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**University of Alberta**

**First Nations Women: A Case Study**

**by**

**Nina C. Wyrstok**



**A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial**

**fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**in**

**COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY**

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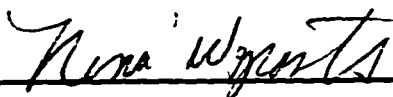
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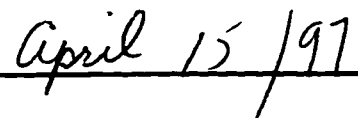
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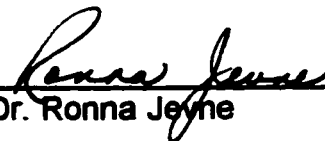
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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **FIRST NATIONS WOMEN: A CASE STUDY** submitted by **NINA C. WYROSTOK** in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY** in **COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY**.

  
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## **Dedication**

**This project I dedicate to the loving memory of my grandparents, Colonel, Dr. and Mrs. E. L. Stone, who devoted their lives to "doctoring the Indians" during those days when tuberculosis ravaged First Nations communities. Their gift to me and, indeed, to all of their children, was the understanding that cultural differences are to be cherished, not eliminated.**

### **Abstract**

**The purpose of this investigation was to develop a case study of contemporary, First Nations women of Western Canada. Undertaken in the qualitative paradigm, this study examined First Nations women's poetry as a primary source of information and asked the question, "When First Nations women write, how are we informed about their realities"? The poems were written by Western Canadian, First Nations women from diverse tribal, educational, and economic backgrounds. Some were published, some were not. In addition, four poets collaborated in this investigation through the process of interviews. The themes which were derived from the poetry and interviews were descriptive of a community of women who are experiencing a complex of issues relating to loss, grief and disconnection on the one hand and a complex of experiences relating to reclamation and reconnection on the other. Specifically, they wrote and spoke of loss and disconnection from their land, their own bodies, and the men in their lives. They wrote and spoke of their loss of safety and trust, the loss of their culture and disconnection from themselves. On the other hand, the poets also spoke of ways in which they are reconnecting to their land and the men in their lives. They wrote of reclaiming their own bodies and their cultural identity. They described healing and reconnecting through spirituality, reconnecting to their mothers, loving their children, and reclaiming themselves as human beings. These themes were explored in light of the historical context of the colonization and residential schooling experiences of**



**First Nations people. Finally, the themes of disconnection, on the one hand, and the themes of reconnection on the other, are integrated into interactive circles which incorporate the more global concepts of the Land, the People, the Family and the Self.**

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I owe great thanks to Dr. Paterson who treated my work with the same commitment and enthusiasm as if it were his own. To Dr. Jevne who inspired me to push the limits of convention as well as the limits of my own. Thank you Dr. Wilson for trusting me with this task from the beginning. I would not have proceeded without that trust. I am grateful to Dr. Ward, Dr. Janzen and Dr. Hampton who offered me their enthusiasm, support and wisdom.

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## CHAPTER 1: THE ORIGINS OF A QUESTION

### Introduction

Last year a colleague of mine attended a workshop to train professionals in the treatment of sexual abuse. The workshop, presented by leading proponents in the area, had been outstanding, she said, and especially rich in explicating treatment strategies. What my colleague found particularly interesting, however, was this. At the conclusion of the workshop, a First Nations woman rose to address the workshop presenters. She said that, while she had learned a great deal from the workshop, she felt compelled to say that these proposed treatment strategies would fall flat among First Nations women. This woman went on to explain how it was that this personal empowerment paradigm was foreign to the value system of First Nations people. "Oh, that's interesting...", was the response. Then a rustling silence. Despite the efforts of this woman to articulate her concerns, it was apparent that those in attendance were not quite sure just what she was attempting to explain.

Yes, the cross-cultural literature in psychology certainly tells us that the First Nations perspective is different from the dominant, Western world-view (Attneave, 1985; Herring, 1990; Richardson, 1981; Trimble, 1981). We also know that these cultural differences will surely impact the effectiveness of mainstream therapy with First Nations clientele (Attneave, 1985; Hammerschlag, 1988; Sue, 1981; Torrey, 1986). But what does this actually mean to us when the office door closes and we, the counsellors and educators, must somehow, in relationship with the First Nations client or student, put this

knowledge to work? How *do* First Nations women see their worlds? And how can we catch a glimpse of this world view through *their* windows rather than our own?

When I first arrived in the Arctic some twenty years ago, I was naive and ignorant of other culture groups but fortunate enough to have good "educators". It was not long before I realized that those simple "truths of life" which I had always "known" were actually nothing more than beliefs, mostly given to me by my parents. It was not long before the local people of the North came to share their "simple truths" with me. And they were different. I came to see the First Nations women with whom I worked as "made of a different kind of stuff" than the women I had known until then. They had a kind of "survival stuff" which left me in awe.

When I began to assemble my thoughts regarding research for my dissertation, I returned once again to those readings which have compelled me for years, those of the First Nations peoples. As I read, wrote, read and rewrote a proposal, I stumbled upon a collection of poems written by First Nations women. My first readings left me overwhelmed and needing to stop periodically in order to absorb the startling realities being shared. The more I read the more I was compelled to read. Finally it occurred to me that these poems expressed the depth and essence of human experience which I could only dream of touching through more conventional data gathering processes.

### The Question

First Nations women's poems express those issues and experiences of

importance to them and through the vehicle of their own choosing rather than the imposed instrumentation of someone else's design. A reading of these poems compelled me to ask the question, "When First Nations women write, how are we informed about their realities?" Specifically, in this study, I asked the question: How do First Nations women describe their worlds? What can we learn about the sources of their strength and hope? What can we learn of their despair? That is, what can cross-cultural educators and counsellors learn about the realities of Western Canadian, First Nations women by way of the study of their poetry?

### **Significance of the Question**

Sue (1981) chronicles the social sciences through a long history of viewing minority cultures from models of pathology. Theoretical shifts in social science thinking moved the focus next to models of culturally deficient and finally the concept of culturally different, a long way from genetically deficient.

In keeping with this current appreciation for cultural difference, (Atneave, 1985; Pedersen, 1985; Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner & Trimble, 1981; Ponterotto & Benesch, 1988; Sue, 1981) the field of cross-cultural counselling, borrowing from anthropology, has accomplished a great deal in illuminating the value systems, world views and cultural beliefs among the diverse First Nations peoples (Atneave, 1985; Bryde, 1972; Koverola, 1992; Richardson, 1981; Trimble, 1981). Not surprisingly, there is resounding agreement among multi-cultural counsellors and educators that, in addition to fundamental self examination, a thorough understanding of these cultural beliefs and world views

is essential to professionals working in the First Nations community (Katz, 1985; Margolis & Rungta, 1986; Pedersen, 1985; Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner & Trimble, 1981; Ponterotto & Benesch, 1988; Sue, 1981; Torrey, 1986). But is this enough?

We know that culture is not static but rather, dynamic (Peoples & Bailey, 1988). We know that cultural value systems and world views are not of the nature of discrete units to be measured but rather, they are understandings intricately woven into the context of those realities and lived experiences of the people transmitting them from one generation to the next. And I say, "What about that context?" What are those realities within which First Nations women must make sense of their cultural beliefs and value systems?

The intent of the proposed study was to shed light upon that context of the reality of contemporary First Nations women. Not only would this be of interest to First Nations women but also to those professionals engaged in educating them, counselling them or preparing others to do so. To explore this contextual backdrop would be to enrich the literature which grapples with responsible multi-cultural education and counselling.

Increasingly, First Nations communities and organizations are becoming concerned about the agendas and methodologies of non-Native researchers (Attneave, 1989; Green, 1980; Kraus, 1989). There is increasing pressure for researchers to consider not only their own interests but those of the people and communities being involved in their research projects. As Green (1980) points out, it is time for researchers to ask First Nations women what their agendas

and issues are.

There are any number of ways in which to ask First Nations women about the issues which concern them. What might be difficult is reaching not just the spokespersons, community activists and leaders, but also the dispossessed and the voiceless. It is with this in mind that I have chosen the poems of First Nations women. Written in the settings of university offices and classes, busy homes, quiet spots in the trees and from jail cells, it is in these writings that First Nations women are finding voice to tell of their realities. Why not listen? Perhaps in turning to First Nations women's own words we can begin to gather insight not only into their cultural beliefs but the context in which they live them out.

### Definitions

From the start, I note that, as Cruikshank (1990) points out, there is no universal name by which First Nations women refer to themselves. In use are such terms as First Nations, Aboriginals, Natives and still the term Indian. In grappling with this problem, I have referred to these women by way of the specific terms which they chose for themselves and in more general discussions, by way of the term First Nations people. By First Nation people, I refer to women who consider themselves to be of Native or Aboriginal background whether they be Status, Non-status, Treaty, or Metis.

References throughout this study to the concept of *culture* will be in keeping with a working definition provided in 1871 by E. B. Tylor (cited in Peoples & Bailey, 1988). "Culture...is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, and any other capabilities and

habits acquired by man as a member of society" (p.18). Concepts such as world view, value system and belief system will be used synonymously with this concept of culture.

### **Boundaries of this Study**

Dr. Peggy Wilson (1994) is a well published scholar and clinical psychologist who is a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation. In her role as a most invaluable supervisory member of this project, Dr. Wilson gave me pause for thought regarding a point which seemed only too obvious in retrospect. Dr. Wilson aptly offered me her informed opinion that the making of distinctions between Canadian and American First Nations or between British Columbian and Albertan First Nations people is a Euro-American conceptualization: not Aboriginal. The geographical borders and boundaries arbitrarily used to divide North American countries and provinces or states are those of the colonizers, not the First Nations.

Be that as it may, it was still necessary for me to place arbitrary boundaries around that group of First Nations women whose poetry I would examine. It was my original thought to limit myself to those poems of Western Canadian women. In response to the interest in this study expressed by several Northern First Nations women, however, I opted to include in the study group Northerners of the Western Arctic. As stated earlier, those who consider themselves to be "First Nations" will be considered as "First Nations" for the purposes of this study.

Although the range of writing within the First Nations women's community

is broad and rich, I arbitrarily chose to limit my study to that of poetry, excluding prose.

What do I mean by "contemporary" poetry? In an arbitrary fashion, I have delineated for myself the last 10 year period as my criterion for contemporary writing. Poems written or published in the years 1986 through 1996 were considered within the bounds of this project.

Finally, this project was carried out from a naturalistic or qualitative perspective. As Owens (1982) explains, "Naturalistic inquiry seeks to illuminate social realities, human perceptions and organizational realities, untainted by the intrusion of formal measurement procedures" (p.4). The qualitative approach assumes that the world is not an objective thing but rather, that there are multiple realities to be discovered (Merriam, 1988).

#### **Limitations, Biases and Preconceptions**

The selected group of women who wrote the poems used in this study are not to be considered representative of First Nations women generally. Because generalization in a statistical sense is not the goal in qualitative research, probability sampling was not carried out (Merriam, 1988).

Participants were selected for their expertise in the area under study, that is, for their ability to transmit the sought information through poetry. Each has shared her own unique view of the world and its meaning to her. What is hoped is that this project can offer the reader an interpretation of those parts of poets' worlds which are shared among them and, in this way, lead the reader to find insight into his or her own way of understanding this reality.

And an interpretation it is. It is understood that any qualitative inquiry is fundamentally based upon the researcher's interpretation since we can never actually experience another's unique experience (Bruner, 1986). The writers of these published poems have laid their souls bare to be shared with and interpreted by anyone who cares. Yet I choose to interact with these poems on paper and, in so doing, I speak my own voice and leave my own thumbprint upon that interaction. The voice of the writer is in the poem; my voice is to be in that interaction.

My own personal assumptions and biases do, however, impact these interactions and interpretations. I acknowledge that I have difficulty setting aside the historical and political issues of the First Nations peoples when I think and write about their concerns generally. I anticipated that I would need to consciously set these issues aside in order to appreciate that which the individual writers expressed in their poems.

### **Overview of the Study**

This first chapter was written to introduce the reader to the objectives of the study and to those methodological and a bracketing of the value-laden presuppositions which have influenced the study throughout.

In commencing the work of a review of the First Nations American psychology literature, I was immediately confronted by a rather serious problem created by the open-endedness of my question, "When First Nations women write, how are we informed about their realities?" It was readily apparent to me that a question so broad and open as this might be very difficult to delimit in the



review of the literature. As Morse (1989) points out, this is often the case in qualitative research where we are pushing into new territory. Morse's solution is simple, "In the writing-up phase, literature is integrated with the findings" (p. 292). In the end, how I chose to do a literature review was somewhat of a compromise between the conventional approach and Morse's. I have written the literature as a separate chapter but have covered those topics which evolved from the data rather than selecting them at the outset of the project. Chapter two, therefore, is a review of the literature which pertains to those topics and issues raised by the data and provides a socio-historical background from which the reader may consider these matters.

In chapter three, methodological presuppositions and philosophical underpinnings are further elaborated. Although the research design was one which evolved over time and with informed experience, the essential structure was, nonetheless, laid out from the beginning.

Purposive sampling was carried out in a manner described by Patton (1980) as maximum variation. Women poets were selected from a wide range of backgrounds so as to achieve as much breadth of experiences as possible. The collection and analysis of poems (data) were designed to occur in a circular and recursive fashion (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1984). Data collection was designed to conclude when further collection produced only very small increments of new information and when an emergence of regularities or a sense of integration became apparent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Analysis was carried out utilizing and integrating organizational structures

described by Merriam (1988) and Colaizzi (1978). Data were first organized topically then systematically sorted into preliminary classifications. Next the data were unitized or broken down into units of meaning, each one being the smallest bit of information which could stand on its own. Each unit was coded as to a specific or any given number of specific categories. These categories were further analyzed for recurrent themes and patterns through a comparative process, asking, "Is this one like this other"? until all units of meaning were sorted into appropriate categories representing higher level themes and patterns.

Following the preliminary data analysis, four poets were located and interviewed with regard to these early findings. The purpose of the interviews was to seek the input and feedback of these women so as to ensure the trustworthiness of these findings. The interview data were used to reshape and enrich the final analysis. In the end, these findings were compared to those issues which First Nations women are currently addressing through their community based work shops and discussion groups.

Chapters four and five document an integration of the findings from the poetry, interviews and other sources. Chapter four deals with those aspects of the women's lives which tell of loss and disconnection. Chapter five tells of those aspects which are related to reclamation and reconnection. In the lives of these women, there is both loss and reclamation.

Finally, what do these findings mean to the therapist, counsellor or educator of First Nations women? The implications of these findings are the substance of chapter six.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### Introduction

In the very early stages of writing this project, I undertook a review of the literature pertaining to First Nations women. I reviewed endless studies from psychology, anthropology, cross-cultural research and literature. In the end, I had a piece of writing which was so wide ranging that it was of almost no value to the reader. I asked myself why this review simply did not work. I explored how other researchers tackle the problem which is created by a research question which is as open ended as mine.

In developing the final review of the literature, I was, in the end, guided by several major considerations. Firstly, Morse (1989) provided me with the concept that, in the qualitative paradigm, the literature review can be developed so as to cover those subject areas which have emerged from the data, and, consequently, require further discussion. Secondly, in keeping with the concept of a case study, I wished to develop a context or background from which to understand who these Poets are. Essentially, I wanted to provide a meaningful foundation from which to answer the question, "Who are these women today and from whence have they come?" My own wide ranging reading of the literature brought me to one other very important point. In the opinions of many First Nations scholars (Gunn Allen, 1992; Barman, 1996; Duran & Duran, 1995; Halfe, 1993; LaDue, 1994; Voyageur, 1996), any meaningful discussion pertaining to contemporary First Nations people is necessarily based upon an understanding of their traditional world view as well as the historical context of the colonization

process. With these considerations in mind, I began building this foundation by exploring the traditional world view of First Nations people and moved next to a review of the impact of colonization.

### **The Traditional World View: Spirituality**

*It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell,  
and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-  
leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things;  
for these are children of one mother and their father is  
one Spirit (Black Elk, 1932).*

*I am a Native American because that is what I am. My  
relationship to the Great Holy Mystery and Mother Earth  
make me what I am. My beliefs make me what I am...  
(Horn, 1993, p 276).*

*You may say the non-Indian's religion came from  
the outside, like God being out in the sky  
somewheres (sic) with his Kingdom and the  
people being down here trying to work their way  
up to heaven. Whereas in the Indian sense, God  
is you, in you, part of you...(Vickie Downey, 1993,  
p.18).*

The Spirituality of First Nations people is very different from that of the Judeo-Christian, ecclesiastic religions. Despite the cultural diversity among the hundreds of First Nations, there runs a common thread, a shared knowledge and belief system with regard to Spirituality (Meili, 1991; Storm, 1972; Trimble, 1981; Wall & Arden, 1990). Spirituality, to First Nations people, is a way of being in and relating to the world, to the entire universe. Unfortunately, a thorough understanding of this Spirituality is not easily absorbed through reading but, rather, through living among those who know. More importantly, it is impossible for someone like myself, originating outside of the First Nation culture group, to

properly explain the complexities and nuances of this sophisticated Spiritual world view. I qualify my discussions here by stating that my perceptions are those of an 'outsider'. I have undertaken this venerable task with a great deal of care in hopes of helping the non-Native reader to appreciate the world view from which these Poets have come and to which they are returning. It is my most sincere hope that I do no disrespect in attempting to even minimally introduce the reader to those concepts of First Nations Spirituality.

