreated with the obvious intent to declare him or her *persona non grata?* Silence is the first reaction. Then there comes the development of a mistrust of that world. And, eventually, anger.
>
> The anger is what started me writing. Writing, for me, then, is an act of defiance born of the need to survive. I am me. I exist. I am a Dakotah. I write. It is the quintessential act of optimism born of frustration . It is an act of courage, I think. And, in the end, as Simon Ortiz says, it is an act that defies oppression (in Swann and Krupat 1987, 57-58).

Writing is thus a political act that allows one to define oneself against the outside world. Julia Emberley suggests that Native women's writing does this by resisting in three ways:

> (1) The texts resist the normal conventions of literary classifications;... (2)The writings resist alignment of Aboriginal women with other critical practices such as feminism, for example... (3) Both in the characterization and as writing subjects, Aboriginal women are writing themselves and their people into history as subjects to and of their own making (1996, 99-100).

Both the art and the artist may define themselves through Aboriginal women's writing. Maria Campbell's *Halfbreed* (1973) has received a lot of attention because of the precedent it set in this regard:

> As one of the first Indigenous women speaking out...Campbell begins to understand how her identity has been constructed for her. Through the act of writing, the author begins to analyze her life and community, and then look at the ways she is connected to the larger canadian community. Inevitably, she awakens other Indigenous peoples' political consciousness (Acoose 1995, 91).

Campbell's autobiography made room for more writing of this genre, and in doing so opened space for Native women looking for a way to reclaim their identity.

Many Native women have indicated that writing offers a comprehensive strategy of resistance in that it confronts the outside world and heals the personal at the same time:

> In [Native women's] writing they are breaking silence, fighting racism and patriarchy, subverting the English language and creating their own language, putting English words to the test of an Indian world view, reconciling their tribal pasts with their individual presents, dealing with internalized racism, uniting powers, transforming the spiritual to the physical, maintaining the world view, values, and responsibility to the oral/word sacredness perpetuated by their grandmothers, maintaining and enlivening their spiritual connectedness within all that exists...(Charnley 1991, 42).

Writing can be part of a personal healing journey. In a chapter entitled "The Good Red Road: Journeys of Homecoming in Native Women's Writing" Beth Brant states:

> I conduct writing workshops with Native women throughout North America, and the overriding desire present in these workshops is to heal. Not just the individual, but the broken circles occurring in our Nations. So, writing does become the Good Medicine that is necessary to our continuation into wholeness (1994, 13).

Native women talk about the healing process that writing offers (Arnott 1995, 28 Brant 1994, 67-74; Kiju Kawi in Kelusultiek 1994, 121; Maracle 1996, 3-10, Mitchell in Kelusultiek 1994, 200-220; Walters 1992, 53). Anna Lee Walters states: "Writing released years of oppression. It made me whole and free" (53). It is writing, Walters claims, that allowed her to stop trying to follow the mainstream, and stop denying her tribal essence (53). Beth Brant describes the act of writing as listening and "coming home" (1994, 20-21), and changing her perception of herself (ibid., 120). After writing for a subversive newspaper at residential school (and getting caught), Mary Crow Dog states: "It was the kind of writing which foamed at the mouth, but which also lifted a great deal of weight from one's soul" (1990, 36). For these Native women writing creates a space where they can deal with anger, pain and sadness, and then begin to kindle positive feelings about their identity. Finally, it engenders direction and hope for the future, and pride in the past:

> We have found that the written word does not have to be wrapped in the thoughts of the colonizers, but rather can convey the resilience of our survival (Fife 1993, 2).

Language and Naming

Some Native women writers pay close attention to their use of language, as they see language as a colonial tool that must be addressed. Many Native writers choose to write bi-lingually, as a means of reclaiming their traditional voice (Brant 1994, 14). Writing in English is seen as problematic by some because of its connection to the colonizer.

Janice Acoose says she finds writing in English both a "painful and liberating" experience (1995, 12). This is due to the fact that "...too often, the knowledge and understanding of the ways of (my) ancestors is contradicted by the white-canadian-christian patriarchy's english language," (ibid.). Acoose voices a frustration at not being able to operate fully in the languages of her ancestors. At the same time, she claims she is liberated by the ability to convey Indigenous reality, and to recreate and rename in English (ibid.). She pays attention to her use of the language; she chooses to use *Indigenous* rather than other terms such *as Indian, Native, native, First Nations, Halfbreed, halfbreed, Aboriginal and aboriginal.* She does not capitalize proper nouns like canada, and she capitalizes Indigenous. By adopting a critical approach to language, she resists incorporating colonial concepts:

> Since these words name the white-christian patriarchy's constructs of Indigenous peoples, in the book I deconstruct the authoritative centre of the white-eurocanadian-christian patriarchy by using lower case letters to signal a politically motivated de-authorization in my life and thought of the concepts that had for too long held too much power (ibid., 13).

Acoose also talks about the process of renaming herself. She points out that the nuns attending her birth robbed her mother of the right to name her; they took it upon themselves to assign Acoose the name "Mary" (1995, 20). She rejects the label "Indian" and denounces the

colonial system that denied her the ability to assume part of her identity through her mother's lineage (ibid. 22). She states:

> This change in naming to a patronymic form strongly confirmed patriarchy and contributed to the effacement of women's influences. The effacement of Indigenous women as individuals is also reflected in some of the old documents such as baptismal certificates, applications for "Halfbreed" Scrip, and even in some of the census registers, where in the space reserved for women's names, individual women are generically referred to as "Indian woman." (ibid., 22-23).

Acoose finds empowerment as an Indigenous person when she is renamed Misko-Kisikawihkwe by an Elder from her father's community (ibid., 19).

Patricia Monture-Angus is also careful about her use of language. She does not call the provinces by their English names, rather, she refers to the territories according the Indigenous nations that have maintained them (1995). Her collection of essays, *Thunder in My Soul: A Mohawk Woman Speaks* (1995) reflects the evolution in her thinking about naming. She footnotes an article in which she refers to Native people as *First Nations*, explaining that, at the time of the second publication, she had come to see the term as too narrowly defined to capture the experience "of all original people resident in this territory now known as Canada" (ibid., 42). Monture-Angus also changes her own surname, and offers the following explanation:

> In 1991 when I got married, I assumed my husband's surname. This decision was about respecting the Cree family I married into. I use the two last names so that everyone knows how I am related to both the Crees and the Mohawks. My husband's name was Okanee. However, my husband is not by birth an Okanee. This happened to many Indian people. Our last names got all mixed up because of the application of Canadian laws about naming (ibid., 3).

Naming is a way for Monture-Angus to define an Aboriginal identity based in tribal traditions. In this situation, it is also an act of resistance against colonial practices that determined how names were assigned.

Monture-Angus also sees the value in consulting Indigenous languages when seeking clarity around Indigenous thought and resisting colonial concepts. Within this process, Monture-Angus is further able to reflect on the influence of colonization :

> When I am trying to understand traditional ways of being, I have found that learning the word in my own language and the literal interpretation facilitates my own understanding of the matter in question. When I first queried about the word for justice in Ojibwe, I was told "ti-baq-nee-qwa-win." When literally translated, it means, "to come before a system for something that has already been done wrong." It became obvious that this Ojibwe word was used to describe justice after the period of contact with European society's justice system. During our conversation, the grandmother repeated many times to me that there really is no word for justice in the Ojibwe language. I found our conversation interesting because it was most obvious the effect on the people and the language contact they had. The reference point for this word in the Ojibwe language was a system not their own (ibid., 238).

Language is therefore useful as a tool to measure and examine conflict between Indigenous and colonial concepts and systems. It allows the namer to leap across the ideological gaps and try to work within Indigenous systems that have been erased, in part by the effacement of Native languages.

Defining as Native/Woman

As a result of internalized racism, many Native people have chosen not to define themselves as Native (Aboriginal, Indigenous, etc.). This happens more frequently for lighter skinned people, who may choose to define as white (although the need to deny one's heritage may also lead to claiming an alternative ancestry that is not white)[4]. Some may not take this option; they claim their ancestry in spite of the pressures to flee. This has been demonstrated in the example where Rita Joe, mistaken for a white woman, confronts a racist who is calling her friends "squaws" (see page 97). With this act, Rita Joe resists the option to disappear as a Native

[4] In Richard Wagamese's novel *Keeper 'N Me* (1994), the main character adopts a black identity in response to his pain around being a Native person. His healing takes place when he returns to the reserve and realizes the incongruity of his charade.

person. Yet many Native people go through a process of denial, and then eventually accept their heritage. Their decision to claim an Indian identity is strategic in terms of healing and resistance to internalized racism.

In Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* (1983) the protagonist denies her heritage and tries to be a "white person" throughout the book. Her attempts at assimilation come to an end upon the death of her sister. The death marks a turning point in which she decides to follow in the sister's example of seeking understanding and acceptance of her Native heritage. Her denial is lifted, and she moves forward as a Native person in search of a better life for all Native people.

Joanne Arnott writes about her family's denial of Aboriginal ancestry:

> At this point, I am convinced that my father doesn't "know" that he is Native. I think perhaps one of his brothers, the most visibly Native of the bunch, "knows," but he has never spoken to me about it. My father's sister has been knowing/not knowing if for years, she has told and denied so many times that I get dizzy not thinking about it (footnote omitted) (1995, 64).

For Arnott, it is important to shake this denial and therefore to resist the oppressive forces that have created it:

> For my own sanity and for the welfare of my children, it has been crucial, pivotal and inescapable: I must reclaim my Native heritage, my roots, my Indian-ness (ibid., 65).

Rhonda Johnson talks about the difficulty and confusion that Metis people endure as a result of trying to place their Indian identity. She states that many Metis people live in denial about their Indian heritage, but that they feel guilty about it (1993, 156). For Johnson, acceptance of her Native ancestry is a way of resisting racism against Native people, and the racism that fed her denial about her heritage. By embracing her Native identity, she finds peace with herself:

> A Metis friend summed it up when he said that being Metis means that the Whites and the Indians are always fighting inside you. For the last while, the Indian inside me is winning. I felt that I am finally coming home (ibid.).

Some Native women have gone through a process whereby they reclaim a distinctly female identity. In *I Am Woman* (1996), Lee Maracle talks about how she moved from responding "as a person, without sexuality", to operating from a place of womanhood (1996, 16). Maracle sees this as an important step, as it involves deconstructing some of the racism and sexism that has resulted in the denial of Native womanhood:

> The denial of Native womanhood is the reduction of the whole people to a sub-human level. Animals beget animals. The dictates of patriarchy demand that beneath the Native male comes the Native female. The dictates of racism are that Native men are beneath white women and Native females are not fit to be referred to as women (ibid., 17-18).

By defining herself as a Native *woman*, Maracle can begin to refute some of the stereotypes:

> I AM WOMAN! Not the woman on the billboard for whom physical work is damning, for whom nothingness, physical oblivion is idyllic. But a woman for whom mobility, muscular movement, physical prowess are equal to the sensuous pleasure of being alive (ibid., 17)

Paula Gunn Allen offers another explanation for why Native women need to reclaim womanhood:

> Not until recently have American Indian women chosen to define themselves politically as Indian *women* -- a category that retains American Indian women's basic racial and cultural identity but distinguishes women as a separate political force in a tribal, racial, and cultural context -- but only recently has this political insistence been necessary. In other times, in other circumstances more congenial to womanhood and more cognizant of the proper place of Woman as creatrix and shaper of existence in the tribe and on the earth, everyone knew that woman played a separate and significant role in tribal reality (1986, 30).

Claiming womanhood is a necessary response to the negative impact of colonial values and systems. The way in which womanhood is claimed, however, must be based within Aboriginal culture.

Taking A Stand On Feminism

In challenging certain aspects of Anglo-American feminism[5], some Native women resist collaboration with, and assimilation into a society that has otherwise been destructive to them. Julia Emberley sees this as both a challenge to the "double blindness to racism and ethnocentrism within the tradition of Anglo-American feminism" and a confrontation of "the very terms and definitions of gender on which their [feminist] theoretical knowledge and culture is based" (1993, xv.)

Some Native women have written about the racism and ethnocentrism that they have felt in certain feminist circles. Haunani-Kay Trask states that she has no use for American feminist ideology as it "insisted on the predictable racist assertion that all peoples are alike in their common "humanity" -- a humanity imbued with Enlightenment values and best found in Euro-American states" (1996, 909) . Lee Maracle talks about how she has not felt a sense of solidarity with white women in the feminist movement because of their failure to acknowledge the racism that women of colour endure (1990, 166). Referring to the feminists that helped her campaign to free her husband from prison, Mary Crow Dog says "...with all their good intentions, some had patronized me, even used me as an exotic conversation piece at their fancy parties" (1990, 244). This patronizing and exclusive attitude is also discussed by Mary Ellen Turpel (1993, 183), Winona Stevenson (1993, 160) and Patricia Monture-Angus, who states that she does not see feminism removed from the colonial process (1995, 177).

[5] I wish to acknowledge that there are many schools of feminist thought and that, in fact, this thesis could be seen as a feminist work. Native women have taken a stand against certain practices and approaches in the feminist movement, as I have indicated here.

Viewed in terms of a neo-colonial process, the Anglo-American feminist movement is understood by some as another attempt to claim and assimilate Native women:

> A lot of times when we try to interact with other women's groups, particularly groups that call themselves "feminist" groups, they come to the table with equally as passionate, strong, opinions as that "box" that we don't want to be in. They try to make it more palatable because, after all, we have this universal sisterhood; *we* know that this does not exist. We protest the notion that the "box" is good and we deny attempts to have us attracted to it. (Skonaganleh:ra in Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra 1989, 10).

Sylvia Maracle (Skonaganleh:ra) infers that the movement for Native self-determination dismisses the possibility for a "universal sisterhood":

> In our community, we want to define ourselves and not in somebody else's context (which is what we see the "feminist" definition to be, for example) (Skonaganleh:ra in Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra ibid., 10).

The "universal sisterhood" that purports to trangress cultural boundaries is not a source of empowerment for Maracle. Rather, it is experienced as another attempt by a Euro-Western dominated group to subsume Native peoples and cultures within its boundaries.

Further to this, many Native women state that they can not separate their gender from their origin (Osennontion in Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra ibid., 15; Monture-Angus 1995, 177-178; Turpel 1993, 184). This is not surprising considering the fundamental differences in the traditional conceptualization of gender between the Indigenous and the Western world:

> ...how female genders are made differs considerably in a society in which gathering and hunting comprise the prevalent modes of production, where exchanges between men and women can be characterized as a form of balanced reciprocity, as compared to a capitalist society in which the exchange of women dominates the very constitution of its social relations (Emberley 1993, xv).

In spite of changes to traditional Indigenous economic systems and cultures, Native societies have maintained distinct principles and philosophies that stand in opposition to those found in Western societies. Haunani-Kay Trask takes exception to the assumption of "the essential value of individual accomplishment and ambition" she sees in American feminist ideology (1996, 909). Patricia Monture-Angus also has difficulty with the hierarchical separation of individual and collective rights, that is, the placing of one above the other (1995, 235). Many Native women conceive of themselves, rather, as part of a collective:

> Non-Indian feminists emphasize middle-class themes of independence and androgyny, whereas Indian women often see their work in the context of their families, their nations, and Sacred Mother Earth. Preservation and restoration of their race and culture is at least as important to Indian women as their individual goals for professional achievement and success, although many Indian women clearly have made important professional commitments and value the role of work in their lives (Laframboise and Heyle, 1990, 471).

Whereas some schools of feminism uphold the value of commitment to community, these women have been put off by the widely publicized aspects of feminism that emphasize advancement through a focus on the individual (which can imply a discounting of responsibility towards family, community and nation).

Native women often describe a woman's power to be located in a distinct realm from the men's. Winona Stevenson states: "When feminists talk of "power" in terms of gender, they assume that women do not have the same power as men and that women want the same power as men" (in Johnson et. al. 1993, 164). Like Laframboise and Heyle, Stevenson responds to those aspects of feminism that emphasize androgony. Likewise, Sylvia Maracle and Marlyn Kane assert that they are different from men, and that therefore, they do not seek equality or "sameness" (Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra 1989, 15). Other Native women have stated that they do not find solutions by seeking white male-defined positions of status and power (Monture-Angus 1995,

179; Turpel 1993, 184-185). They subscribe, rather, to a principle of gender balance, as manifested in distinct responsibilites for male and female.[6]

Because they understand a woman's power to be different, some Native women resist the mainstream suggestion that they need to mark their achievements in relation to men. They resist the label "feminist" because of the connotations it has assumed in popular culture; that one must "prove" oneself on (white) men's terms. This woman reacts to the label "feminist" as she sees it as a denial of her female power:

> I thought it was an accusation the first time I heard that I'm a feminist. No. I don't need to prove to a man how strong I am. I don't need to prove to anybody what I'm capable of . I don't have to prove who I am (Lorraine Canoe in Wall 1993, 295).

Competition with men as it occurs in mainstream culture holds no appeal for many Native women. In some cases, this results in holding fast to lifestyles and tasks as they existed in traditional socieites. The comments of this writer show that Sioux women take on a decidedly domestic/family focused role in opposition to the popularly constructed notion that feminism entails competition with men in their world:

> The [Sioux] women are not ardent feminists stressing female supremacy and competing with men; they are more concerned with family, community and tribal sovereignty. They have many choices, but the roles that are most important to them are the traditional ones of grandmother, wife, and homemaker (Reyner 1991, 6).

The position of these women is one of resistance, in that they decide not to enter into the domain of competition in a white man's world. They direct their efforts inward, and focus their energies on rebuilding their nation as they might have traditionally: as mothers and grandmothers at the centre

[6] The responsibilites of women and men will be discussed later, on pages 123-129.

of the family and community. They thus assert their sovereignty by rejecting a feminism that they understand to necessitate participation in a white man's society.

The efforts of many Native women to elevate their gender are implicit in the work they do on sovereignty, healing, and decolonization (Trask 1996, 915; Jaimes 1991, 335; Johnson et al. 1992, 171). They see the larger scope of work as the only way to address their situation. As Patricia Monture-Angus points out, the oppressions against Aboriginal women must be addressed in all their complexities:

> Organizing against a single form of violence -- men's -- is not a "luxury" I have experienced. The general definition of violence against women is too narrow to capture all the experiences of violence that Aboriginal women face. This narrow definition, relied on by dominant institutions, structures and the reality within which I live in a way that is most counter-productive. In fact, this constraint feels very much like an ideological violence. The fragmentation of violence and the social legitimization of only the wrong of physical violence results in a situation where I am constrained from examining the totality of my experience within a movement that is advanced as offering the solution to that violence. The simple truth is feminism as an ideology remains colonial (1995, 171).

Winona Stevenson concurs with Monture-Angus in her assertion that Native women do not have the "luxury" of focusing solely on the oppressions they face as women (in Johnson et. al. 1993, 171). They see that to accept feminism as an answer to their oppression would efface all of the other oppressions that contribute to the dire situation of Native women. Many Native women have, therefore, bypassed feminism in order to address their oppression as part of the larger process of colonization.

Rebelling Against the Church

A significant and pervasive ideology that Native women have resisted is Christianity, or, as Barbara-Helen Hill refers to it, "churchianity"[7]. This is both in response to the oppressive

[7] Hill states: "I use the word "churchianity" because it is not necessarily Christian teachings that are wrong, rather, the church's interpretation that has destroyed the people" (1995, 13). Whereas I would like to acknowledge this respectful position of Hill, I will use the term "Christianity" in this section as I find it difficult to make a separation between teacher and teachings when discussing Christian traditions of patriarchy.

policies of the church, and out of a need to hold on to or rediscover Native spiritual tradition. Carol Devens traces this resistance to the days of the missions:

> "It is you women," charged the men of a Montagnais band in New France in 1640. "...who are the cause of all our misfortunes, -- it is you who keep the demons among us. You do not urge to be baptized; you must not be satisfied to ask this favour only once from the Fathers, you must importune them. You are lazy about going to prayers; when you pass before the cross, you never salute it; you wish to be independent. Now know that you will obey your husbands" (1992, 7)

It is likely that the Native women in this case are resisting because of the changes the church brings to their culture and community, but also because they recognize the impact it will have on their autonomy. They recognize the destruction and resist the force at work.

Many contemporary Native women are vocal about the role of the church in the destruction of Native society. Maria Campbell states:

> My personal opinion is that when it comes to Aboriginal people in Canada, we have the church to "thank" in all areas, whether we are Métis, non-status or whatever, for the dilemma that we are in now! Certainly the church has always been the "man coming in front of " the oppressor, the colonizer" (in Lutz 1991, 47).

Beth Brant writes that the bible destroyed Native culture (1994, 50), and that it brought a new kind of story, full of cacophony and cruelty (ibid., 54). Leslie Marmon Silko points to the conflicts between Pueblo and Christian worldviews, explaining how this caused her to begin to resist the church at an early age:

> Because our family was such a mixture of Indian, Mexican, and white, I was acutely aware of the inherent conflicts between Indian and white, old-time beliefs and Christianity. But from the start, I had no use for Christianity because the Christians made up such terrible lies about Indian people that it was clear to me they would lie about other matters also. My beloved Grandma A'mooh was a devout Presbyterian, but I can remember, even as a little girl, listening to her read from the Bible and thinking, " I love her with all my heart, but I don't believe in the Bible." I spent time with Aunt Susie and Grandpa Hank, who was not a Christian. The mesas and the hills loved me; the Bible meant punishment (1996, 17).

Joanne Arnott analyzes the impact of Christian ideology on women through Western culture:

> Western art, so thoroughly compromised by and entangled with Christianity, fails entirely to celebrate what is unique about women as women, and overexposes our nakedness along with fruits, vegetables, farmlands and animals felled by the hunt, all presented with the presumption of male audience, sentience and dominance. Religious themes celebrate suffering, death and resurrection: women's roles are those of the mourning, the damned, and, very occasionally the mother, sometimes breastfeeding, never birthing (ibid., 108-109).

For Arnott, negative images and the negation of women's power can be traced through art to Christian thinking. The result, she states, is that women raised within the confines of Christian mainstream can "live out our entire lives without finding even a taste of the sacred within ourselves" (ibid. 108).

Native women are critical of the limitations placed on women and their role in society via Christianity. Christian ideology is implicit in the evolution of dichotomous thinking around women:

> In such christian dogmatic tradition, women are merely appendages to men and are generally represented as either innocently pure virgins, virtuous mothers, or fallen women. Even the foremost mother, according to a very narrow christian biblical tradition, immaculately conceived the child Jesus and thus maintained her virginal state. This kind of christian fundamentalist obsession with purity and virginal innocence has created extremely problematic situations for all women, and when sexism is compounded with racism, such obsession creates overwhelmingly intolerable situations for Indigenous women (Acoose 1995, 54).

Women's social and economic choices are limited by such ideology, as expressed by Joanne Arnott:

> Being Catholic, I was raised with images of the Divine and Holy Female, in the forms of a God-Mother and numerous martyrs and saints, perverted by the bloodymindedness and misogyny of church traditions, but present nonetheless. Just as the public domain led me to believe I could grow up to be a mother, secretary or teacher, the Catholic domain expanded my options. If you are unimaginative and blessed, you can bring new little babies to Jesus as wife-mother. If you like to travel, be a missionary. For the very

> ambitious (although you cannot chose this, you can pray for the honour), there are the sacred roles of martyr and saint to strive and die for (ibid., 107).

These limitations stand in contrast to the roles and responsibilities of women inherent in pre-Christian thought.

The return to traditional Native expressions of spirituality is a fundamental step for many Native people towards reclaiming their ancestry and a Native identity founded in Native philosophies and worldviews. For some Native women, the rejection of Christianity and return to Indigenous tradition is not only a means of confronting colonialism, but also of reconciling women's position in society:

> The impression many have gained in this Christian/misogynist place is the Girl's and Woman's most spiritual role is that of the sacrificial beast on the family altar. Movements by First Nations people to reclaim traditional healing ways, by Celtic-origins folk to revivify pre-Christian ways, and by women of all kinds to reclaim, revivify and/or recreate devotional practices linked to celebrations of Divine Female in some of Her limitless Forms, are all signs of an awakening of power after just a few centuries of the New Dark Ages (Arnott 1995, 100).

Cree Elder Rose Auger links the return to Native spirituality to an overall recovery of Indigenous nations:

> Part of this waking up means replacing women to their rightful place in society. It's been less than one hundred years that men lost touch with reality. There's no power or medicine that has all force unless it's balanced. The woman must be there also, but she has been left out! When we still had our culture, we had the balance. The woman made ceremonies, and she was recognized as being united with the moon, the earth and all the forces on it. Men have taken over. Most feel threatened by holy women. They must stop; remember, remember the loving power of their grandmothers and mothers (in Meili 1991, 25).