### The Language of Spirituality

White Deer of Autumn (1990), a well known writer and teacher, suggested that using the English language to explain the concepts of this Spirituality has serious limitations. He explained that terms such as *Wakan Tanka* (Lakota) and *Kitche Manitou* (Ojibway) do not actually refer to deities at all but, rather, to "names that incorporate an understanding that all things are part of an incomprehensible totality which always was and always will be" (p. 4). Furthermore, White Deer of Autumn clarified that English words now commonly used, such as *The Creator* or *The Great Spirit*, are inadequate to convey this concept of the First Cause. Furthermore, explained White Deer of Autumn, these terms have an anthropomorphic connotation which is less than meaningful in the First Nations understanding of Spirituality. White Deer of Autumn would like us to think of the Spirituality of his people as conveying the understanding that "the four-legged and winged nations, the creeping and crawling ones, the plant and tree nations, and those who dwell among the stars, are descended from and are a part of this Great Holy Mystery" (p.5).

Eduardo Duran (1984) noted that First Nations peoples' close association, or sense of oneness, with all of creation is a quality which sets this cultural psyche apart from others which have differentiated themselves from the world around. Duran explained that it is this consciousness of oneness which gives birth to the animated, life quality of all things in the world as it is perceived by the psyche.

### **The Role of Story Telling**

An integral and central part of this Spiritual way of living is the oral tradition of story telling. The telling of ancient stories has long been an important (although not the only way) in which First Nations people have transmitted their cultural values and Spiritual beliefs to successive generations (Cameron, 1981; Cruikshank, 1990; Storm, 1972; Wall & Arden, 1990 ). Sacred stories of origin are central to the understanding that each tribal group holds with regard to who they are as a people and how they came to be dwelling upon their own particular place on the Earth. Stories of origin carry ancient information concerning the lineages of clans or peoples as far back as their ancestral Animals, such as the Bear or Turtle (Cameron, 1981; Storm, 1972; Wall & Arden, 1990) . Finally, it is important to recognize, that for many people, their stories are their own Sacred property (Cameron, 1981; Wall & Arden, 1990). Some would have received their stories through a dream or vision and others would have received them from an older person who chose them to be worthy of carrying and transmitting the story.

First Nations people traditionally would have turned to these tribal stories

in order to find the meaning and explain the circumstances and events of their own lives. Cruikshank (1990), an anthropologist, made this observation through her work with First Nations women who frequently responded to her questions with the telling of a story.

Usually such stories involved a bewildering series of characters and events, but with practice I learned to follow the complex plots and to understand that when women told me stories they were actually using them to explain some aspect of their lives to me (Cruikshank, 1990, p. 15).

### **Sacred Activities**

First Nations traditions assume a Spiritual essence in all of the creatures, whether plant or animal, and all of the Earth's formations, whether ground or water (Storm, 1972; Wall & Arden, 1990). What this means is that a respectful relationship must be observed with all of that which has been created and set upon the Earth. In offering this respect, First Nations people have, since time began, practised elaborate and complex Spiritual activities, rituals, and celebrations and observed taboos.

### **Rituals and Taboos**

Rituals and taboos play a vital role in the conservation and responsible use and sharing of resources. For example, the Okanagans traditionally carry out rituals and prohibitions in association with the salmon upon which they were dependent for life itself (Hudson, 1986). The First Salmon Ceremony involves ceremonial cooking and distribution among all the people of the first fish caught

each spring. Its bones are, through ritual, returned to the water. Taboos prevented swimming upriver from the salmon traps. As with most animals viewed as the sustenance of life, prayers of thanks are offered to those creatures which sacrificed their lives to the people.

Many First Nations hunters would observe a complex system of elaborate taboos and rituals in accordance with the Spiritual beliefs associated with hunting (Brody, 1988; Feit, 1986; Mandelbaum, 1979). One small aspect of this world view would involve the belief that the hunted animal actually offers itself to the hunter. The animal is not merely encountered by chance but, rather, it offers itself to and is received by the hunter with due respect and thanks. An early ethnographer, Frank Speck, recognized this Spiritual foundation, likening the practice of hunting to that of a "religious occupation" (Feit, 1986). Perhaps what Speck missed was that, in the traditional path of Spirituality, all of Life, not just hunting, is a Spiritual occupation.

### Healing Rituals

Spirituality, ritual and taboos are also inextricably interwoven in the First Nations conceptualization of health and illness. Locust (1988) explained that, wellness is perceived in the context of harmony of the spirit, body and mind while illness is thought to result from disharmony. Natural illness is often thought of as having been caused by the violation of taboos while unnatural illness originates with malevolent Spirits (Ellenberger, 1970; Locust, 1988). Typically led by shamans or recognized healers, rituals are enacted for the purpose of maintaining or restoring the health or balance of the group or individuals



(Hammerschlag, 1988; Torrey, 1986). The diversity with which healing rituals are enacted is remarkable but it warrants saying that their treatment outcomes in dealing with psycho-social ills, for example, are equivalent to those of practitioners in the dominant culture (Jilek & Todd, 1974; Torrey, 1986).

### **Celebrations**

Spiritual celebrations are also an integral part of daily living, as Louis Farmer, an Onondaga Elder explained, "When the sacred strawberries come up in early spring, that's what we celebrate. They're not just strawberries to us. They're the Creator's gift to his children...they have the Creator's power in them" (Wall & Arden, 1990, p. 118). Life is celebrated as it unfolds in its natural and wild state, not in accordance with the turning of the pages of the calendar.

### **The Role of Societies**

Many First Nations have engendered social structure through the formation of both men's and women's societies within the group (Cameron, 1981; Mandelbaum, 1972). Membership is usually earned through rigorous means which demand demonstration of the highest of moral and Spiritual stature. For example, Cameron (1981) told the stories of a secret women's warrior society among the Nootka Nation, many of whose members died in battle with the Spanish Conquistadors. Typically, members of the societies are affiliated through sacred costumes, songs, dances, stories and rituals which are unique to and are thought of as 'belonging to' that society. These sacred activities not only serve to bond members together but to provide the structure for the roles and functions which each of the various societies are to perform

within the community. This sacred activity, while taking many different forms and sometimes carried out in strict secrecy, is an important part of First Nations spiritual as well as social experience.

### **Grandfathers and Grandmothers: The Spirits**

There is another aspect of Spirituality among First Nations people which is discussed less often and usually with some degree of caution or discretion. This aspect has to do with the Grandfathers and Grandmothers or the Spirits: those who "dwell among the stars" (White Deer of Autumn, 1990). Among traditional First Nations people, Spirits are a real part of the world and they are encountered in various ways throughout people's lives. The Spirits are summoned by an Elder or Healer to assist with or participate in ritual or healing activities (Meili, 1991; Young, Ingram, & Swartz, 1989). There are other times when the Spirits visit a person in his or her dreams or sleep, usually imparting important information or urging the dreamer to follow a specific path (Horn, 1993; Wall & Arden, 1990). Sometimes these visits are actively solicited by the dreamer, through fasting and sleep deprivation. At other times the Spirits come of their own volition and for a purpose. Although the Spirits may be loosely referred to as dwelling in the sky or among the stars, this does not mean that they are of a separate reality. The Spirits are still thought of as being in relationship with all others, as part of the whole of Life and are referred to as The Grandfathers and/or the Grandmothers (Wilson, 1996).

This Spiritual world view historically provides First Nations people with a unifying means of making sense of the self and all of the world around. It

provides a means for transmitting history, cultural beliefs, a sense of both cultural and personal identity. It prescribes a code of conduct which supports balance and harmony for the individual, the group and the ecosystem upon which people depend. It provides a structure for long term management and equitable sharing of resources. It provides a means of transmitting information regarding the ancient history of peoples, their ancestral lineages and the Lands upon which they live. To purge this Spirituality from the First Nations people has had catastrophic effects which have a resounding impact to this very day.

It is this conceptualization of Spirituality which first must be appreciated in order to begin to understand what it is that the Poets tell us when they write.

### **Colonization: The Sequelae**

*Anthropologists have often described what happens to a society when its spiritual values are exposed to the impact of a (dominant) civilization. Its people lose the meaning of their lives, their social organization disintegrates, and they themselves morally decay" (Carl Jung, cited in Halfe, 1993).*

Why a discussion of the history and politics of colonization in a psychological research project? I do so with the assertion that colonization is not just a political or historical process set in a specific time and place. It is a psychological event occurring over unbounded time in the psyche of an entire culture group. The process of colonization explains and describes the psychological events which have brought many First people to their present situations. Said Haig-Brown (1988), a First Nations researcher from British Columbia, "Colonization works the same way everywhere, its policies geared

toward displacement and elimination of indigenous culture: genocide" (p. 11).

Eduardo Duran (Duran & Duran, 1995), is a person of Native American descent, a psychologist and researcher/writer who has been providing mental health services to his own people for thirty years. He asserted,

The past five hundred years have been devastating to our communities; the effects of this systematic genocide are currently being felt by our people. The effects of the genocide are quickly personalized and pathologized by our profession [psychology] via the diagnosing and labelling tools designed for this purpose. If the labelling and diagnosing process is to have any historical truth, it should incorporate a diagnostic category that reflects the effects of genocide. Such a diagnosis would be "acute and/or chronic reaction to colonialism" (p. 6).

#### Loss of Land

Couture (1996) claimed that the centrality of Land in the religion of First Nations people is the feature which distinguishes this Spiritual cosmos from the other classical religions of the world. Perhaps one of the most readily visible effects of colonization, then, is the loss of land which was traditionally occupied and utilized by First Nations people (Brody, 1988; Deloria, 1973; Frideres, 1988; Wright, 1993; York, 1990). Across Canada, indeed across the Americans, First Nations people have, for 500 years, been systematically removed from their lands through various tactics and strategies. The stories of displacement and land loss are so widely known and documented that it may not warrant repeating here.

### **Loss of Resources**

The important point is, however, that this process of land loss continues to this day. Massive hydro development projects threaten the already diminished lands of people in Northern Quebec and Manitoba (York, 1990). Oil companies encroach upon the lands of the Lubicon people in Alberta, removing raw resources to this day. Bands which are financially distressed are increasingly tempted to lease out their tribal lands in an effort to raise the money so desperately required to deal with health and social problems.

### **Loss of Sacred Grounds**

What does this land loss mean to the First Nations people? It is obvious enough that the loss of access to bush resources such as fish, game birds and animals means poverty and hunger. Vine Deloria, Jr. (1973) was the Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians and a practicing lawyer and writer as well. In association with land loss, this highly distinguished scholar identified the loss of something else less visible but equally vital to the survival of the people: their place and means of Spiritual activity. He pointed out that, "One of the primary aspects of traditional tribal religions has been the secret ceremonies, particularly the vision quests, the fasting in the wilderness, and the isolation of the individual for religious purposes" (259). This type of activity is now less possible due to development and technology. Many sacred places have been turned into golf courses, strip mines, and flight paths for airplanes. The encroachment of mainstream development means that there are few places left for First Nations people to carry out the Sacred activities which are required

for their Spiritual health as a people. To Christian people, this is the equivalent of closing down their grocery stores, churches and medical clinics in one fell swoop. Using Brody's (1988) terminology, there is a cumulative impact.

### **Loss of Traditional Roles**

The impact of colonization is also felt in the loss of men's and women's time honoured roles in their communities (Duran & Duran, 1995; Gunn Allen, 1992; Jaimes & Halsey, 1992; LaDue, 1994; Voyageur, 1996).

### **Loss of Men's Roles**

For many men, once they no longer had access to the land and its bush resources, they were no longer able to adequately provide for their families. Furthermore, when the rights to the land were constrained and removed, what became of the warriors, those men whose role it had been to defend and protect the Land for their people? (Duran & Duran, 1995). Chiefs and leaders were looked upon to stave off the encroaching impact of the colonizers, settlers and missionaries but, ultimately, could not do so.

### **Loss of Women's Roles**

Several writers have noted that, in the past, much of the ethnographic literature pertaining to First Nations people has suffered from tendencies to either distort or entirely overlook the traditional roles and activities of the women in these culture groups (Gunn Allen, 1981; LaFromboise, Heyle & Ozer, 1990). Furthermore, the scant literature which deals with contemporary First Nations women typically focuses upon pathology and clinical issues rather than the strengths and resources of these people. More recently, writers are

documenting how First Nations women historically had central and vital roles in First Nations families and communities ( Gunn Allen, 1992; Jaimes & Halsey, 1992; LaDue, 1994; LaFromboise, Heyle & Ozer, 1990; Voyageur, 1996).

Women were revered as 'vitalizers', the givers of Life itself (Gunn Allen, 1992).

The role of Mother imparted the highest degree of stature in ceremony and in community life where women often carried out roles of Spiritual leadership.

Jaimes and Halsey (1992) have debunked the notion that indigenous tribes had been male dominated, and have suggested that women played important leadership roles in the political sphere. In fact, they suggested that most precontact First Nations people were organized around a matrilineal/matrilocal structure, radically different from that of the European social groups. Women often had property ownership rights, political rights and were the transmitters of the language and culture (Medicine, 1988).

With colonization, First Nations women lost their roles, their rights, their membership within their own bands or tribes and even their right to call themselves Indians ( Gunn Allen, 1992; Jaimes & Halsey, 1992; Silman, 1987; Voyageur, 1996). Loss of traditional, spiritual, economic and political roles leads to chronic disruption of the family and the community; in the words of LaDue, a "cultural trauma" (LaDue, 1994).

#### **Loss of the Role of the Elder**

It has always been the Elders who have been the spiritual leaders, historians and wisdom keepers in First Nations oral traditions (Couture, 1996; Ing, 1991; LaDue, 1990; Long & Fox, 1996; Meili, 1991). Elders are the ones

who hold the knowledge of all that is. They provide for connections to the past and they advise their people as to the future. Elders are all of these things but they are also much more. Couture (1996) explained that Elders have "knowledge of and skill in 'primordial experience' ... centred in the pervasive, encompassing reality of the Life-Force, manifest in 'laws' - Laws of Nature, the Laws of Energy, or the Laws of Light" (p.48).

One of the most devastating impacts of colonization and assimilation processes has been the loss of the true Elders (Couture, 1996; LaDue, 1990; Meili, 1991). Colonizing governments criminalized the Elders' activities, jailing individuals for participating in activities such as the Potlatch (McNair, 1986). Eventually the role of the Elder, too, fell into decline (Couture, 1996). The powers of the Elders were sometimes perceived by the people to have left them, as they [the Elders] failed to return the people to their safety.

#### **Missionization and Education**

When it came to providing education to First Nations children, colonial governments were quick to embrace the partnership of various religious denominations (Barman, 1996; Duran & Duran, 1995; Haig-Brown, 1988). Since both parties shared a vision of assimilating First Nations people into the dominant culture, their goals were much the same. Initially in Canada, federal educational policy permitted these various religious groups autonomy to operate however and wherever it was that they so chose. Religious organizations had much to profit as their missionaries gained unrestricted opportunity to set about the work of converting their charges to Christianity. Removing the children from



the 'heathen' influences of their parents was thought to be the most effective route toward religious conversion. The government, on the other hand, had much to gain from this partnership, being relieved as it was of the financial burdens of this task. The federal government, in leaving the operation of schools to the missionaries, was relieved of direct responsibility for the financial and supervisory support of teaching staff (Barman, 1996).

The disastrous results of church administered, residential schooling has been widely documented (Barman, 1996; Bull, 1991; Chrisjohn, 1991; Duran & Duran, 1995; Haig-Brown, 1988; Ing, 1991; Martens, 1988).

#### **Break Up of the Family Unit**

One of the most salient results of forcing children into residential schools was the separation of children from their parents for long periods of time; essentially, the break up of the family unit (Barman, 1996; Bull, 1991; Duran & Duran, 1995; Haig-Brown, 1988; Hodgson, 1988; Ing, 1991; Martens, 1988). Children were removed for most of the year from the guidance and teachings of their parents and raised instead in a barracks-like setting where nuns and priests or brothers directed their activities. Children were purposely separated from their siblings, boys and girls removed from each other's company. Normal family relationship building could not exist and several generations of children grew up not knowing how to live in the family context.

Parental role models were not available nor could children learn from their own mothers and fathers how to assume this most pivotal and critical social role: the parent. In Residential Schools: The Stolen Years (Jaine, 1995), Elise

Charland (1995), confessed to the impact of residential schooling on her own parenting abilities,

**I did a terrible job as a parent... My children were growing up with my abusive behavior of slapping, whipping, and screaming at them for everything they did. I loved them in a very sick way. Hit them, then kiss them...My oldest child was mother and father to the rest of the children...I was that ugly person I had been told I was since a child. My anger and rage was killing me and killing my children's spirit...I didn't teach my children any values, beliefs, culture, or language. I didn't have anything to give except my rage (pp. 31-32).**

### **Cultural Alienation**

**Under the roofs of the residential schools, First Nations children were isolated from their families and cultures. They were forbidden to engage in their traditional beliefs and practices or to speak their mother tongues (Barman, 1996; Haig-Brown, 1988; McEvoy & Daniluk, 1995). Governmental policies aimed at assimilating First Nations people into the Euro-American culture were carried out within the walls of the residential schools.**

**Haig-Brown (1988) asserted that eliminating a language has long been a key process in the elimination of a culture. Residential schools, where persons in authority had absolute control over their charges, made for the ideal setting to carry out this task. Haig-Brown discovered that, in the Alberni Indian Residential School in the 1920s, for example, the punishment for speaking the Tseshaht language was to have a sewing needle driven through the tongue. Children were taught that their own spiritual beliefs and practices were evil and the work of the devil (Martens, 1988). Bev Sellars (Sellars, 1995) explained that children in her**

residential school constantly received the "message that because you are Native you are part of a weak, defective race, unworthy of a distinguished place in society" (p. 124).

### **Sexual Abuse and the Residential School**

As is the case with most culture groups, traditional First Nations cultures held strictures on the sexual activities of their people according to age and kinship (McEvoy & Daniluk, 1995). Although it is not certain as to whether or not this deterred incest or sexual abuse prior to contact, what is clear is that sexual abuse and incest have become staggering problems since the missionization experience (Chrisjohn, 1991; Haig-Brown, 1988; Martens, 1988; McEvoy & Daniluk, 1995). Chrisjohn, in his study of former mission school residents in British Columbia, estimated that between 48% and 70% of his respondents had been sexually abused while in attendance in these schools. Using Briere and Runtz's (cited in Chrisjohn, 1991) revised Trauma Symptom Checklist, Chrisjohn was able to conclude that, those who had been abused, evidenced significant psychological symptomology. Furthermore, findings from this study indicated that even those who had not been sexually abused experienced the impact of the abuse, albeit indirectly.