Marilou Awiakta juxtaposes Indigenous and Western creation stories to point to the need to reclaim Indigenous tradition. She challenges Christian notions that link sin with women. She "makes cider" out of the story of Eve and the apple in the garden of Eden:

> Myth is a powerful medicine. For centuries, the proverbial "Eden apple" has rolled through Western culture -- the arts, politics, theology, society -- and pointed its accusing, wounding stem at woman: "You are to blame for sin and destruction. You deserve to be punished." I refuse the apple. Instead, I reach for the strawberry - the powerful, healing medicine of Cherokee Eden (1993, 118).

Awiakta turns to an alternative (Cherokee) story about a strawberry, in which conflict between men and women is resolved through healing rather than blame and punishment (ibid.).

Some women, in spite of their ongoing participation in the Christian faith, have acted in rebellious ways towards the church policies and values that oppressed them in earlier years. Rita Joe talks about how she rejected the option of becoming a nun, and how, upon leaving the residential school, she did not go near a church because of the anger she felt about the regimentation of spirituality therein (1996, 56). She searched for "the spiritual part of me that would be my own" (ibid.). When she goes back to visit the church as a young adult, she presents an attitude of resistance:

> I wore my red, red shoes and a beautiful dress. My hair was long and I had lipstick on, about an inch thick. I wanted to show the nuns: "This is me. You have nothing to do with it, with the way I look or present myself. You have nothing to say about it. I dare you to say anything about it." That was the attitude I had (1996, 64).

Joe's presentation of herself is an act of defiance to the multiple oppressions she endured as a colonized woman. She had been one of thousands of children who had their long hair cropped and doused in gasoline to get rid of (often non-existent) lice. Her long hair is thus an assertion of a reclaimed Native identity. The red shoes, beautiful dress, and heavy lipstick appear to be an

assertion of a sexual identity in defiance of the sexual morals for women imposed by the church. At this visit, Joe presents an image of resistance.

Rita Joe further resists the sexual morays of the church by engaging in premarital sex:

> I fell for a young man in Halifax and went to Montreal with him, but I soon came back home again, alone. It was then that I found out I was pregnant... I knew that I had made a big mistake. I had rebelled against the regimentation I had experienced at the Subenacadie school and thought I could do anything; I thought I was my own boss (1996, 65).

Joe eventually has three children before she marries. Comments on the Christian-based morality of this are notably absent in her autobiography.

Edna Manitowabi also experiences youth pregnancies as part of a rebellion towards the church. In trying to understand a pattern of unplanned pregnancies, she states:

> I was also trying to figure out why sex had played such a destructive role in my life. I guess it must have dated back to my Catholic schooling and the values I received there. Sex outside marriage was wrong, wrong, wrong. My parents were also Catholic, and although they did not express these views very strongly and always accepted us girls when we came home with our babies, the did not have any other values that would have replaced the Catholic ones. Because I viewed sex in that light, birth control was out of the question. It seemed only just to me that I ran the risk of "getting punished" every time I slept with somebody....When I slept with somebody...I did it kind of destructively....In a way it was a kind of suicide (Manitowabi 1970, 21).

In the absence of anything to replace the values of Catholicism, the young Manitowabi uses her sexuality as a means of both rebelling against the oppressions of the church, and turning these oppressions inward on herself.

Barbara-Helen Hill credits the church for the (often) sexual nature of internalized abuse and low self-esteem among some Native people. In an article on sexual abuse, she states:

> The puritanical thinking and the strong influence of the church dictated sex a taboo subject. All of this brought shame to the once free, healthy Natives about their dress, their bodies, their parenting skills. They felt shame for their acceptance of sex as a natural part of life. Subsequently, the children learned shame (1995, 69).

Abuses endured through the church and residential school instilled sexual dysfunction that would stem generations. The shame and abuse took on a particularly violent character for Native women as a result of sexist understandings of women perpetrated by the church. Hill talks about the changes in the role of sex for women when traditional Native teachings are replaced:

> As a result we have generations of children experiencing abuse. We also have the puritanical teachings around sex. For example, sex is man's thing; men enjoy it; it's a woman's duty; it's dirty; save yourself for your husband. Also there was no mention of sex and sexuality. There was no nurturing and teaching of women's roles and men's roles as there once was (ibid.)

The result is the loss of a healthy sexuality for Native women.

In order to move around this problem, some Native women explore pre-Christian understandings of sex and sexuality.

Reclaiming Sex and Sexuality

Although the approaches to sex and sexuality in Native women's writing vary, there is agreement that sex must be reclaimed from the violent and male-serving position it currently occupies. Some Native women argue that mainstream culture has totally stripped women of their right to a healthy sexuality:

> Sexuality is promoted as the end-all and be-all of womanhood, yet perversely it is often a form of voluntary rape: self-deprecation and the transformation of women into vessels of biological release for men. Our bodies become vessels for male gratification, not the means by which we explore our own sexual wonderment. Any other sexuality is to be considered abnormal and to be derided (Maracle 1996, 24).

Many Native women reject the commodification of sexuality as it exists in mainstream society (Barbara-Helen Hill 1995, 73), and make it clear that this is the intellectual property of the west:

> Thinking of sex as an it and women as sex objects is one of the grooves most deeply carved in the Western mind. This groove in the national mind of America will not accept the concept of sex as part of the sacred generative power of the universe-- and of woman as a bearer of this life force. The life force cannot be owned as property, used and consumed -- or merchandised (Awiakta 1993, 252).

The commodification of sex is further seen as a means of oppressing people by virtue of both race and gender:

> From the golden halls of Vatican City to the styrchnine-laced paths of Jonestown, the story is the same: confine the minds and bodies of the followers, especially the minds and bodies of those who are poor and of colour, and make sure the women answer to only one person -- a white male who can rape at will, who can dole out forgiveness and redemption for a price (Brant 1994, 55-56).

In the aftermath of colonization, sex has become a tool whereby men, and particularly white men can oppress Native women.

Native women propose a number of alternative views to this unhealthy approach to sex and sexuality. Both Lee Maracle and Barbara-Helen Hill find it problematic that sex is equated with love. Hill states that it is a problem that "men have not been taught intimacy"; that they equate intimacy with sex, and sex with love (1995, 74). This kind of thinking leads to sexual abuse. Maracle separates sex and love, and asserts that it can be satisfying for women to have one without the other. She denounces sexist morals that prevent women from having sex outside of love and marriage (1996, 27-28).

Quoting Dennis Banks, Marilou Awiakta describes the sex act as "but a minute part of the overall act of love" (1993, 61). For Awiakta, sex is linked with love in that it is part of maintaining the overall harmony and balance of the world. At twelve years old, Awiakta receives a teaching from her mother that "sex is good and natural" and "after hunger and thirst... [sex is] the most powerful drive in the world" (ibid. 54-55). Awiakta's mother goes on to explain that sex is also part of the creative force of the universe, set in place to ensure the survival of the species. For this reason, Awiakta's mother cautions her against engaging in sex until she is prepared to bring life into the world (ibid.). The precautions around pre-marital sex that Awiakta receives are not, thus, rooted in sin, but in the force of creation. Awiakta comes away from this experience with positive feelings around sex and her sexuality:

> In sum, the idea was ingrained in me very young that sex is an integral power in the Creator's plan. That it is good, I am good, the opposite gender is good, provided the law of respect keeps everything in balance. A sacred power, a great responsibility (ibid., 56).

Sex can therefore be seen to be working in conjunction with, rather than against, spirituality. Like Marilou Awiakta, Barbara-Helen Hill frames sex as sacred in the sense that it is an expression of creation:

> Sexuality is human participation in creation and creativity. Procreation is the need for our species to continue. Sexuality and spirituality are interwoven. Our spirituality is our core. Sexuality is our identity. We are spiritual beings who identify as sexual human beings (195, 72).

Beth Brant also defines sex within the realm of spirituality. She portrays sex as an act of prayer:

> Sexuality, and the magic ability of our bodies to produce orgasm was another way to please Creator and ensure all was well and in balance in our world (1994, 55).

As I have explained in the "Traditions of Gender Equity" section, homosexuality was freely expressed in some Native societies (see pages 77-78). Beth Brant blames the church and state for the homophobia that currently exists in Native communities. She says, "our sexuality has been colonized, sterilized, whitewashed" (1994, 60). Both Brant and Paula Gunn Allen (1986) reclaim lesbianism within the Indigenous traditions that preceded contact with western homophobia. In so doing, they reject the colonial systems that have been central in oppressing them sexually.

POSITIVE IDENTITY

What positive, alternative identity do Native women maintain or adopt?

Woman as the Centre of the Community

Many contemporary Native women resist the devalued and marginal place that women have traditionally occupied in both public and private spheres of western society. They understand themselves as the centre of the community for a number of reasons.

Lifegivers and Mothers

First, women are responsible for bringing life into the world, and with this tremendous responsibility comes a recognition of their central place in a community. Shirley Bear states, "Women are powerful because they birth the whole world" (1990, 134). The recognition of women as lifegivers is not limited to a biological interpretation. As Paula Gunn Allen explains, it is a traditionally conceptual and spiritual way of interpreting the role and powers of women (1986, 27). The understanding of women at the centre of creation extends to an acknowledgment of their place in the community:

> ...Cree women are at the centre of the Circle of Life. While you may think of this as a metaphor, it is in fact an important reality in terms of how one perceives the world and how authority is structured in our communities. It is women who give birth both in the physical and the spiritual sense to the social, political, and cultural life of the community. It is upon women that the focus of community was historically placed and it was, not

> surprisingly, against women that a history of legislative discrimination was directed by the Canadian state (Turpel 1993, 180).

Whether they birth biological children or not, women are accorded high status because of their capacity to produce and to nurture. Patricia Monture-Angus maintains that women were the lawmakers in the community by virtue of the fact that they "are the doorway through which all life passes" (1996, 263). Marilou Awiakta states, "To separate the gender that bears life from the power to sustain it is as destructive as to tempt nature herself" (1993, 70). By virtue of their life-giving power, women therefore sit at the centre of the lives and communities that they have produced.

In this understanding of motherhood, women not only produce life, but are responsible for nurturing life as well. This translates into the adoption of a central role in ensuring and maintaining the well-being of the community. Paula Gunn Allen points out how motherhood is equated with governance:

> At Laguna, all entities, human or supernatural, who are functioning in a ritual manner at a high level are called Mother (1986, 28).

The power of motherhood is such that it becomes a metaphor for those who hold high levels of responsibility for community. Joanne Fiske has written about how this "ideology of motherhood" works in Native community politics. As those with the capacity to mother, Carrier women assert authority in the governance of their communities (1992 & 1993). All women, by virtue of their gender, may claim responsibility for community in this way.

Jeannette Armstrong sees the nurturing capacity of women as a powerful tool of resistance:

> We find our strength and our power in our ability to be what our grandmothers were to us: keepers of the next generation in every sense of that word - physically, intellectually

> and spiritually. We strive to retain our power and interpret it into all aspects of survival on this earth in the midst of chaos.
>
> It is the fierce love at the centre of our power that is the weapon our grandmothers gave us, to protect and to nurture against all odds. Compassion and strength are what we are, and we have translated these into every area of our existence because we have had to. And we must continue to do so. It is a matter of the right of females to be what we fundamentally are -- insurers of the next generation. (1996, xi).

In this sense, all females are insurers of the future generations, whether they produce biological children or not. All women carry responsibilities to children and community, and the power that comes with this understanding is one that allows Native women to resist the forces that threaten the well-being of their communities.

Teachers

As mothers, and insurers of the future generations, women are instilled with the role of teachers as well:

> Traditionally, women rearing their daughters and sons cultivated a more intimate relationship with their children than do men. Thus, women are the transmitters of cultural norms and values (Williams 1989, 49).

This responsibility is key, as it carries with it the responsibility to pass on the culture from one generation to the next. In this role of teacher, Marie Battiste sees women as the ones who "begin the dialogue with the future" (1989, 61). She states:

> They are the first teachers who transmit knowledge of the past and present to the future. They create an extensive, coherent, concrete tribal bond with the future through an easy silence and caring (ibid.)

This function has been maintained by many women in spite of tremendous pressure to assimilate and let Western institutions fully assume the role of teacher :

> Woman has had a traditional role as Centre, maintaining the fire -- the fire which is at the centre of our beliefs. She is the Keeper of the Culture. She has been able to play

> that role, even in a home divided. She has maintained that role even though church dogma has suggested that our families need be structured in a different way; that we teach "Dick and Jane", that there are certain aspirations that young boys should have, and differing and somehow lesser ones that young girls should have. She has maintained her role despite intermarriage which caused her to be cut off from her roots, both legislatively and sometimes physically. Her home has been divided as a result of education. A wholesale taking away of our children to schools diminished her role and her 100% right to teach her children, by imposing laws which require her to hand over that child, who comes home and checks everything her mother says in the context of what the teacher said, and this, when teachers are poorly equipped to deal, from our perspective -- an aboriginal perspective, with what the children *should* be taught (Skonaganleh:ra in Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra 1989, 12).

In maintaining their role as teachers, Native women resist the pressure to relinquish their traditional female responsibilities.

The struggle to hang on to the role of teacher, particularly the teacher responsible for passing on culture, is central to the struggle for a positive Native identity. Native women have expressed that, as teachers, they are responsible to ensure the Native identity of their children (ONWA 1980, 2). In promoting a sense of personal identity, they also promote a positive sense of group identity:

> As women, we need to promote a sense of personal and group identity. A positive self-concept is developed by how we see ourselves and how we think others see us. By promoting recognition of our cultural heritage, we will increase our pride and self-acceptance. As women, we have the power to end racism by redefining and implementing appropriate ways of honouring cultural diversity in our daily interactions with our children. Our own Metis children will be stronger and richer people for our efforts (Betty Ann Barnes in RCAP 1996, 89).

The women's role in nurturing identity further attests to their key position in Native communities and nations. Betty Bastien explains this in terms of relationships:

> One of the major roles of Indian women has been to maintain "tribal identity" for their children and their children's children. Tribal identity is based on the collective experience, in which relationships are characterized by the interdependencies of self with others, in which partnership is the basis of life and force through which life is strengthened and renewed, and in which children experience themselves as tribal people rather than as individuals...Within this web, a Native woman gives her child unconditional love as she receives it from Mother Earth. She teaches her child a reverence of and a profound respect for all creation, because everyone in creation

> participates in a manner that perpetuates and strengthens life. Father Sun teaches woman that life grows in the web of creation. In raising her child, a Native woman teaches that responsibility lies in nurturing and renewing the relationship with all creation (1996, 127).

The woman's role as teacher is therefore linked to her role as nurturer and lifegiver. Through the power and strength accorded to her because of these responsibilities, she is able to ensure the individual and collective identity of the children in her nation.

RESPONSIBILITIES

How is the Native women's identity manifested in the role they play in their communities?

The responsibilities of a Native woman are inherent in the central role that she plays in her community. Some of these have already been discussed within the description of roles: Native women have the responsibility to teach the future generations; to pass on the culture; to provide and nurture life; and to ensure the well-being of the community:

> "Rights are not our way. We are born with responsibilities. We have many roles to fulfill based on the gifts of the Creator. If you are given the role of mother and the gift of giving life, you have certain responsibilities that come with that gift. The responsibility to nurture, to guide, to love, to support life is the role given to them by the Creator. If people live in this way all things are taken care of. You have no need for rights. (unidentified Elder quoted in Diabo 1993, 7).

The responsibilities to nurture, teach and oversee manifest themselves in terms of a Native woman's actions within a community.

The Responsibility to Speak

As the community members responsible for overseeing community well-being, Native women have the responsibility to speak up about the way it is being run. Sylvia Maracle talks

about how this traditional role has translated into the way she conducts herself in her work and her life:

> The fact that I am a Mohawk woman means to me that I have a license to make changes in the world. I have my instructions from the beginning of time to look at the world we live in, to challenge and encourage people to return to our roots. Some of my great aunties, who are still alive, don't bat an eye in telling someone they know or someone they don't know: "This is what has to be done." I grew up that way, and now I get paid to do it...." (in Brant Castellano and Hill 1995, 246).

Beverly Hungry Wolf says that the women must speak, for example, about the damage that is being done to the environment. She sees this tied into the women's responsibility to instruct the children to look after the environment, and also as related to women's connection to the earth:

> Speaking only amongst us women, I realize that we have abdicated our position of equality and let men rule us. But I say that we are not powerless! It is now time to reclaim our position. As givers of life, we can reclaim our special closeness to nature and the Earth Mother any time we want it! Think about this, then speak out your feelings. You have an obligation to think about this; you have a right to be heard (Hungry Wolf 1996, 81).

Hungry Wolf's contention that women have been too silent is supported by other women. Many feel that women are beginning to take up this responsibility now:

> It's the time of the feminine. With a woman, it's what we feel. When I look around at different women, I see sadness and a heaviness -- her sadness and her heaviness because of the way her children are living today.
>
> Women need to be recognized. The words of women have to be recognized. The women will come out. It might be prophesied or doesn't have to be prophesied, but the feeling is so strong that the women will come out and voice their feelings. Whether people want to hear it or not, it's going to come because it's meant to be (Vickie Downey in Wall 1995, 12).

Whether it is with regards to their families, their communities, their nations, or the future of the planet, women are instilled with the responsibility to speak about things they see in need of direction.

Community Activity And Politics

The responsibility to look out for the well-being of the future generations often translates into action, which some women take up at an early age:

> When I was seven, I started organizing the cousins. We'd find a corner in the house, we'd make beds on the floor and would put all the little kids behind us. We'd get axes and knives, we'd go after them and run 'em out. So that was my first organizing (Janet McCleod in Katz 1995, 276).

Chief Nora Bothwell sees women as the primary motivators in the community. She links this to their traditional roles:

> Native women traditionally were the teachers. I believe that they have to be initiators and motivators as well. Women have the quality that they can do a hundred things at once. You have to when you have kids and have to run a household on a limited budget. Women can push (in Canadian Woman Studies 1989, 35).

Women can therefore turn the skills of overseeing their families to oversee their communities and nations. Marla Powers demonstrates that Sioux women are vociferous and "dominate community meetings" (1986 148), and one of her research participants states that women make good (legal) judges because they are used to making unpopular decisions with their children (ibid., 157). Marlene Brant Castellano and Janice Hill also link the traditional female responsibilities of mother and teacher to community and tribal development in their discussion of an interview with Emily Fairies:

> For Emily, the contemporary responsibilities of women involve their traditional roles as life givers, mothers, and teachers. By linking these traditional responsibilities with new

> skills, Aboriginal women can take on professional roles and build new community and governmental institutions rooted in Aboriginal languages and cultures. (1995, 247).

Native women are thus called upon to take up the responsibility for their communities by actively working in community politics:

> Our people will not heal and rise toward becoming self-governing and strong people both in spirit and vision until the women rise and give direction and support to our leaders. That time is now, the women are now actively participating in insuring the empowerment of their people. Life is a daily struggle as women, as mothers, as sisters, as aunties and grandmothers. We are responsible for the children of today and those of tomorrow. It is with pure kindness and our respect for life that allows us to gladly take up this responsibility to nurture the children, to teach of what we know, from what we have learned through trial and error. (Nongom Ikkwe in RCAP 1993, 7).

This is happening in many communities. Mary Ellen Turpel asserts that First Nations women "run first Nations communities" (Turpel 1993, 182). The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples discovered "...in community after community the leadership being demonstrated by Aboriginal women" (1996, 17). Yet although Native female political involvement is active, it is often through unofficial or unrecognized channels. Often, Native women engage in politics through their influence on chiefs and elected officials. Their authority may not be recognized within this type of system, and their voices may therefore be excluded by both government and community officials. When this is the case, some Native women take more radical routes, as in the case of the Tobique women who began their struggle for housing and justice for women by occupying the band office (see Silman 1987).

Some women see the adoption of public political roles as a stepping outside of the traditional female realm, as women did not traditionally contribute to politics through these kinds of positions (Sanderson in RCAP 1996, 56; Powers 1986, 212). From this perspective, women are said to be taking on both women's and men's work. Yet women need to take up these types of positions in order to fulfill their greater, overall responsibilities of looking out for the future

generations. In the absence of traditional systems where male and female contributions to governance are in balance, women must take on positions within the heretofore male-dominated Indian Act political system. Sylvia Maracle states:

> I, for one, have promoted women becoming involved in the Band Council system, not because I think it is a good one that should be perpetuated, and not because I think there should be "equal" representations of women to men. Rather I believe that women have a responsibility to make sure that we don't lose any more, that we don't do any more damage, while we work on getting our original government system back in good working order (1989 in Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra, 14).

This responsibility is part of their role to protect the future generations from the corruption and damage that can occur within the political systems that have evolved, and will continue to evolve:

> Native women will, I think, provide the buffer, that cushion so that abuses of power don't happen. Since obviously everyone recognizes that self-government is going to come about, must come about, Native women are going to have to take a more active role than they have in the past political life. They have to ensure that (Aboriginal) governments which are established practice respect, fairness, equity. (Jeannette Lavell 1995 in Brant Castellano and Hill, 247.)

The face of work for Native woman may change, therefore, but it remains embedded in traditional understandings of her responsibilities. In this way, she is central to the past, present, and future of Indigenous nations.

Helping the Men

Finally, as part of their role in overseeing the healthy development of communities, many Native women have expressed their responsibility to help the men heal. They understand the reasons for the downtrodden position of many Native men, and see the necessity for the men to get better in order for Indigenous nations to recover:

> ...Traditionally our men were builders, hunters and shaman, but when they moved into cities, they were without work, they were isolated and filled with self-hate. I saw it in my family. As long as our men are drunk and are dying in doorways... we will remain an "endangered species" (Ramona Bennett in Katz 1995, 159).

In spite of the fact that Native women are often oppressed by Native men and the patriarchal systems that support them in this dysfunction, many Native women understand that they must work with the men in order to find their way out of patriarchy:

> Some of our men have lost touch with their sense of responsibility to women. They have been taught that patriarchy is the ideology of the civilized, and they have tried to act accordingly. However, this cannot mean we abandon our men. They too have been abused and oppressed by the Canadian State (Turpel 1993,181).

As teachers, Native women take on the role to bring men back into the folds of gender equity. Many work to bring men back to a sense of their traditional responsibilities:

> In addition to all of the responsibilities already talked about, perhaps the most daunting for woman, is her responsibility for the men -- how they conduct themselves, how they behave, how they treat her. She has to remind them of *their* responsibilities and she has to know when and how to correct them when they stray from those (Osennontion in Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra 1989, 13).

With this, I conclude my overview of the questions "Where Have I Come From?; Where Am I Going; and What are My Responsibilities?, as defined by the literature. I will now turn to the interviews to enrich this understanding and place it in the context of my community and the women therein.

DEFINING IDENTITY

INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW FINDINGS

The following two chapters are composed from material I collected out of interviews with twelve Native women. In the interest of anonymity, and because the Native community is so small, I do not offer detailed biographical information on each participant. I have also refrained from placing pseudonyms under the quotes, as a reader familiar with the Native population in Toronto would likely be able to recognize some of these stories, and then match them up with the remaining dialogue under that pseudonym.

Suffice to say that seven of the women are Ojibway, two are Mohawk, one is Oneida, one is Algonquin, and one is an Indigenous South American (who has been in Canada and part of the Native community here since her youth). The women range in age from 34 to 72, with the majority of them middle-aged.

I chose these women because they are exemplary; they are leaders and activists in the Native community in and around Toronto. I know each of them personally as friends, employers, teachers, colleagues, and community members. They are role models to me; I wanted to tap into their knowledge and share it with other Native women.

The interviews were conversational and casual in tone. I began by explaining my thesis topic, and then asked the participants generally about how they had developed their positive sense of identity, and how they conceived of themselves as Native women. In some cases I asked specific questions relating to their personal situations as I knew them: how they had come to doing work with women; how their work was tied to their identity, and so on. The interviews lasted between one and two hours. I then transcribed the interviews and returned them to the

participants for editing. One participant was interviewed twice, as she expressed an interest to have further dialogue.

I organized the transcripts by coding the material according to methods described by Miles and Huberman (1980) and Tesch (1990). This technique of qualitative research, and the tenets of grounded theory and emergent design have supposedly liberated me from constructing a piece that flows according to my agenda. The assumption is that the categories and themes that form these chapters have emerged from the data (Bogdan and Biklen 1982; Lincoln and Guba 1985) rather than from my understanding of Native womanhood, my approach to the subject, or my desire to prove a thesis. Whereas I found the techniques of qualitative research useful to collect and organize the material, I would not suggest that I have succeeded in removing myself from the data. My presentation of the interview findings is clearly representative of my agenda. I have taken the words of the participants and shaped the answers to questions that I am pursuing. I present these words in the way that I understand them, and in a way that is useful to me. I have sought to present a positive image of Native women, and I have delivered it in the following chapters.

In my first draft of this section, I simply presented the words of the women without contextual or editorial remarks. I felt this was sufficient as a means of presenting the information the participants had provided. I have since added contextual material for a number of reasons.