First Nations women who were raised in the residential school environment were deprived of the opportunity to develop a healthy understanding of their own sexuality. Sexual issues were not ever discussed and were often regarded as disgusting. Some believed that sexual abuse was a punishment for having had sexual thoughts or feelings (Martens, 1988).

### **Alienation from Mainstream Education**

There is considerable agreement that the very administrative structures of residential schools set their students up to fail. Firstly, from a most basic human perspective, it was often the case that students in residential schools were underfed and, consequently, suffered from chronic hunger (Barman, 1996; Bull, 1991; Haig-Brown, 1988). Said one of Barman's participants ,

Hunger is both the first and last thing I can remember about that school. I was hungry from the day I went into the school until they took me to the hospital two and a half years later. Not just me. Every pupil smelled of hunger (Mack, 1993, pp. 22-23 in Barman, 1996, p. 286).

There is no doubt that learning is seriously impeded by hunger and that residential school students were handicapped by these kinds of administrative policies.

Secondly, academic programs were frequently centred around menial tasks or church duties rather than academic learning (Barman, 1996; Haig-Brown, 1988). Placing students into non-academic labour was, in fact, an administrative decision, justified by assimilative policies. Girls cooked, cleaned, sewed and mended. They washed, ironed and, in some cases, sewed all of the uniforms worn in the school (Barman, 1996). Boys, too, spent their time in manual duties, explained a participant in Barman's study,

So I feed the horses, clean the barn, feed the cows and later even milk the cows. I got up at four o'clock in the morning sometimes and go look for them cows...I tried to go to school but there was not enough time. I went to Alert Bay for school but instead they put me in a job (Mack, 1993, pp. 22-23 in Barman, 1996, p.286).

First Nations students who may have had educational aspirations were, in this way, set up to fail, having never acquired the basic skills taught in mainstream schools.

Barman (1996) also asserted that there is considerable documentation suggesting that teachers who taught in residential schools had substandard training and experience to offer their students. It was often the case that 'teachers' had no training at all but were missionaries sent out by the church to "try and do the best they could" (p. 284).

The long term result of these administrative policies is such that many First Nations people remain alienated by and highly distrusting of the mainstream educational system. Their resentment and distrust may be passed along to succeeding generations, manifesting in irregular or poor attendance of their own children at school. To be alienated from the educational process ultimately means to be alienated from the work place and the wider societal system.

### **Colonization and Cultural Trauma**

"The impact of colonization can never be underestimated" (Halfe, 1993). The long term effects of colonization and assimilation have been what LaDue (1994) referred to as 'cultural trauma'. The trauma of losing their lands, languages, spiritual leaders, family units and roles in the community has had the cumulative effect of leaving many First Nations people in alcoholism, despair, and grief. It is this trauma - not alcoholism - which underlies the difficulties faced in First Nations communities, LaDue argued. Although there is no doubt

that alcoholism has, and continues to play a devastating role in tribal communities, La Due would say that alcoholism came *after* the traumas previously discussed.

### **Poetry in the Study of First Nations Issues**

Several researchers have explored the poetry of a people as a means of exploring their psychology. Sedano (1980) carried out a thematic analysis of images from the poetry of the culture group he referred to as the Chicano Movement, meaning Mexican Americans struggling to establish a distinct cultural identity. Although Sedano was not explicit about the intent of his work, one can surmise that he was exploring the use of Chicano poetry as a vehicle for the politicization of the Chicano people. "An understanding of these themes, (from the poetry), their attendant images, and the contexts in which they appear illustrates and explains how the Chicano poet creates and defines an audience and converts that audience to the identity the poet defines", explained Sedano (p. 178).

Sedano (1980) did not describe the methodology used to carry out the project, referring to the method only as a rhetorical analysis. What Sedano reported to have found in this poetry was a sense of history and cultural roots, a series of archetypes from that culture and a sense of place or 'homeland'. Cultural identity is made meaningful in these poems not only through Chicano themes but also by way of comparing them to the Anglo themes of oppression and assimilation, according to Sedano.

Hecht, Ribeau and Sedano (1990) carried out a multiple methods (two-

stage) study pertaining to interethnic communication within the culture group they referred to as Mexican-American. The authors' goal was to identify themes used by these Mexican Americans to interpret their relationships with members of the dominant culture.

In the Hecht, Ribeau and Sedano (1990) study, the researchers firstly employed a content analysis of Mexican-American communications with Anglos so as to identify issues and communication strategies. Following this content analysis, themes from Chicano poetry were used to triangulate and validate the original analysis, leading to modifications in accordance with this triangulation. Specifically, the poems were subjected to a critical analysis intended to validate those themes which had already been identified in the interviews of the first stage.

Emergent themes from the Hecht, Ribeau and Sedano (1990) analysis were those of anti-negative stereotyping, shared world view (within the culture group), relational solidarity and self expressiveness. The authors posited that these themes are representative of those ways in which Mexican Americans struggle for ethnic satisfaction within the context of identities imposed upon them by the dominant culture.

Lyman and Edwards (1989) documented the implementation of a poetry writing program among elderly Navajo residents of a nursing home. Poetry groups were held on a weekly basis to assist the elders in writing a 'Life Review' through poetry. Findings of this inquiry were that the Navajo poets wrote about the past; about growing up as a Navajo person; about growing old in the

traditional way; about their religion, values and beliefs; about the here and now of their lives; and about sharing and giving advice. Lyman and Edwards indicated that the poetry writing experience had been meaningful and growth producing for both residents and staff alike.

### **Pulling it all Together**

Having gone through this process of exploring the historical and cultural contexts, I needed to pull back a bit in order to see where I had been. I have opted not to review literature which explores First Nations issues through the mainstream lens: like the epidemiology of psychiatric pathology for instance. I have not developed a discussion of the research pertaining to psychological testing and measurement issues in the First Nations community. It seems apparent that what has held the most interest for me in this review are those areas of study which look at the First Nations people and their issues from their own point of view. As Emma La Rocque (1990) has challenged her colleagues to do, I have made a conscious effort to seek out and review the scholarly works of First Nations people. So, having laid a foundation for understanding the traditional and historical context of First Nations communities, I moved next to the poetry.



## **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

### **The Question of Paradigms**

**What is credible research? Is it possible to conduct credible research outside of the parameters of the positivistic, scientific paradigm? Not only are these questions argued endlessly and passionately but they will continue to create discussion and tension long after my study concludes. It is not my purpose to assert the qualitative perspective over the quantitative. Rather, I need only to acknowledge that each perspective is distinct from the other in meaningful ways. Each perspective will advance our understanding of our worlds if it is based upon rich and germane data and is carried out methodically, systematically and thoughtfully.**

**Having chosen to work within the qualitative paradigm, I recognize that there are important assumptions and presuppositions which beg discussion. These assumptions in themselves distinguish qualitative work from those of the positivistic paradigm.**

**One of the first assumptions in the qualitative paradigm is in response to the ageless ontological question, "What is reality"? From the naturalistic perspective, there is no one objective reality (Anderson, 1989; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Merriam, 1988). Rather, it is assumed that realities are relativist and multiple. Guba and Lincoln described realities as "apprehendable in the form of multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature" (p. 110). In contrast to the scientific or quantitative paradigm which assumes a single, objective reality,**

the naturalistic paradigm assumes that we each create our own realities through personal interaction and experience. Each Poet will have written her vision of the world as she has experienced it in the context of her family, community and the historical events which push upon her world.

With this constructed, multiple realities conceptualization in mind then, how do we next approach epistemology? How does the qualitative researcher conceptualize the nature of knowledge? An important presupposition in the qualitative paradigm relates to the conceptualization of knowledge. Knowledge consists of created constructions which emerge through consensus among those individuals who have experience and mastery in that world (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Those First Nations women who have actually created their visions and realities through the poetic form have the 'knowledge' which I seek to understand and describe. My objective was not to prove or disprove theory but rather, to interpret the poems in such a way as to engender meaningful description and, hence, knowledge of those realities.

Finally, the qualitative researcher assumes that he or she is the tool or the instrument of the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Lipson, 1989). We do not attempt to expunge ourselves from the research in the false hope that this will guarantee objectivity and freedom from bias. Knowledge, whether gathered through empirical or naturalistic means, is never value-free (Bixenstine, 1976). We concede that our values and beliefs influence the course of research at every step of the way and that these values are, in turn, shaped and reformed as a result of the research process.

### **Research Design: A Vessel for a Journey**

**Exploring the visions that First Nations women have of themselves represents uncharted waters. There are no beacons nor maps to follow. What I was searching for from the beginning was a research strategy with sufficient structure and definition to keep me on course, yet flexible and supple enough that I could refrain from squeezing and crushing the fruits of the data into ill-fitting forms: the problem of the Procrustean Bed (Lalich, 1996).**

**In the early process of painstakingly assessing the merits of the various qualitative strategies, I increasingly lost sight of their meaningful differences and began to slip into an abyss of ambiguity and confusion. Shoved under my bed is a cardboard box full of papers marked "AS": Abandoned Strategies. Recounted here is a brief glimpse of the considerations I weighed out in choosing a qualitative strategy.**

**An ethnographic approach (Patton, 1990) seemed at first inviting since I was already assuming that cultural factors would certainly be in the foreground for many First Nations women. This approach was set aside, however, since my intent was not to explore nor document the beliefs or culture-system of a specific, homogenous, definable culture group.**

**Phenomenology (van Manen, 1984) would be of no help to me since it was not my objective to identify a specific and definable phenomenon upon which to cone down and focus my efforts. I confess, though, that I wondered at one point, "Maybe, should I look for their visions of the future? Their experience of despair?" I chose not to reshape the question to fit an enticing method!**

Grounded theory was tempting (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). My readings in the grounded theory literature left me with a sense of more clarity, structural organization and guidelines to follow than many of the other strategies. This approach somehow felt tighter and cleaner, like a methodology that I could check off on a list as I went along. But was I committed to theory development? No, just description.

What about a narrative? (Bruner, 1991; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994; Sandelowski, 1991). This strategy was one that appealed to me very much at first. The three references which I have cited here are but a very small sampling of those stashed in the Abandoned Strategies box under the bed. What was so appealing about the narrative form is its capacity to hold that data intact, to respect the integrity and unity of the whole piece of datum. This would be wonderfully well suited to the poem. In the end I decided, however, that there would be no chronology inherent in the diverse poems to be collected from so many people, places and times. There would be no tracing of events over time other than the events of my own mind. My sense was that I did not wish for myself to become the major character nor for my own research story to become larger than the realities and visions of the women who wrote these poems.

The last approach to capture my serious attention was the case study (Merriam, 1989; Stake, 1994; Yin, 1989). Merriam (1989) suggested employing this methodology when the objective of the study is to create a holistic interpretation and intensive description of a contemporary phenomenon. In qualitative case studies, the 'case' may be an individual, an agency, a set of

events, a classroom or a social group (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1994; Yin, 1989). I could certainly allow that First Nations, female poets could be considered a social group. Merriam, Yin and Stake would all agree, however, that the object of the study must be a *bounded* system. Could I legitimately make a compelling argument for a bounded system? At first I thought not. But Stake (1994) submitted that what bounds a system may be the phenomenon of interest to the research study, in this case, poetry. Whether these First Nations women have much else in common, they have all had the experience of transforming their worlds into the written permanence of the poem. Each and every poet included in this project represents that population conceptualized by me as First Nations women who write poetry. Each one has the capacity to afford me the opportunity to learn. A descriptive, exploratory single-case study, then, was the strategy underlying this research project.

### **The Research Question Revisited**

Yin (1989) and Merriam (1988) both discussed the concept of the unit of analysis. But what exactly is the unit of analysis here? Is it the female, First Nations poet or is it the poem itself? Is it the messenger or the message? Do I wish to understand how it is that First Nations women use poetry as a vehicle for the expression of their realities? Or do I wish to understand what those realities and visions actually appear to be through the examination of poetry as data? In addressing this crucial question, I vacillated many times choosing first the women, then the poems then finally the women again. Then for reasons unknown to me, it suddenly became obvious and simple that it was the poems

which were the units of analysis. While the Poets are the case, the poems are the unit of analysis.

### **The Poets and Poems: Sampling Decisions**

Having identified the unit of analysis, sampling decisions followed. In the most general of terms, qualitative inquiry does not typically involve random or statistically representative sampling procedures, primarily because generalizability in the statistical sense is not a research goal (Merriam, 1988; Morse, 1989).

For the qualitative case study, various forms of nonprobability sampling may be appropriate (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1989). In purposive or purposeful sampling, the most common strategy, a sample is selected among those individuals from whom the researcher will have the opportunity to learn the most (Patton, 1980). The criterion upon which participants were selected are three-fold: they must consider themselves to be Western Canadian persons of First Nation descent, they must be women and they must have written poetry.

For the purpose of this case study, purposive sampling was carried out so as to achieve what Patton (1980) refers to as maximum variation. In operational terms, this meant that I would select as participants Poets from diverse cultural, educational and socio-economic backgrounds to the extent that this biographical information was available to me. This is not to be mistaken for an attempt to emulate the quantitative method of stratification. Rather, it is a deliberate attempt at gathering as rich and diverse a collection of data as possible. Furthermore, because the qualitative paradigm permits an ever-evolving,

spiralling structure, I left myself the freedom and leeway to, at later stages of the research, actively seek out Poets with characteristics which may have become relevant or important as the study developed.

As with any purposive technique, the maximum variation strategy is one which, in contrast to several others, affords the researcher control over which participants are included and which are not (Morse, 1989; Patton, 1980; Patton, 1990). It is, therefore, incumbent upon the researcher to take deliberate steps to achieve maximum variation. For example, I needed also to avoid creating what is known as *elitist bias* (Sandelowski, 1986) by selecting only Poets whose work had been published and, in this way, biased for literary merit or achievement status. I would also need to be careful not to limit myself to only those poems which appealed to me aesthetically or personally; those poems which especially spoke to me because of my own vision of the world. I would need to consciously select works which I might not necessarily grasp initially, and then work through an analysis to reap their fruits. From a logistical perspective, I also needed to ensure that some of the Poets would be accessible for personal interaction with me. It would be imperative that at least a small number of women could be accessed and enlisted as member checks or evaluators (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990) for the purpose of validating my findings as they emerged.

In order to achieve maximum variation, I sought out poems written by about 20 women who have come from a diverse range of backgrounds. They are of various First Nations groups and from divergent occupational

backgrounds. Some are younger and some are older; they write upon the desks and tables of their universities, offices, cluttered kitchens and prison cells. Some have published their poems, some have not.

Those who have published their works were selected from four major sources. *Seventh Generation* (Hodgson, 1989) is a compilation of prose and poetry by First Nations men and women, few of whom had been published before. *Writing the Circle* (Perreault & Vance, 1990), is an anthology of writings by Western Canadian, First Nations women. This collection was pulled together with the express purpose of giving First Nations women a place to find voice and, given its wide ranging readership, this has indeed been accomplished. The women whose poems appear in *Writing the Circle* come from diverse backgrounds, some being experienced writers, some being Elders whose spoken Cree words were translated and set to paper. *Bear Bones and Feathers*, is a collection of poems all written by Louise Halfe (1994) who is clearly an experienced, bounteous and eloquent Poet. She is a person who is oft invited to address various groups in both the writers' and First Nations communities. Finally, *Steal my Rage* (Maki, 1995), is a selection of poems from previously unpublished First Nations writers. Says Maki, the editor, "only a week after sending out a call for unpublished First Nations writers, the submissions began to flow in until we received almost four hundred works" (p. 1). A selection committee set about the difficult task of choosing what was considered to be a "good representation" of submitted works. From these, I narrowed the selection process to that of being women and Western Canadian. Why was the A



*Gathering of Spirit* (Brant, 1988), collection overlooked one might ask? A careful reading of the notes regarding contributors, however, revealed that only one writer, Emily Gallant, actually fit the Western Canadian criterion. Unfortunately, Ms. Gallant's work was narrative rather than verse so this entire writing collection was set aside rather than being part of this study.

Because all of these collections included minimal biographical information about the writers, it was possible to make some purposeful sampling decisions. It should be noted that many of the Poets are of a Cree lineage. Although there was no deliberate intent on my part to achieve a sampling which reflects the demographics of First Nations people in Western Canada, this weighting of Cree people is, nevertheless, reflective of these demographics.

Finding women whose poems have not been published was more difficult but immensely interesting. "Seek and ye shall find". In my life, it has always seemed to me that I stumble upon those treasures which I seek in an almost fatalistic sort of way, as if it were simply meant to be. When I first mentioned my project to a friend of mine who runs an adult education class in the Arctic, she said, "Oh, isn't that wonderful! It just so happens that we incorporated a poetry writing section in our personal growth segment and you wouldn't believe how proud they (the students) are of their writing". This is how it was that I received about 30 poems written by people of Inuit and Dene descent who were students at the Native Women's Training Centre in Inuvik, N. W. T. As chance would have it once again, upon mentioning my project to a fellow student whom I spoke to only the once, she delighted in putting me in touch with a fascinating

local woman who writes poetry from her heart and soul since her eyes see almost nothing at all. Other poems were collected from women located through the adult literacy program run by the Ben Calf Robe Society. Another set of poems was accessed through contacts with the Native Friendship Centre in downtown Edmonton. Finally, the Elizabeth Fry Society was invaluable in putting me in touch with several First Nations women who have written poetic verse from their own view of the world: behind bars. In the end, there were 35 poems included in this project.