First, I realized a need to assist the reader with her/his response-ability to shift out of a mainstream paradigm when reading this section. To use an example: left alone, the discussion of male/female division of responsibilities might be read from a Western perspective where such division almost certainly involves oppression. I have, therefore, reminded the reader that the division between genders in Native traditions is more reflective of a need for balance, complementarity, reciprocity, and responsibility.

In some cases, I suspect the English language and the concepts embedded within it do not serve well to convey the vision that the women offer. When women, for instance, speak of a need for self-sufficiency, what the Western mind is likely to engage is a concept of western liberal individualism. This runs contrary to values typical of Native cultures, where a sense of self and the individual is grounded within a sense of responsibility to community and relationships. When the participants speak of a need to love and nurture oneself, they do not divorce themselves from responsibility to community, as with the "me first" Western ideal. It may be that when Indigenous concepts of self are translated into English, they therefore run the risk of being mis-interpreted. It is likely that words like "self-sufficient" are unable to convey the meaning intended.

Finally, before entering the texts, I would like to remind the reader to examine her/his assumptions about Native women. What is s/he looking for in this piece? A portrait of the spiritually enlightened? A glance at those with a connection to nature? It is certain that the spiritual realm, and a relationship with the earth (for example) factor into Native female identity, but the reader must be wary that such elements are borne out of complex histories, cultures, values, philosophies and politics that are continually under a process of change. The reader who is tempted to engage in pat examples of Native culture must remember that these stories convey a social movement of Native peoples as they struggle to reclaim themselves in the wake of colonization.

I see the stories as tools to dismantle patriarchy and racism. In this way, my intention is to offer a vision, a philosophy, and a strategy for resistance.

DEFINING IDENTITY

The women I interviewed have forged their identities through many factors. This chapter explores some of their supports, and then describes steps that they have taken in order to arrive at a positive sense of themselves as Native women.

It is interesting to note that five of the women stated at the outset that they have never had a problem with their identity. They attributed this largely to the support they had received as children in terms of developing a positive sense of self. Three women spoke of a conscious process that they had made to reconstruct a positive sense of themselves, and the remainder did not comment directly on their personal identity struggle.

Whatever the case, it is clear from the findings in this chapter that all of the women interviewed have been active learners and participants in the struggle for a positive Native female identity; for themselves, and for other women.

SUPPORTS

Strong Families

The women who commented that they had not struggled with their identity indicated that this was the result of having support and encouragement from their families. These women reported a sense of "always knowing who they were" because their families had taught them to be proud of this:

> ... I think it's how you are brought up at home. That's where you get your identity. You don't find it in a different setting. Everything you'll find at home. It's how your parents

> have brought you up. When your parents say that you are a Native person -- it wasn't a Native person, it was Ojibwe-kwe[1]. My mom and dad always stressed that.

These strong families taught by example as they were comfortable with themselves as Native people:

> I've always been aware of myself as Anishinabekwe[2]...I think a lot of that awareness of who I am and who I was came from my parents. They were really good role models. Both of them have been very aware and comfortable about their roles, as a man, and as a woman, and certainly as Native people.

Many of the participants attributed their fortitude in particular to female family members. Four of them stated repeatedly how "lucky" they were to have had strong mothers and grandmothers. Six participants spoke directly about their mothers, describing them variously as: strong, generous, kind, caring, non-judgmental, non-critical, a good person, a good teacher, and "a saint on earth". As one woman said, "I used to think if there was ever a description [in] a dictionary that talked about somebody [as a good person], I would see my mom's picture."

Five women spoke of their grandmothers as exemplary women. They described them as significant players in the community. Four participants mentioned that their grandmothers had been midwives and/or healers in their communities. Three women mentioned aunts who had acted as role models, teachers, and guides. When asked about how they had come to work with women in their present careers, two women mentioned that they came from large families of girls. They had also been surrounded by their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers in their upbringing. They concluded that their families were very "female oriented", and that this had an impact on their present work with women.

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[1] Ojibwe woman.
[2] Ojibwe woman.

Role Models

Participants who did not make reference to blood relations referred to other community members who acted as role models along the way. One woman referred fondly to weekends spent with three old women in her childhood village. She maintained a long term relationship with these women; they helped her out when, as a young woman, she returned to them looking for answers about her identity. Three participants talked about meeting women who were influential in their development during adulthood. They spoke of specific women who had made an impact on them, and also of a general community of women peers who are also involved in building healthy identities.

Participants noted the hard work of their female role models. As children, they learned by observation that their female family members were capable of taking care of themselves and their children. Their foremothers performed whatever tasks were required to keep their families going:

> In the female role, or the perceived female role, my mom cooked. She was a tremendous cook. She could cook, she could sew -- in terms of housekeeping, that was just an activity. But she chopped wood, she'd do water, she took care of the garden. She didn't limit herself. And none of us were limited either. It wasn't a job that one of the boys did, and another job that the girls did. We all did it. When my dad went out to the bush, we all went.

Two women pointed out that their mothers worked in order to bring income into the family:

> To this day, I never remember [my mother] ever saying somebody should take care of me. My father was away for months at a time, off doing work, and he would bring home money after three or four months, but in-between there wasn't any. So she did have to work, and she never had a "woe is me" attitude towards it. There was just always a notion that women work, and it never occurred to me that this wasn't the case for everyone.
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> My mother was a tremendous role model. Not just as a working woman of her day, which she was -- she was a teacher -- but also for the healing work that she did all her life.

Another woman noted her grandmother's self-sufficiency. She talked about the strength of her grandmother in raising her alone:

> [Grandmother] was, to me, this incredibly competent woman, who would do anything. She hunted, and because of what we lived on, we were on the land...she had a gun, and she taught me how to use a gun, and she taught me how to fish, and then she did this healing work with people.

Overall, many of the participants observed women in their childhood who took on family responsibilities for childrearing; economic responsibilities in terms of providing for the family; and community responsibilities as healers, teachers, and community organizers.

In one case, where tasks were divided more definitively by gender, the woman understood her mother's work to be as hard and as valid as that of her male counterpart:

> My father was the chief, so he was an elected leader. But my mom was also very involved, with fundraising, or kids programs, and things like that. At the same time that she was looking after eleven kids. She had eleven kids... dealing with all that stuff.

Whereas it is not clear whether this gendered division of labour was equitable, the respect accorded to this woman for her work is notable.

Several participants spoke of the respect generated by their female relatives. The participants pointed out, first, that these women had a strong sense of respect for themselves:

> She had very strong values and principles that she lived by. She didn't just talk about these values; she lived these values. And these values were respect. She always used to say "Respect yourself as a woman." And in order to respect yourself, there are certain things that you do and you don't do.

Three participants cited, by way of example, that their mothers did not condone the use of alcohol. This approach to alcohol might be seen as an act of resistance within communities where alcohol abuse was rampant; and its effect on communities devastating. The women's recognition of the

effect of alcohol on community is illuminated in the comments of one woman's mother, who explained alcohol abuse as a means by which a person could lose their sense of self and responsibility. This mother explained the problem to the young girl as follows:

> "When a person drinks, they give themselves away, and become a tool of that alcohol. Alcohol is not a tool for them, they become a tool for the alcohol, and the alcohol does whatever. Alcohol does not allow you to have any respect for life; anyone else's or your own. That's why so many people die through alcohol, is for that reason."

This interpretation, and that of the other two women who referred to alcohol indicates that a solid identity is grounded in self-sufficiency and the ability to perform one's duties, as they relate to community responsibility. This position is worthy of respect.

Many of the mothers and grandmothers of the participants were accorded great respect within their communities. One woman talked about the way her mother was treated by community members, and how this had an impact on her identity and sense of herself:

> I used to think that we were the most lucky family... Because my neighbours and friends would say "You're really lucky"... It was also expressed by other members of the community. Not the women of the community, but the men. To extend such a respect towards her for being a really good mother.... So everything that we felt as kids was entrenched by other people's views.

The respect accorded to this woman for being a good mother is noteworthy when considering the lack of value accorded to childcare in mainstream society. By contrast, this child gains a sense from the community that her mother's work is highly regarded.

In particular, the respect and support the participants' foremothers received from their male partners was a great source of learning for those participants who were witness to these relationships as young girls and women. Nine of the participants expressed positive views of their

fathers, and three spoke about the balance they observed in the relationship between their parents:

> The one thing that my mother [had] that was different [from] me was that she had a very devoted husband in my father. And that certainly helped her to go through being a working woman and having nine children, and being very poor also.
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> ...My father was a very supportive man to my mother. So there was a real balance in our family, which, you know, you don't get 100% of the time. He was always there to support his family. He was always there for my mother.
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> My mother had her role, she was happy with it, and my father had his. Together they kind of made a team. So there was never any sense in our family of inequality -- that her role and function wasn't valued.

In watching these relationships, the participants learned about the principles of balance, respect and complementarity. The way in which their mothers worked with their male partners contributed to their sense of the equity that is possible in male/female relations.

Encouragement and Guidance

One woman demonstrated the impact of her grandmother's support with these words:

> She just made me believe that if the sun rose in the morning, it was for me. She gave me this incredible gift, to believe in myself. That because she could do anything, so could I. Although these lessons were not imparted verbally, she gave me the lesson nevertheless, and I got it. It was very powerful.

This woman goes on to talk about how the support from her grandmother gave her "enough self-esteem for life". She was thereby provided the strength to stand up to racism as a child, and to violence and oppression as an adult.

Although many of the lessons imparted to the participants were unspoken, some of these teachers verbally encouraged the young women to develop themselves and learn how to deal with the outside world. The approach of one woman's father was to "insist" that she go to school so as to equip her with the tools she would need to deal with mainstream society. She states:

> He told them "I want her to go to high school. I want her to go to high school and be what she wants to be. "

Many women spoke of receiving encouragement to carry on in community development work, or with the revival of traditional ways in spite of the reactionary attitudes they have been faced with in their communities.

Two women talked of receiving lessons in resistance from their foremothers. The grandmother in this quote provided a rare verbal lesson to ensure the child's survival upon leaving home:

> I do remember one spoken lesson. It would probably be the first one -- which kind of startled me because she had never really talked to me like that before.
>
> I was going away to the sanitarium. And because I was her child, I was brought up very much like her. She was a true pagan. So she said, "I want to tell you something my girl...You are going away and you are going to meet lots of people, white people over there....They are going to try to teach you things...You just remember one thing my girl: people can teach you all they want, but you don't have to learn."

Another woman told me a story about the early political awareness fostered by her mother, who provided her with a copy of the Indian Act when she was twelve years old. This mother instructed the young woman to read the Act, and to understand that "everything in my life was affected by that piece of paper." Through this transaction, the mother encouraged the young woman to consider her position as a Native woman with respect to the greater Native and non-Native society, and to make decisions accordingly:

> She said that it would probably not be a good idea to get married. That marriage in itself was primarily for the benefit of men more than women.... And she said "Look in there further, and realize that if you marry somebody from another reserve, then you have to go over there. You lose your right even to be buried here amongst your own family." That's how much the Indian Act affected us.

This same woman received encouragement from an aunt to take part in the resistance movement at Wounded Knee:

> I think the lucky thing for me was when I got politicized, I was politicized by my mother's sister, my aunt. -- Who woke me up one morning and said "There's a lot of trouble going on at Wounded Knee. Wake up and pay attention". With ten kids and a happy-go-lucky husband and all the rest of it, she had to wake me up and tell me "There's things going on, and you've got to pay attention, because you're young and educated. Use your brain!"

The guidance of this woman's foremothers impacted on the way she came to understand herself and her position in the world. It was the foundation for her resistance and the acknowledgment of a need to create her own world, in opposition to hegemonic pressures.

The significance of these early role models is clear. In spite of the fact that almost half of the women were removed from their communities by the age of seven, the foundations they received in the early years from either blood relatives or other relations proved to be a source of strength that would ensure survival throughout their lives, as expressed by this woman:

> Being with [grandmother] for those first seven years gave me an incredible strength. Because she gave me all the self-esteem that I needed, for the rest of my life....
>
> ... going back to our roots is the only answer. I think I am as strong as I am because I never lost that. My grandmother had me for the first seven years. Some wise educator once said "Give me a child for the first seven years and I've got [her] forever."

All of the interview participants were able to call upon some kind of link to multi-generational communities of women that have resisted the adoption of colonial values and practices. The

princess and the squaw stand at the periphery of such communities of women. Within such a context they are aliens; imaginings of a foreign mind.

Grounding In Native Community

For several participants, ties to community are as significant as ties to family in terms of bolstering a positive identity. One woman maintains that she did not have any problems with her identity because she has continued to return to the reserve throughout her life. She proposed that children born in the city have more of a problem with identity. At the same time, she asserts:

> People, when they leave the reserve sometimes, tend to think "Well, I'm in white society," so you figure you're white. You're not. You're never white.

She finds her strength in "not forgetting anything my parents taught me". Values, philosophies and teachings embedded in the community are the link to a solid sense of identity for this woman.

It corresponds that some of the women experienced feelings of alienation as a result of having to leave the reserve. This is particularly true if they were taken away at a young age to a sanitarium or to attend residential school. This removal resulted in the slow erosion of relationship to community, and thus an identity that could be grounded therein:

> I was born on the reserve, and I lived on the reserve up until I was six or seven, and I came home every summer after that. But because of the programming, you were almost living separately from everything that was happening. The longer that happened, and as the years went by, you were losing contact. You were losing the closeness you had with the people.

The removal and subsequent immersion into dominant society led to a sense of "being lost" for two of the participants. Life in Toronto for these participants as young women was remembered as a time of darkness and confusion:

> You were looking at the world in such a different way. It was almost as if you were alone in the world. Because the people that I was seeing at the time weren't Native people.... I was walking down the street one time, when I was very young... and felt that feeling that you were the only person in the world. And wondering... that everybody else was a robot! [Laughs].

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> I had been in a great darkness, with no direction, and a lot of confusion. There wasn't those ones that I could go to who would help me figure out what was going on, what was happening in my life, even in terms of the wandering stage.... That sense of loss, that sense of confusion, that sense of not being able to cope, and not knowing who you are, I guess. You are trying to fit into mainstream society...Just not being able to feel a part of the dominant society. Because that's where I was living... in Toronto, in the urban setting.

Identity confusion was greatly enhanced by not having contact with other Native people.

A participant who came to Toronto as a young woman told me that she had never had a problem with her identity, largely as a result of being able to hang onto a strong sense of herself as Native through contact with other Native people:

> You may wonder, *well she must have had a problem [with her identity]*, but I didn't. I looked around for my people when I went downtown, and I met them. We all got together and one or two or three or four of us women, we knew by just looking at a person, you knew that they were Indian.

This woman sought out the company of other Native women, and found a great sense of security within this community.

Although all of these participants had at least some early connection to their Native communities, they pointed out that there are ways to foster and maintain Native identity for those who have not had, or currently do not have access to a reserve community.

Urban Native Organizations

In the absence of a reserve community, urban Native organizations have emerged to provide the space where Native people can connect. The woman who "looked around for my people when I went downtown" was part of a movement that led to the formation of the Native Canadian Centre of Toronto. The two women who spoke of "being "lost" as young women in Toronto stated that they began to "find themselves" again as a result of becoming involved with Native organizations in the city. One of these women began to attend Native Canadian Centre activities. She was also involved in an institute set up to explore Native culture and spirituality. The other woman found strength in her identity when she began to work for Native political organizations based in Toronto.

As explained by one participant, Native urban organizations provide Native people a degree of isolation that protects and fortifies them against an onslaught of demeaning messages from mainstream culture. She equated this with the geographic isolation of some reserve communities which has protected on-reserve Native people in a similar way:

> I think the notion of isolation in terms of urban dwellers means this sort of distinctiveness, a separateness around our culture, our traditions, around our organizations.... I think those are also sort of safety net issues for us.

It is evident from the words of some of the women that interaction with the mainstream population can be detrimental to a Native person's sense of identity, particularly when this interaction is largely tainted with sexist and racist interpretations of Native people. Immersion into Native communities, whether on-reserve, or within Native urban organizations both protects and builds on a positive sense of identity.

Connection to Other Women

Connections with other women have been strategic for the development of a positive Native female identity. As discussed in the section on role models, many participants pointed to the support they received from relationships with women. Three women talked specifically about how they were supported by other women upon the break up of their marriages. They stated that this support was helpful in allowing them to see themselves in a more positive way.

Connection with women further allowed participants to refine a consciousness of oppression and the possibilities for resistance. One woman spoke of the learning she took from discussions with female associates in Native political organizations:

> I guess it was probably in the '70s, that I really started looking at [the positive side of my identity]. And it was mainly because I entered the Anishinaabe world. When I say that, I started working for Native organizations. So you were more conscious of the political stuff that was going on and what was happening in the world, and your view of the world got bigger. It encompassed...Turtle Island, I guess. Because of the experiences and meeting people from other places. Meeting other women, and talking with other women.

This woman developed a more positive sense of herself by way of a developing political consciousness engendered in discussions with other women.

In four cases, this political consciousness came through more formal women's groups. One participant spoke about her discovery of women's groups within the women's liberation movement. She stated that this was the beginning of a different consciousness of herself:

> There was all this talk of women's liberation, and the more I read, and the more I talked to them, the more I suddenly realized that women are in a very inferior position in our society. And then I sort of started to apply it to my life.... It just opened up such a world for me that I'd had no idea existed. I'd had no idea of my own, --my own oppression as a woman, I guess, until I started reading and doing theatre with the theatre group on women's issues.

More commonly, women mentioned healing circles[3] within the Native community. Two of the participants conduct women's circles and ceremonies. They mentioned that this has been key in terms of their own healing, support, and development.

Grounding in Place

The significance of place with regards to identity was raised by one woman, who stated that it is important to teach urban Native children that Native people belong in this (North American) geographical space:

> From when I was very little, I've had people, Native people, old people telling me all the time "We were always here. We didn't come from someplace else. We might have moved around on this continent, but we were always here." How can you change those words? You can't. "We were always here". They mean the same thing. They mean the same thing to my son and my daughter, as they did to me. That we were always here, this was always the place.

Several other participants brought out the importance of a sense of belonging linked to place. The loss of this sense of belonging is seen as the root of a lot of problems with identity, as explained by this participant:

> In doing healing work, what I do is take them back to their first hurt, and what does that have to do with? Sometimes it's taking them back to the fact that they had no home. That's a pretty deep hurt. That takes us all the way back to -- we are a land based people, and as colonized people we've had no home. And because we've had no home, there are all these other problems that are attendant to that.

The dispossession of homeland factors heavily into identity problems for Native peoples, and the struggle towards a healthy sense of identity is linked to reclaiming that space. It is therefore important politically and conceptually that young Native people (urban and rural) understand North America (Turtle Island) as their homeland.

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[3] Healing circles often take the form of discussion groups whereby Native people address issues of oppression and strategies for resistance and recovery.

Connection to Land

All the participants identified connection to the land as a factor in defining their identity. Childhood lifestyles close to the land were seen as part of the foundation for a strong sense of self. One participant inferred that this relationship with the land further fed her sense of identity as female:

> I lived in a natural world. I know that I was intensely connected up to that world. And I believe that that's an experience of the feminine, looking back. The giving-ness of the earth was always there... I think that connection...made me conscious of myself as a natural being.. I think what it's done for me, at this stage in my life, I can carry on in a way that allows me to do that with a reasonable amount of balance.

The conceptualization of the earth as female provides many of the participants a sense of self-as-sacred, as I will explore more fully in the next section (pages 177-181).

One woman spoke about her childhood relationship with the earth being one of comfort, solace and restoration:

> ... I would go back to the bush... and the little people would take me places, in my mind, or I would lose time. I don't know how long I would be back there, and then I would come out really happy, and re-energized to carry on. That's where I would release a lot of my frustrations, ever since I can remember.

The supportive relationship offered by the land was explained by another participant as that of mother or grandmother to child:

> [I learned] from my grandmother that you always have your mother, and you always have your grandmother...She referred me to the earth. The earth is always there; your grandmother [moon] is always there. And if you can't tell anybody else, you can always tell them. So I remember when I would be really upset with my family... then I would talk to her. I would go out and sit quietly...taking walks in the nighttime, under the moon. Just addressing her, saying "Here I am. Have you ever seen this happen?" Because I knew she had been up there for awhile.

A participant who has lived in Toronto for many years talked about how she maintains a relationship to the land in spite of being immersed in an urban centre. She stated:

> I think I bring things from the past and put them into today....I just want to create an awareness that within our environment there are some things that are still truly Anishinaabe.
>
> A Native person from the reserve coming into the city [feels] that it's a really cold place to be. Because of all the buildings, because of all the material... When I look at the tall buildings, I get to see what humans have done with the things of the earth. They've just reconstructed them and put them in a different thing. So I look also at the beauty of the human thinking, the creativity.
>
> The glass is made from sand, the mortar is made from the earth, the steel is made from the earth, it comes from inside the earth.

This participant identifies with the land even though she no longer has access to it as would a person on-reserve. This conceptualization of the land harkens back to the sense of belonging and connection to place previously discussed.

For many participants, a relationship to the land offers avenues to strengthen their identities and resist oppressive experiences. The earth, as female, offers an image of woman that is powerful in her ability to sustain life. For this reason, one woman concluded that relating to land as female is helpful for raising the esteem of women:

> Starting to connect with mother earth as a woman; I think that's pretty important. Because it's that mother for all of us, men and women. That's a pretty powerful ally.

Connection to Culture and Tradition

All of the participants related that their identity was formed through Native tradition and culture. Many of the women could not speak to having a consciousness as women per se; they saw their womanhood as inseparable from their understanding of themselves as Native people:

> It's very difficult, I think, to separate the fact that you're a woman, and that you're Anishinabekwe woman. In my mind, there's really no separation there.

Although I tried to bring some of the participants around to questions about *female* identity in particular, many of the women responded by talking about identity solely in terms of race and culture. As with the findings in the literature, it is clear that the participants' identity is founded primarily in their understanding of themselves as Native people.

An identity located primarily in race as opposed to gender might be attributed to the fact that *Native* identity in particular has been under attack since the arrival of the Europeans[4]. Reclaiming Native culture and tradition has been extremely important for all of the participants. They see it as a critical factor in developing a positive sense of being:

> [I have a] very strong belief that our people need to go back to our own traditional ways, in order to recover in all ways, physically, mentally, [emotionally], spiritually.
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> I think going back to our roots is the only answer.
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> My teachers, my Elders are saying "We've talked long enough. We need to *do* again. We need to start practising, start living those kinds of teachings."

The resurrection and reconstruction of Native tradition becomes a reclaiming of self against years of oppressive assimilation tactics aimed at the erasure of Native peoples.

Some women mentioned that meeting with Elders and people with traditional knowledge has been critical to their personal sense of peace and balance:

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[4] The participants' refusal to conceive primarily of themselves as *female* may also be because their notion of womanhood is so distinctly defined within their cultures. Their femaleness therefore opposes an alliance with a generic sense of womanhood, which is, ultimately, based in mainstream culture. For the same reasons, there is a refusal among many Native women to align themselves with feminism.

> I was really lucky because, at the same time I was becoming aware of how to be outraged and outrageous, I also met up with people who could talk about tobacco, could talk about the fire, could talk about the role of women, the history of the people.
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> Just seeing all those old people gather, and experiencing the knowledge from that end...Those stories nourished my soul, gave me life, and eventually there was an incredible beauty that I began to feel. I began to feel an incredible sense of wealth, in terms of tradition and wealth that I never knew we had.

Four of the women talked about how they actively sought out knowledge from Native traditions, largely by contacting Elders. One of these women began this process late in life, during her retirement. She talks about this journey:

> I sought out the Elders that came to those meetings, and I sat and talked with them, and it was like I was just a young person at their feet again, learning their ways, learning about the smudging ceremony, learning about the feather, learning about the sacred pipe, learning about the circles, the sweat lodges, the feasting --even down to the medicine wheel....
>
> I read a lot. I research a lot. I go to pow wows. I go to conferences where the Elders are there, and I seek them out. I think some of the Elders I go to are way younger than I am.

As part of reclaiming culture and tradition, some women mentioned the significance of discovering their Indian name and clan. Four of the women talked about how this was central to furthering an understanding of their identity. They stated that their names provided them with strength and a sense of purpose, and affirmed whatever work they were doing for themselves or their communities. One woman received her Indian name while camped out in a protest. Another woman was named when she went home to her community to share traditional teachings. She was having difficulty with the response of the community, and was encouraged to continue when she received her name. A third woman said that receiving her name had confirmed that she was doing the right thing by speaking out in the community and teaching traditional ways. Another

woman noted the significance of an Indian name in terms of creating a positive sense of identity for the future generations:

> More and more I come to see the importance of that: a young woman who is on her healing journey, back to the traditions. She has a baby, that child is going to get an Indian name when they should have an Indian name, early on, after their birth. You know, doing all those things, and they just don't have so many strikes against them.