Women whose poems had not been published were asked to sign consent forms which gave me permission to reproduce their verses (see Appendix A). Each Poet was asked to choose whether or not she wished anonymity or to have her name recorded along with her verses. All of the Poets asked that their names be associated with their poems.

### **Trustworthiness**

The strategies undertaken in order to assure the trustworthiness of this research process were many.

### **Triangulation**

Triangulation is a term used liberally, variously and often ambiguously in the qualitative paradigm. But what does it actually mean? In the broadest sense, triangulation is the process of collecting data from several different sources, utilizing several different methodological techniques to do so (Patton, 1990).

Although discussions of the various theoretical conceptualizations of

triangulation can become deeply philosophical or highly technical, I especially like Knafl and Breitmayer's (1989) clear and pragmatic synopsis of the central issues:

It is important to recognize that the term triangulation has two distinct applications. While some researchers continue to focus on the *convergence* [italics added] function of a triangulated approach, other authors use the term triangulation to describe the multi-strategy approach they use to attain *completeness* [italics added] (p. 212).

Knafl and Breitmayer pointed out that triangulation is applied to convergence activities when the purpose of the research is to develop instruments or to measure discrete constructs. Alternatively, in those studies where the goal is the description of a broader areas of interest, triangulation is applied to attaining completeness. It is this latter application, that of attaining completeness, which is germane to my study. For the purpose of this study then, triangulation was meant to be that process of collecting data from multiple sources, through multi-methods, which I carried out to ensure as complete a perspective as possible.

#### Triangulation of Data Sources

Numerous strategies were undertaken to ensure that I was gathering a complete field of vision. Gathering data from numerous different sources and by divergent means was one of the central strategies. Several major sources of data were gathered from: the poems previously discussed, interviews with poets and archival sources. In the latter regard, I had the good fortune indeed to benefit from the boundless data base of the Legacy Project, created at the

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. The Legacy Project developed a CD Rom containing more than 2000 oral presentations as well as hundreds of studies and task force reports from the First Nations communities and spanning the last 25 years. Through this CD Rom I was able to review the issues and realities which First Nations women have been identifying as being at the fore in their community efforts. As would be expected, tapping into several of these sources was like unravelling a thread from a sleeve: each leading to another and another. The biggest problem became, at that point, limiting the unlimited.

### Investigator Triangulation

#### The Supervisory Committee

The supervisory committee plays an important role in a research project (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). I was fortunate to have available to me strong researchers who each brought unique talents and resources to the table. I chose these people to work with me because of their strong backgrounds in First Nations culture, qualitative research methodology, the 'politics' of research and their abilities to work together effectively. I turned to each one at different times, for different reasons, and was supported through making good decisions and guided back to the path when losing focus.

#### Peer Debriefing

Early in the research process, I enlisted the commitment of two colleagues who were unrelated to this research project. Known in the qualitative paradigm as *peer debriefing* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1989), it affords the researcher the opportunity to test out insights yet prevent

him or her from losing neutrality. Their commitment was to meet with me periodically for the purpose of playing the role of the devil's advocate, critically reviewing with me my progress and my formulating ideas. They read the data, my analysis of the data and critically reviewed my interpretations with me. Later, in the course of the project, a third peer was enlisted to review the data as well as a rather fully developed draft of the findings. This person's expertise was not only in research but in the First Nation's women's community as well. Feedback from these three peers was incorporated into the writing process.

#### **Member Check Interviews**

In order to ensure that I had captured a meaningful and valid analysis of the poems' themes, I conducted what is known as member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Yin, 1989). To accomplish this, I sought the consultation of a small number of First Nations women, selected primarily by the criterion of accessibility. In order to meet with First Nations women for this purpose, I approached a number of settings and organizations such as The Elizabeth Fry Society, the University College Entrance Program at Concordia College, First Nations Friendship Centres, the Feather of Hope Society and the Ben Calf Robe Society. Following the leads, and sometimes cold trails, I eventually had the opportunity to meet with a number of Poets. After offering members a written (or verbal) account of the preliminary analyses, I asked them, "Do you see (hear) yourself in this work?" Interviews were carried out in person and were relatively unstructured, giving each member the opportunity to respond to and give feedback and direction with regard to my analysis and

interpretations. In other instances, the women asked to read my writing for themselves and responded to what they had read. Their feedback and suggestions were incorporated into the evolving drafts.

Who were these women who finally agreed to meet with me and guide my work? I consider them to be my collaborators. Some spoke with me through interviews; some spoke to me more informally, opting not to tape record. Those who opted to be recorded in formal interviews signed consent forms which gave me permission to do so (see Appendix B).

Through the Elizabeth Fry Society I located two Poets, writing from behind bars. Both moved inexplicably among various prisons in the Northern Alberta region during the writing of this project. I know nothing of the crimes which led them to prison nor do I even know if they know of one another. At the time of our talks, the women's prison in Edmonton was experiencing repeated escapes followed by immediate and swift security measures. These measures were met with increased tension, violence, and tremendous uncertainty for everyone. My visits were very much impacted by these prison breaks and their aftermath.

On the day that I first met a lady named Janice, I had been admitted to a secure unit in a city prison in order to speak with her. I introduced myself, shook her hand and began to describe my purpose. In that moment, Janice's name was called over the public address system and she was told to "pack up". She was leaving. Within 10 minutes, she had stuffed her belongings into a pillow case, was attempting to say guarded but emotional good byes to a few

women under the watchful and apprehensive eyes of everyone else. She, and several others, were whisked away to whereabouts unknown. I made several attempts to track her down and was unable to do so for many months. By the time I relocated her, she had been through several jails. Security had been tightened to such an extent that I was no longer permitted to enter her unit to speak with her. I was not permitted to bring pen nor paper and absolutely not a tape recorder. We tried to discover who the other was over a short-corded phone behind a pane of smeared glass. Soon after our meeting, I phoned the jail to schedule another. Janice was gone to an institution outside of the province and I never saw her again.

The first time I met Corey, we had the unsupervised use of the psychologist's office at a jail outside of Edmonton. We were given our privacy, a cup of coffee and someone had even thought to have Corey's lunch set aside for her in case we took too long and missed her meal time. We had as long as we needed together. On the next occasion of meeting with Corey, following the escapes at the women's prison, she, too, had made several moves through numerous institutions and across provinces. We met in a glass booth under the watchful eye of security and were hustled out after our 30 minute visitation time was up. It was just as well. Our oxygen allotment inside the booth seemed to have expired at about 20 minutes. In the interim, Corey had read the writings which I had sent her. Although she was helpful and positive in her feedback, I suspected that what she really wanted to talk about was her survival, not my work. Corey shared a great deal of her personal life with me which I struggle to

use respectfully in this project. Corey said that she writes to heal herself. With the encouragement of a lady from the Elizabeth Fry Society, she plans to undertake a writing of her life story. I hope that she will do this.

Marie is a Métis woman in her fifties who has raised a family of her own. Her connection with the Native Friendship Centre in Edmonton is, to her, like a life line. Marie was born blind and sent off to Ontario where she was educated in a special school for blind children. Her summers at home with her family were filled with many of the troubles described by other First Nations women yet she had many other experiences uniquely her own as well. Marie is a cancer survivor and writes poetry to give herself strength and courage. Like Janice, she repeatedly expressed her wish that her poems could find their way to other First Nations women in need of support and comfort.

Joanne is a woman whom I met through the Ben Calf Robe Society. Women like Joanne work 18 hours a day for the First Nations community and barely surface for breath. We met in her office and, between phone calls and knocks at her door, we madly talked about everything under the sun: her childhood, her mother, her children, her job, her trip to a hippy commune and the plight of First Nations, teen-aged girls. Joanne was very generous with her poetry but said she would not be able to meet with me again in a more structured, interview context. After several phone calls, I sent her a copy of those parts of my writing which incorporated her poetry and asked that she contact me if she wished me to change in any way my treatment of her verses. We laughingly agreed that "no news would be good news." I did not hear back



from Joanne and I assumed that she had accepted my interpretations. Months passed and I phoned just to be sure that I could proceed with my interpretations. Joanne was immediately enthusiastic, we met the next day and had a wonderful interview together. She phoned the next week and said that she had a lot more to say; "Could we meet again soon?"

Lois is a Poet who works at the University of Alberta, supporting First Nations students in their academic careers. The first time we spoke, Lois had just received word that several of her poems had been accepted for publication. She was quietly thrilled. Lois has a sharp, analytic mind and research know-how of her own. She agreed to share some of her poems with me but with the understanding that she would read my treatment of her poetry before giving full consent. This was more than satisfactory to me because I very much wanted her input. As a matter of fact, Lois undertook a careful reading of themes relating to being disconnected and provided me with thoughtful, helpful feedback.

Sky Dancer Louise Halfe is the author of *Bear Bones and Feathers*. She has a degree in Social Work and has Nechi Training in addictions counselling. Sky Dancer was the Poet whose work first caught my eye years ago. It was her poetry which inspired me to envision this project in its very beginnings. Maria Campbell said of her, "With gentleness, old woman's humour, and a good red willow switch, Louise chases out the shadowy images that haunt our lives". I sent her letters of inquiry for two years before I finally located her in Saskatchewan. Sky Dancer humoured my overzealousness and agreed to meet

with me to discuss my work further. In the end, she did not come to Edmonton but spoke to me at length over the phone. Her insight was invaluable.

SkyBlue Morin was recommended to me by people at the Ben Calf Robe Society. This is a lady whose poetry I had already selected, read, re-read and analyzed so I was delighted to learn of her whereabouts. SkyBlue met with me, bringing me further readings, writings and helping me to learn as much and as quickly as I could about the Aboriginal part of her cultural background.

### **Strategies for Ensuring Rigor**

#### **Referential Adequacy Materials**

In addition to the poems collected for analysis, another set was collected and stored until the final stages of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These archived data are called *referential adequacy materials* (Guba & Lincoln, 1992; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; ) and were later used to test the dependability of the study findings. Do the archived materials contain themes which are contrary to or unaccounted for by the findings? If this should be the case, the researcher is obliged to return once again to the analysis process in order to explain the differences found in these referential materials and welcomes this additional information as part of attaining a complete and holistic picture. While Yin (1989) described this process as somewhat analogous to a split-half technique in the quantitative paradigm, others (Knafl & Breitmayer, 1989) would liken it to a triangulation strategy which ensures the broadest possible coverage of the area of interest.

#### **Audit Trail**

Compiling an audit trail is one of the fundamental tasks of the qualitative researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990; Sandelowski, 1986). In practical terms, this means keeping a written record of all of the steps taken and decisions made throughout the research process. This documentation should be sufficient to permit a second party to retrace the research project, step by step and decision point by decision point. The audit trail would also include field notes, transcriptions and coding data, all for the purpose of ensuring that the research process could be critically tracked and checked, although in reality, not actually replicated. I opened the first pages of an audit trail at the inception of this project by way of a journal divided into three general areas: methodology, logistics and personal reflections.

### **Field Notes**

Throughout the development of this project, I maintained written records of the informal meetings which I had with people which pertained to this project in any way. In my field notes, I described not only our conversations but also those contexts within which they occurred.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

In the qualitative paradigm, data collection and analysis evolve in a spiralling manner, circling around, first gathering data, analyzing them and then searching for more to fill in the gaps or provide more depth.

Analysis was conducted using Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step method as a map. Firstly, I immersed myself in repeated readings of First Nation's women's poems. I read and reread a wide range of poems, gathering a feeling for what it

was they were offering. (It should be remembered that poems had been set aside as referential adequacy materials to serve as a check toward the end of the project). In the next step, I combined Colaizzi's steps two and three which involve extracting significant statements and then formulating meanings from them. This combining of two steps was carried out because the elements of poems are very different from that of lengthy interviews which typically include considerable irrelevant or less than relevant text. In contrast, the poems were complete meaning units in themselves and defied a line by line analysis. There was no irrelevant text to screen out and set aside. Each poem delivered at least one complete message to be analyzed as such. Therefore, I returned to the poems and examined each one individually so as to extract meaningful units. This was indeed the most difficult step in the process, calling for what Colaizzi referred to as "creative insight" (p.59). I later checked and rechecked these meanings with numerous other people, peer researchers and Poets alike, to ensure that I had gathered a valid interpretation of these poems. In the next step, I began organizing the themes which emerged from the individual poems into clusters which made sense together. I checked back with the original poems to be certain that these themes were indeed in the poems.

At this next point, I began gathering and transcribing early interview data and undertaking an analysis of these data and field notes as well. I integrated these themes into an early draft of a description of what it is that First Nations women are telling us in their writing. Had I been attempting to explore a single, finitely delimited phenomenon, it would be expected that this descriptive work

would be exhaustive. In this particular case, the issues which First Nations women address in their poetry are without bounds. I had to accept the qualification that it is not possible to effectively explore and exhaustively describe all of those issues which these women may address in their writing.

The final step in Colaizzi's (1978) process was to check back with a number of the Poets to validate the themes which I had proposed had emerged from the data. As was stated earlier, this was, in fact, a spiralling process as I repeatedly checked back with the Poets then returned once more to the data. In addition to Colaizzi's seven steps, I commenced the task of repeating this process with those poems which had been set aside as referential adequacy materials. In repeating this process, I once again returned to writing and rewriting what it was I believed the Poets to be saying. Finally, I verified that these themes were consistent with those of interest to First Nations women in the contexts of their conferences, workshops and round table meetings.

I add one small note. The reader will notice unusual or irregular spellings, spacings or capitalizations throughout some of the poems. This is because I decided to preserve and reproduce the poems in their true and original forms. I opted not to assume an editorial role but, rather, welcome the poems just as they were handed to me. (All poems are listed in Appendix C).

## CHAPTER 4: LOSS AND DISCONNECTION

*It's been seven lifetimes since Europeans first arrived on the shores of North America. Our ancestors, of course, had already lived here for many thousands of years. But as early as that first encounter, extraordinary events began to occur among us. That initial meeting touched off a shock wave that was felt by Indian people right across the continent. And it is still felt to this day (Tomson Highway, In The Dispossessed, 1990).*

*Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question and no Indian Department. That is the whole object of this Bill (Duncan C. Scott, Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs, Government of Canada 1913-1932, In Indian women and the law in Canada: Citizens minus, 1978, p. 50).*

### Introduction

When First Nations women write, how are we informed about their realities? The first and most important point to be made at this juncture is that, what lies here is my own subjective interpretations of these writings. What I have committed to paper here are my own readings of their own writings. Although I have greatly benefitted from the conversations I have had with six of these Poets, the poems will forever speak for themselves. With this caution in mind, the reader is urged to deliberate slowly, to reflect and to find his or her own meanings in the poems that follow. The reader might ask him or herself, "What is this woman wanting me to hear"?

When First Nations women write, how do they represent their worlds? We are informed of both a profound sense of loss and a profound sense of reclamation. The Poets describe how it is that they lost so many of the threads of their connectedness to their worlds and how it is that they are restoring and reweaving once again these connections.

It needs saying that, although I begin my discussions here by exploring those themes pertaining to loss and disconnection, disconnection was not always a pervasive experience in First Nations communities. Obviously, in the context of their greater histories, there were the ties of family, community and tradition before the dislocation, loss, disruption and disconnection of colonization. Furthermore, in exploring the themes of the Poets' writing, I discovered that the despair of the disconnection is offset by a wealth of material expressing reconnection, reclamation, and restoration of that wholeness which once was theirs. In her classic retelling of West Coast women's stories of sacred origin, Anne Cameron (1981) succeeded in tracing for us this journey of coming full circle, "... to all other women, with love, and in Sisterhood, this leap of faith that the mistakes and abuse of the past need not continue. There is a better way of doing things. Some of us remember that better way" (Preface). With this in mind, I begin with those themes which tell us of the Poets' sense of loss and of being disconnected.

Duran and Duran (1995) asserted that it is impossible to understand the psyche of First Nations people without an understanding of the impact of colonialization. The devastating effects of assimilation policies cannot be overstated and are voiced in many of the poems which grapple with disconnection and alienation.

Many of the Poets speak of a most profound sense of loss. It has to do with being disconnected; disconnected from their cherished Land, disconnected from their own bodies, from their men folk, and, ultimately, from their own sense

of value as human beings. What underlies this disconnection is the tragedy of being cut off from the essence of life for First Nations people: traditional Spirituality. This most pervasive theme of disconnectedness emerged from the poems in a number of different yet inter-related contexts.

### **Loss of the Land**

*An Indian without land is a dead Indian (The World Council of Indigenous Peoples, 1981).*

First Nations people have, until very recent times, been completely dependent upon the land for all of the basics of life (Morrison & Wilson, 1986; Mandelbaum, 1979). Not only have they relied directly on the land to sustain life but they have based their Spiritual practices, rituals and taboos upon the cycles and complexities of the land so as to preserve and protect it for future generations. For First Nations people, the land is not just their resource base; it is the giver and the sustainer of Life. The land is Mother and it is the womb (Horn, 1993; Wall & Arden, 1990).

At a deeper level, the original land and environment is the birth place of the cultural myths of the people and, when these lands are no longer intact, what becomes of the old myths and their capacity to give meaning and direction to the individual? (Duran, 1984). For the Poets, to be disconnected from the land is to be separated from all that gives, supports and nurtures the human being and the human psyche.

### **Desecration and Anger**

Disconnection from the land is experienced in various ways. Jeanette Armstrong's writing describes the colonization of her native land as a desecration



of sorts, an "unholy search for power". Her experience of this colonization process is to bear witness to the wanton destruction of the Earth, the waterways, and the living, breathing creatures. In her poem, *History Lesson*, Armstrong documents, from her perspective, how it was and, emphatically, *still is*, that First Nations' land has been taken forcibly while she is held to witness its plunder and destruction. Her images of mutilation and killing, colourized food products and scented toilet paper and the greed for money leave us with a vulgar, if not obscene, vision of the dominant culture,

Out of the belly of Christopher's ship  
a mob bursts  
Running in all directions  
Pulling furs off animals  
shooting buffalo  
Shooting each other  
left and right...