Two of the women actively sought out information on their clan, and one talked about how this was vital for her self-knowledge. Upon receiving information from her father about her clan, she states:

> All I really needed was that little bit he gave me. In telling me that, he told me who I am, in terms of the bear, and the characteristics of the bear. Just knowing, I guess, that that's where I come from. And that's who I am; again, that was a big impact on me. That I am a bear. And what the bear does. What the bear symbolizes. That's my direction.

Other women stated that clan provides one with a sense of identity by defining responsibilities. One woman explained that being part of a clan instills a sense of belonging as it relates to responsibility. Identity and self-esteem are reinforced with the knowledge that one is part of a community of people who have well-defined relationships to one another. This woman remarked:

> When I was a little kid, I used to be told to be careful how I treated others, because they always know who you are. I believe that was a holdover from the clan system. You carried all your relatives with you wherever you went. And you didn't want your relatives to get a bad name because of you.
>
> So whatever we have to do to restore that balance is what the clan will do. Because as much as they accept you as bright and shiny and new when you are born into the clan, they also accept the not so shiny, not so pretty looking things that come. To me, that unconditional acceptance was part and parcel of the strength of the nation. That's how the nation maintained it's strength, it's unity -- all of that, within that system.

Two women spoke of the rejuvenation that women experience in relearning Native culture and tradition through urban Native organizations. One woman stated:

> I think what ever is done to make [women] feel plugged in and proud is what has to happen. And in some cases that is making a shawl, learning a song, and things like that.

Native urban organizations are part of an overall healing movement in this regard, as explained by this woman:

> We talk about what we do [in this organization]; getting people back into the traditional ways is really a liberation movement, because overall you are liberating that Anishinaabe experience that is inside all of us.

By offering access to tradition and culture, Native urban organizations liberate Native people to identify as distinctly Native. This follows on five centuries wherein an identification as Native has been erased, denied, oppressed and suppressed.

One woman pointed to the hope manifested in the cultural revival that has happened over the last 25 years in Toronto:

> You know, not even twenty years ago...the jingle dress came back in Ojibway country. [This] is a very healing process. [I think of] when the strawberry festivals came back to the Iroquois, [and] when we started to bring water out to the ceremonies. You can point to them. You can actually say, "This day, this man or woman came to this centre, and showed us how to do this ceremony". The handshake circle that we do; I remember when Four Skies came 21 years ago and did that workshop at the Toronto Centre for us. We didn't know how to greet each other... you know, it was all big groping if Indians hugged each other before that! Now it's part of a ceremony, it's part of cultural teachings, it's part of a norm in our community. Despite recovery issues, victims of violence, sexual assault, all those things, we managed to recover some of those things.

The recovery of tradition through these organizations is significant in that it allows Native people to denounce the centuries of shame and denial about their heritage wrought by the colonizer.

The recovery of tradition led many participants to a consciousness about the impact of colonization. Three of the women talked about how Native spirituality was once banned by the state, pointing out that traditionalists were thus required to hide their practices until very recently. Upon returning to her community with a desire to share the culture and tradition that she had recovered, one woman talked about recognizing the impact of this loss:

> ...[I was] beginning to realize what oppression has done to our people, and how they have been silenced and how ashamed that we had become. And how we had denied it and put it out of our lives, and hid it. So no wonder I had a great sense of being lost. No wonder I was crying for something that was -- big that was missing from my life. And really that was it. Tradition and culture. And spirituality.

A second woman also spoke of the devastating impact of shunning Native culture and tradition. She pointed out that this is still being felt in many communities, citing the following example:

> There's a community in Northwestern Ontario called [community]. The kids there are -- well everybody, not just the kids -- hanging themselves. They are sniffing all the time. They are just like, totally blotto all the time.
>
> There are seven born-again churches there, evangelical, or whatever you call them. It's a very small community, but the churches that are strong there are those born-again churches, and they've got our people. They've got our people, and that's why they are killing themselves, because they have been led to believe that the drum is pagan....
>
> Lots of us are finding ourselves again, but that community is in real trouble, because they are not allowed to practise their own religion, which is our medicines, our drums, and so on.
>
> [This community] is one example. There are a lot of our communities who are in trouble like that. And a lot of our communities have become rejuvenated because they went back to where we should be, which is our medicines, our drum, and so on. That connects us right back to the land.

The women reflected that it is a struggle to resurrect and reconstruct Native tradition, but that the resistance of the older traditionalists is now bearing fruit for the present generations.

Spirituality

Native spirituality is inherent in much of the tradition and culture that the women spoke of. Several women referred to spirituality in particular as a key support in their personal development and healing process. Two women stated that it is the driving force of their being:

> In my own way, I stick to spirituality... If you look at the circle, everything falls into place from spirituality -- your emotions, your mental and your physical.

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> In my own space, I think all of these things hang together in terms of a spiritual focus. That's pretty important... More than ever, I advocate for the development of the spiritual side of life because it's just not balanced if it's only the other stuff, the other parts of the wheel.

Two other women spoke about spirituality being a guiding force in their work, and thus their understandings of themselves:

> I think [I've had] a lot of affirmations from the spirit world. I can hear things being said to me. And from being more aware as each day goes by, by praying, by meditating, I can see things that way...Teachings written to me as if from the grandfathers, healthy grandfathers, or spirits, affirming me that I'm part of creation, and that I have a job, or that I have a role.

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> I guess spirituality has always been there as well... I've always called upon my relatives who are in the spirit world to help me... And I've heard other people say that too. Other women.

A few women mentioned that spiritual ceremonies helped them recover shattered identities. One woman was involved in creating a community where Elders could come and teach. She saw this as a forum to provide a strong foundation for her children:

> A lot of us back then realized that we were products of the residential school system, and so a lot of our problems were because of the dysfunctionalism. These things we were trying to work out as adults, [and] a lot of the things that we felt were helping us were the ceremonies, and so that's the kind of groundwork we wanted to give our kids.

This participant felt that the provision of Native spiritual tradition to children and youth was helpful to the development of a positive sense of self. Similarly, some of the women talked about the importance of conducting ceremonies for women. Moon ceremonies, puberty ceremonies and women's fasts were mentioned as tools for developing positive female identity and self esteem.

Language

Language was mentioned as an important factor for maintaining a strong sense of identity. Of the twelve women, only three are fluent in their original languages, but a number of the women have gone back to try and relearn the language of their nation. One of the fluent Ojibway speakers mentioned repeatedly that this has helped her to retain a solid sense of identity in spite of the fact that she has lived in Toronto since she was fifteen years old. She simply stated, "I always felt that I was still Native because I spoke Ojibway."

Another woman, though not a speaker of her language, pointed out that in some cases Native women have been able to resist negative stereotypes because they have been isolated from misogynist colonizer language:

> We are the first [and in some cases the second] generation... not to operate in our own language. I talked before about the concept in Mohawk of woman. How do you describe a woman?... You can't call her some of the negative concepts. When you want to call somebody down and you use English, they are very feminine concepts. You know, bitch, other words...it's very female oriented, that negativity.
>
> Well you can't do that in Mohawk. When you talk about a woman, you talk about Ista. That woman is your mother. That's what you are calling your mother...
>
> So I think language protected us. I think [its] the same thing, in terms of Anishinabekwe. That concept of woman. Not somebody's possession, not a belonging, not a negative concept, but in the purest most respectful way you can.

By working in Indigenous languages, women may self-define outside of misogynist paradigms. The result is a more positive sense of self and womanhood.

Creativity

A number of participants mentioned that creative expression had been important in defining their identity. Singing was mentioned by three women. These women talked about how women's singing and drum groups are a vehicle for women to be able to "claim their voice", literally, and figuratively. One woman talked about having the sense that she had "come home" upon hearing the drum:

> That was when I felt as though I had come home. That was when I heard the songs that the drum was sounding out. With the sound of those songs, and the vibration, it was that sense of being... a great sense of peace, and finding some place that I had been looking for, for a long time. Finally I found it, and it was that sense of coming home to where I belonged.

This woman sees her connection with sound as an important tool to assist her with knowing who she is:

> It's only recently that I've come to realize how much sound effects me. Whether it's the sound of the drum, or the sound of singing, it's a certain kind of sound that is very very strong.

Discovering her voice allowed her to have a sense of confidence in herself, and a knowledge of self that was based internally. She talked about having the "spirit of an artist", stating that this led her to further self-discovery:

> For me, it's sound. That's my gift...the voice. I'd always put voice outside of myself because for a long time [I felt], "I'm not good enough. I don't deserve that." ...Even a strong voice, it was always "the voice". It was always external, out there....
>
> In that experience of doing voice work, I found out where it came from. That it comes from my source. It comes from my soul. There was this incredible sense of "Hey, this is me. This is who I am." Again, a sense of coming home. And really finding the voice, finding my voice. Being able to express that has given me a great sense of liberation, a great sense of freedom.

Another woman told me of her plans to help women to uncover themselves through acts of creativity. She is designing a woman's group focused on creative expression:

> I'd like to sort of help them find their gift. Find their gifts, whatever they are. Whether it's storytelling or painting, or being a teacher, or whatever their gift might be. And then start nurturing that gift within themselves.

This woman also talked about how it is important to stimulate the senses in order for learning to occur. She believes that expressing oneself creatively is an avenue to self-discovery and healing.

ACTS OF RESISTANCE

In addition to having strong supports, some of the participants' actions have encouraged a strong sense of themselves as Native women. With each act of resistance, the participants confirmed and defined their identities in opposition to the falsehoods around them. I will highlight some of these acts here.

Challenging Stereotypes

It is evident from the participants words that challenging stereotypes can be a liberating experience. Some participants shared stories about encountering and addressing negative stereotypes. Two women spoke of experiences that happened in school. In the following story, the young participant takes on images about "savages" perpetrated by a priest:

> [The priest] was up there, and every boarding student in the school had to attend this particular mass. We were sitting in the main body of the chapel, with all the nuns, right from the mother superior down to the most naive nun you could find. And there was us, all the boarding students. I'd say there were about 25 Native students...
>
> This guy comes up on the altar, and he's doing his spiel. He comes to a point where he's talking about how these guys got to be martyrs -- was that they were going to save the souls of those heathen Indians and savage beasty-type people. I guess they hadn't decided whether we were human or not. They were trying to save us, and we killed them off. [He said] that, to this day, which was about the early '70s, he hadn't seen any real progress in terms of civilizing these savage Indian kind of people, and he kept going back and forth to these Native communities trying to civilize us.
>
> Right around that time I'd gotten sick and tired of it, and I walked out.

With this act of resistance, the young student inspired a number of the other Native students to walk out of the assembly. Her leadership thus offered Native students the opportunity to demonstrate that racism is not acceptable. Furthermore, the young woman achieved a new level of consciousness about racism. She then educated one of the nuns that, in spite of her goodwill, the "sister" was operating within a racist framework:

> ...The Directress of Orders, who was by then a pretty good friend of mine,...stopped me in the hallway and asked me what was wrong.
>
> I said, "Didn't you hear him? Couldn't you hear what he was saying about my people?" And she blushed. She hadn't realized that she hadn't considered the effect somebody else's words might have. In fact, what she was confirming was his notion that we were still uncivilized savage-type people who really didn't have any feelings, and that those attitudes prevailed. Even among people who I thought I had known for a few years.

Two women spoke about their current roles as educators in dispelling negative stereotypes. One woman explained this as part of her duty as a role model:

> I see it as my (or other women's) role to do the best I can, and to learn about as much as I can to change or get rid of any kind of negative thoughts or beliefs or stereotypes about women, about Anishinaabe women in the Western's ideas or thoughts. When I do that with myself, then it gets passed on to my children....I change things in my mind, and then my beliefs will be passed on to my children without even saying anything to them...Then I think about the other children that I come in contact with, or other women. I share with other women what I know... to affirm what my thoughts are, or my beliefs.

This woman's resistance to negative stereotypes is based in traditional Native teachings. She "changes her mind", and shifts from the dominant paradigm in her consideration of Native women. By adopting a vision of Native womanhood founded in Native traditions, she works consciously to dissolve negative stereotypes for the present and future generations.

Another woman spoke of her role in assisting young women to develop their consciousness of negative stereotypes. She talked about an exercise in which she asks young women to deconstruct the cover of a *Cosmopolitan* magazine. In so doing, she leads them to

consider how this kind of media impacts on their sense of self. She demonstrates how racism and sexism articulate to throttle positive Native female identity:

> There is a real problem with body image in our society. In our communities with our young people it becomes a bigger problem because the sexism inherent in *Cosmopolitan* magazine is intertwined with racism as well.
>
> So one of the things that we end up doing is actually looking at those magazines... I say "Where are you? Where are you in these pictures? Is this you?" And they say, "Well not exactly".
>
> "Why is it not you? It's not just the size of the boobs. What else?"
>
> So we totally deconstruct it, and the last thing that they actually see for themselves is, *that's not their colour*....We've been so brainwashed that it's the very last thing.
>
> Finally, [I say] "What colour is that woman?" And they say, "Well, she's white".
>
> "What colour are you?"
>
> ...So that's how you make them see that this is not good for them....The minute we recognize our invisibility -- [that] will give us the tools to start making us visible....
>
> We've got to start seeing the society, the media, all of that shit out there [as] the enemy [of] our people. It doesn't represent us, and it keeps us oppressed. Once we recognize that, we've got our first tool to start working against it. And then we start creating our own materials.

This woman advocates for an awareness of the fact that "we ain't white". This means rejecting white stereotypes as well as Native stereotypes. She inferred that Native women living in poverty need to be honest about their situations in order to make steps towards a better life. The key in this, however, is to acknowledge that the ideal is not embodied in idealized stereotypes of white culture:

> Sometimes women are in such a fragile situation that they want to pretend that they've had a "normal" life, right? And that means a pretend picket fence, and pretend food on the table, and pretend no-alcohol in the home, when all the time what we have is no picket fence, and no food on the table, and no toothbrushes of our own, and a sense of desire to be Dick and Jane, and a dog named Spot.
>
> You know, we all want to be Dick and Jane. Well, we ain't white, right? And therefore that is the primary thing that we have to acknowledge. We ain't white. We are special. And in what way are we special?

When women are able to reject both white and Native stereotypes, they can begin to see positive alternatives for Native identity.

Resisting Assimilation

Part of asserting a positive Native identity involves maintaining that identity in the face of pressures to assimilate. One woman told me a story about how she worked through this dilemma in residential school. While complying with the nuns on the outside, she refused to let go of her sense of herself as Native:

> In the sanitarium they made me take holy communion, and stuff like that. Because of my lesson from my grandmother[5], [I thought] *I can ride with this, but this is not my true self*, and so I just played games. The Roman Catholicism was fairly heavy, and continued to be at the Indian residential school I was in. But in my heart I was a practising pagan. On the outside I [participated in] holy communion, and because I spoke French and seemed so compliant...they thought I was the one that they were going to save. And [that] I would end up in a convent, being like them.

The nuns in this story made repeated attempts to get this young girl to separate herself from her Indian identity and companions, telling her "You're not like them, you are like us." They instructed her "It would be best if you just quit seeing those people, because they are not for you." Like Rita Joe, this young girl resists the "offer" to become white, thereby maintaining her connection with Native people from within:

> I never said anything. But I recognized then another lesson in racism....The amazing thing for me was that they were thinking that I should be honoured by them telling me this!

This experience refines her consciousness of racism, and affirms her resolve to steer clear of assimilation.

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[5] See the story on page 139, where the grandmother tells this young girl "People can teach you anything they want; you don't have to learn".

Applying the Master's Tools

A few of the participants expressed the value of mastering the ways of white society. In particular, (formal western) education was referenced as a tool for survival. One woman related that her father had told her: "You have to go to school to learn something, to be something, so that you can walk around the world just the same as everybody else." Her father's impression was that she needed to be able to speak out, and all the better if in the language of the oppressor. Consequently, this woman was very strong in her belief that education is the means by which one can function effectively in the mainstream world. A second woman also mentioned the significance of women "grabbing hold of their education" as a means to become self-supporting and independent. Both were clear that this did not mean abandoning Native identity or tradition. The ideal, as presented by one woman, is the application of both traditional and Western education. She described this as the capacity to "see back as well as forward".

TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES

Participants spoke of a number of experiences that were key in developing their consciousness of themselves as Native women. Although many of these experiences were traumatic, they emerged from them with a stronger sense of self, and a renewed spirit of resistance.

Transforming Trauma

One woman told a story of early childhood trauma. With the help of her grandmother, she was able to learn from this experience:

> I was raped... I was totally devastated by that experience. And so I had gone back to my grandmother. I remember her sitting down with me and saying that, in truth, people can hurt you physically, but it was up to you as a human being whether or not that was going

> to take over your life. And she said that women know and understand pain more than men do. Not just understand pain, but know how to deal with it.
>
> ...For her, in taking care of me, she helped me to understand about power and control issues. That it was really important as a woman that I understand that. The fact that I was seven years old and a little girl wasn't the issue. I was a woman from the day that I was born, and therefore whatever those lessons that had to be learned, had to be learned.
>
> ...Because of that experience at seven, I had to learn all these other things, about what went with that. Like how does a woman understand her power so that she is not affected by those who try to control her power through size and physical strength and all that stuff? How does she maintain her control of her environment? And how does she understand her own power, and her relationships.
>
> All of those things I had to learn, in some ways at a younger age than other young women. But also it was a matter of survival. Simply survival for me, to have to know those things. Otherwise, I could have become a perpetual victim, and who needs that?

This woman concludes: "I think one of the things we learn from early trauma is how to survive future trauma". This process requires a lot of guidance and support, as exemplified by the role that this woman's grandmother played. Through this process of education, the participant's grandmother taught her that women are oppressed, and that they are subject to being victimized by those that are stronger physically. She then gave her some tools to resist this oppression. The Grandmother allowed the child to see that, as a female, she had a different kind of strength. At seven years old, this woman began to understand the battle that she would face, and then to acquire the tools necessary to take it on.

This woman later talked about how one must take these kinds of experiences and transform them into a source of knowledge and resistance. She advocates abandoning "Ken and Barbie, Dick and Jane fantasies", and working with the realities posed by the traumatic experiences:

> To me, when we see that fast life coming at these children, then we should know enough to cut the fairy tale stuff. Quit the idea that we can somehow ignore the things that have been done to these children and start recognizing that they are on a different learning track.

> I think my grandmother was very clear in terms of what she started to teach me. She started to teach me about the effects of powerlessness and loss of a sense of personal dignity and control, and how it affects somebody, and what they are likely to do to try and regain that. She was very clear that she wasn't treating me like a little kid who didn't know anything. She wasn't dealing with an empty vessel any more that she had to pour knowledge into. She started to show me, that, based on my experience of life, I had to be able to share her knowledge with her, and to share my knowledge with her.
>
> I think sometimes we forget that when our children have experiences that are not appropriate to their age that in fact we have to rethink the order in which we are going to teach them. We like to believe that children build on previous knowledge, just the same as we do. Meanwhile, they've skipped a whole chunk of learning and they've gotten knowledge they weren't supposed to have, right? So when we're dealing with that we have to quit the fantasy and fairy tale stuff. That's not to say they can't have fun, they can't enjoy life, they can't have new experiences -- all those things are still there for them, recognizing that they have knowledge beyond their initial age.

Through this woman's experience, we can see the critical role of the teacher in the transformative experience.

Another woman spoke about how sexual abuse had stripped her of her female identity:

> A lot of the abuse that was happening to me when I was small, as you grow up, it was like all the female part was taken away. It wasn't good, or it was abused.

This woman began to transform the traumatic experience in adulthood. At this time, through guidance and support from other women, she has been able to "clear the negative stuff out"; a preliminary step to embracing a positive sense of Native female identity:

> After dealing with most of that,...I started putting my head up, and started seeing me as a woman, and not just something sexual, but everything that I am: a lifegiver -- and [understanding] my roles with the language, or the land, or the children.

A few women talked about bad experiences in marriage. One woman said that she began to think about her identity as a woman at this time as a result of having to combat the negative ways in which her husband was using it against her:

> The guy I married made me really aware that I was different. He tried to use all this psychological stuff on me because I was a Native woman....When you are younger, you don't think about it, you just live it. But when you get older, society makes you more aware that you are different.

By leaving abusive situations, this woman and the others who spoke of destructive marriages were able to reflect on their worth and begin to construct a different identity for themselves. Three participants marked this as the beginning of a different consciousness of themselves as women:

> When me and my first husband split up, [I began to realize] that there was more than just doing the role of what society tells you to be or do...He was really abusive and that's how I felt about myself I guess. I'd had enough of it.... [I realized] there was something better for me... I think that's when I started looking.

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> [My husband] resented my going to school, even if it was only one evening a week. Any minute I was away from him he resented. And I started to question why women were treated like that by their men, who supposedly cherished them, loved them, and so on.

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> In the past, what they would say is "so and so's wife" or "so and so's woman". There was that sense of ownership....It was almost like you're a shadow...
>
> [I am] finally coming out of that shadow. Finally coming out of that darkness. Coming into light. Finally coming into a sense where there is that celebration.

Dream

Dream may be used as a learning tool and, (as I propose in my methodology), a way of accessing knowledge. In this regard, one woman spoke of a profound learning experience that came through a dream. She had this dream at a time when she was really struggling with her identity and sense of purpose in life. She was suicidal as a result of a feeling of "being lost", and this dream of a near-death experience provided a turning point whereby she began to search for a more positive sense of identity. She describes the dream experience as follows:

> It was so real that it felt like an actual death. I looked at myself leaving the body, and travelling to a different realm, and being able to see for the first time the incredible

> beauty of...that love and that sense of belonging, of joy...Eventually I just wanted to keep going because of that light....I was immersed in that feeling of light and joy.
>
> But then there was that cry, of someone calling after me. Telling me not to go; that I had to come back. "You have to come back. Please come back". I knew that it was coming from the earth plane. I didn't want to go back because I remembered it to be a place of struggling, always struggling. So the cry kept getting closer and closer, and stronger, and more pitiful, until finally it sounded as though it was right behind me. It sounded as though nobody could help that person, except me. And the minute I turned to go back and help her, I woke up, and I was the one that was crying that way. So basically I was calling myself back.
>
> That dream was a turning point in terms of what I was struggling with. It was that sense of identity. Because it was after that dream that I actually started to ask myself "Who am I? Who really is [name]? And to say [name] was not enough... I wanted to find the source, I wanted to find -- who I am.

From this dream, this woman was able to gain a sense of purpose in life. It prompted her to focus on her recovery, and to recognize that she had "a path" that was grounded in her identity as a Native woman.

ATTITUDES

A number of common approaches and attitudes emerged from the transcripts to indicate that resistance is assisted by such factors.

Critical Consciousness

A few women related stories of coming to a consciousness about the sexist discrimination of state and society. One woman, struggling to raise her children without support talks about "being very conscious that it was a man's world". Another talked about an experience in which she was denied post-secondary education funding because there was no policy to fund single women with children at the time.

The women contend that a deconstruction of these experiences is strategic in terms of enabling women to turn them around. Three participants mentioned how important it is for Native

women to develop a consciousness of the effects of colonization in general. They see it as their role to assist younger women with this understanding:

> Hopefully there will be opportunities for women to understand the roots of their colonization and what happened from it.

⊕

> I think one of the things that I try to be clear about is around the history and the impact of colonization....To be very clear about the historical relationship of the settlers with the original people of the land.

⊕

> What I always take us back to is "how did we get to be in the position that we are in?" So we always explore issues of violence...Because we were colonized, we have grown up in communities in certain ways, and that means violence in our communities.

The critical consciousness of the participants was achieved through various means. Some women began to shape their consciousness of their oppression and build a resistance to it by looking at the larger political scene. One woman claimed that the education and connections she made through Native people at work provided her with a better education than university. By talking with other Native women, she was able to critically examine the colonial experience and her part in it:

> We used to talk politics. Sit around and talk politics when all the men were around doing their thing... So all that working with Native organizations throughout the years, and meeting women from all across Canada, and hearing what was going on in their communities... For me it was a real experience. It was better than going to university.

As a result of this experience, this woman got involved in demonstrations and wider political activity. It transformed the way she thought about herself, and the way in which she approached her place in society.

As discussed previously, another woman made reference to two historical events that shaped her consciousness. When she was a young teen, her mother gave her a copy of the Indian Act to read. This was at the time of the disputes over the status of Native women who married off reserve[7]; it served to inform her of the systemic discrimination faced by Native women. As a young adult, this woman began to be aware of the discrimination faced by Native people across the continent by following the developments at Wounded Knee. As with the woman who worked in Native political organizations, the appreciation of the bigger picture instilled in this participant a sense of responsibility to act: she, too, became involved in demonstrations and struggles for justice.

After being politicized within a larger Native community, a few of the participants returned to their home communities to share their renewed sense of perspective. They reported being shocked at the oppression they were faced with. These experiences acted to further shape a critical consciousness on the part of the participants; they were incited by them to continue their work against the oppressions that Native people have, in many cases, internalized. One woman describes her work in community politics:

> It was really difficult because once I had been to that Anishinaabe university [experience in Native political organizations] -- and you come home and you try to practise what you've been taught, and what you've seen...you were supposed to help. So you come to a job where...everything was just so internalized...where [the people] only looked at themselves [as] working for the band, and doing their job, but they didn't really look at the [fact that] they were working for the people.

The second participant reported having difficulty when trying to do work in the spiritual realm. In response to her attempt to share traditional Native teachings, members of the community claimed

[7] Up until 1985, Native women who married non-Native men lost their Indian status.

that she was engaging in "witchcraft", and "work of the devil". This heightened her awareness of the extent of internalized racism in her community.

Self-Nurturing

One important tool for survival that several participants discovered is to be self-nurturing. Many arrived at this notion after coming through a period where a sense of their worth had been stripped away. In the case of one woman, this had happened through the course of her marriage. She spoke about how she had been treated as the shadow of her husband. As a result, her consideration for self was eroded. Reflecting on her separation from that relationship, she stated:

> I guess what I've learned is to begin to nurture myself. To help myself feel good about [name]. And so it's like I feel I have come full circle...coming to a place where I realize that I have to start with me....I'm the one that is lifting myself up. I'm the one that is celebrating myself. And one of the ways that I do that is I do things for myself.

A second woman inferred a need to step away from the selfless position that is encouraged of women. She stated:

> We need to be able to stop for a minute, and to focus on us, on ourselves. To have that time for ourselves as a woman. I know we are so focused on our children, our spouses, our husbands, our jobs, you know, that we don't stop long enough, I think, to focus on ourselves, and our own gifts as a woman.

Another woman remarked on the need for consideration and love for self in the wake of sexual violence. She stated:

> I think that's an important thing that we forget to teach our young women -- is to really love themselves.
>
> ...One of the studies that I've read from people who study sex offenders is that one of the long term methods that these abusers use is to tell them that nobody else loves them but him...What he essentially does is he isolates the child's every other source of support, including their own self-esteem. When I read that, I know and I recognize the value of loving yourself...You need to be able to love yourself and believe in yourself that you are valuable, worthwhile, capable, you know, all of those things that define us as human beings....

A love and nurturing of self is therefore part of a healing process for women who have been encouraged to be selfless, or to participate in the self-hatred because of abuse.

The need to regain a love for self is particularly critical for Native women as they may have suffered from internalized racism and self-hate as a result of outsiders negatively defining their being[8]. In this regard, one participant talked about the need to "heal the self before group healing can take place". The emphasis on self is, therefore, steeped in a history of abuse, the erasure of Native identity, and the healing process that is occurring, individually, and as a social movement.

Transforming the Negative to the Positive

Many participants advocated adopting a positive vision of Native peoples. In speaking of the barriers that Native people face, one woman summed up:

> If I only took those negative experiences, and said "This was the total and complete Anishinaabe experience of life," -- I'd have to say that there isn't anybody on this earth that I would wish that on. And I don't believe that we are only alcoholics and glue sniffers, wife beaters and child abusers, and all those things -- those victims of whatever system is in place. I refuse to accept that that's the sum total of being Anishinaabe. Because it isn't.

In spite of the oppressions that she has faced, this woman does not accept the identity of the downtrodden. In so doing, she embraces a vision of Native people that provides her strength. A second woman spoke repeatedly about the need to focus on the positive:

> If you allow yourself to be clouded by all the negativity, or all the negative experiences that you've lived through, you'd be broken down. A person would be really broken down, and you see a lot of that in our nations. Women, especially, will forget that they are mothers, will forget that they are grandmothers, and will forget that they are aunties, and just smother and suffocate in negativity. We need to see those good things, those things

[8] Here I refer the reader back to the section on "The Construction of a Negative Identity" (pages 42-51).

> that we've learned. An experience isn't good unless you've learned something from it. Whether it's a negative or a positive experience.
>
> [People say] "[name], you see life through rose coloured glasses. Why don't you take them off and look at the real thing?"
>
> And I say, "Because I've lived through the real thing. Why should I look at it again?" My angers and everything, I had to put down to be who I am. I've had to put those away, and I've not come through my life unscathed.

Some of the participants talked about their ability to live through mistakes. One woman perceived her mother's strength to be in the ability to accept mistakes, and in particular those of her children:

> She never criticized anything that any of us [children] have done. Even though we've done lots of things, it's like: "You make your mistakes and then you've got to build on them."

The use of humour was also deemed important by a number of participants:

> When you are feeling very down, when you are depressed... you need to find something to be humorous about. Some humour in life, even it if was an experience from your past...Share that experience with someone who can laugh as heartily as you. [My mother] said, "That's what brings you out of depression, is laughter, nothing else. No pills will do it... The more you laugh, the longer your life will be. If you cry all the time, you shorten up your life, thereby depriving your children of yourself.

> Another thing [my mentor] taught me was laughter. Even though I think I've always had a good sense of humour all my life... being in residential school [killed it]...One experience I could relate is I got a strapping for laughing, which I couldn't understand. I couldn't understand that logic.
>
> When I started working for Native organizations, that laughter was always there. That humour...Native women are always laughing, it seems to me.

The words of these participants demonstrate that they have actively sought a positive vision of themselves and their communities. They have worked at transforming their struggles with oppression, and using it as a window to strength.

This attitude and approach was described as the belief in transformation and change. One woman mentioned that it is great being a Native person, "because we have that ability [for change]". She stated that Native people are able to continually transform and make something out of their mistakes, adding that the Native community encourages people who take this on:

> I think in terms of Native teachings, we recognize that the capacity to change is always there...

Native women are deemed to be more willing and able to change, according to some of the participants. One participant explained:

> I think women are more prone, or have a better success rate with change, because they have more motivators, especially if they have children. They have external motivators.

Change for the better, as guided by women is conceived of as a process that is happening at both the individual and community level. One participant explained the Native healing movement as follows:

> People will talk about it in terms of the prophecies of changing woman, depending on what you use as changing woman...
>
> -- You [may] use that as that maple tree, and the teachings that the maple has as she goes through her cycle: that young tiny one that buds; that one with the green leaves; the one with the magnificent colours, and the one that stands there alone. But that life sap in the ceremony that she gives to the people [is] healing and renourishing, revitalizing, changing it...
>
> That woman is going to change. She recovers, that we see her return to her roots.

In spite of all the afflictions, the abuses and the oppressions that many of these women have endured, they have managed to transform their experiences and change into the strongly rooted and flourishing life force described above.

Overall, the participants were remarkably positive. Several of them talked about how it had "been a struggle", but that it had not gone unrewarded:

> I will always love and cherish the life that I've had. No matter how hard it's been. It's been a struggle. And I look at it and say "I learned so much. But I've learned so much." And I can't see anything bad about it.

A few of the participants referred to the often quoted Cherokee saying "A nation is not lost until the hearts of the women are on the ground". The resistance of these women; their determination to see themselves in a positive sense, and their resolve to pass this on to the younger generations is evidence that this expression holds some truth.

A RECOGNITION OF BEING

A RECOGNITION OF BEING

Through their struggles to nurture a positive sense of identity, the interview participants have arrived at some teachings, values and principles that allow them to see Native women apart from negative mainstream interpretations. In this section, I will share some of those insights and the lessons. I will conclude by showing how this feeds into the women's sense of responsibility.

RECOVERING THE SACRED

Life is Sacred

One critical understanding that the participants reflected is that all life is sacred. This involves a recognition that life is granted to people, plants and animals by the Creator, and that we have an immediate connection to the spiritual nature of the creation:

> We talk about first teachings. Anishinaabe people talk about good life, Iroquois talk about the teaching being that I am sacred; that I am a sacred space. And that it's so sacred, that those are the elements to communicate with the other world, because that's what I have been given. So I don't need an intermediary.

With this understanding, it follows that the individual begins to see her own life as sacred. This is a keystone in terms of healthy self-image.

Some of the participants learned early on to see themselves and their bodies as sacred. One woman learned this from her grandmother as a child. This lesson provided her with a tremendous amount of self-esteem. It empowered her to stand up to the spousal abuse she encountered in her thirties. She left her husband after he hit her once. She attributes the fortitude of this action to the teachings of her grandmother:

> Once you love yourself, you will never allow anyone to hit you. That was the fortunate thing about my grandmother...She taught me: this space is sacred around you. The only way that anybody can touch it is in a loving way, and at that, with your permission. So I was 34, I guess, and here I was being struck in the face. I thought, "Holy shit! Nobody does this to me!"

Woman's Body as Sacred

This sense of life as sacred has a great impact on the conceptualization of the female body. The female body as sacred contrasts dominant society teachings of the body that are loaded with shame.

One woman told a story to illustrate a shift in her mother's attitude about her body; from acceptance to denial:

> I remember my mother, she had twins. So she was nursing one of the twins, and the priest came to visit. He referred to her breasts as "les babines" which is a French word for... hide. Because our breasts are very brown.
>
> He said to her "Cover tes [your] babines". In a very contemptuous way. And our people honour their bodies, right?
>
> Ever after, that mother of mine went and hid herself when she was nursing her babies. Now we see it too. Lots of women, even refusing to nurse babies, sticking bottles in their mouths instead. That has a lot to do with those Christians. They got us into a shame-based thing that we're still struggling to get out of.

In this story, shame of the female body and its functions replaces what can otherwise be seen as a natural and sacred capacity. A recognition of the sacred ability to nurture one's children becomes lost in this new way of thinking.

In cases where there is sexual abuse, there is little consideration of the sacred. The shame is passed on to the victim, thereby enforcing dominant attitudes that reinforce low-self esteem and

hateful feelings towards the body. One of the participants talked about the need to turn this thinking around:

> ...The other day I was listening to a psychologist talk about the damaged goods feelings of young women who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse. That whole damaged goods thing; I almost wish that they would redefine it and say, someone has damaged the good.

This woman talks about "the good life" that we are given from the Creator. With this understanding, the body is good. It is sacred, and therefore not responsible in any way for the deviance it might meet in its course.

A further example of shame about the body came out in a story that one woman told about a friend who is Chinese. She told me that her friend had, in her youth, made use of extensive make-up to change her skin colour. She had also glued her eyelids to the skin above her eyes in order to make them appear less oriental. The participant shared this story with me to illustrate how poor body image because of racism and sexism can cause one to violate one's own body. In this case, a sense of the sacred is clearly absent.

With contrast to these dominant interpretations of the female body, some Native women have been taught to see themselves as sacred by virtue of their ability to bring life into the world. One woman shared with me the story of how she came to discover this through elders in her community. The elders' understanding of life contrasted with what the young woman had learned from the nuns and priests; that an unwed mother is unworthy and unpure, and that the "illegitimate" child is similarly tainted:

> What I learned from those old women is that life is very sacred. A child coming into the world is a sacred spirit, because it is coming from that realm....But the church teaches differently.

> I believe that we come into the world pure. We are a sacred being. We don't come into the world wearing somebody else's original sin. We don't come into the world tarnished or blemished. Because that's what we heard all along...

As a result of negative lessons learned about childbearing, this woman felt shame about the "illegitimate" children she had borne. They were taken away by the Children's Aid Society, and she was left with the attitude of "you're easy, you brought it on yourself". Learning about the sacredness of life enabled her to change her self-image and begin to identify with her responsibilities as a mother:

> It wasn't until I started to learn from those old women, and those old men about the sacredness of life that I began to honour and respect...celebrating that new life. I wanted to be a good mother. I wanted my children to have a good life.

One woman mentioned how important it is to have an acceptance, knowledge, and celebration of menstruation. She sees menstruation as part of a sacred cycle that is at the very essence of life itself. For this reason, she advocates ceremonies for young girls who have begun to menstruate:

> ...Celebrating that young girl who has just become a woman, that's a gift we are given. Celebrating the first flow, just as the earth, when she's flowing in the spring time, it's the same thing....That's who we are as women. We all flow. We all bleed, and that's how we bring forth life, that's how we mold and shape life...That first blessing that was given to women is that you open the door and water issues forth. You are able to take that life into your arms, and take her to your breast. Celebrate that miracle.

Another woman talked about the need to keep the body healthy in order to prepare for the time when one will be called upon to give life:

> [Mother] always used to talk about preparation. Preparation of the body to give life. And I started to think about that at puberty, really. She was very conscious about keeping healthy, to give life....[rooted in] the spirituality of a woman, to be gifted, to give life. [I remember] how much emphasis she put on how grateful we must be.

This woman later talked about healthy eating, and how food was perceived as medicine in her traditional culture. She said "we look at food as medicine". Again, this was related to a woman's sacred responsibility to give life:

> Eating for health. I think that's one of the things that the women a long time ago were very aware of; eating for health. In preparation for life-giving....

She tied this into the woman's responsibility to feed children. Their role is not only to give, but also to sustain life:

> We've been talking about re-learning how to honour the traditional foods from a spiritual perspective, like we used to a long time ago. I think that's really necessary for health, for our young people, for ourselves, as a woman, to look after our children. We've got to stay healthy. And our children will learn how to eat...
>
> ...It's always been the role of the woman to see that that happens in our family...It's the woman that gardened. It's the woman that prepared the food. It's the woman that fed; it's the woman that fed the body to nurse.

In this quote, the participant applies the concept of woman as a source of nourishment both literally and figuratively. She draws on traditional labour division around food preparation and encourages the woman to see herself as one with a capacity to nourish. When asked about her literal interpretation of woman as nourisher, she concurred that in a society such as ours where both men and women work outside the home, the task of food preparation must be shared.

Woman's Body as Land

Following on the acknowledgment of a woman's ability to give and sustain life, many Native women conceive of themselves and their bodies in relation to the land. As mentioned in a previous quote, one participant explained that women menstruate and flow "just like the earth, when she's

flowing in the springtime." The images of Mother Earth and Grandmother Moon offered by many of the participants speak of lifegiving cycles. The earth produces and the moon regulates. In turn, the waters of the earth are vital in that they bring on and sustain life.

As mother of all life, the earth is seen as female, and woman's relationship to her is close. One woman mentioned how, in her tradition, the woman did all the gardening. Women worked closely with Mother Earth to sustain life. A second woman spoke of different male and female roles with regards to gardening. As a child, she recalls watching her father plough the earth. She wanted to help him, but her mother explained to her that it was a man's task to do the planting. His job was to impregnate the earth, just as it is a man's task to plant the seeds of life in a woman. Yet only woman has the capacity to nurture the seeds. This defines her responsibility:

> It was the women that took care of all those little plants. They watered the garden; kept it going...He couldn't go to the garden and take stuff out of the earth. It was a woman's responsibility to do that. It was like a woman helping another woman in labour and childbirth.

The equation of women and earth offered a valuable lesson for one of the participants upon reaching menopause. Her menopause coincided with the end of her marriage, leaving her with a sense of being "uncelebrated" and "all used up". She experienced a crisis at this time which was "like an earthquake". She talked about how she was brought around to a renewed sense of herself through the teaching of an Elder about the earth. He shared with her the following insight on how the earth had been misused:

> "You know, over there in Europe, they refer to her as old. The Old World. And here they refer to her as the New World....We have to try to keep her young here. Because over there they aged her, they aged her over there, and they used her up...Even in some places over there...she can't give life anymore. And so there are places where people are going hungry. They are starving. And they are fighting. So over here, we have to make sure that we celebrate her. And keep her young"

From this story, the woman began to reflect on how she had been unduly self-sacrificing in her marriage. She had participated in the kind of unbalanced relationship that Western society has engaged in with Mother Earth. Western society has imposed a similar relationship and expectations on women. The end result: when one is no longer able to give it all, one is "uncelebrated" and perceived as "all used up". Through this equation, this woman was able to articulate her vision of the unbalanced nature of male/female relations in mainstream society:

> I guess that's something that we learned from the Western worldview. It's the women who are the givers. Men take.

Like the earth, she understood her responsibility to nurture and sustain. Yet she could see how this responsibility is easily twisted out of shape by the takers of an unbalanced society. She concludes:

> It's the earth who gives life, who does that nurturing. And there's a difference between giving and nurturing. I think that's what we have to get back to. To find that.

Her personal response has been to make an effort to nurture herself. This has led to her feeling "young again".

Woman's relationship to the waters of the earth also provides a strengthened understanding of women's abilities and responsibilities. In response to my questions about women's roles, one participant offered this impression:

> I thought about the water, and women's responsibility for the water, and the moon teachings, and all the feminine concepts in our teachings around the earth.
>
> The thing that strikes me about the water is that it will take the shape of any of the containers, the vessels that we put it in. If it's a bowl for ceremony, it doesn't matter if it's a rock bowl or a pottery bowl, a wooden bowl, or a copper bowl.

> The other thing to remember about the water is that it is the strongest force on the earth....Even the wind can't do what the water can do, in terms of determining the process of life. And we know that water comes first before life itself. We know it has responsibilities to cleanse us, to quench us, to nourish our thirst; that it is also responsible to allow us to sit beside it to find peace.
>
> But whether it's that single drop [or] to the largest body -- that represents the female element. I think [of] that role in terms of tradition; that we have the capacity as women to take those shapes, but also to *make* those shapes...We recognize that we don't have this kind of power where you bang your fist on the table; but that it's the power of the water, that sort of, every day going against something that ultimately changes the shape of the thing.

This woman presented a powerful image by offering teachings around a woman's abilities with relation to the waters. Inherent in these teachings is the understanding that women have the power of the force of life itself. They are adaptable, and able to direct and withstand long processes of change. At the same time, these teachings instill a sense of responsibility in those that have the capacity to provide and sustain life.

The need to honour earth, moon and water was mentioned by several women. From the menopause story, it is clear that both men and women have the duty to respect, nurture, and celebrate the earth. Women have specific responsibilities related to their connection to the earth, the moon and the waters. Four participants mentioned the importance of doing full moon ceremonies. The significance of these ceremonies was impressed upon one woman by her grandmother:

> [Grandmother] used to tell us a long time ago that the moon is the women's energy, and the sun is the men's energy. And so it was important that we celebrate the moon. It was important that we honour the moon ceremonies.
>
> She said that the moon is so strong with it's energies that a long time ago, the women all got their moon time at the same time. Because in our mind, we all honoured that grandmother moon so. So that birth control was easier to figure out, because they were all on the same cycle. Where now today, we seem to be all on different cycles. So they emphasized more using the moon for natural birth control because it was easier for the women to work together, and to give one another support that way...And so [grandmother] used to say "Don't ever forget the moon, because you are a woman, and that's your grandmother.

This woman and another participant talked about how they had reclaimed their duties of conducting moon ceremonies. One of them told me that that it is important for her to do this work as it helps women to learn and understand themselves in a positive way. By honouring these entities, women are thus able to honour themselves.

WOMEN'S RESPONSIBILITIES

Part of coming to a positive sense of being includes embracing an understanding what many Native women refer to as *responsibilities*. When asked about the "role" of women, one participant stated:

> I came to understand [that] the role of women didn't really have anything to do with whether or not a woman has the same legal rights or definitions....It was more along the lines of: what is it that you have to do; and what is it that you are capable of doing.

The "who am I" is embedded in the "what is it that I must do?". Each understanding feeds the other to construct an identity. All of the participants demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility founded within their understanding of themselves as Native women. This section demonstrates how they translate these responsibilities into the workings of their lives and their communities.

Purpose

At the intersection of identity and responsibility, one finds a sense of purpose. As with the recognition that all life is sacred, the acknowledgment that every life has a purpose is critical towards developing and maintaining self-worth. One of the participants talked about learning this lesson from her parents:

> They never condemned. Never condemned other races. Never condemned nobody in their religion. They said everybody is supposed to walk this earth. Everybody was given something to do on this earth, something to use with their hand, or feet, or their head.

The teaching about purpose came to another participant through a dream experience:

> I began to realize that we all have a purpose, we all have a meaning. We all come into this world looking for something. Everybody comes to learn something, to give something, everybody has a journey, everybody has a path.

This understanding reinforced the participant's will to live, and to take on responsibilities for her well-being and that of her community.

One woman spoke about having an innate knowledge of her identity related to responsibility. She saw the purpose of her life as something simply waiting to be uncovered:

> I believe that we were born with a certain knowledge, and certain roles and responsibilities, -- The assimilation policy has been there all our lives, [but] we *know* [our responsibilities]. I think it's genetic. We have this map that tells us what our responsibilities are. And unfortunately, we've also had to deal with this other [mainstream] map.... [but] you know I still think that you come out and do what you have to do, -- when the time comes.

Purpose in this sense is the acceptance of "doing what you have to do". This woman saw her purpose as defined within a concept of responsibility to community. A second woman told me that she "always knew", from birth, who she was, but that she had to go through a lot of negative experiences before she could come back around to remembering. Her understanding of self was also very related to her purpose; in her case, through her work as a teacher and leader in her community.

a recognition of being

Indian names were also noted by a number of the participants in that they confirmed what their purpose, or work in this life is. Names like "She Who Speaks the Truth", "Eastern Doorway Songbird Woman"; and "Rock Woman" demarcate the leadership roles that many of these women have taken on.

As explained by these women, an understanding of purpose carries with it the responsibility to act. This is defined as direction that comes from the spiritual realm:

> They say that you've agreed to a purpose before you came. You knew what you were going to be doing. So you have to continue on or you're dishonouring what you said you were going to do, and you are dishonouring life. This is what you told the Creator you wanted to do and learn.

This feeds into how many of the women conduct themselves as members of their communities. One woman described her incentive to do community work in this way:

> [Art Solomon] talks about the gifts that we are given by the Creator. And how you need to use them for the good of the community. So that's something else I think about a lot. Because he says "You know, when you are standing in front of the Creator and he says "What have you done with the gifts [I] gave you? I want to be able to say "Well, I did this, and this, and this... [Laughs].
>
> ...I think just as a Native person who was given certain gifts and certain responsibilities, I really feel it's my, kind of obligation to use those for the good of the community. And that's what I try to do, in really all my working life, the 25 years that I've been working.

Another woman inferred that an acceptance of purpose, responsibility and work is common to Native women. An active participant in (informal) community politics, she explained that the predominance of women in this realm is, in part, due to an acceptance of purpose:

> I guess [there is] that strong principle that you can't just sit there and not do anything. I think that a lot of Native women have that. I find that Native women are very vocal...even though they might be shy when they are growing up, it's going to come out.

It is clear to many of these women that they carry a sacred responsibility to act for the betterment of their communities. By what means do they take on these duties?

Lifegivers, Mothers and Nurturers

For many Native women, the ideology of woman-as lifegiver defines both their identity and the responsibilities attached to it. The ability to give life is described as this woman as an innate spiritual right:

> I was always taught we had innate spiritual rights as a woman. Those are ours. we don't need to convince anybody, or try to control society. That's who you are...Lifegiver, nurturer, that's the innate right I am talking about. Nobody can take that away from us. And nobody can give them to us. We are born with those rights. But it's up to us to make them strong. To look at that as [a] real healthy, positive way, as a woman.

By seeing oneself in this way, Native women are able to capture the magnificence of their being:

> They talk about women and the ability to give life, is like the Creator. The Creator gives life, and women are like that. They give life. I mean, you can't get much better than that, really! [Laughs].

This definition of being allows many of the participants to see themselves as critical players in their families and communities. They are active in the sense of being able to create their lives and the lives of those around them:

> I think that one of the things that Native women recognize is that they are the keepers of creation. And every step that they take lends itself to that creation. She may take that same step over and over again. But it's still creative.

The understanding of woman as creator implies that women are self-determining by virtue of their ability to create. Self-worth and self-esteem are thereby greatly enhanced.

As mothers, women are understood to be at the centre of family and community. Several participants mentioned that women are "the strength of the family". They stated that women maintained "the integrity of the family" and that they have always had the responsibility to "keep the family together." One woman gave the example of her grandmother. When this head of the family died, the family was lost:

> I think the knowledge of [grandmother's] power really came to me after she died...It was almost like a dissolution. Her daughters and sons were all very lost...She was a very capable woman, and she knew how to provide that sort of strength...My own mother died a few years later, so it never got resolved in that sense. The kind of *you can't leave home because your mother's there.*
>
> ...[My father] didn't have any sense of how to find his way home after she died. For him it was several years before he got comfortable coming home. That was his wife's home; it wasn't his.

Motherhood is known as a sacred responsibility as nurturing children is seen to be tremendously important. One woman described it as "finishing creation". The sacredness of this task is evident in a story one participant told me about a young woman who had not been attending a woman's circle that she runs. The young woman felt bad about her absenteeism, but this woman told her:

> "You're not shirking your spiritual responsibilities. [*That child*] is your spiritual responsibility. That's what children are. They've been give to us as gifts, which means the Creator trusted us an awful lot. "

This participant went on in her interview to explain that she tries to instill an understanding of responsibility to the children when speaking with young women:

> I talk a lot about our children, and how we see our children...How we should be doing everything for them. I mean, we don't have to feed them when they are twelve years old, right? [Laughs]. But doing everything to make sure that child is walking in a strong way, and in front of you. Because you're not pulling that child behind you. What you're doing is you're coaxing them along in front of you.