Civilization has reached  
the promised land.

Between the snap crackle pop  
of smoke stacks  
and multi-colored rivers  
swelling with flower powered zee  
and farmers sewing skulls and bones  
and miners  
pulling from gaping holes  
green paper faces  
of smiling English lady (Jeannette Armstrong, *History Lesson*, 1989, p. 54).

The processes of commercialization and industrialization have altered and defiled the land to such an extent that Armstrong feels as though she is a witness to the slow death of its life-giving forces. The cleaning products and foods of convenience which the dominant culture perceives as the necessities of

modern life are, to the Poet, icons for the nature-defying, life-threatening and utterly foreign forces which have stolen her sacred land out from beneath her feet. She continues,

The colossi  
in which they trust  
while burying  
breathing forests and fields  
beneath concrete and steel  
stand shaking fists  
waiting to mutilate  
whole civilizations  
ten generations at a blow (Jeannette Armstrong, *History Lesson*, 1989, p. 55).

Worst of all, there is a dreaded finality about it all. There is a point beyond which the land cannot recover from the assaults of industrialization and the economic activities of the dominant culture. This signals not just the demise of the Aboriginal people, but of all living creatures warns Armstrong,

Somewhere among the remains  
of skinless animals  
is the termination  
to a long journey  
and unholy search  
for the power  
glimpsed in a garden  
forever closed  
forever lost (Jeannette Armstrong, *History Lesson*, 1989, p. 55).

The ironic implication of Christianity in this last passage is by no means a theme unique to the psyche of Jeanette Armstrong. Again and again, First Nations women put voice to their perception of the Christian churches, or 'Black Robes' as they are often called, as willing, if not eager allies in the domination and colonization of First Nations people. Anne Cameron (1981) explained, through

the wisdom of "Granny's" words,

At first things were okay, but bit by bit it all started to get ugly. They had officers and sailors and soldiers, but the trouble came from the holy men, the priests in their robes. Eyes like burnin' coals and not even the memory of kindness in them (p.71).

The ominous images of the Black Robes repeatedly emerge throughout the poems, as the reader will see.

In writing these pages, I wondered if I should deal with the repercussions of missionization in a separate section, as a theme unto its own: The Church. In the end, I chose to permit the effects of Christianization to emerge throughout all of the many themes of the Poets' lives, just as they would occur in the context of real Life. In every day living, the Women could not set the Church to one side as though it was a distinct entity to be dealt with in seclusion. No, the impact of missionization permeates all aspects of their minds, bodies and souls, they tell us.

To ensure trustworthiness, I asked a colleague of mine to read these poems and to give me feedback about the themes which had emerged for me (field note, January 14, 1996). Apart from that task, however, I must say that this poem, like no others, drew a very strong response from my colleague. She was immediately struck by the bold and undisguised angry tone of this poem. Her intuitive reaction was that this anger is misdirected or in some way not justified. Her forefathers, too, had suffered abuses and indignities which were bestowed upon Slavic immigrants at one time. They, too, were forced to give up a way of life which embraced the land and to find their way in the new and modern era. Furthermore, the sins of those who came decades and, indeed,

centuries before us are not our sins, she pointed out. Why are we to be held culpable for the, admittedly, destructive behavior of the colonizers of so long ago?

My colleague's response to Armstrong touched an extremely sensitive nerve for me. Many years ago I began grappling with this whole issue of "Am I to blame?" and I thought that I had laid it to rest. But here it was again. How is it that this poem challenges me in this way? It is because this poem is not just a History Lesson. It is also a contemporary snap shot. It is also about today. When Jeannette Armstrong writes, she challenges the reader to examine how it is that he/she either protects or abuses the Earth. Complacency will not be acceptable to her.

#### Lamenting a Lost Paradise

For Joanne Wood, the land is both an immediate giver of Life and a symbol of her people's future. The land symbolizes a spiritual lifestyle which was meant to be hers and her children's. It symbolizes health and strength among her people. When the land was good to us, all was well. But Joanne recognizes that this lifestyle and historical moment has passed. Her sense of loss is associated with the depletion of the land and its resources. For her, to lose the land is to lose the hope of the future for her children. She laments that the traditional ways supported by the land are no longer available to her and may not be there for future generations. The land resources are both tangible and symbolic of a whole way of life which has been lost as people became dislocated and disconnected from them.

Once there were many  
 And the land was good to us.  
 But now it is my time  
 And I have almost forgotten  
 How it was in the old days  
 When the deer flooded the earth  
 And gave us life.

Tomorrow there may not be  
 Any deer for our children.  
 Only their spirits remain  
 In those places remembered  
 By our ancestors (Joanne Wood, 1996, untitled, unpublished).

Joanne's sadness for the loss of the connection to the land is clear and simple. Her faith and belief in the spirits which remain, however, suggest to us that her commitment to an underlying spiritual belief system has not been lost to her. This is the source of her hope for the future. In this way, she remains connected to her spirituality. I shall return to her verses at a later point to better understand that spiritual reclamation which many women are identifying and nurturing.

In *White Magic*, by Tracey Bonneau, her mind slips back to the peacefulness of her home only in a still moment, catching her completely off guard. Amidst her struggles to numb herself and block out the pain in her life through abusing drugs, she momentarily touches a memory of home, jolting her with a pang of pain for that which she has no more: her land. The memory is so painful that she must instantly release it, block it from her mind, disconnect and return once again to numb.

... She heads toward the skids  
 walks into a bar  
 spots a friend  
 who lends her two bucks

She hops on a crowded bus  
 She pulls the bell  
 She jumps off the bus  
 her tired legs  
 carry her  
 home  
 She opens the rundown door  
 flops down  
 on the three legged couch  
 she pauses for a moment  
 falls into a deep sleep  
 a small farmhouse  
 Green green grass  
 Birds singing  
 A white palimino horse  
 Chickens and dogs  
 Where  
 Where is this place  
 Pain  
 grips her heart  
 She sits up  
 sweat pours from her forehead  
 She washes her face  
 tries to collect her thoughts  
 the telephone rings  
 "Hey Babes, I'm coming over,  
 I have the magic"  
 Her eyes light up  
 again  
 She plugs in a funky tape  
 The long slender leg  
 stretches across  
 a Christian Dior  
 nylon.....(Tracey Bonneau, *White Magic*, 1989, pp. 85-86).

"a small farmhouse / Green green grass / Birds singing / A white palimino horse/  
 Chickens and dogs / Where is this place / Pain / grips her heart". This one  
 small glimpse of home is the 'golden nugget'. This separation from home must  
 surely be the source of the pain underlying her numbness.

I have not reproduced Tracey's entire poem here, rather, just a selected  
 portion. What precedes the chosen verses is a lengthy and detailed vignette of

dressing herself up for the men, using cocaine to 'get numb' and surviving the street scene. We read the poem and we know that she would be alright if she could just get home to the birds and chickens, the palomino and her people. So does Tracey's woman, maybe, but for now she is too numb. She is trapped up in a circle of poverty and self-abuse from which she seems unable to escape except through drugs.

Interestingly enough, of the many, many poems written by First Nations women that I have read over the last two years, very few talk directly or explicitly about the serious impact of drugs or alcohol. There are the few which may briefly acknowledge, but not explore in depth, the impact of their mothers' drinking, "You drank, you left me / By myself, unwanted" (Corey Cardinal, *Memories of an Abused Child and Self-Abused Adult*, 1995) or "You drank to forget and to seek comfort" (Joanne Wood, *Forgiveness*, undated). But there are very few which address the impact of drugs or alcohol on the Self. Tracey is one of the few. Clearly Tracey also has a great deal to tell us about escape and detachment from her own sense of the Self. To further explore this experience, I will return to her at a point further down the road. Yet in bringing together my last thoughts regarding the Poets' separation from their home and land, I am remembering an adventurer-journalist I once read who would say, "Lose the land, lose the soul".

Tony Horwitz (1987) is a journalist who hitchhiked the barren outback of Australia, observing the triumphs and struggles of the Aboriginal people whose lives too are spiritually linked with the land. He shared a most poignant insight

into the relationship which Australian Aboriginal people have with the land. In observing the reverence with which one man, Tjamiwa, regards the renowned Ayers Rock, known to the locals as Uluru, Horwitz commented,

Uluru dominates Tjamiwa's visual and spiritual landscape. He built a hut recently, making sure that the doorway opened directly on to a view of his 'Dreaming Trail' - the creased north face of the Rock to which his people are connected. 'I do not own this thing', he says of Uluru. 'It owns me'.

I envy Tjamiwa the security of having his history, his law, his roots all preserved in a massive piece of stone. But this strength of Aboriginal belief is also its greatest vulnerability. Lose the land, or become alienated from it, and Aboriginal culture loses its very soul (Horwitz, 1987, p. 71).

#### **On Being Disconnected from my Body**

*Who cannot love her Self cannot love anybody  
who is ashamed of her body is ashamed of all life  
who finds dirt or filth in her body is lost  
who cannot respect the gifts given even before birth  
can never respect anything fully (Anne Cameron, Copper Woman, p.62).*

There can be no escaping the devastating impact that sexual abuse has had on First Nations people as a group and as individual beings (Chrisjohn, 1991; McEvoy & Daniluk, 1995). When First Nations women write, they often tell us of the wreckage in their lives which results from sexual abuse. Be their abusers strangers, relatives or agents of the Church, the damage is onerous. When First Nations women write about their abuse, they want to be heard! They want their abuse to be 'on the record'. They want to assert their voices and they want to heal themselves.

When I asked Corey what First Nations women want to tell us through



their poetry, she explained that

...it might have to do with a lot of pain. I think there's no other way...of..they have nobody to turn around and tell. Nobody wants to believe them that it [sexual abuse] has happened. So this is one way...they turn around and write. It helps them to remember and it lets other people know that it's happened....If I wrote it down, I knew it was happening and I was trying to stop it. Even though it wasn't stopped. I was trying to stop it in my own way... There was the pain and...uh...I thought if I wrote down what they were doing to me, maybe somebody would find it and read it and they could know I was hurting and help me (Corey, p. 1).

Sad to say, at that time, no one heard Corey's plea for help. But now her voice is being heard. Through the Elizabeth Fry Society newsletter, Corey has recently shared her poetry with all of the women in Alberta prisons.

### Escaping my Body

One of the experiences which many survivors of abuse report, is a sense of distancing from or detaching from one's own body (Bass & Davis, 1988; Dolan, 1991). With immeasurable bravery, the Poets have illuminated several different perspectives of this experience of disconnecting from their bodies.

Alice Lee has shown tremendous courage in describing the many faces of sexual abuse and the toll it takes on the mind and body. She circles around, showing us the impact of this abuse from a number of different perspectives and I turn to her words now, and again later in these passages.

In her searing poem, *child's play*, Alice Lee paints a floating image of a rather extreme form of disconnecting, that is, the sense of leaving the body altogether. She recreates for us how it is that a child can completely disconnect

and remove herself from her body and observe herself from across the room. She does this for a purpose: to escape. She disconnects from her body so as not to have to feel or experience the sexual assault. In this case, by disconnecting from her body, she can protect herself. It is a survival mechanism for Alice's child:

the child sits on the toy shelf  
 watching the sleeping doll on the bed  
 the child knows the doll dreams  
 of a tongue  
 in her white throat  
 in the dream the tongue becomes  
 a red hot knife  
 cutting into the white of her throat  
 to escape the doll turns her head  
 into the soft white pillow  
 but the pillow has turned red  
 the night has turned red  
 there is no escape  
 the doll must finish the dream  
 the child sits on the toy shelf  
 watching (Alice Lee, *child's play*, 1990, p. 159).

This powerful poem is not likely metaphorical. We know that people, in particular children, do psychologically detach from their bodies and experience themselves as if from outside of their own bodies during traumatic events. Not only does she detach from her body but she adds further distance by experiencing the assault in a dream context rather than in the reality of the moment.

Indeed, this is a highly complex and sophisticated survival response to trauma. What we also notice, however, is that despite this survival effort, the escape is not entirely effective. "There is no escape / the doll must finish the dream / the child sits on the toy shelf/ watching". There really is no escape. The

psychological damage which results from repeated trauma from which there is no escape can be profound. Joanne Wood explained her own experience of withdrawing from her body.

I was about five years old and that was when the sexual abuse started...five years of age. I think I remember the first time I was abused. He started fumbling... I didn't understand but I *knew* that this wasn't right.... my first encounter with male anatomy...it was like.. (long pause) UGLY! disgusting...because of the smell.. that I had to perform oral sex at five years old ...and going back that far... that's the starting point of...but I came to accept it... but I was able to withdraw and I would just say 'This person can do anything to my body but as long as it doesn't touch my Spirit' (Joanne, p. 8).

### Self Mutilation: I Cannot Feel

In an equally disturbing and very much surreal poem, Alice Lee creates an image of a woman so psychologically disconnected from her body that we see her engaged in preparing her own flesh as if for display in a butcher shop. She is disconnected in order to psychologically distance herself from the exploitation of men who will leer at her body as if it were a piece of prime rib beef in a glass case. The poem is written in such a way as to lull the reader into a numb-like trance, a state from which to apprehend her detachment and to experience how this numbness has no beginning and has no end. The underlying pain, however, is not likely too far below.

Sasha shaves the unwanted hair from her legs shaves the  
unwanted hair from under her arms her hand feels her legs  
now smooth feels under her arms now smooth her hands move to  
her breasts full firm her stomach flat her hands to her  
thighs and stop there feeling the unwanted flesh Sasha

thinks of the appointment tomorrow with the agent from the  
 man's magazine thinks of the eyes of many men looking at her  
 body at her thinks of the eyes looking at the flesh Sasha  
 reaches for the knife the fish filleting knife newly  
 sharpened by her reaches for the knife and slices the flesh  
 from her thighs from her thighs from her (Alice Lee, *Sasha shaves the  
 unwanted hair from her legs shaves the*, 1990, p. 159).

A colleague of mine who helped me to stay true to the poems, shared a  
 valuable insight into this poem. She sensed that Sasha would like to destroy  
 that which the men want from her. Hack it off. In so doing she would be, in her  
 own way, preserving herself and her dignity. I think my colleague is right.

### My Body is Sexual: It Betrays Me

From a different perspective, Sky Dancer Louise Halfe relates, in *Valentine  
 Dialogue*, the experience of having one's body objectified. "Dthey dink I'm a  
 cheap badge to hang on dere sleeve, as if to make me public property", she  
 protests. She refers to her body parts using names which are humorous and  
 perhaps, in so doing, gives herself some distance from the humiliation she  
 experiences. Yet, beneath the humour, there can be no denying the exploitation  
 and shame associated with her sexuality. Her body has undeniable urges and in  
 order to satisfy these needs, she becomes vulnerable to those who exploit,  
 deceive and humiliate her. She describes being disconnected from her own  
 body by experiencing it as something which betrays her.

I got bit.  
 By what?  
 A snake bite.  
 Where?  
 In my spoon. Gone er eea merchant.  
 Wholee sheeit.  
 Love, he doid me.

I have a pain in my heart.

Fuckin liar.  
Hate all of dem.  
Dhink day can hang dair  
balls all over the place.

Cross my legs next dime.

Mudder says day all alike.

Snake in dair mouth.  
Snake in dair pants.  
Guess dats a forked dtongue.

Mudder says I'll never lift it down.  
Fadther says I'm nothin but a cheap dramp.

Shame, shame.

Da pain in my heart  
hurts, hurts... (Sky Dancer louise Halfe, *Valentine Dialogue*, 1990, pp 89-91).

Why has Sky Dancer louise written this poem in broken English, mimicking Cree speakers? Is she gently making fun of herself or her people? No, I don't think so. I think that she is pointing out that this is the plight of the First Nations woman. This is the experience of 'women of color'. White women may be exploited and abused but they are not made to feel shame about the color of their skin. They do not feel this profound sense of cultural shame (McEvoy & Daniluk, 1995). What deepens the disconnection she feels from her body even further is that she has learned that the very color of her skin brings her humiliation.

My brown tits  
they shame me.  
My brown spoon  
betrays me.

My spirit weeps...(Sky Dancer louise Halfe, *Valentine Dialogue*, 1990, pp 89-91).

Her sexual urges leave her vulnerable to those who would gladly exploit and degrade her. She feels forsaken:

And my mouth  
wants  
to feel dair wet lips.  
Sheeit my body betrays me...(Sky Dancer louise Halfe, *Valentine Dialogue*, 1990, pp 89-91).

Alienation from the Men in my Life

Sky Dancer louise Halfe's portrayal of men in *Valentine Dialogue* is none too flattering. Some of the Poets we have already read describe the feeling of being objectified by men, "thinks of the eyes of many men looking at her body at her" (Alice Lee, *Sasha shaves the unwanted hair from her legs shaves the*, 1990, p. 159) or how the "Fuckin men. / Dthey dink I'm a cheap badge / to hang on dere sleeve, as if / to make me public property" (Sky Dancer louise Halfe, *Valentine Dialogue*, 1990, pp 89-91). Others feel abandoned.

### Abandonment

Esther Price describes her estrangement from her man with humour yet clearly, she perceives that, to him, she does not exist. She has become invisible, unheard, unloved and finally, angry:

I ask him to fix the door, he tells me, "AFTER A COFFEE AND A SMOKE".  
I ask him to go to the store, he tells me, "AFTER A COFFEE AND A SMOKE".  
I ask him to love me more, he tells me, "AFTER A COFFEE AND A SMOKE".  
Let me tell you how I hate those words, "AFTER A COFFEE AND A SMOKE". (Esther Price, *After a Coffee and a Smoke*, 1993).