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The ideology of motherhood is comprehensive in that women with this understanding accept a responsibility to look after *all* children: theirs, others, and those of the future generations. The responsibility for the children then translates into a larger responsibility for future of the nations. One woman described her political activity as part of her responsibility as a woman to look after the children. She talked about the responsibility to motivate other community members to take action about any wrongs that might be taking place:

> I think it's our responsibility to motivate. And to get people going, and realizing that they have that responsibility to help our kids. Like we said in our protest, it's our responsibility to look seven generations into the future.

Another described how the motherhood ideology defines the political process of the Iroquois. This plays itself out in the way that chiefs are chosen:

> We produce life, and I guess [because of] the fact that you're mothers -- as a whole, [you are] responsible for community. We see all these little young ones. [We have] a community responsibility to ensure that these young ones are all taught the same responsibilities, to the overall community and nation.
>
> You start at an early age to watch their growth....When there's a [political] vacancy...there's a number of them that you have a tendency to look at.

Women are not chiefs within this traditional system, as they oversee and choose the chiefs. They have this responsibility because their judgment and wisdom in overseeing the growth of the upcoming generations is recognized.

Another Iroquois woman told me:

> You know, most Mohawk women today, they don't have any problem making choices, and making decisions. They are good decision makers.

She concurred that the Mohawk women's ability to make decisions for family and community arises out of a tradition where Iroquois women have always had great decisions to make. Women in this tradition have carried a crucial role in the governance of the nation, and have been able to make decisions accordingly.

The need for women to oversee governance in the modern electoral system is described by this participant:

> Whoever you have in terms of leadership, whether it's a man or a woman...you can reckon that...women are the community. The women are giving the direction.
>
> If the leadership is male, [perhaps] they can reckon that within themselves, or say to the external world "I've been put in place here, and I represent my people, but my direction does come from the life-givers". I think that's something that needs to be looked at.

Whether formally or informally, women need to be accorded a meaningful role in politics in order to fulfill their responsibility to oversee the development of the nations.

One woman explained that women have managed to maintain something of this function in spite of having official political avenues stripped away from them. She talked about the Native political organizations that she worked for in the 1970s. At that time, (and even still), positions of political power were held by men. Yet the women, usually secretaries, would discuss politics while the men were out putting the political public face on things:

> We used to talk politics. Sit around and talk politics when all the men were around doing their thing. So we'd analyze the whole situation -- what the men should actually be doing (laughs), and things like that. And I suppose when you think about it now, that was our role.

In spite of the low status of women within the political and organizational systems that have come to represent Native communities, this woman sparked a career of political activism and

responsibility through this practice of conferring with other women on governance issues. As mothers of the nations, such women have managed to find avenues to play out their roles in a forum that offers no official course to do so.

Another means of fulfilling the responsibility to oversee and govern is through informal political action. One participant stated: "...when you look around at who's doing things, it's the women". She gave some examples of political action being undertaken by women:

> Native women are achieving. And really working hard to make the world a better place, not just for Native people, but for everybody. They are fighting to save the environment, in different places. Fighting to save sacred sites. Things like that, and people don't know about those Native women. They don't have any kind of an appreciation of the role, I think, that Native women have chosen to take on.

Native women thus continue to seek out ways to oversee community well-being by whatever means possible.

This ideology of motherhood and the responsibilities it implies extends even to women who don't have children. It is notable that three of the women I interviewed do not have children of their own, yet they talked about themselves and other women in these terms. They often spoke of their responsibilities as "aunties". Like mothers, they have a responsibility to nurture. One of these "aunties" explained how this responsibility guides her employment and her community work:

> I've approached [my work] as somebody who really wants to see the community heal and recover... I think there's certainly a large element of caring in that; you know, that nurturing part as well. I haven't had any children, by choice, really. I sort of feel like I had a big family to look after.

Another talked about how learning this responsibility had been critical in the development of her identity. She, too, translated this into how she operates in her community:

> ...Learning to be called an auntie. Learning how does an auntie behave. Not that I'm my brother's children's aunt -- *how* am I an auntie, which I think is a very different concept in terms of talking about responsibility. It talks about responsibility not only for self, but for family, for clan, and for nation. I think living in downtown Toronto, it talks about responsibility for myself, for my family, for my relationships, and for my community. And I am prepared to acknowledge that there are communities, plural.

The concept of familial relationships and the corresponding responsibilities can thus be applied to family, work and community relationships within whatever context the woman is operating.

As aunties and mothers, women nurture, oversee, and also instruct. Many of the participants talked about the need to teach values and principles by way of example. They feel a responsibility to act as role models. They also spoke of their responsibilities to pass on their cultures. One participant explained that women have always had this responsibility by virtue of the fact that, as caregivers, they are the first teachers of the children. She asserted that women have therefore "taught the men all that they know". Because of this function, children and adults continue to go to the women for this type of nourishment:

> ...The people you have who are tremendous traditionalists and ceremonialists got it because of something that the women gave them....They were looking for that, they were looking for their mother, looking for their auntie, looking for that nourishment, support, that nurturing that I talked about.

One woman described herself as a trailblazer, and I would add that all of the participants have been trailblazers in terms of the responsibilities they have taken on as teachers.

As lifegivers, nurturers, and teachers of the nations, the participants I interviewed are able to discern the enormous responsibilities that they carry. This understanding is further enriched by the way in which they can see how these responsibilities operate in balance with those of their male counterparts.

MEN'S RESPONSIBILITIES

It is not possible to go into a description of traditional Native men's roles and responsibilities here; that would require another thesis. It is important, however, to share some of the participants' insights about male/female relationships and men's responsibilities insofar as they elucidate the question of Native female identity. Traditional gender balance is key to an understanding of Native female roles. As such, the way in which these women operate in relation to men feeds into their positive sense of being.

In examining male/female roles, it is important to note that this is not a discussion that offers prescriptive and literal formulas for tasks. Some of the women mentioned the need to distinguish between tasks and responsibilities. When asked about male/female roles, one of the women initially replied "I don't know what a female role is supposed to be." I believe she was responding to sexist definitions of "role", as she went on to tell me that this sort of understanding has no place in her culture:

> Western society has a tendency of imposing that. "That's not your role":..There might be tasks, but that's not responsibility. It's a task. The hand that's needed to get the job done.... I think that's what society does, is, they confuse a task with being gender-related. It's ridiculous. the only thing that has to be gender related is the fact that woman produces. But the man also contributes to that production.

After this response, the woman later went on to speak extensively about male and female responsibilities in community governance. This indicated to me that her initial response was with reference to the unbalanced nature of male/female "roles", work, and the respect accorded to these elements in Western society.

Other women talked about how men have to share in the tasks of childcare and cooking, while at the same time talking about women's responsibilities as mothers and nurturers. This confirmed to me that the ideologies undertaken here can not be interpreted in the sexist or limited

ways that they have been in Western culture. They must further be understood within the spectrum of tasks that characterize modern society. The duty to oversee the growth of one's children and nations is incongruous with the Western housewifely existence, whereby a woman may be isolated, imprisoned in a nuclear house and household, and without voice in either family or community. Such responsibilities need to be translated into tasks that suit the environment and support equality. The principle is balance.

Gender Balance

Balance is a central theme in male/female relations and responsibilities. Traditional and spiritual teachings advocate gender balance. A metaphor often referred to in this regard was that the men are related to the sun and the women are related to the moon. The medicine wheel was also used to demonstrate gender equity. One participant used the medicine wheel to explain the distinct division of responsibilities between genders:

> ...the medicine wheel was divided, and the division was that there was going to be men's responsibilities and women's responsibilities... The man was given the responsibility to provide and to protect. She was given the responsibility for creation, and to nurture.

The essential point here is that the medicine wheel is divided in half; that one side does not serve for the other to consume. The responsibilities are to work in a complementary way, and in balance with one and other.

Upon learning about gender balance and responsibility through traditional Ojibwe teachings, one woman was able to move from a position where she had seen men as "expendable". She shared her lesson with me:

> Midewiwin has a very real understanding that, in fact, the creation doesn't continue without male and female balance. There is nothing that you can do that is completely female, nor completely male.

> Even in the way that the Midewiwin society operates; the teaching lodge, the sweat lodge. Those are not built without the cooperation of men and women. I mean, the men can bend as many poles as they want. If the women are not there to tie those poles together, they will not have a sweat lodge.
>
> It's very simple, but to me, a profound teaching tool; that each of them plays a role, but that they can't complete their work without each other.

This woman also gave the example that Ojibwe clans can not function without a head man and a head woman. She pointed out that each had their distinct responsibilities, and that both were necessary and equally valued.

Loss of Role

Some women spoke about how Native men have lost the practice and understanding of their role. A few mentioned that women have come through the colonization process better than men. One woman explained:

> I think that women are still the nurturers. And they, also, I think, have become the hunters and gatherers. Men have had, I think, a far more difficult time, because there's not as much call for warriors these days. So our role has really been ongoing. It's taken different shape and a different form right now, whereas the men, I think, have really had to find a new role. They haven't reached as much success as women, I think, because women as well are more ready to admit to the need for healing and to build supportive relationships.

This quote draws attention to the problem of translating traditional responsibilities into modern day tasks. Another participant concurred that Native men have had a difficult time translating their responsibilities into the modern context:

> His responsibility to provide and protect has become increasingly strained as a result of governance changes, of moving away from the land into a more urban, industrialized society with different demands... The introduction of the social welfare system; [things] that are supposedly safety nets -- all these kinds of things have moved him further away from his role than [she] from her role.
>
> ...When you get into the notion of protection, what do you do in a contemporary society to protect people against racism, against sexism, against gender issues, against homophobia? It becomes harder when you are part and parcel of that process. And protecting, remember, has really become a paramilitary sense in Canada, and certainly

> North America. It's done by police services. You see what I mean? Rules, regulations, legislation that governments are elected create (no matter by what proportion of the society) -- and so I think it is harder and harder for the man to do those things.

Several participants remarked that Native men are now struggling to make sense of their roles. They saw it as a problem that many of these men have no inclination to reconstruct their roles by resurrecting tradition. One woman talked about how, with the exception of a few, the men in her community are not interested in helping to revive traditional ways. She commented that they are "into Western thinking too much", and focused on "jobs and cars, or whatever".

Some women talked about the sexism in Native communities. They all conferred that sexism has been compounded by colonization:

> We have to recognize in our communities that men have taken their lessons from other men in society. That old boys' club is as healthy in our communities as it is in the corporate world. It is as healthy in our communities as it is at the Royal Bank, as an example.

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> I honestly believe that the kind of sexism that we have going on in Aboriginal communities, in our nations, and even in our families...is the absolute inheritance of colonialism. The men have inherited that.

Violence against women in the communities was also attributed to sexist behaviour arising from experiences of colonization:

> As a colonized people, we are a land based people, and we've had no home. And because we've had no home, there are all of these other problems that are attendant to that. Therefore, men who have no home get angry -- and who are they going to react against? Well, they ain't going to react against DIA. DIA is too big, so they are going to beat up on their wife, right?
>
> ...In Aboriginal communities, what we are beating up is not just the woman, but we are beating up ourselves because society has told us that we are inferior... If we are going to do any kind of healing work we have to go both with the victim and the victimizer,

> because we are all coming from the same place. We are all being victimized and all victimizing for the same reason; that is, a colonized destructive society on our culture.

Another woman related community politics and dysfunction to a chauvinism brought on by colonization:

> Chauvinism is not gender related. It all comes from someone else's government, and the way they treat other people; not just our [people], but their own.

The violence, dysfunctionalism, and abuse of power, largely practised by men in Native communities, is thus seen as the fallout of colonialism, rather than the inevitable dominance of one sex over another.

Recapturing Balance

A lost understanding of traditional responsibilities implies a shift in the balance of power. Participants were clear that, whereas power and control are more accessible to men, women are also capable of adopting these positions. Three women used the example that some women in their communities had been just as guilty as men in their abuse of power and control. Such women may assume this kind of power as chiefs. They have also been able to appropriate power through positions in the band office or other western or Indian Act-based political organizations. One woman stated:

> I don't think women are perfect. I think that some women have been co-opted. I think that's common with people that have been oppressed...you know, small groups of people starting to control things.

All of the women advocated looking at how the resurrection of traditional values and philosophies can combat such power dynamics. The need to proceed with caution in this regard

was noted, as one woman pointed out that some men use traditionalism to advance themselves in a sexist way::

> I find that many traditional men are very chauvinistic. They are rigid. There's just no flexibility. A lot of them say women shouldn't be singing; they shouldn't be drumming. I think there are, in our teachings, some natural laws that have to be followed. But you can't just be making up stuff. And that's often what happens. People do that, just out of their own insecurity, for their convenience.

As is evident in the comments of this woman, reclaiming traditional ways is about finding balance and equity in the contemporary context.

One woman explained that traditional Native cultures had systems to maintain a balance of power, thereby ensuring that sexist abuses of power were kept in check:

> I don't believe that sexism was thoroughly unknown before Europeans came here. I have to figure that we had the same capacity for "isms" in our original societies that we have today. All those "isms" are quite available to everybody. What was [also] available, however, was a method by which to balance that.

In addition to the balance accorded by previously mentioned gender responsibilities which ensured women's role in community governance, the balance of power was also monitored by clan systems and clan responsibilities. An Ojibwe participant pointed out that each clan symbolizes gender balance by way of a structure that includes a head man and a head woman. The clans have means of resolving conflict and thus checking abuses of power through these leaders. In turn, individuals are primarily accountable to, and protected by their clans, thereby eliminating power privileges and dynamics simply drawn along gender lines. An Iroquois participant also made this point, stating that males and females can not be accorded different standards because of the recognition that, as individuals that share clans, they have common responsibilities, identities and tasks:

> If you go back to some of our clans, my brother is a bear just as well as I am. There's responsibilities that both of us have -- they're no different.

There are, however, certain responsibilities that the men carry which also assist with ensuring a place of esteem for the women of the community.

Role Models

Participants mentioned that Native men need to be role models for the younger generations. Some women talked about the need for men to acknowledge their role in community and domestic violence. One woman told me of a Quebec Native women's conference where (predominantly male) chiefs were asked to take accountability for the violence in their communities. They vowed to work with the younger men in ensuring that the cycle is stopped. She added that she was heartened to see some Chiefs in B.C. also take this sort of action:

> A wonderful development is that in some of the reserves in BC... the Chiefs and Councils are finally getting behind the women. When they've decided to do this, then the man is not allowed on the reserve until he has undergone certain forms of counselling and treatment, anger management, and other things. And that is really what's needed, because [there's no change] without [involvement of] the power structure. [And] let's face it, the chief and council are usually mostly men. That is changing as well. I hope that will become the way.

Another woman agreed that men need to take responsibility as role models in healing the violence and dysfunction:

> It's important for our men to realize that they have a large part in healing, not just themselves, but healing women too.

She talked about how the healing has to occur simultaneously, as the roots of the violence are the same for men and women. In this way, assuming responsibility for healing oneself also assumes responsibility for healing work that needs to be done with the other gender.

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Man as Helper

Some women talked about the traditional role of the man to be a helper:

> I used to listen to my grandma, who was a midwife. She always said our belief was that it was the responsibility of the man to be in calling distance to the woman....It wasn't that the man had to be right beside her all the time. But within calling distance of need....That was the concept of being [in] the supportive role of the woman.

This woman talked about how her father was "always there" for her mother. She said that he was "a total helper", making references to the way that her father had helped her mother to raise the children. She told a story to illustrate the respectful, yet limited position of men in this regard:

> My mother always said that when each child was born they spent two years right with them. So during the night, if the child woke up and my mother was sleeping, my dad would put the breast to the baby. He was still fulfilling his role of helping, but it was only my mother who could nurse that child. I thought that was so respectful, for a man to do that. The baby was right there, always with them, until the next one came along. So that was how he helped. And even though my mother would cook the food, my father always fed the children. He always made sure that we were fed. So that was sort of the working together, and I guess that's what I mean by being a helper. Helping a woman.

This participant made the important point that men who have an understanding of themselves as helper are not inclined to appropriate a woman's responsibilities. She demonstrated this by telling a story about her son:

> Two years ago, [my son] and his partner had a child. When this child was born, he wanted so much to be a part of this child. He said [that when] the child was born, he realized that he could not perform all the things that child needed. [He realized] that [the] mother had a role in nursing the child, and [that] he had a role in supporting the mother. He said, he [had] never thought of that. It became so profound. He became very aware of men's roles and women's roles.

This story offers an example of how the balance of responsibilities and a gendered division of certain types of labour can be translated into the modern context. As helper, this man was looking

for ways to assist the woman in her responsibilities. He was quick to give up any inclination to control or take over her responsibilities and duties.

Woman as Helper to the Man

At this time of confusion about responsibility, some participants indicated that Native women must act as helpers to the men by encouraging men's healing and self-discovery. One woman said:

> You can hear that quite a bit at the ceremonies... that the women are really strong now, and are going to be getting stronger yet. One of their roles is to pray a lot for the men, because this is the time period when they are going to be really weak. The don't know what their role is, and we have to give that understanding to them, and we have to pray for them more yet, for them to gain that strength.

By helping men understand their responsibilities, the women act on their roles as educators. Some of the women stressed that this does not mean protecting men from looking at the dysfunction that they perpetuate:

> I think we, as women who are involved with Aboriginal men, aid and abet in that [sexist] attitude, because we are so protective of men...That used to be fairly prevalent in non-Aboriginal circles. Women used to cherish men in a way that protected them from reality. I mean, it took me a long time, as an example, to tell my husband that I felt discriminated against.
>
> ...So there's a whole lot of work to do on both sides. I think we have a responsibility as educators to educate our women as well as to educate the men....These are big boys; they can handle it. It's time to say, "Hey, you know what? This is a world that is equal, and I'll tell you what equality is." And just enumerate it. Their egos will survive.

Another woman pointed out the problem that women "prop up [their] men" by "having more faith in them than we do in ourselves". She supported this with the example that women consistently call on male traditionalists and healers to be their helpers when the expertise is as easily found among women.

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One participant said that women can help men by considering how they are raising their sons. She told the story of the eagle to illuminate this:

> I want to talk to women who are raising boys, who are raising little boys and young men. I want to tell them a story about the eagle, and how the eagle gets ready.
>
> [The eagle] gets ready to have children. Eagle makes a very conscious choice about a mate. You know, it's not like she went out for a dance on Saturday night, and she gets pregnant. She makes a very conscious choice that she is going to have it, and she mates. In the case of the eagle, when she mates, she expects it to be a lifetime commitment. She's not destroyed if it isn't, but she goes into it saying, "I want to make this commitment".
>
> [Eagles] go through a cycle of living together before they have their little ones. [And] he works as hard as she does at getting the nest ready. The nest is made of really big logs; they start out as big around as your arm, and bigger. They bring them...smaller and smaller and smaller, until you have just the little wee ends of the stems of leaves, where the twig is. Then they groom each other to get that nest ready, and that's when they put all their down in. So you start with this log nest this big that goes down to a softest down.
>
> When those eggs are coming... he contributes that whole time. They share that responsibility. And then the little ones come.
>
> The little ones struggle to be born. They are not very strong, and that eagle egg is a little bit stronger than most eggs. And so they really struggle to do that. She doesn't get over-anxious and say "Oh, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that," she learns patience right away, because she wants those little ones to learn that patience and that strength.
>
> So they have them, and they take turns with them. If he's not there, believe it or not, eagles will help other eagles. They don't kill the babies, but usually they are both there.
>
> So now they are growing, and she's feeding them, she's teaching them stuff, and there comes a point when...she decides it's big enough, that she makes a conscious decision about [how] she's going to equip them to live. And that's how the old people talk about it. She makes a conscious choice that I'm going to teach him or her how to live.
>
> So what she first does, is she blows away all the down in the nest. So you have them little soft twigs, and he's a little bigger now. And then a few days will go by, and she'll take those out. And then the bigger sticks, and this will happen over a period of weeks, until finally there is just those big logs that they first put down there, and that little guy, he could fall down through the nest if he isn't careful. But she's teaching him self-reliance; she's promoting his independence. And she's saying there's a time when you have to get out of my home.
>
> I don't think that Native women are doing that anymore. I don't think that we are raising our young men in the same way we raise our young women. I don't think we are equipping them to live, to be independent, to be self-reliant, and to leave her house. And

> leave her house doesn't mean I go find a woman and I move into her house, and she does all those things for me that my mom did.
>
> ... I think this [is] key: this struggle issue of who we are as a people has these two halves of a medicine wheel. And I don't see one half developing the same way.... I see women, in terms of, if we are going to keep struggling, how we are going to conduct ourselves, how we perceive ourselves, I think we have got to change some of our own thinking, about how we are going to raise our men. For me, the eagle really strikes that.

In addition to offering a number of lessons about respect, balance, and responsibility in male/female relationships, this story ties into a lesson that another participant provided previously:

> I'm always amazed at how much energy adults put into controlling children. As if they wouldn't be quite willing to let us do things for them... The lessons [learned from Grandma about] taking care of people... [were] not in the sense of [taking care of them] -- but taking care in terms of *what people learn*. What provides guidance to people so that they can make decisions, learn about themselves. That's what I had been able to see what taking care really means.
>
> ...The kind of protecting we [women] do doesn't necessarily have to do with keeping everything out. [It's] learning how to deal with it when it comes.

The words of both these participants stress that women are not wholly responsible for men's well-being, but that as mothers and educators, they have some responsibility in teaching men how to take this responsibility on for themselves. Otherwise stated, one participant cautioned of the problems that occur when women conduct themselves as "co-dependents" in their relationships with men. It is clear that women must not "aid and abet" men in their dysfunction; that they need to act as helpers, educators, and guides as boys and men struggle with their independence.

What this leads to for both women and men is a position some women talked of as self-determination. This position is critical to survival.

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SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-determination was referred to in many ways. One participant told me about a process whereby she had to "reinvent" herself. Another spoke about how it is important for a woman to "claim" herself. In so doing, these women were able to resist all of the negative experiences that they had been through and find a way to understand themselves in a positive light.

One woman labelled this process "self-government". The self-determination process of this participant included working through her gender biases and arriving at an understanding about the balance between men and women:

> [I came to] recognize, beyond the political changes that had gone on, the internal politics that I have to deal with...It's a personal...self-government I suppose. Govern yourself! Don't let anybody else do it. -- Just to be able to make decisions [that] may not make sense to anybody else, but at least they are rational to you.

Upon accepting a new understanding of men and women and making decisions accordingly, this woman was able to resist negative influences and pressures. Resistance, to her, is self-government.

One woman framed the questions of this thesis as questions of self-determination:

> The nature of your thesis-- when you are talking about that process of self-identifying... I refer to [it] as self-determination. I think that once we identify who we are, then we determine that future world, our goals and responsibilities and things.

With reference to the significance of Aboriginal languages, she told me that it is critical to have the ability to define who you are. Based in the literal, or language, self-determination pervades cultural understandings of roles and responsibilities.

She further talked about the process of self-determination as the notion of "learning to respect myself", stating:

> I think that process, as I say, of self-determination, [is] of what role am I going to play, what responsibility [do I take] for myself. For my behaviour, for how I change, for what I am going to contribute.

The need to respect oneself was identified as key by another woman. She explained that this feeds into the process of self-determination via an acceptance of responsibility based in tradition:

> It's easy enough to say that there has to be more respect given to women. That first respect, they have to give to themselves. Know who you are. What your responsibility is, and assume it. Before we can start pointing fingers at anyone...understand your material and what your role is. And understand it to be attached to your nation.

This woman sees that "knowing who you are" is based on an understanding of responsibilities according to both gender and clan. For both these women, self-determination occurs by adopting an understanding of oneself through these responsibilities, and then acting on them in a way that benefits community and nation.

An acceptance of responsibility for self and actions was evident in the way that one woman described her upbringing. She talked about how she had learned to accept responsibility for herself and her actions early on in life. This lesson came largely through the women in her family:

> If I decided I wanted something, or I wanted to do something, I was never asking permission. The notion in our family was that if you believe something is important to you, a necessity, it was your responsibility to say what it was, and figure out how you wanted to do it.
>
> I remember being young and hearing someone say "And what will happen after?" [Laughs]...What will happen after is the important thing... That was always the important part of the plan was to figure out what was going to happen after, and live with it. You couldn't complain...
>
> And I don't know if that comes from generations of experience of "What's going to happen after?", but I don't know too many women in my family who complained about what happened after. It wasn't encouraged.

Some women talked in terms of self-sufficiency and self-reliance. As outlined on pages 135-136, several women spoke of female role models who had been self-sufficient. It is important to note that this kind of self-sufficiency goes hand in hand with an understanding that one has an ongoing responsibility to community members. In an ideal situation, this kind of self-sufficiency operates in balance with the relationships one has with others in the community. In the absence of such interdependent community relations, participants talked about how this understanding is being applied.

Many of the participants talked about the fact that, in contemporary times, men do not always operate in partnership with women. Two participants made reference to single parent families in this regard:

> I think what it means is that, although it is difficult -- and I went through it, -- women have had to use both principles. They have had to be the providers as well as the nurturers.

⊕

> Generally speaking, there's a high percentage of single women that need to become very strong. Self-sufficient, self-supporting, and then they can become good role models for these young children.

The notion of self-sufficiency is thus adopted by women who have little support to do their work. Whereas men have abandoned their responsibilities in many cases, women have adjusted theirs, and adopted notions of self-sufficiency as they struggle to take on all the responsibilities.

The principle of self-determination is also used when responding to other people's actions. In the case of one participant, a position of self-determination helped her to recover from the oppression and trauma of rape (see pages 160-161). Another woman stated that, after her sister had been raped, her mother stated: "You can't let something like a man's abuse keep you down for the rest of your life." One woman uses this stance of self-determination in order to resist

in order to resist racism from the outside. She asserts that one must stand up and refuse stereotypes as a "minimum standard of defiance". Yet she adds:

> After that, what somebody else does isn't all that important to me. What a racist has to say is just what a racist has to say. He's ignorant, it's not my problem. It might be if he decides to thump me out or something like that....but essentially, it's what I have to say to myself, to my children, to my family, that is far more important in my estimation than anything that a racist might decide to say to me.

Taken to a greater level, self-determination is extended to the nation. This is exemplified in the descriptions that some women provided of community politics. They spoke about the lack of self-determination and the internalized powerlessness of communities that accept the dominant governance of chief and council. They pointed out that the problem with the current system is that it encourages people to devolve responsibility. One participant talked about her attempts to bring an understanding of self-determination to her community:

> I felt my role was to have people turn around and look outside their inner circle, and look at the community and start realizing that their job was to help the people, and that the people were their bosses, rather than the other way around...But the system doesn't allow for that. Because the chiefs are their bosses, in the political scene....
>
> ...As a woman who has been actively involved in trying to change what's going on, we can't rely on the political organizations because they won't help you. Because the chiefs are their bosses....Once somebody gets into office, once they've had those votes, they operate on a basis that they have total control, and the total right to make decisions, all the decisions of the community.

The acceptance of responsibility is strategic at both the individual and community level in order for both to operate in a healthy way.

One woman demonstrated that the acceptance of responsibility through the clan system may be applied to an office setting.:

> There are specific roles and responsibilities that are required of a clan system. You take on the responsibility. The wolf doesn't say to the bear, "Now listen, this is something that

> you need to be doing". And the turtle doesn't say to any of the other two the same thing. The bears know what their responsibilities are, and whether it's through their chiefs or their clan mothers, or the faith keepers, all of them know what their responsibilities are.
>
> We have people here who have great expertise in terms of their writing ability, in terms of their knowledge attached directly to health, social or economic [issues]. And so, you just say "[work] as each of them to their clan [responsibilities]" -- [and then] you bring them back together and you share.
>
> You all win if you play out responsibilities. Because if you're constantly giving them direction, then it's guided again. It never becomes their own. They are never accountable, they are never responsible. The other system would say "I need your OK on this, and I need your OK on that", and it doesn't' allow them to start developing a better handle on who they are.

Self-determination is thus closely tied to an acceptance of responsibility. Healthy personal, community, and organizational identities emerge with this practice and understanding. For many of the participants, this is the hope for the future.

THE FUTURE

The women were very positive about the direction of Native nations. They see the woman's role as critical in this development. Three women talked about how Native women are strong, and getting stronger. Two women mentioned that women are leading a healing movement, and one pointed to prophesies about this:

> The prophesies also said how we were going to be let out of [these difficult times].
>
> One of the things the prophesies talk about (in a very specific Iroquois story) is the animals gathering their children back. And gathering their children back [implicates] wanting to be a good parent, wanting to be a good member of a clan, a community, that would begin the healing movement.
>
> ...We've seen the healing movement begin, in our time. We've seen it begin in cities, where women want to heal, they want to recover, they want to stand up.

Another woman noted that twice as many women as men are involved in the personal healing work through her organization. She then pointed to the work that women are doing in terms of fighting destructive powers:

> Native women are really achieving. And really working to make the world a better place, not just for Native people, but for everybody. They are fighting to save the environment, in different places. Fighting to save sacred sites. Things like that.

Several participants expressed hope and faith in the younger generations. Three women spoke highly of younger women who are getting an education in order to make changes in their communities. Three other women talked about the significance of young women who are learning traditional ways towards applying them to overall community development. Another participant noted that her daughters are operating from a position of strength and resistance that is different from her experience:

> I see [my daughters] already practising what I'm doing at a younger age. They've seen me cry... when people say things, or do things, or whatever. But I don't see them take it as hard as me....They bounce right back, real fast.

Another woman praised the ability of the young women to work from a position that incorporates the traditional and modern:

> I call it my "thirty-somethings". I see a lot of hope in the thirty-somethings, because the women are not only grabbing hold of education, but they also have the capacity to see back as well as forward. They can see back to some of the traditions, as well as they can project into the future.

The healing that has preceded the younger generations was noted. One participant stressed the impact on upcoming generations that are being raised by parents who have struggled out of their dark times. She attributed this in part to the work of women, stating:

I've seen a real community development happen in Indian country in the last two decades as the healing movement is starting, like I've never seen before. I don't think any other generation can point to [it] and say that kind of development has happened so rapidly. There are young people who can stand up now and say..."I was never an alcoholic, I wasn't a drug addict, I didn't have an abusive relationship."...

...These women made this investment in these people, and so our whole modus operndi isn't from this negative perspective; this perspective of a downtrodden, desperate, marginalized, poor people. And we still may be poor, we still may be marginalized, but we are not desperate in the sense, and we're not so downtrodden in the sense of recognizing who we are.

And what about all these young ones who we are raising? They are going to be in a position to say "You know, I never saw my parents drink. I never saw my parents do drugs. I wasn't in the Children's Aid; my parents raised me. I had my Indian name. I knew my clan, I knew these ceremonies, and I went to school and got A's....They are going to be phenomenal. It will be amazing to meet these next young women and men who are going to lead us.

In looking to the future, this woman offered these words of hope:

I think that how we conceive of ourselves and how we conduct ourselves in a future-looking sense, I see that recovery very much at the root of it...

... I believe you'll see a generation of leadership that will really be, in some respects, what we saw seven generations ago. Before all the alcoholism, before the lack of self-reliance. The welfare introductions, the control of the military and then Indian Affairs.

We are already seeing people emerge from the community, primarily women, but I think men as well, who are that changed person.

a recognition of being

FINAL WORD

FINAL WORD

I began writing this thesis in search of a positive definition of Native womanhood. I have identified that the interview participants and the women in the background literature foster a powerful sense of themselves through a process of *resist, resurrect and construct.* They resist negative definitions of Native women ; they resurrect Native tradition; and they construct a positive vision of Native womanhood.

Sylvia Maracle speaks of a similar process with her questions: Who am I?; Where have I come from?; Where am I going?; (and once I get there), What are my responsibilities? (page 50 of this document). As Maracle points out, these are lifelong questions, and I have only begun to explore them. I will pause in my journey here, and point to the work I have done on these questions thus far in the making of this thesis.

Who am I? frames the work. As a woman of mixed Native and European ancestry, what does that mean? I take Maracle's suggestion, and look at where I have come from. Therein begins my resistance, with a rejection of the kind of womanhood that Western cultures brought to Turtle Island[1]: one in which women are understood to be the property of men; where the split between public and domestic is pronounced, and where work in the latter is deemed less worthy; where women are seen as sexual objects in the service of men; where violence against women is rampant; where men are able to operate without responsibility to women, children or community. I reject the notion that the path to equity between genders is a gender-less society in which everyone is the same. I reject the offer of equality which means I must become individualistic, self-serving, white and male.[2]

[1] Otherwise known as North America.

[2] I recognize that Western feminism, in its breadth, explores other alternatives to equity. I am responding to popular conceptions of "equality".

I look to the past for ways to identify as a Native woman, and discover the way in which this has been constructed by the mainstream. As I develop an awareness of the mainstream construction of Native women, I am able to resist negative options to identity myself therein. My Native ancestry does not make me an oversexualized Pocahontas; an exotic virgin whom, like uncharted land, lies in waiting for consumption by the whiteman. Nor am I the dirty and simple squaw, the beast only worthy of the burdens that men choose to heap upon her. The subtle and not so subtle manifestations that this may take in my life may now be met with resistance. Because of my mixed ancestry, my ability to "pass" as white, my class, and my location in Toronto[3], I am not personally faced with the incidences of overt racism that are commonplace to so many Native women. I am more likely to meet with the type who is "turned on" by my "Otherly" status. Next time I meet someone with an appetite for "eating the other",[4] I will know what is feeding their palate. I will not offer myself up for consumption. It is particularly important that I have reduced the risk of engaging in like romantic notions of my Native self as I continue to seek ways to define my Native womanhood.

In looking at where I have come from, I therefore reject traditions of racism and patriarchy, resist their current manifestations, and then dig around for something better. Again, I must examine where I have come from. I find it useful to look to the traditions of gender equity embedded within Indigenous cultures. I dig for a vision that is useful to me, and resurrect those pieces that I will need to construct a vision for the future.

What is it that I resurrect? That each gender has its own sphere of abilities and responsibilities; that women are lifegivers, nurturers and teachers; that sex, sexuality and the

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[3] Whereas racism exists in Toronto, racism against Native people is much more extreme in places where there is a higher, more visible population of Native people. In my case, I have only ever encountered overt racism in Manitoba.
[4] I refer the reader back to the discussion in the "Use of Literature" section, page 31-32.

female body are not based in sin, but in the sacred; that every life is sacred; that every life has a purpose; that everyone carries responsibilities to community. The question remains, how do I now reconstruct?, or "Where am I going"?

Some of these traditions are immediately applicable. By adopting a notion of my body and my sexuality as sacred, I can conceive of myself outside of the realm of sex object. My female sexuality becomes a source of strength, rather than one of oppression or shame. I must kindle and protect it as though it were a sacred fire, and resist against those who wish to use it for sale or profit. If I begin to see my femaleness in relation to Mother Earth, I can see how I am neither virgin nor whore. I can see how woman/earth is used, as whore, for profit and sale. I can see how, as virgin, she is misinterpreted to be passive, an empty vessel waiting to be filled up, and only when she becomes the property of a (white) male. If I see myself in relation to the earth, I know that I am, conversely, creator, and that my fulfillment, sexual or other, is not contingent upon being "used up" as someone's property. I have my own rhythms, and I will carry on regardless of whether someone comes along to claim me. I can adopt Native tradition to celebrate those distinctly female rhythms, and so I take up things like moon ceremonies or menstrual ceremonies to remind me of the sacredness and vivacity of the female body.

The notion that every life has a purpose and meaning is helpful because it means that my life does not fall within some kind of hierarchy that places certain types of life above others. A strong sense of responsibility allows me to see that gender equity does not occur through the encouragement of self-serving independence. It must be fostered through a notion of interdependence; a world in which everyone carries responsibility to others. This further negates the position that, as a woman, I carry all the responsibility for the well-being of family or community.

Some of the teachings are more problematic to resurrect; they require a thoughtful consideration before I can apply them to my contemporary world. The notion that all life is sacred is helpful because it raises the esteem for women by virtue of their ability to bring life into the world, thereby erasing shame around sex and pregnancy. I concur with Bonita Lawrence's conclusion (see appendix); that the reverence for life, and the reverence for an ability to nurture life is notably absent in mainstream society. This lack of this respect for life has led us to the brink of social, economic, and environmental disaster. Yet some feminists may have problems with this understanding as it might, for instance, be used to fuel the "pro-life" (anti-abortion) debate. Sylvia Maracle asserts that this interpretation is grounded in Western thinking; that, traditionally, the decision about whether to produce life or not was understood as a decision between the woman and the Creator (personal communication). My response? When I internalize the position that all life is sacred I am left with a sadness around abortion, yet I have to remember that this practice takes place because we live in a world that does not celebrate, support, or honour the lifegivers. The terms of the debate defy the translation of a Native paradigm in which all life is sacred: "pro-life" slots the woman back into the service mode, and allows everyone but mother to renege on their responsibility, and "pro-choice" runs the risk of allowing people to overlook the likelihood that no woman would *choose* to go through the trauma of abortion. The lesson I take from this is that I need to construct ways to honour the sacredness of life and woman's role in it that do not result in her oppression.

Another tradition that might require some reconstruction is that of each gender having distinct abilities and responsibilities. Where am I going with this? It allows me an approach to identity that is not genderless, but how is this different from the split that occurs in traditional Western societies? How is this vision different from, say, a fundamentalist Christian argument that assigns the domestic to the woman, and the public to the man? How does it differ from a spiritual tradition in which the men instruct and the "ladies" define their space in the auxiliary? What is problematic, for example, about a men's social organization like the Rotary club?

I find it useful to start with the principle behind the tradition. If we are to define certain spheres according to gender, the principles of balance, complementarity, and a sense of responsibility are key. Gendered spheres of labour, spiritual practices, social activities, or other sectors only become oppressive when one side is deemed more worthy than the other, or when one is there to serve the other. In Western society, gendered divisions are often structured so as to maintain the dominance of men over women. Mainstream men's organizations that are used as a network to maintain a (white) male stranglehold on the systems that govern us all are, significantly, operating without regard to balance or responsibility.

To the fundamentalist who says: "I do my work, and she does hers", I say, "Does she have autonomy in making all decisions that fall within her realm, or do you govern both?; Is her work deemed as worthy as yours by the society you live in?; Do you work as many hours as she, and does she retire from domestic work at 65?; Are public and domestic understood to be interdependent, and do you have systems in your society whereby each sphere can check and balance the other? We now live in a society where the traditional female sphere, the domestic, is considered to be "dependent" on the male, the moneyed economy. This separation sets up power dynamics, and throws off all sense of responsibility and complementarity.

Once I hold firm to the *principles* behind an equitable division, I can comfortably turn to the question "What, then, are my responsibilities?", and how do I work them into the modern context? How can I, for instance, conceptualize a distinct female responsibility to create and nurture in a society where its obvious manifestation, work in the domestic realm, has been isolated and undervalued?

I conclude that I must find ways to use these traditions conceptually, and remember (as one participant pointed out) not to confuse task with responsibility. I may create and nurture in any

number of ways, and I take on each associated task with a vision to functioning within a balanced system. I may choose to have children, but I do not carry the full responsibility for them. I know that the man who helped me to produce the children has a heavy responsibility to help me nurture them[5]. This means that he must take on whatever tasks are necessary to enable me to fulfill my responsibility to mother, be they washing dishes or cooking while I nurse a baby; working in paid employment should I decide to personally provide the children with their early childhood education; or heading off the children's demands at times, so I do not become "all used up".

Like many of the women I interviewed, I may equally direct my responsibility for creating and nurturing to the public domain. This can imply work in any number of sectors: political, social, economic, judicial, etc. As a worker or leader who takes on the responsibility to nurture the community, I should expect the respect, support and cooperation of men. This is especially important as I will likely be operating in an out of balance society where men hold most of the power.

The central metaphor of woman as lifegiver, mother, and nurturer can be applied in any number of ways in the modern context. What is important is that it delivers me into a place of esteem and participation in a community which also understands that it has responsibilities to me.

This work represents the very beginning of my quest to understand "What are my responsibilities?" Because of the gendered division of responsibilities, I feel it begs a counterpart piece on male responsibilities in order to enlighten how the female responsibilities highlighted here might truly operate in balance with the male. The way in which the two complement each other needs to be further explored.

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[5] I know there are some women who make decisions to be single mothers. I doubt that, provided the opportunity to share childcare in a partnership that is balanced, anyone would *choose* to take on the work of raising a child alone. It is important to note that many women choose to raise children in a lesbian partnership.

At this pause in my education, I can point to these few things that I have been able to resist, resurrect and construct. The understanding of Native womanhood I have constructed in this piece will hopefully allow both Native and non-Native men and women to abandon the princess and the squaw. Personally, this piece has encouraged me to see strength in myself, as a mother, an educator, a writer, and a community worker. It is my hope that others may use this work as a tool to promote a strong Native female identity so that we can build a balanced vision that takes us a step away from patriarchal and colonial systems which thrive on imbalance. In this sense, we may continue to set the terms for healthy individual and community development.

APPENDIX: CONCLUDING DIALOGUE

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In keeping with the idea that knowledge is collective, and that in building knowledge, "one speaks only as another voice in an ongoing cycle of conversation" (Turpel 1993, 179), I decided that a dialogue with a peer would make a good appendix to this thesis. My purpose was to demonstrate how this knowledge can be applied to the everyday. I wanted to illuminate through dialogue what I have learned from the work, and to demonstrate what an outside reader might gain from this piece.

I invited my friend Bonita Lawrence to read the thesis, and then discuss it with me in an interview which we would tape and transcribe. Bonita describes herself in the following biographical sketch: "Bonita Lawrence is a mixed-race person of Mikmaq and European heritage. She is an auntie, and a Ph.D. student at OISE." I chose to work with Bonita for this conclusion because we have a number of things in common. We are both mixed-race, urban women who have grown up largely outside of Native culture. As students we are both studying issues of identity for academic and personal reasons (Bonita is writing about mixed-race identity). I felt that because of these similar positions and interests we might be able to arrive at some shared conclusions and insights that would demonstrate how this knowledge can be applied to someone in my position. This would bring the knowledge back to the personal; the reader could then see how this knowledge may be applied to the writer.

The dialogue was open and conversational; similar to informal conversations that have occurred between Bonita and me on various occasions. Bonita arrived, having read the manuscript and equipped with a few questions, and we settled in at my kitchen table to discuss the thesis. I later edited the dialogue, and divided it into the sub-headings presented here. The sequence of the topics is as it occurred in our conversation.

concluding dialogue

Translating Tradition

bl:

We have discussed previously that only a few women are starting to talk about how the traditions work in every day life. Women have written about it a lot -- people like Emma Laroque have talked about how they have to apply the traditions so that they challenge patriarchy -- but in everyday life it's not very easy to encounter women who talk about that.

ka:

Nobody's really written about the traditions and how they can actually be used. That's partly what I'm trying to explore, because there seems to be this sort of gap. I'm not going to be the one to fill it. But at least I'd like to start having that sort of dialogue. I guess partly what the purpose of this interview is to see how we can apply some of this knowledge to our lives, and also towards breaking down patriarchy.

bl:

You have said that so much has been taken away, and people are so insecure about their identities that it's not necessarily easy to talk about the discomfort we might have with the traditions. I was thinking too, that because I come into it as a Ph.D. student the thing I encounter from Elders is "Don't be an intellectual". It's hard to ask questions then, because I feel often that I am asking questions from the heart, not just from the brain. But they are always taken as if they are just from the brain; an intellectual who wants to poke needling little questions at the traditions. So I was thinking that maybe that also works against people asking questions of the Elders about "Is this really relevant? The way you were taught says that women shouldn't play the big drum, but I find that women are so much more powerful when they play the big drum!" It seems that the tradition of having non-Natives peppering questions about Native traditions from the outside works against us when we try to ask questions from the inside.

ka:

I think there's that, and I think feminism also works against opening traditions up for questioning. There is such an aversion to feminism in Indian country, for good reasons. But there are good questions that are posed by feminists as well. And so when you start to approach things that feel like they are coming from a feminist perspective, it can be interpreted as an attack on culture. So rather than looking at the question and how it could be used constructively, you get shut down.

You said that people challenge patriarchy in the traditions in writing but not in talk. Now that I think about it, a lot of women that I talked to danced around some of these questions. One woman said something about "Why is it when we go to these conferences, you see all the men Elders get up and go on at length, and the women Elders sit there listening." She told me, "We have to start getting some of those women up there to speak." Another talked about an experience attending a ceremony where women are supposed to sit with their legs to the side. An Elder was going around slapping women on the knees, telling them to "sit right", which she felt was very patronizing.

bl:

Also, it doesn't take into account the difficulties people may have in sitting!

ka:

Things like wearing a skirt, or sitting with your legs to the side, or the concept of women's responsibility for children -- those are things that I was trying to understand without approaching from the perspective of Western feminism. -- Which may say, "this is oppressive".

My struggle to think about how women can find equity in the world started out from a very Western perspective. Being a teenager, and saying, "Oh this is a bunch of bullshit, what is expected of women, and so therefore I'm not going to participate in any of that. Therefore I'm not

going to have children. I don't intend to marry. I don't intend to be somebody else's other half", etc. -- kind of rejecting all those traditional female roles in Western society.

As I got into my twenties I started exploring Native culture and meeting friends who were telling me things like: "Being a mother is a really positive thing"; and "Well, you don't really want to have children without a partner. It's important to have a partner and to be a mother." From that time I began to try to see those relationships and responsibilities from a different paradigm. I try to look at the roles from a Native vision and worldview -- with all the other pieces that are supposed to fit with it. Not out of context or without all of the other surrounding supports and community systems that fed those responsibilities.

It's true. Women have a primary responsibility for children. And so how can we take that and apply it in a way that is really about having power, having a place in society, being respected, being supported for that important role. If Western society has turned motherhood into an oppressive situation how do we go about flipping it around so that it becomes a very powerful one? It's difficult because it gets all mixed up with the culture that has come around in the last 500 years, -- and perhaps some of the culture that was there before.

You have to challenge the way these roles are presented, but sometimes it backfires on you because it may be interpreted that you are coming from a Western or feminist perspective.

bl:

And you are constantly playing the devil's advocate at times: arguing feminism with the traditionalists, and arguing tradition with feminists! [Laughs].

ka:

It's true!

But that's why I wanted to talk to some of these women. First of all, a lot of them are not only powerful in the way traditional Native women were powerful; they are also very powerful in the way Western men are powerful. For example, some of these women are executive directors; they have power within that kind of a work structure. So I said to myself, "Well, how is it that these women have achieved both?" They must have some kind of a critical approach that's allowed them to work in what has largely been a man's world.

bl:

One thing that struck me is the barrenness of Western traditional stuff. I'm thinking about the lack of attention to nurturing. To say that the primary job is to bring up children is to challenge the anti-life bias of the West; it's not only to challenge feminists or the downgrading of the female. It strikes me then, that with the western feminist approach even things like cooking aren't necessarily valued. I find because I like to cook, even sharing with roommates, I take the position of "Excuse me, it's important to nurture people!"

Early Education

bl:

In the interviews you said that all the women had supports for a strong identity; either strong families or strong role models in the community. I was wondering how that has applied in your life?

ka:

Well I guess a lot of the women I interviewed are role models for me.

I had a strong mother too, so I had that role model growing up. From a very early age, I have always challenged patriarchy, albeit from a young mind. But I feel as though I am just on the edge

looking for more knowledge about how to challenge patriarchy from a Native perspective. I'm just starting to understand the depth of that different paradigm, and how is it that we can apply it.

bl:

A lot of the women talked about the importance of identity as *Native* women. Because your mother is non-Native, is there anything that might have been missing in this regard for you?

ka:

My mother was strong in the sense that she always worked outside of the home, which, in our generation, not all mothers did. This is similar to what some of the women were talking about in the interviews -- about how their mothers always worked, either for pay, or as part of a responsibility to community. With relation to the public/private split in Western society, our home was balanced in the sense that both my parents worked outside of the home, and both worked in the home. I've never really explored with my mother about how much of a balance she felt there was. I think there is always some way that patriarchy creeps in. But certainly as a young person I felt there was more equality in our house because of the fact that my father cooked and cleaned.

bl:

You didn't feel inferiorized as a girl.

ka:

No.

Sex and Sexuality

ka:

What was missing in my early (non-Native) education?

I think that sense of a woman's power that comes from her ability to create and nurture. What a woman's body is. All that stuff is really, really important. I was never provided with any of that kind of teaching.

I think about facing all of the sexism that we see in the mainstream; the sexual jokes, the use of women as sexual objects. There is no questioning of "What is a woman's body?" Lots of women go along with the sexism; one approach is just to go along with the joke. It's like they think that you can't be oppressed by it if you are going along with it, or something like that.

bl:

In a non-Native context, the response to challenging sexism is that you are being a prude. You don't have any alternative body of knowledge. And let's face it, it's the same with a lot of Native women. The church has messed that to pieces, but still, it can be reclaimed.

ka:

Yeah, it's that thing about being a prude. If you are not going to accept women being sexualized, then it's like you are trying to shut out sexuality. You don't want to be prudish about that. But what's your alternative?

I've had a lot of struggle around that. About women's bodies, and feeling those deep feelings of fear, because of your body. Because of what can be done to it, because of the violation that happens. I don't know if you feel that too, or if all women feel this. That's part of what I am trying to overcome.

When I go to the women of the interviews, and I tap into their body of knowledge, it helps me see that there is something that will allow you to get beyond that fear of *either I'm a sexual object, or I'm frigid, or what?* What are my alternatives?