### Violation and Abuse

Duran and Duran (1995) asserted that the ills and problems of First Nations people cannot be legitimately explored without an understanding of the socio-historical context. Nowhere is this point more meaningful than in the examination of family violence and spousal abuse. Duran and Duran point out that the pervasive, forceable removal of children from their families had a devastating impact on the First Nations family system. Children placed in Christian boarding schools were separated from their parents, their cultures and their tribal beliefs. The colonial assimilation policies effectively eradicated traditional First Nations cultural practice for a time, they say, and left in its wake a complete loss of power and a despair in the psyche of these people. When this despair and self hatred is externalized, Duran and Duran would say, there is violence. These experts attest to the staggering incidence of family violence within the First Nations nuclear family.

In *Please Stop!*, Virginia Charles begs for this violence to stop. Apparently there was, at one time, a loving relationship with her man. But no more. This loving connection has been severed. Charles feels betrayed as his love turns to abuse. She is utterly fearful.

Hands that once caressed me are now pushing me, shoving me  
 a hand that once gently touched me is now slapping me,  
 punching me, beating me, beating me.  
 A body that once tenderly made love to me  
 is now accusing me, forcing me.  
 A body that once respected and shared with me  
 is now blaming me, shaming me, disgracing me.  
 The voice that gently once said I love you  
 is now swearing at me, tearing at me.  
 The voice that once spoke gently to me is now  
 yelling at me, scaring me, scaring me.

The arms that once held me tenderly  
 are now throwing me, dragging me.  
 The arms that once protected me  
 no longer guard me, shield me  
 destroying me destroying me  
 The man that once loved me  
 is now hurting me  
 hurting me

Please stop hurting me, hurting me...

(Virginia Charles, *Please Stop!*, 1995, p. 74).

So profound is the fracture between this woman and her man that she refers to him as bits and pieces of disconnected body parts - his hands, his voice, his arms - each part of him as a weapon from his arsenal. Notice also that, as she puts words to this relationship, its very space on the page diminishes, creating a visual image of a loving connection which is rapidly disappearing altogether.

### Leaving Him Behind

Suzanne Methôt laments a fading relationship in her poem, *To a Healing Man*. She sees that the man in her life is emotionally unable to embrace a relationship with her. He struggles on with his own difficulties, stuck and unable to establish a trust with her. Despite the mutually felt pangs of desire, they remain emotionally separated. She knows that corporal love will not be enough to bridge the gulf between them. She can give of herself but not all of herself. Although he struggles to wrestle his demons, the distance grows.

A man, nothing more  
 less than a dream spirit  
 not much more than a child  
 trapped not within your power  
 I remain trapped by your pain  
 unable to calm  
 you're unable to trust



the fires that smolder  
 like incendiary bombs  
 they occasionally bounce past me  
 scorching like an accidental torch  
 or the angry wounds of manhood rites  
 never completed  
 the desire to love remains strong  
 the passion and lust are still growing  
 but bodies willing, our hearts cannot  
 and no Trickster's plan can change  
 what the ancients deem fated  
 passion's lieutenant: sometimes  
 but never all for me  
 you cannot give the answers I seek  
 yet I know that  
 the others are faint colours  
 on the landscape of reality  
 I am oil, thick and unrelenting  
 and no Toltec gods  
 can protect you from my  
 truths...(Suzanne Methôt, *To a Healing Man*, 1995, p. 84).

Joanne described to me the fading of just such a relationship. In the beginning, it was full of promise and excitement but, in the end, it left her weary and disappointed. He was needy. He demanded endless caring but had little to offer in return. In the end, she had to look inward and wonder what it was about her own being that seemed to need to care endlessly for others and to try to fix the broken.

I met a man who was a Pipe Holder - 31 years old - he swept me off my feet. He said those magic words. 'I want you'. I never heard those words in all my life...I was reeling. Spiritually he was...I went down to the Sun Dance with him.. supported him...there was a lot of stuff that we did together... certain things...he's been in and out of jail since he was 20 years old...abused by his father... a lot of tension.. a lot of relationships that went bad... anger issues, financial issues.. at that time I thought it was really cool for me to pay for everything...then I realized! I'm going to

give and give and give...in this relationship.. and I'm beginning to know where this person's at and it not healthy. He's not healthy at all.. then I realized how I'm drawn into these relationships ..I remember how the Elder told me "You got to watch for that Joanne.." Even though he was a Pipe Holder and a Sun Dancer. He was still young and very proud...so we sort of went our separate ways (Joanne, p. 15).

I asked Corey for her insights into the relationships between men and women. What she had to tell me was most interesting and nowhere to be found in any of the poems. These insights come from her own personal experiences in travelling the country

... being in Ontario and being with the men there, the Native men there, I'm blown away by the way men treat women *here*. And I see it so much because out East the women are held as Sacred. Because they have the sacredness of being able to create life. So women are held up as sacred. They're not above men and they're not below. But they're held in high respect because of that gift being able to create life and closeness to the Creator. ... They (men in the West) have not been taught to respect women. They haven't learned to respect themselves yet. They have an arrogant self-confidence. Because they're good looking or whatever or they have the charm and, hey, it goes beyond that. You know these boys don't realize , and they are *nothing but boys!*.. They are not men yet... It's a learned behaviour how to be with these people [Eastern people] and they will tell you. They'll take you aside and say You know, women don't talk like that... I've done my best healing out East. I did it by the fire, I did the sweats and I did it with those people (Corey, p. 17).

In the end, the Poets have given loud voice to their experience of being disconnected from the men in their lives. This is a great loss and continues to

be an issue in the political arena (Voyageur, 1996). The political separation between men and women which originated in governmental policy remains contentious despite amendments to the Indian Act. Politically, First Nations women are increasingly expressing their concerns and asserting their rights as women (Jaimes & Halsey, 1992; Silman, 1987; Voyageur, 1996).

### **Loss of Safety and Trust**

One of the earliest and most fundamental tasks of the small child is to learn to trust (Erikson, 1950). Trust is the basis upon which the child learns to relate to and interact with the rest of the world. We know that when a child's sense of trust, safety and security is shattered, there are enormous repercussions. The child is left utterly vulnerable.

In *confession*, Alice Lee creates for us a horrific image of her loss of trust and innocence. Totally vulnerable to the power and authority of a priest, a person in a position of unquestionable trust, the small child is taught that her small body houses the primordial snake of evil. Snakes lurk within her. This, she learns, from a man who has the power of Heaven and Earth in his hands, to say nothing of her body, her trust and her innocence.

i remember  
my first confession  
i was five years old

there is a snake inside you  
the priest said  
I must get it out  
so you will stop doing bad things

i remember  
his hands  
under my skirt

inside my panties  
looking for the snake

the way he was touching me  
made me hurt inside  
but i was too afraid  
to say anything

he said it was my turn  
to look for his snake  
he put my hand on him down there  
i felt a hot hardness  
i tried to pull my hand away  
but he held it tight (Alice Lee, *confession*, 1990, pp. 158-15).

So damaging was this invasion of her tiny body and soul that it haunts her  
nights years later, leaving her utterly vulnerable and reexperiencing her trauma  
even in her adult life:

i always sleep with a light on  
the dark makes me feel  
a heat  
in my hand (Alice Lee, *confession*, 1990, pp. 158-159).

### Loss of My Culture

*...the contemporary Indian writer's preoccupation with alienation in its classic dimensions of isolation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, lowered self-esteem, and self-estrangement accompanied by anxiety, hopelessness, and victimization, may be so pervasive because the writers are one way or another predominantly breeds themselves...That is , breeds are a bit of both worlds, and the consciousness of this makes them seem alien to traditional Indians while making them feel alien among whites. Breeds commonly feel alien to themselves above all (Paula Gunn Allen, 1992, p. 129).*

### Alienation

Sociologists call it anomie (Durkheim, 1951). Anomie describes the state of hopelessness and despair which befalls people when their cultural traditions and values are alien to those around them. This is often the experience of

people who have been overwhelmed by another, dominant culture group or by a rapid shift in economic or socio-political structure. Psychologists call it despair. It is the emotional state of utter hopelessness and resignation which befalls people when they feel that nothing they do or can do will make any difference. Poets call it shipwrecked. Shipwrecked is "when the ordinary structures that hold you up are gone" (Bly, 1996).

In his unique and insightful exploration of the Native American psyche, Duran (1984) explained this alienation and despair from the First Nation's perspective. As the reader will recall, Duran explained that, what is unique about the psyche of First Nation's people is their sense of oneness with the world around them. They have a sense of being at one with the universe and a consciousness that gives life-like qualities to all of creation. What becomes of the person whose psyche is at oneness with the universe and suddenly, that universe is overwhelmed and displaced by modern technology and industrialization? Duran emphasized that,

unconsciously it (psyche) strives to maintain that oneness and balance with a strange and changed world; the psyche itself has become strange and alien to the individual because the psyche is still trying to maintain the participation mystique [sense of oneness] and that oneness no longer holds true, because the world is too different (p. 56).

### Anger

In *Hostility of Winter*, Rena Patrick cannot be at one with the cement and plastic world. She is, perhaps, a stranger in a strange land. She resents the

degradation of the air so that others may enjoy the convenience of their cars. To her, those Christian religious symbols which have replaced the sacred symbols of her own culture, make a mockery of spiritual life. Christmas angels are posted in the city core like billboards; their purpose only to seduce people to buy and consume. Rena feels ridiculed, marginalized and alienated. Poignantly, she says, "moccasins aren't made for walking on cement..." (p. 71).

The grey forms of evil spirits  
 Rise up from the backs of cars,  
 Their foul smell assaulting you  
 As the cold smacks your face  
 And bites you  
 Like a mean little dog.  
 Tacky angels laugh at you  
 From light posts  
 Plastic stars shine upon you  
 With distant fires,  
 Mocking the real spirits  
 Who get lost in rush hour crowds  
 While the stench of evil spirits  
 Rising from cars chokes us.  
 Tacky angels shine irritating light  
 And my feet hurt now  
 'Cause moccasins aren't made for walking on cement  
 There's hostility in the air  
 Where there ought to be Christmas spirit  
 Hostility.  
 As I watch each passerby,  
 Got to sit facing the window  
 Lest those tacky angels talk behind my back (Rena Patrick, *Hostility of Winter*, 1995, p.71).

#### Disconnection from the Self

Some of the Poets describe a sense of being disconnected from themselves. Their capacity to believe in themselves and their sense of worth has become severely eroded and, in some cases, all but gone.

### Despair

In the end, when a person has become disconnected from that sense of oneness with Life which gives her meaning, purpose and identity, there is little left of the Self. Her ability to guide her own Life in the directions of her choice is gone. The first time that I read Constance Stevenson's *Thanks Anyway*, I was alarmed. I read her poem and wondered, "Is this person still alive"? So bleak is this message that I surmised its author to be exhausted of the energy and desire to fight her despair any longer. She seems to be completely alienated from all of the people in her life. Constance doubts they even really care whether she lives or dies and similarly doubts they'll bother to think of her after she is gone. She just wants 'out'. For Constance, her alienation and detachment from her world are profound.

So tired of wearing this phoney smile  
the one that I've worn for this last while.  
And, in my mind, I feel like dying,  
forget about those I may leave crying.

They'll forget me in times to come,  
with every day's rising sun.  
In time, I won't even be a memory.  
This so-called life of mine just isn't to be.

But, I'll go to my grave,  
and to those who tried to save  
a life that wasn't worth a damn thing,  
one that's just not worth remembering,  
Thanks anyway (Constance Stevenson, *Thanks Anyway*, 1989, p. 273).

From talking with Marie, I knew that there had been times in her life when she had experienced this deep kind of despair. I asked her to describe for me what her experience was of this alienation:

It was as if I was living in a void. Like I didn't feel anything. It was like an emptiness. Like there was nothing there...Even when I was a little girl, I don't remember feeling anything...Before I felt like I didn't belong anywhere. I felt like I was a stranger to every situation. It was a very very empty, lonely feeling...I can honestly say I never felt anything for anybody. I just felt (pause) numb...Like there'd be days I'd get up and I'd think, 'Well, why am I here'? (Marie, pp. 4-5).

### Self Loathing and Self-Blaming

In addition to being left with a sense of vulnerability, there is also self loathing and blame. Perpetrators of sexual abuse are often highly skilled in convincing their victims that they themselves are to blame for their own abuse. "there is a snake inside you / the priest said / I must get it out / so you will stop doing bad things", remembers Alice (Lee, *confession*, 1990, pp. 158-159). Something inside her tiny body forces her to do evil deeds, she is told. She is the one to blame.

Family members also contribute to the victim's sense of being to blame. Corey, for example, was actually punished for being sexually abused at the age of 11 years,

...he molested me every night and then all of a sudden, he cut my hair all off. I went home (pause) like the night they [social workers] got me away I spent the night in a foster home and they took me home the next day and my mom slapped me and told me to go to my room. This was my greeting back home (Corey, p. 8).

Regardless of how the victim learns to blame herself, self-blame is still a remarkably common phenomenon (Bass & Davis, 1988; Dolan, 1991). Worst of



all, once self-blame becomes lodged in the psyche, it is very difficult to remove.

Corey's experiences with physical, sexual and emotional abuse all through her childhood have left her also with a pervasive sense of self-loathing and blaming. As she struggled through her early childhood years, trying in vain to stop the abuse, she learned not only that it could not be stopped and that she was to blame for the abuse. Just as she had been punished by her mother for being victimized, she has learned to punish herself. She punishes herself physically, sexually and spiritually. First she rages against those who have abused her, openly declaring her hatred for them, "But only flashes of hurts of pain. / I try to bury them once again. / I hate you all!" Then she then lapses into punishment of herself.

Today I see me  
Now I am the abuser  
I abuse myself  
I don't need anyone to do it  
I do it myself.  
I don't see any worth.  
I don't want or care for me.

She has lost her sense of self worth.

I sexually abuse myself  
By being with someone  
Who cannot satisfy me.  
I deny my womanhood  
I deny my body satisfaction  
I physically abuse my self  
Through eating, smoking  
Drinking, drugs, accidents and fights (Corey Cardinal, *Memories of an Abused Child and Self Abused Adult*, 1995, unpublished).

She exists in an endless cycle of abusing her body; drinking and drugs to stay numb, fights when the anger refuses to be numbed.

I mentally abuse myself  
 I tell myself I'm no good,  
 I'm not good enough, not smart  
 I underachieve, I'm garbage (Corey Cardinal, *Memories of an Abused Child and Self Abused Adult*, 1995, unpublished).

Would Corey allow anyone else to talk to her this way now? Probably not. But that inner voice which refuses to be quieted runs a continual dialogue of internal messages which undermine her sense of worth, a phenomenon so common among women who have been abused (Bass & Davis, 1988).

I emotionally abuse myself.  
 By leaving myself alone  
 I deserve no love, nobody.  
 I don't cry, I enter a fantasy world (Corey Cardinal, *Memories of an Abused Child and Self Abused Adult*, 1995, unpublished).

Corey's emotional abuse takes the form of self-imposed isolation. She cuts herself off from others because she does not deserve to be loved. Pushing her emotions underground, she escapes through dissociating.

Perhaps the harshest punishment which Corey administers herself is the 'no redemption' treatment. How is it that a person can ever heal and recover if she is unworthy of help or forgiveness? It is her shame which prevents her from seeking the Spiritual connections which are so vital to healing, she contends,

I spiritually abuse myself  
 I am too ashamed to pray  
 I am unworthy of the Creator's help or forgiveness (Corey Cardinal, *Memories of an Abused Child and Self Abused Adult*, 1995, unpublished).

### Loss of Control

In her poem *No, Not Dying*, Christina Rain expresses the despair, the fear

and the dazed helplessness of a life which seems to be outside of her control. It is as if the ground is wildly shifting about beneath her feet, preventing her from getting her footing.

Numbness, fuzziness, dumbness,  
     Who's to say  
     Exactly what death is  
     Totally unfeelingness, helplessness  
 As I go through the day  
     But how can I be like this  
     Fearful, tearful, never cheerful  
     Lonely, only me  
 What is Death?  
     The end of one phase  
     Left in a daze  
 Groping, moping, a little hoping  
     Seeking a spark  
     To light up the dark  
 Running, falling, slipping,  
 S-l-i-d-i-n-g  
     Out of control  
     Yah!  
     That's it, no control  
 (Christina Rain, *No, Not Dying*, 1989, pp. 242-243).

Control. We know that a lack of controllability can produce a wide range of emotional responses including a state of helplessness, anxiety and depression (Seligman, 1975). She continues in this suspended state of no control. It is as if the world is watching and waiting for her to do something , anything.

Floating inside some large bowl  
     For everyone to look down on  
     Watching, waiting, wondering,  
     Feeling scared, ever so terrified (Christina Rain, *No, Not Dying*, 1989, pp. 242-243).

She retreats to the numbness, the buried emotions which she dare not release.

Yet feelings go denied  
     Who wants to deal with it  
     Lock it up deep in a pit

Then bursting into flame  
 As if it were a game  
 Who's in control  
 Your feeling soul  
 Yes, no one but your inner being  
 Crying, hurting, bleeding, but  
 No, not dying... (Christina Rain, *No, Not Dying*, 1989, pp. 242-243).

In the end, despite her sense of veering out of control, Christina hints at the promise of finding that thread of hope. "No, not dying". As long as there remains some sensation of pain and she is still feeling something, she must still be alive. This thread of hope is just enough to keep her connected to her world.

### The Diminished Self

One last thought occurs to me with regard to the Poets' presentation of Self. The reader has no doubt already noticed those Poets who use the small 'i' rather than capitalized 'I' in reference to themselves. This diminutive style of self presentation would naturally not become apparent through interviewing or other more conventional techniques of collecting data. Given the free form of self expression inherent in the poem, however, we become privy to this devalued way of viewing the self.

There is another perspective as well. Lois Edge (1996) is a poet who spoke with me informally about this project and my interpretations of the poems. She pointed out to me that this interpretation of the diminished self is not necessarily always the case (field note, June 24, 1996). Said she, there are times when the small 'i' might carry the meaning of having respect for one's place in the greater scheme of things. I see this in her poems.

## CHAPTER 5: RECONNECTION AND RECLAMATION

### Introduction

*The spiritual heritage of Native American people is here - it has not been extinguished. I believe the spiritual fire still burns and is beckoning for America, indeed the world, to come closer, to listen, to learn, and to share in its warmth and comfort (Eddie Benton-Banai, 1990).*

The Poets talk also of reclamation, restoration and reconnection. By reclaiming their culture and spirituality, they have begun the process of restoring their connections to so many other parts of their lives. Some grasp for the connections to the precious land of their ancestors; land of their own. Others speak of returning to the Sacred Circle, to traditional ways and to the wisdom of the Elders. Some speak of the victory of reclaiming their own bodies. Others weep for their need for connection to their Mothers. It is through these processes of restoration and reconnection that they reclaim their own health and wholeness.

### On Being Connected to the Land

*Like us, us Indian people, our land is like a mother, because she gives us everything, like medicine. Anything we hold dear is sacred to us, like our land because that's where our medicine comes from (Cecilia Mitchell, in Wall, 1993, p. 262).*

I return to Horwitz's (1987) observation of the Australian Aboriginals' affiliation with the Earth, "Lose the land, or become alienated from it, and Aboriginal culture loses its very soul" (Horwitz, 1987, p. 71). Would it be the case then, that, to reconnect with the land would be to rekindle the very soul?

In a most spiritual piece of writing, Lois Edge weaves this reconnection. Reaching back into the collective consciousness of her people, she reclaims the

piece of frozen Earth that spawned her ancestors and, in so doing, she rejoins them. She finds her place upon the Earth and among her people. She is a part of the Great Mystery which has no beginning and has no end.

...kayas

long time ago  
on my homeland  
i lived

i stood  
my feet firmly placed  
on Mother Earth  
my beloved

looking outward  
overland  
frozen ice crystal flows  
clear day  
rising morning sunlight  
blue windswept rippling river sky  
dew drops fog wisps

green grass straw reed  
border shoreline  
naked grey willow  
thicket behind  
warm breath  
air  
caribou hide rustle  
draped across thick shoulder  
tall strong sinew muscle  
sun darkened flesh  
beak nose winged eye

my people gather  
nearby  
lifting  
blade etched mammoth tusk horn  
blowing trumpet sound  
rising

day wind song echo

day wind song echo

i go...

(Lois Edge, *day wind song echo*, 1996, unpublished).

I could not help but notice that the visual experience of Lois' words is that of being centred and balanced. Also, this poem exemplifies what Lois told us earlier with regard to the use of the small 'i' to suggest having respect for one's place in the greater scheme of things.

I asked SkyBlue Mary Morin how it is possible to maintain that spiritual connection to the land while that very land base is ever eroding and changing. When she offered her own insight, I realized how much she spoke of the same connections as Lois has,

The spirit of the land ... um, one of the ways that I make a connection to the land, and the spirit of the land, is through Sweat Lodge ceremony. A Sweat Lodge ceremony is a rebirthing ceremony where you go into the womb of your mother ... the Earth, you build a lodge, give birth and when you come out ... you've left whatever pain or hurt you had with the stones ... you've come out possibly they call it rebirth or a lighter person to come out cleansed, healed ... and I just did it this week ... feeling, sort of feeling, being cradled in the womb of Mother Earth. That was my experience this week because I had to do that ... as part of my suicide prevention and grieving. And um, the other connection to the land is when we honour the four directions during the spring equinox, the summer solstice, the fall equinox, and the winter solstice. Those are the four directions that we honour, the changing of the seasons ... so that's our spiritual connection and um, some of the Elders, and as well as myself, when you walk upon the land, you can feel the pull, feel the energy ... and one place that I went to was Wanuskewin in Saskatoon. It's got a medicine wheel. Anywhere where there's a medicine wheel, you

can feel very powerful energy and you're walking. You're walking um, perhaps with more care ... you may have a vision of what might have been there at one time ... when I first walked Wanuskewin, I could see my ancestors ... 5,000 years ago as they walked upon that area near the creek. They lived there ... and that's the spirit of the land, that the spirit that's there (SkyBlue, p. 1).

In *The Barren Journey Home*, Bren Kolson paints a harsh and bleak picture of her homeland. This barren and severe land is both giver and taker of life itself. It is imperative to find one's own place in its midst and to ensure survival through respect for the delicate yet harsh balance.

...Native to this cold and unwanted barrenland,  
I have learned to take the fierce elements  
and tame them by the windows of my eye.  
They command me. I am indifferent to them.

Indigenous to this land I know,  
I have seldom snared an animal,  
if it was not for survival.  
They have tried, though, to fix me,  
in their motionless trap.  
But I am human. I would not succumb,  
to the wild wind's whip or the wilful wolverine.  
I am fixed, in sanity, on surviving.

Legends of my ancestors do not leave me alone.  
But legends about people survive  
It is my ancestors who said, "Trust the spirit of the land  
but do not trust the land to man".  
And they have helped me.  
These spirit men and women have helped me to survive,  
welcomed me into their spirit world,  
while I surrender myself to the land.  
Guided me, throughout and in, decision.  
Used the signs on the land as augers,  
pointing the way to the right path,  
and not losing myself to insanity or indecision... (Bren Kolson, *The Barren Journey Home*, 1990, pp. 130-131).



Yet, despite this most severe and seemingly unforgiving land, there remains still an intricate connection with her ancestors and, therefore, her place in this world. Her connections with the land and her ancestors are inseparable and they both guide her and anchor her.

### **Reclaiming My Body**

To Joanne I posed the question, "If you could set the agenda, and change what you thought needed to change...to give Native women a better sense of well being,... what would be one of the first things you'd change?" (Joanne, p.1). She was lost in thought for awhile and returned with,

I think ...it would be good to look at our sexuality...(long pause)... our bodies...I'd like that we could be comfortable with our own bodies (Joanne, p. 1).

### **Through Sacred Tradition and Ritual**

The sensory experiences of traditional rituals and sacred traditions have the power to reconnect women with their own bodies in ways which are enormously healing and empowering.

Though frequently guarded as secret and seldom documented, many sacred activities and taboos are observed by First Nations people in order to pay respect to the natural cycles of women's bodies. Acknowledging women's power to give Life, these sacred rituals also serve to affirm women's rightful place within their societies and rightful roles in relationship to all others beings and natural forces. During their menstrual cycles, for example, women are believed to have inordinate power, so much, in fact , that they are often

excluded from various activities for fear that their power will overwhelm that of the Spirits. As explained by Elder George Kehewin,

It's the power you [menstruating women] 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...It's not because we don't like them, it's the power they have (Meili, 1991, p.152).

When First Nations women write about sacred activities and rituals, they inform us of how it is that they are also reclaiming their cyclic powers, their bodies and their rightful places in the traditional social order. SkyBlue Mary Morin has succeeded in so eloquently recording this sacred and often secret relationship between Mother Earth and a woman's natural cycles. In one piece of writing, Ms. Morin has woven together the connective threads of women's bodies, natural cycles, Mother Earth, the creation of Life, women's rightful social position and the Spirituality inherent in all of these aspects of Life. In so doing, she has shared with us a glimpse of how First Nations women are reclaiming their own bodies and powers by way of reconnecting with their spiritual beliefs:

Women sit upon the moss  
cleansing their bodies  
of monthly bleeding  
to bond with Mother Earth.

They used to sit in lodges  
for revered privacy  
to relish their time  
with the Earth Mother.

Afterbirth was returned  
to the Earth Mother  
to bond with whom  
we had come from.

A child's umbilical cord  
was buried in Mother Earth  
to bond the child  
to its true Mother.

Such bonding made us one  
with the Creation  
and gave us understanding of  
the Sacredness of Mother Earth (SkyBlue Mary Morin, *Bonding with Mother Earth*, 1990, p 214).

SkyBlue's own daughter has been welcomed into the woman's world  
through her mother's ceremonies,

My daughter has her own smudge bowl to smudge, because she's a woman now. She came into her womanhood so ... the only ceremony I did with her was to smudge and pray on the full moon. To teach her about her connection to the moon, to grandmother moon. So every full moon for the first year- she came into her womanhood in the fall, we meet, we get together and we smudge and my son is there too. He's the balance, he's the fire. We're the water people. Balance of fire and water, he's the fire keeper and he brings all his little things that he wants smudged. He likes ceremony and they know that every full moon, we're going to smudge and this is part of sort of my work to make sure my daughter is connected to herself as a woman. Connected to the universe, connected to Mother Earth, Father Sky and I told her at the conclusion of all this, we were going to a Sweat Lodge together. She's been in Sweat Lodges as a little child. She's been to many of them, but she's also at an age where peer pressure tells her different things. So, I have told her that at the end of this year, the first year of her coming into womanhood, we would do a Sweat together because I need to re-establish those things I have taught her as a little girl, as a 4 year old, 5 year old, 6 year old. I want to make sure they're still there and I want her to reconnect with that (SkyBlue, p. 9).

What does it mean to reclaim the pride and ownership of one's own body? Let's return to the wisdom of Anne Cameron's (1981) Granny,

Who cannot love her Self cannot love anybody  
 who is ashamed of her body is ashamed of all life  
 who finds dirt or filth in her body is lost  
 who cannot respect the gifts given even before birth  
 can never respect anything fully ( p.62).

It means finding pride, being reconnected to one's own self and reclaiming the gifts which were given even before birth.

'Respect' is a word which invites pause for thought. A Poet named Lois Edge (1996) told me a story about this word. She herself had sought the wisdom of an Elder at one time, in order to understand what it is that the word respect actually means. The Elder advised her to think about what it means that the breath of the buffalo has been felt in the winds of the prairie air since time began. One should pause to think about this breath of the buffalo as it always was and then, wonder, what if it were to be no more? What would it mean to the Indian if the breath of the buffalo should cease to be in the air, lost forever? This is what respect is about, the Elder told Lois. And so, what does it mean for a woman to reclaim *respect* for her own body? It has to do with the deepest reverence for something sacred and holy.

### Through Self Acceptance

To Sky Dancer Louise Halfe, the woman's body is a natural wonder which is inseparable from the soil and water, from the plants and beasts, and from the timeless cycles of life and death. Her flesh is quivering with life and vitality yet it remains part of the timeless processes of birth, death, aging and decay. *These*

*are the Body's Gifts*, is a most sensual poem. Sky Dancer louise bids the reader to experience the naturalness of the naked flesh and its power to be utterly sexual yet aging and of the Earth, all in the same breath.

I offer ribs, taut flesh stretched like a starving dog's. My  
tits scratching sidewalks.

I offer belly, wedged in spandex. A pit of balled snakes  
quivering beneath touch.

I offer buttocks, rump of deer sailing over fences.  
Wepayos: white tail flipping.

I offer thighs, the smoke of a .303, fingers unclenched.

Take this body of snails and leeches. Stretched babies that  
have left dried creek beds across the gut.

Take it, take it, pressed tight in your beak.  
Beady eyes examining its old, tender flaws.  
Marvel at the rot.

Inside you, Magpie, I will be the glutton eating flesh,  
curing the dysentery of age (Sky Dancer louise Halfe, *These are the  
Body's Gifts*, 1994, p. 110).

"Marvel at the rot", Sky Dancer louise urges. What I love about this poem is the way in which Sky Dancer louise is able to pull complete opposites together and make them belong with one another. She is a young deer leaping over fences and an old crone with stretch marks all in the same moment. How is she able to do this?

Perhaps unwittingly, Sky Dancer louise told me how she is able to do this (field note, July 16, 1996). When Sky Dancer louise writes, she leaves her home and family and takes herself into the solitude of the bush. There she prepares herself for writing through extensive prayer and ritual. Only then are

the words gifted upon her. D'Aquili and Laughton (1979) would explain that this process of prayer and ritual transport Sky Dancer louise into an altered psychological state sometimes referred to as an ecstatic state. It is this state which can produce in the human brain, a sense of union of opposites, integrating apparent dichotomies as if in harmony. Lex (1979) explains that properly executed rituals permit the temporary dominance of the right - hemisphere which is associated with perceptions of unity and holism. It is in this altered state that Sky Dancer louise writes her poetry and in this way, resolves and embraces apparent opposites.

With passion, Sky Dancer louise Halfe rejoices in the experience of being in her own body. She celebrates her sexuality and embraces all that is natural about the gifts of her body. Furthermore, she takes great joy and pleasure in having overcome the debasing ridicule aimed at First Nations women; women slurred as "dirty drunk Indians... all sluts and bitches who sleep around" (p.227), in the words of abused women from the McEvoy and Daniluk (1995) study. Sky Dancer louise permits herself some pleasure in knowing that this acceptance of her body's natural state is something that women of the dominant culture are not as readily able to enjoy.

I've tasted myself.  
Gooseberries, pin cherries and  
rosehips rolled between my teeth,  
stretched till my bones bent  
and my breath was wind.

I've tasted the tongue of  
bear, deer and dog,  
left camomile in the corners of my  
mouth.

I've tasted  
 the sweet drip of sea  
 drying between my thighs  
 belly sweat breathing  
 on my breast.

I've tasted chocolate raisins  
 on my spine, rolling raspberries  
 between my toes and the breath  
 of swallow, feathers on my face.

I've tasted  
 till I'm swollen with sleep (Sky Dancer louise Halfe, *You've Got to Teach White Women Everything*, 1994, p. 109).

Sky Dancer louise told me that she wrote this poem in "retaliation to Cosmopolitan Magazine. "They give the message that women are all tits and ass. We're not," she decried (Sky Dancer louise, p. 5 ). She conceded that, even in her own life and relationships, she struggles with this affront. "Cosmopolitan's expectations of the slim body... those inferences that I'm too heavy, that I need to lose weight to fit the Cosmo image" (Sky Dancer louise, p.5). No, Sky Dancer louise breathes life into an image of a sensual, natural female body unconstrained by the stereotypes of the dominant culture.

### Embracing the Men in our Lives

As I edged closer to the end of my writing, I began to search for gaps and holes, missing pieces. I thought, "What about the good men, the beloved and cherished men? Are there none of them in these poems?" I searched for poems which shed light on the healthy side of the gender relations and I found them. Despite the serious rift between the genders, there are also those relationships which satisfy and give richness to the Poets' lives.

Mabel English describes a most simple gratitude for the man in her life. He is a good provider. But there is so much more. In providing caribou meat to his family, he also provides for their connection to the wider community. He ensures that all will be fed. The entire community will celebrate and feast together, re-establishing the vital bonds of the cooperative survival unit.

My Baba goes hunting for caribou  
 When my Baba kills his caribou  
 We know for sure  
 We will eat for a long time.  
 We have one big feast and dance,  
 We are one big, happy family.  
 Women laughing,  
 Children with greasy faces,  
 Men patting their full bellies.  
 My Baba likes that  
 "Be happy and don't worry"  
 He would say.

(Mabel English, *My Baba Goes Hunting*, 1993).

In this way, Mabel offers us a glimpse of the traditional lifestyle, still intact. Living in a remote, Northern community, the traditional, land-based economy is still viable. Reciprocity and sharing of bush resources remains central to survival of the group and, in turn, permits the survival of an autonomous cultural system (Asch, 1984).

It makes sense that families can be healthy and harmonious when the individual people involved have valued societal roles and access to resources. First Nations people are just like anyone else in this way.

Emma LaRocque most poignantly paints a portrait of the marital bond. In her poem, *Commitment*, she bares witness to the deep bonds of love and loyalty between two people, an aging man and his wife, now deceased. Writing from



the perspective of a daughter, she observes,

My father  
Bends low  
His brown face  
etched  
with grief.

With veined hands  
He pulls the weeds  
He rearranges the rocks  
That held the tarp down  
That covers  
The flowering mound  
That covers  
Her death.

47 years together  
And at 82 his hands  
as strong as the love in his bones,  
So caringly, so angrily  
does he rip those weeds  
To make her place of rest  
As neat as her house was.

If he could  
I know he would  
lift her  
tenderly  
out of there  
out of solitude  
and hold her  
and caress her  
in the way of their youth (Emma LaRocque, *Commitment*, 1990, p. 146).

Here is our glimpse of the kind of man whom we desperately need to know still walks among us. He is a man of love and undying commitment. What is this commitment all about and what does it mean to hold commitment as sacred?

SkyBlue Morin gave to me her understanding of commitment and it belongs here in this discussion of the men in the Poets' lives. It belongs here because it addresses the commitment which First Nations women need to have

from the men in their lives.

One of the teachings I think that we have lost is the teaching of commitment. We're taught in various cultures, whether it's Lakota or Cree... the commitment that man and wife, the commitment of raising children, is sometimes, ...well that's what it's supposed to be. It should be a commitment, real commitment to a relationship and I think presently, a lot of relationships, that commitment... somebody doesn't want to keep that commitment. And commitment is not only like physically, it's not only a physical teaching, it's also a spiritual teaching. For an example, if I were to say I was going to have a Pipe ceremony here tomorrow at whatever time, and invited people to come, and nobody came, I would come into that Pipe Ceremony by myself ... that's the commitment. Because once you've put that commitment into place, you've called upon the spirit world to come and join you. You've told them that you're going to do this. The same thing with a Sweat Lodge. I remember one year in B.C., this Elder had told us that he was going to have a Sweat Lodge Ceremony for us this one Saturday. And we were working in Northern B.C. and we didn't make it back till Sunday. And he said "We did that Sweat for you yesterday", and I didn't understand that at the time until he said "We made the commitment for Saturday, we had to do it Saturday, or the day that we say we're going to do it or the spirits are wondering what'd going on here". An example of that, or an explanation for that is it's like channelling energy. If you're channelling the spirit world, the energy, the spirit will come to that Pipe Ceremony, then you need to have it. Otherwise, they're, you know, the energy is all over the place then, it's not where you said it's going to be ... same thing with Sweat Lodge. The example I gave there. If you've channelled all that energy, all the spirits will come there and you if don't have it, where does that energy go. It's kind of like, could be in chaos, could be confusion ... like the spirits arrive, but you're not there (laughs) ... so that's commitment. So when you

make a commitment to do a Sweat Lodge, you have to do it. When you make a commitment to do a Sun Dance, you have to do it. Commitment is spiritually based. If you make a commitment to be in a relationship with someone, you make a commitment to be a man and wife, that's spiritually based. So I think, like a lot of our problems are, we don't have that commitment. And it's kind of ironic because I got married in an Indian ceremony in Morley Alberta and that's in a book called *Those Who Know*, I should have brought a copy of that, it's *Elders of Alberta*. It's an interview of Albert Lightning and it talks about my wedding there (SkyBlue, p. 4).