Shifting the Vision

bl:

A specific fear that has grown in me comes from having experienced racism. It's something that I've been late to identify as such; fear as a Native woman. Having encountered a couple of incidents of overt violence on the street specifically directed at me as a Native person -- there's a whole group of fears around that.

That's where it is important to get a body of knowledge that can challenge that, that can give you strength in the face of that.

ka:

Yeah, I really liked what you said about how you feel when you walk out of a ceremony in your skirt: so strong that you feel that people can't violate that being. That's the kind of vision I'm trying to tap into and share with other women.

I remember coming back from one of my coffee runs when I was writing my thesis. Scrawled on the side of the mailbox was this word "cunt". That's just such a forceful, ugly thing. Just one word, scrawled on the side of the mailbox. That's all it takes. You can feel the violence in that.

I began to realize the power of adopting a different knowledge and understanding of myself. At the time I was eight months pregnant. I said to myself, "No, I am not a cunt. -- And that violent statement is not going to affect me and who I am and what I am able to do." I just tried to go back to all those powerful feelings about lifegiver, what that part of my body is, what it's there to do. Who I am, how strong, and how positive and powerful that is. In going back to that I was able to resist feelings of fear and violation from that scrawl. Of course, that's a small expression of the

violence that some people feel on a daily basis. But I think that's what we need. We need that pearl of knowledge to be able to resist.

bl:

I was thinking about the male gaze too. Men checking you out. The insistence of the gaze that will not be dropped. They just keep staring. Having dealt with that all my life, the thing that I felt for the first time recently, was the thought, "This is because I have something that they want, and they can't have it."

It was the sense again, of power, of the importance of me as female. That's why they are ogling; they are lusting after something that they can't have. It's not just me as a body to screw, it's an essence in me that is powerful, and they can't have it! So it kind of devalues them, and it's a really funny feeling. I've been arguing with that sense of humiliation all my life. For the first time I felt, "This is about more than my breasts, this is about me as a person, and I am so much more important than that little gaze."

ka:

Now how is that different from that young woman you know who claims feeling a sense of power over men by working as a stripper?

bl:

That one... I haven't talked to her enough about that yet. That's something that I would like to find out, because I think it's a very big difference. And I'm sure it has something to do with her taking the terms that the society gives her and using them somehow. With me, it's realizing that they are so inconsequential, and that there is something else.

ka:

That's precisely what some of these women have achieved; what you have just described. There was this one point where one woman says "What a racist has to say is just what a racist has to say. I don't really care." (And yet she qualifies; "I might care if they bonk me on the head -- when it escalates to that level of violence.")

I want to shift to that position where I have that strong sense of something different. If we can shift enough of that mind vision of women -- that's one way to battle patriarchy. Shifting the vision in your mind. Now that may not stop the violence right off. But it's a start.

bl:

And those things will lose their power to hurt. Because that's what racist and sexist imagery is all about. It invokes feelings of worthlessness in the person. And when you can shift that, then, yeah, they really do have to hit you to make an effect. And hopefully it won't go to that. There's a real resistance there.

ka:

And if they do hit you, what are you going to do? Are you going to be around for more? It's like in my dream, where I saw this person who was being very abusive to my friend. He's saying, "Come over here to this side of the fence and confront me," and I say "No. I'm not going to go over there and let you beat me on your mixed-up turf. I'm staying here."

In fact, the idea for my thesis evolved when I was doing interviews with abused women. They made me think, "What would help a woman to get out of the situation where she is being abused in one relationship after another?"

Developing an alternative, positive sense of self is key to it, I think. But I don't know if that would work for people in the most dire circumstances. I think it's a start.

bl:

I think about my friend who was not able to get out of her bad relationship. On the other hand, she was able to do a lot of challenging within that relationship. This was definitely linked to pride in being Native -- not pride in being a Native woman, pride in being Native. The gender stuff hasn't kicked in enough yet. But at least she had gone from shame to pride.

Connection to Land

bl:

Something that interests me, as an urban person who has no access to a reserve, is the grounding in connection to the land. Some women talked about how you can do that in the city. I was wondering how that has affected your sense of empowerment as a Native woman?

ka:

Well, I don't have any homeland. I grew up in the suburban country, and I've been in the city for many years. My connection to land is to go to the bush -- where it's impossible not to feel the sacredness of the land.. It's so strong that you immediately understand that we are all connected, and that we are all connected to the land. That life is all related. That's when I have a sense that I, too, have a connection to the land, like any living human being. I think if they are open enough to it, all people can have that sense of connection to the land.

How it relates to being female is through an understanding of land as part of the creation, and understanding oneself as part of the creation, but also as creator, as a woman.

In particular the moon ceremonies give you that profound sense of the sacred as a woman. You are out there on the land with a bunch of other women --which is why I make an effort to get out of the city to attend moon ceremonies.

I think it's still possible to connect to nature in the city. There are trees and so on, but you have to work a little harder to get close to it. Whereas when you go to a moon ceremony on reserve, and you are sitting out there under the moon with all these women, singing on that land which is open, it is easier to feel the sacred. So I think as urban people we have look for those opportunities, and make our connection as we are able.

bl:

I find also in the ceremonies, the fact that it's reserve land means something too. The roof of Anishnawbe Health is a very finite piece of Native space. Boundaries of just a few feet on either side. Whereas reserve is a bigger space. Native space.

ka:

It's Native land. It is a different feeling. It's a feeling that you are in Indian country. So the reserves are important to those of us who are urban, non-status, non-nothing... [Laughs].

Also, I have friends who live on reserve who joke about "Well, she is Toronto Metis, but we have adopted her!" What they have done is given me access to sacred space. For instance, there is a reserve where I've buried one baby, one placenta, and now I'm hoping to bury another placenta there. So that's access to the land that is really important. I feel a strong connection to that land because I know my little guys are there. They are connected to that.

I have heard Native people voice the position "We are the land, and if you take away the land, then we are no longer a people." As an urban Native person, I think, "OK, so what does that make me?" But I guess that land is still there, and if we are lucky it's made accessible to us.

bl:

I think you see the truncation when you do find that access. We deal with it in ways that we can. We find people who, say, adopt you into a certain place. But you don't realize the truncation if you grow up urban Native. For me anyway, when you start to go to the reserves you start to see the continuity of knowing that that is a place where you can bury your dead, for example. Other than a Christian churchyard. You realize what landlessness means when you realize that you don't have a place to bury your dead.

Mother and Educator

ka:

What comes out most for me in terms of my identity are two things: Native women are mothers and educators. And that's precisely what I am, in the most literal terms.

Those roles aren't meant to be taken in a literal sense, per se. Like I said, three of the women that I interviewed don't have children. But they are aunties. They see themselves in that nurturing role; that's how they apply themselves in their professional lives, and also their personal lives, with their biological nieces and nephews, but also within the larger community. They also see themselves as educators, in passing on knowledge, passing on tradition, guiding young people, etc.

I am a mother, and so I think about the responsibility that I have and how am I going to apply it. For instance, now that I have a daughter, how am I going to raise her to understand herself as a sacred being? I think a lot of this stuff that I've learned about how life is sacred, the body is

sacred, and how you live your life, and how you use your body in terms of the life force and the creative force is really sacred, is really applicable.

bl:

And at the same time, teaching that sex and the life from it is not sinful. How prevalent that still is -- that "Oh, so and so is pregnant. How is that going to fit into their life?" It's like it's inherently a problem. We still live in a very Christian world, I think. Fundamentalism is on the rise. So how do you teach your daughter to have a healthy sexuality in that environment?

ka:

And my son. One woman talked about raising sons. How do I teach my son to be respectful of what a woman is, what a woman's body is --

bl:

And not just move into her nest, like that woman said! [Laughs].

ka:

Yeah. How do I give my children that strong sense of independence, and at the same time responsibility to the relationships they hold and to the greater environment around them?

I really liked that story about the eagle.

I'll tell you a story about what happened shortly after I had that interview. This friend of mine had been visiting the small town where he grew up. I went to meet him, and he began complaining about all the redneck behavior that he has to endure when he goes to visit his parents. He told me of one childhood friend who, upon spotting a black guy hitchhiking commented "Ne-gro. I wouldn't

let one of them beat me up". When my friend told me this story, I started thinking about how racism is really about fear.

My friend's comment about the men in this town was, "These men are so dependent. They go to the bar and drink beer, and act really tough and macho, and they order their women around. But when it comes to decisions they always have to go home and ask their women." He said "At home they are like small children, waiting at the table to be fed by mommy." And at the same time they are so oppressive to their wives.

bl:

It's about the man being able to remain a child. With no responsibility.

ka:

I started to think: *This is what the problem is. These men don't know how to take care of themselves; they don't have any sense of responsibility. And yet at the same time they are given all of this control.*

So nobody has taught these men to be independent or responsible, and on the other hand, nobody has taught them to be respectful -- not just to be taking all the time.

How is it that I can raise my son to have that strong sense of independence that at the same time assumes a respect for relationships and the responsibilities to them? How do I teach my daughter to have a strong sense of independence -- and not to be someone that is always giving to somebody that is always taking. To have an understanding that there is a balance in relationships, and that we live in a world that is wildly unbalanced.

I started thinking of situations and relationships in some families, where you see, for example, an 11 year old kid ask his mother to get him a glass of water. I can see how the women can be the centre and the focus of the family, but in a unhealthy way. They are dependent on her for permission, yet she must serve. Fathers are often at the centre in a different way. Everyone must revolve around their needs. Sometimes this happens with the male child as well.

So you have to start pulling those logs out pretty early. Even now my two year old wants me to do everything for him, and I say "No, you pick that up because you put it there. Take responsibility. Start to build some strength, start to do things for yourself. You don't need a woman to do that for you all the time."

In listening to these women, I started to think about how to achieve that kind of a balance in a family, and what I can do that will allow my children to understand balance within their lives and relationships. That's my role as an educator, in that small sense. Hopefully I can help share some of that knowledge that I'm generating as an educator/writer/teacher with other people.

Male/Female Counterparts

ka:

In terms of male/female roles and relationships, I have been thinking about the concept of helper, and how I apply that to my life. There is the story about the woman whose son wanted so much to be a part of his new baby's life. When the child is born and the mother is nursing he sees that he can't do that; but that he has a different role to play. And that's the role of helper. The same woman told the story about how the father would lift the breast to the baby in the night, in the capacity of helper.

I've started to think about how that respectful balance can be maintained in our society. I think what's happened with a lot of the women's responsibilities is that in trying to find "equality" in

Western terms, men end up co-opting women's experiences. You hear of these dad's as labour coaches who want to take over the birth experience. It's like everything else -- they want to take that too. I had a friend who didn't breastfeed because she wanted the dad to have an equal sharing at the bottle and the feeding.

In becoming a parent, or in seeing the way things are working in our household, I realize that there are things that are given to us as our birthright as women, and that we must not get confused between men being helpers and men taking over the process. At a birth, a man is a helper. It's not an equally shared thing.

bl:

Nor is the pregnancy.

ka:

Nor is the nursing. And I guess I'm really lucky in that I have somebody who works really hard to be a helper, but doesn't try to take on the experience as his own. In the context of modern society, he does this by cooking when he comes home from work. He does this, he says, because of all the extra work I am doing with my body, producing milk and so on. During my pregnancy, I don't think I cooked many meals.

bl:

I was really moved by that story of the man lifting the breast to the baby, because it struck me about the man being careful about life. That the man saw the breast not just as a sex object, but as something to nourish a baby. Which is a very mature thing for a contemporary man! [Laughs]. That's not that common in that imbalanced kind of man-as-eternal child mode. There was just something that I found very moving, in that it was about women's bodies being seen by men other

than that breast as just something for him to enjoy. So I guess that concept of the two different roles is essential.

ka:

And yet, to look at that from a feminist perspective, one might say "It's her body, what is he doing, taking the liberty of using her body while she is asleep?" But it all depends on which pair of glasses you are looking through. Within the context of the way that family operated and the way it worked, this woman said she thought it was such a *respectful* thing to do. Which is very different than, "Oh, what is he doing, using her body without her permission?"

bl:

Separating women's empowerment from the reverence for life seems to me to be at the crux of what's missing in that kind of feminist approach. As opposed to, say, a feminist approach that tries to be a little more balanced about it and willing to learn from Native traditions.

ka:

I agree. What is important is the sacredness of life, and reverence for life, and the understanding of how we all have our responsibilities around that. Women are key, as are the helpers. They have very distinct roles. They have their place, they don't cross over, they don't try to adopt, co-opt, or take on women's roles.

I'm thinking of what you were saying about "I have something that they want." I think that happens with men, for example, around the birth experience. Within that model, men take over childbirth until it escalates to this point where a woman is in a hospital strapped on her back with a male doctor directing the process.

If men understand what their role is, and which half of the medicine wheel they are on, then they don't feel a need to go over and take what is on the other half. They know what they have. They have their responsibilities. Whereas, what happens in mainstream society is men want to control that other half -- anything that women have.

bl:

This applies to the issue of women helping men. The various teachings I've heard about why women don't play the big drum are not punitive. It's seen as, "Men need that drum because it was given to them as protectors." Edna Manitowabi was at the Three Fires Music Festival, and she gave the teaching of the grandfather drum. Then she asked a helper to some Elder to talk, and he told a very masculinist kind of version of it which emphasized how the Sioux and the Ojibway were at war. Women brought the drum over to the other side of the river, and -- it was all... totally told in men's hands. It pushed the women away entirely. But when Edna told her story, it really made sense that women should not be scrambling to get power from one of the things that have been given to men to get power from. That's part of the balance, too.

It's difficult to come to that. There's this idea of women's roles being about restrictions. I guess there are things that are for men that women shouldn't be trying to do. But that one is hard in society, because there has been such a strong teaching that women can't do this, women can't do that. That's the upbringing that many of us had.

ka:

If we can get back to everybody understanding which side of the wheel they have, and how rich and full that is, and how it cooperates with the other side, then I think it can work.

A lot of the Native teachings help me with my relationships in my family. Part of it is not feeling like I have to do it all, either. Saying "OK, yeah, I do deserve to sit down with my feet up, while somebody cooks me supper, because I am pregnant, and I am working hard."

bl:

I was thinking how much in this society people hate helplessness. Fear helplessness. And how I think when you are pregnant, or when you have a new baby, like when you are ill, you are suddenly limited by biology.

ka:

That touches a cord about not feeling like you have to do it all. Starting to understand that there is another half there, that there is a role for that other person.

One of the women said that she used to think that men were dispensable, but through the teachings she began to understand that there is a male and a female side to everything. I have learned not to feel like I have to prove myself by being independent of anybody or anything. I understand that I have to work in relationship with other people, particularly in this case with my partner. That means accepting that I need him to do his work too.

Men's Responsibilities

bl:

I think one of the things that most makes me want to fly in the face of the teachings sometimes is the idea of the men as protectors. This is hard, especially if you have been abused a lot. I know that I would not have survived except for the intercessions of about five women in my life. Who took me in when I was on the street, who took the time to counsel me, who took the time to listen to me, who stood against my wrath and said " You have to seek help".

All these women made a difference at times of extreme crisis in my life. I know I wouldn't have survived without them. A strong core of my sense of strength as a woman has come from what they have done. I see that in terms of nurturing and protecting, and see that men never protected. Men abused. It's hard, in that context to start to accept men as protectors -- because often the response to it is that you are vulnerable. That's the hard part. The blanket, "Men are protectors". Because it's women who have been protecting in my life.

ka:

I had in my first paper on this topic a section on women as protector. But that's not a word that is often used when you talk about men and women's responsibilities. But I think women are protectors in the sense that they oversee, they nurture, they watch what's going on, and they intervene.

I'm not really sure, because it's like one woman said in her interview; protection has become so ill-conceived. I don't know if men are operating in that role any more, of protector. But I see protector in the sense of helper.

bl:

The protecting aspect of women's nurturing role, and overseeing role, I think is something that has to be emphasized. Because I think that's so common in women's lives, that other women have interceded to keep them going.

ka:

I can think of one example of men protecting. This was in a community where women were doing a camp-out protest. They were trying to protect the community, but the men came as protectors and helpers. They sat outside guarding the fire, ensuring that people in the community didn't come in and instill violence, or disturb them.

bl:

Speaking up for women would be another way. Speaking up to other men. Coming in-between women and abuse from other men, including abuse on the streets. It could also be if a man is with a group of other men and they are downplaying women in some way, that he should intervene. That's a protector kind of role.

But it gets all wound up in patriarchal notions of manhood. The macho kind of thing. I'm thinking of the men in the American Indian Movement; those sort of strategies.

ka:

Warrior stuff. Which is partly where it comes from. I mean, women with young children do need protection, from violence, or predators, or whatever.

bl:

Yeah -- in the sense that warriors started doing things like intervening when a lot of people had been assaulted or killed. Physically intervening, -- I'm thinking of AIM. And I think there is a certain freedom to act when you are not in the primary nurturing/overseeing role, There is a certain freedom to act, that men could perhaps do more.

Conjecturing on men's roles![Laughs].

ka:

I'd like to see somebody write the other half. The counterpart thesis. I'd be interested in going around talking to men myself, but it doesn't seem appropriate. I wish somebody would take interest in it.

Mixed Race Identity

bl:

One of the things that struck me related to my own concerns around identity and mixed-race identity. Because of having been brought up not to identify as Native, I struggled with the assumption that one is unequivocally a Native woman. As I was reading it the first time, I sort of argued with that a little bit in my head. *So what do you do if you are not sure of yourself as a Native woman?* If you have been brought up to think of yourself as non-Native, and you are trying to understand where you fit?

I was wondering if that has come up at all as you are doing it? A little voice in me said, *Well this is all right for Native women, but what about me?* [Laughs]. As a... something. [Laughs].

ka:

It's about adopting a tradition. At what point do you begin to take on that tradition as an identity? Obviously I'm going to be imbued with all sorts of Western tradition that I've grown up with, and that I continue to live with. My family is, by and large, Western. But I don't feel uncomfortable claiming Native womanhood, even though a lot of these things have come to me recently.

When I first started hanging around in the Native community I went through a lot of that questioning: *Am I Native or am I not? Where do I fit in?* But the only people that ever questioned whether I was Native were non-Native people. No Native person has ever said to me "Well you are not Native." Native people always claim you as one of them. So finally I just said, "To hell with it, if Native people say I'm Native, I must be." And they are the ones that matter, that have the right to say whether or not I belong as part of the community.

Perhaps this is part of being in an urban Native community. Maybe I wouldn't find people so accepting if I went up to northwestern Ontario, for instance, but by and large I've found that Native

people have embraced me as a Native person. And so, the only times I've ever found myself shuffling around and feeling uncomfortable is with non-Native people.

bl:

I find that very much the case. The questions always arise for me in dealing with academia which loves to quantify and qualify. Also, in dealing with non-Natives, like my roommate who wants to accept only the white parts of me in subtle ways that constantly work on me. There is also my mother's ambivalence about her own identity. It's like the source has been contaminated in some way, in the sense of her ambiguities about how to name herself. It means that I have to take it from her, because she is the person who grew up still exposed to Native culture. I didn't. So if she is ambivalent, how the hell can I not be?

What I find is the deeper I delve into academia, the more I move into a kind of marginal bizarre state in terms of being neither one nor the other. And it's when I spend too much time around non-Natives, that I then come into your paper and say *Is that for me?*

Reader Response

ka:

As you were reading it, were there things that came up that you felt you could apply to your life? How do you think this might be useful to other people?

bl:

I guess one of the things I did find useful was enumerating things like "Acts of Resistance". Those things have to be spoken about. Exactly what are Native women doing to challenge negative self-images? Often it's not really set forth so specifically. I found the specificity of it really useful. It was useful not so much in a personal sense, but in an activist sense.

It was the same with the attitudes for the healthy self-image. The specificity of the different categories: recognizing stereotypes, speaking up, talking back, writing as resistance, reclaiming language and name -- all those things ground people in what they need to do in order to develop healthy self-image, and respond to others.

Also, the "reclaiming sex and sexuality" part I found really useful because it's not talked about very much in teaching circles. It's something that is so central.

ka:

There's not too much of it either. When I looked in the literature, I had to dig around for material on sex and sexuality.

bl:

I also like the part about the importance of self-nurturing for healthy self-image. There is almost an oppressive sense I get sometimes when I hear knee-jerk comments about responsibilities, taking up our responsibilities. When you know you already have too much on your plate. Then to hear the story about the old world being used up, and saying that you can't just let yourself be raped -- to be all used up. I found that one clicked.

ka:

And those people that are being nourished by you have a responsibility to give something back. Just like with the land, right? We have the responsibility to be the caretakers of that land.

We have responsibilities to all the relations, human and other. That sense of responsibility really came out in this research, I think. And it's so key to a healthy society, to healthy gender relations. There's no sense of that kind of responsibility in the dominant culture. We need to see more of that.

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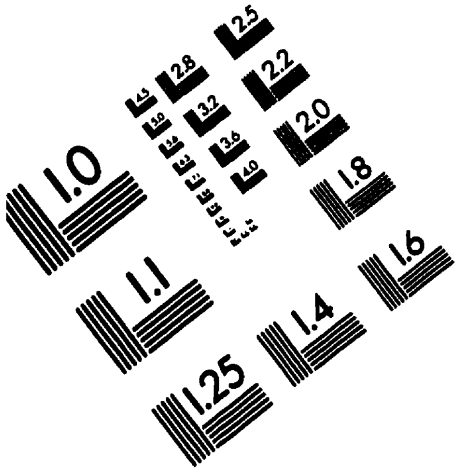

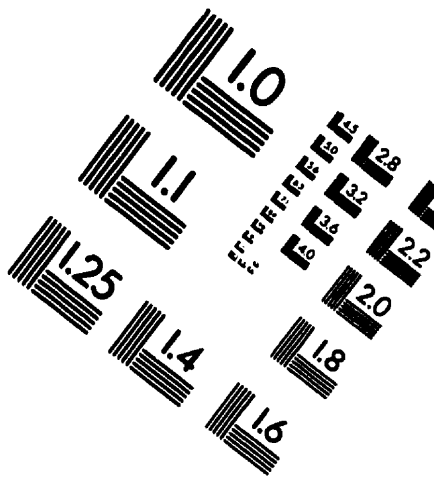

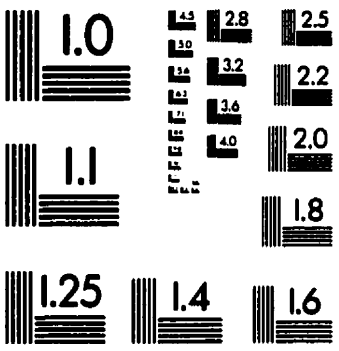

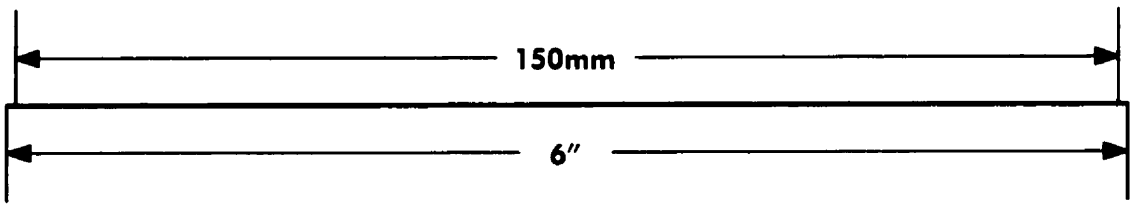

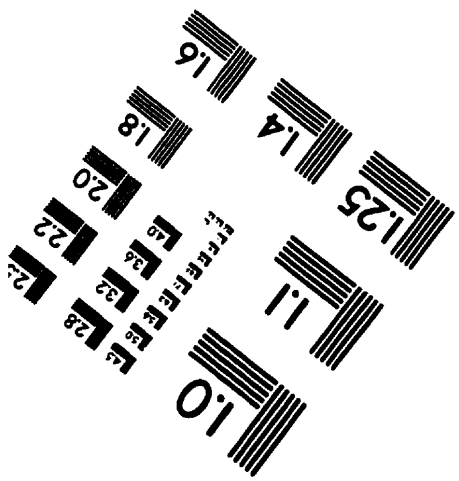

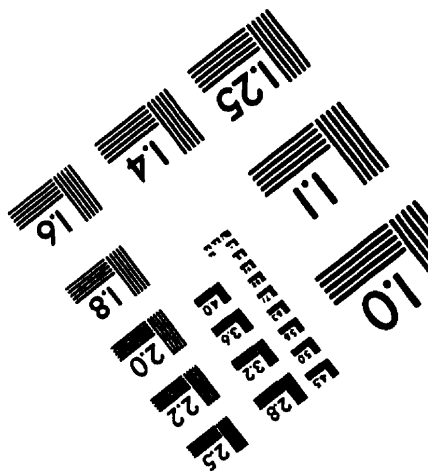

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