Cherie Harrison speaks of the carnal connection to the man in her life. She revels in the passion of this relationship and its erotic quality. She is totally and completely connected with her man, sharing this moment in her verse. This is the universal, human experience.

A hundred and seventy five pound body  
 The texture when softly stroked  
 Is like feeling the firmness of a Watermelon  
 His light hazelnut hair, and  
 His devilish sparkling eyes  
 A smile that is sexy, breath taking, and yet intelligent  
 He takes me in his arms  
 Then slowly dances  
 His way into my mouth  
 The hugging of our lips lasts still  
 Rolling onto the floor  
 Still deeply kissing, and  
 Rubbing each others bodies  
 It was not long before  
 Our flight to the pleasure room came due  
 We removed each others clothing,  
 Piece by piece with our teeth, and  
 Made love in the light of a dark moon lit night (Harrison, *His*, 1995, no page number).

#### Reclaiming Cultural Identity

It has been said that, following hundreds of years of oppression, First

Nations people are reclaiming their cultures (Duran & Duran, 1995; Jaimes & Halsey, 1992; Meili, 1991; Voyageur, 1996). They are taking back the rights to their languages, traditions, their rituals and their ceremonies.

### **Reclaiming Ceremony and Ritual**

Cultural ceremony is but one vehicle through which many First Nations women are exploring and reclaiming their own cultural identity. The Sun Dance, observed by various groups, is one of the most important ceremonial events in the annual cycle (see Mandelbaum, 1972, for an in-depth discussion regarding the details of this ceremony). Although Mandelbaum's (1987) documentation of the Sun Dance is a rich and vivid recounting, well worth the read, it comes almost entirely from a man's perspective and reveals very little of the women's roles or experience of this event. As Voyageur (1996) pointed out, this is often the difficulty with written accounts of First Nations culture. Gayle Weenie's verse gives us that insight into the feminine experience of the Sun Dance.

You can hear the drums  
 You can hear the chants  
 You can hear the rattles  
 You can hear the flutes

You can see children playing  
 You can see people laughing  
 You can see tents in a circle  
 You can see the sacred lodge in the centre

You can hear the crier  
 You can see the colourful offerings up around the lodge  
 You can smell the sweetgrass burning  
 You can feel the warmth of the sacred fire burning

You can see the dancers in rhythm with the drum beat  
 You can see the servers inside the lodge  
 You can see families with their giveaways enter the sacred lodge

**You can hear their thanksgivings and prayers**

**You can hear the singers on horseback  
As they sing in unison around the lodge  
You can see young and old, sit and watch  
You can feel the spirit of our forefathers**

**Ah! The Sun-dance - the most scared of our ceremonies  
It has been practiced for years  
It must be carried on for more  
Because it is so (Gayle Weenie, *Sun-dance*, 1990, pp. 280-281).**

Weenie touches on the social aspects of this event: the children playing and people laughing. She shares the sensory experiences of the colors, the rhythmic, hypnotic sounds and the sacramental scent of the sweetgrass. She connects with the Spirits of previous generations thereby placing herself among them. Most importantly, in her own way, she is saying, "This is who we are. This is what we do. It is the same."

### **Reclaiming Cultural Identity through Symbols**

***The true symbol...does not merely point to something else. It contains in itself a structure which awakens our consciousness to a new awareness of the inner meaning of life and reality itself. A true symbol takes us to the centre of the circle, not just to another point on the circumference (Thomas Merton, in Campbell, 1972. p.265).***

***Symbols express and represent meaning. Meaning helps provide purpose and understanding in the lives of human beings. Indeed to live without symbols is to experience existence far short of its full meaning (Bopp, Bopp, Brown & Lane, 1985, p. 8).***

Every culture has its symbols. Symbols unify people through the communication of complex relationships and perceptions. According to Paula Gunn Allen (1992), however, in the Indian cosmos, symbols are the "statements of perceived reality rather than metaphorical or poetic statements." (p.70). Gunn Allen explained that, among First Nations people, symbols are an expression of reality, not

imagined nor metaphorical reality.

We also know that symbols can have curative or healing powers (Combs & Freedman, 1990; Hammerschlag, 1988; Torrey, 1986). E. Fuller Torrey, the renowned psychiatrist, contended that symbols can constitute a form of healing suggestion. Hammerschlag (1988) described the power of sacramental substances such as tobacco, used almost universally in the healing processes of First Nations.

The smoke gives color and smell to one's words. What is said can be sent on the wings of an eagle to touch God's ear. And the smoke can cleanse the body of the clinging dust of ordinary reality. The power of the smoke comes from mixing your breath with that of others, a reminder that we are all on this path together - people, plants, animals, and air (Hammerschlag, p.138, 1988).

When First Nations women write, they speak of their reconnection to the symbols of their culture. The four cardinal directions and colors are remarkably ubiquitous among many bands and tribes. Although various groups ascribe different interpretations of the four cardinal directions and colors, there remains a remarkable continuity all the same in the reverence for these symbols.

The door to the East,  
the light of wisdom,  
Nearby the Sacred fire  
where rocks are heated.  
An Honoured woman  
leads the lodge members  
to the heart of Mother Earth.  
She walks in the direction  
of the Sun  
placing Tobacco  
at the Four corners.  
Then sits in the West.  
Red glowing rocks

are placed  
in the centre of the hearth (BlueSky Mary Morin, *The woman's  
Sweatlodge*, 1989, pp. 27-28).

They speak of their reconnection *through* the symbols of their culture. By holding the images of these symbols in their minds, these woman are able to grasp onto that thread of connection: connection to their cultural identity, to their blood-related people and, hence, to themselves.

Lois Edge (1996) weaves this thread of connection to cultural symbols over the course of the history of her people and remains, at the end of that time, still connected.

i am going to tell you a story 'bout long time ago  
maybe few thousand years  
could be more  
maybe many, many thousands of years  
who can say?  
people been here on this Earth for a long time

way back, when our thoughts were different  
not like they are now  
no

so  
one day in winter  
i find myself  
standing  
with my brothers and sisters  
in a circle  
listening to drumsong

i find  
myself  
within a single thread  
of life's beauty

took me a long time to get there  
to that place

long time...(Lois Edge, *day wind song echo*, May 1996).

The power of the symbolism of the circle cannot be overstated (Bopp, Bopp, Brown & Lane, 1985; Storm, 1972). The circle is a primordial symbol having meaning for peoples across the globe. Among First Nations, it symbolizes harmony, balance, wholeness and wellness. It symbolizes that state of balance which exists when all things are as they were intended to be by the beauty of the natural world. It also represents that which has no beginning and has no end, like the history of the First Nations people, or as Lois ponders, "maybe few thousand years/ could be more/ maybe many, many thousands of years/ who can say?" To be standing in the circle with one's brothers and sisters is to belong, to be valued and to be right with the world and to be right with oneself. Lois' connection to the circle symbol reaches back through the millennium, making her at one with her unnamed ancestors, their histories and now her own. Listening to drumsong. The drum is also a powerful symbol for First Nations people and an integral part of ceremony. As Gunn Allen (1992) explained, "the drum does not accompany the song, for that implies separation between instrument and voice where no separation is recognized. Words, structure, music, movement, and drum combine to form an integral whole" (p. 64). (The remainder of this particular poem reappears later in my discussions).

Molly Chisaakay (1990), in *The Elder's Drum*, echoes this same sense of connection to her culture and people through the symbol of the drum. The drum has the power to hold its keeper strong, balanced and healthy. For Molly, there is a profound sense of love and belonging. She is spiritually connected to her people and can rejoice in the pride which is a part of this,



The smoke rises from the sacrificial fire,  
 the circle is getting bigger, and many share hope,  
 the elder begins to drum and circles with song,  
 my love for the people in the circle exuberates,  
 the many times I have shared these rituals,  
 noticing the whiteness, and the age of my grandfather's hair,  
 he seems frail and yet the song comes with such clarity,  
 and my spirit rejoices, in the song of my people,  
 that we all have the dignity to be,  
 to determine the spirit, to be like the man who sings,  
 and yet be proud of the heritage,  
 our grandfathers leave us the path,  
 the song, the sacred song. (Molly Chisaakay, *The Elder's Drum*, 1990, pp. 27-18).

Meili (1991) spoke with Molly and gathered a sense of the powerful symbolism vested in the drum. Molly explained to Dianne Meili,

There's a spiritual meaning behind everything at the Tea Dance...The drum represents the circle of life. It's made of an animal skin and wood, the Creator's gifts to us, and you have to heat it up near fire for it to sound good. There's a real power behind it. The drum brings people together and awakens something. When you hear it and dance, it's a way of expressing yourself, rejoicing. You realize you have this powerful connection between yourself, the Creator, and everyone else (p. 6)....When you take the drum, you have to be in tune with what it stands for. You have to live what you say about living a good and humble way by accepting the teachings of the drum. My grandfather could have drank alcohol when everyone else was, but he couldn't go against the teachings of the drum (p. 4).

Had she not explained it to me, I never would have understood the wonderful symbolism in Sky Dancer Louise Halfe's poem, *Grandmother*.

According to Sky Dancer Louise, the bear is an incredibly powerful symbol in her

culture. "It has to do with the Self, with introspection...going inside of yourself like the bear goes into the cave for the winter...going into the Inner space. The bear is used a lot in healing ceremonies... parts of the bear. It is a healing symbol" (Sky Dancer, p. 4).

A shuffling brown bear  
snorting and puffing  
ambles up the stairs

In her den  
covered wall to wall  
herbs hang  
carrot roots, yarrow,  
camomile, rat-root,  
and cha cha moose e gun

To the centre of the room she waddles  
sits with one leg out and the other hugged close  
She bends over her medicines  
sniffs and tastes them  
as she sorts roots into piles

Satisfied  
she selects the chosen few  
grinds them in a small tire grater  
Small mounds of powder collect  
Her large paws take a patch  
of soft deer skin  
In it she mixes and wraps her poultice  
until hundreds of tiny bundle chains  
swing from the rafters

The brown, labouring bear  
Nohkom, the medicine woman  
alone in her attic den  
smoking slim cigarettes  
wears the perfume of sage and sweetgrasses  
and earth medicine ties

Nohkom, the bear hag  
healer of troubled spirits  
healer of ailing bodies  
queen of the sorcerers

She wears a red kerchief on her head  
 Long, blond-white braids hang below her breasts  
 She hums her medicine songs

She bends and her long skirt drapes  
 Over her aged beaded moccasins  
 she brushes her potions off her apron  
 straightens and surveys her medicine chest

Along day's work complete  
 the bear nohkom ambles down the stairs  
 sweeps her long skirt behind her  
 drapes her paws on the stair rails  
 leaves her dark den and its medicine powers  
 in silence (Sky Dancer louise Halfe, *Grandmother*, 1990, pp. 91-92).

Taken literally, this glimpse of the medicine woman, quietly going about the business of preparing her remedies, creates a powerful, healing image. Sky Dancer louise's portrait of Grandmother introduces us to a cultural figure whose role in the community is revered by First Nations people. She is a healer. Yet if we read this poem again, this time through the lens of the symbolism which Sky Dancer louise described, we see now the inner journey. She retreats into the inner sanctum, surrounded by the fixtures of roots and herbs: of intuition, self knowledge and inner wisdom. She sorts, measures and fixes the little bundles: thinking, considering, pondering and resolving in her mind. Wearing the red handkerchief on her head with braids below the breasts, she is retreating into her traditional cosmos, into the world where two legged creatures have a place among the other creatures. Sifting and sorting through the recesses of her mind and soul and finding resolutions. When this task is done, she returns to the light of day, leaving the inner world behind, but bringing with her the learning.

Have I read too much into this poem? Am I trying too hard to find

symbolism? I don't really know. I do know that I could check back with Sky Dancer Louise one more time to determine if I have or not. But I won't. Sky Dancer Louise would like her poetry to serve as a catalyst for thought and reflection. She believes that each reader should interpret the poem in his or her own way, gathering what he or she will (p.4 line 13-17). So, in this case, I have done that. This image of the inner journey of thought and reflection is the image which pleases me most. It feels so very much like retreating into my piles of poems for an eleven hour day, having a page and a half of writing to show for it at the end of that day but loving every word as I turn out the light behind me.

#### **Healing and Courage through Spirituality**

For some, spirituality is a source of strength and courage. Returning to the traditional activities and beliefs provides guidance and strength.

#### **Healing through Sacred Activities**

Rituals and ceremonies are the backbone of First Nations Spiritual life and Sacred tradition (Mandelbaum, 1972; Meili, 1991; Tooker, 1979). When First Nations women write, they inform us of the power of these ceremonies. Through these ceremonies, people are united and healed. They are reconnected to the Spiritual guidance they seek and they commune with their ancestors.

Rituals and ceremonies are the vehicles through which a value system is brought to life, stirring the senses of the people and breathing life into traditional beliefs. The sweatlodge or sweat bath is a ceremonial ritual variously practised among many, many First Nations groups across North America (Hammerschlag,

1988; Mandelbaum, 1972; Meili, 1991; Tooker, 1979). For Mary BlueSky Morin (1989), this prayer ceremony is very much a sensory experience also. Her recounting of this sacred ritual of the Woman's Sweatlodge goes beyond explanation of the purpose or power of the ceremony. By recreating the sensory experience of the sweat lodge, Morin empowers the reader to vicariously participate.

..The smoke is rubbed  
over our bodies.  
Then the cedar is sprinkled.  
We breath deeply.  
She holds the Water pail  
dips the sage branches  
and moistens the stones.  
The steam hisses and rises  
and the Prayers begin (Mary BlueSky Morin, *The Woman's  
Sweatlodge*, 1989, pp. 27-28).

Strength, healing, reconnection. The sweat lodge is a sacred place from which First Nations women take back their health, strength and power. Through this Spiritual activity, women are reclaiming their health, strength and rightful place in the community.

Prayers for others,  
for strength, for healing,  
for a vision, and in gratitude.  
The Rounds are long  
the heat increases  
but the women are strong.  
After the fourth Round  
of Prayer  
the door is opened  
I crawl out (Mary BlueSky Morin, *The Woman's Sweatlodge*, 1989, pp.  
27-28).

Only those who embrace the spiritual beliefs endure the heat and receive the

healing powers. From this sacred ritual, the Poet receives strength, her reconnection to her culture and Mother Earth.

The others are standing  
about...  
Still Others had left  
the lodge earlier  
because they could not  
accept the belief.  
I lay on Mother Earth's breast  
feeling her coolness  
regaining strength  
thankful that my  
spiritual beliefs  
have brought me this far (Mary BlueSky Morin, *The Woman's  
Sweatlodge*, 1989, pp. 27-28).

#### Courage and Strength through Spirituality

Marie is one of the women who collaborated with me in this project.

From our long talks, I came to know that she has faced a number of very difficult situations in her life. She has had to muster up her strength over and again. In her unpublished poetry, Marie speaks of finding that strength and courage to cope. She finds it through her spirituality.

Marie's poem is exceptionally interesting. She shared with me her story of falling critically ill with cancer. Lapsing into unconsciousness, Marie had what she described as and referred to as a 'near death experience'. Marie told me that she saw in detail and color, the hospital room and the people tending to her. She saw herself moving down a long white-light tunnel, at the end of which stood an Indian Elder with long white hair. He told her, "Go back. You still have something very important to do". He gave her encouragement and instructions. This poem is her retelling of this experience and the spiritual presence who paid

her a visit in those moments. What is so fascinating about this story is that Marie has been legally blind since birth yet she saw this near death experience with utter clarity. To this day, Marie has full memory for the visual details of this experience. "It was a very beautiful gift that enriched my life", she explained.

I felt your hand upon my head, as I unconscious lay,  
 You'd pull the covers over me, through my illness beside me you stayed.  
 Like a proud and mighty warrior, at the foot of my bed you stood,  
 I thank you, oh kind and gentle one, to me you were so good.  
 You taught me the true values of our beautiful Indian ways.  
 You have given me strength and courage to face each and every day.  
 I thank you once again my friend, for showing me the way,  
 To achieve the best that life can give, throughout each and every day,  
 Some day I hope the time will come that we walk hand in hand,  
 So thank you once again my friend, as I feel such inner peace.  
 I feel that you are close to me; may this friendship forever be (Marie Joki, *To my Beautiful Indian Chief*, unpublished, undated).

In another poem, *To You, oh Little Spirit*, Marie urges herself onward, knowing full well that there lies more adversity in the path ahead. She holds up for herself the promise of joining her ancestors, her people. To be rejoined with her people gives her comfort, courage and connectedness. It is this promise that gives her the strength and courage to continue in her battles.

Be brave, oh little Spirit,  
     for you will face much fear,

Be strong, oh little Spirit,  
     for in strength you will find courage,

Be courageous, oh little Spirit,  
     for you will have much to endure,

Be honest, oh little Spirit,  
     for in honesty you will find trust,

Be forgiving, oh little Spirit,  
     for in forgiving you will truly find inner peace.

Live in these good qualities, oh little Spirit,  
 and one day like an eagle you will fly to your home  
 to join your ancestors. You will have accomplished your mission  
 (Marie Joki, *To You, oh Little Spirit*, unpublished, undated).

### Reconnecting through our Ancestors

*An elder is someone who understands that the world belongs to the dead. The dead made this world. We didn't make it. They made the poetry and the songs and the customs. The ancestors are very much invested in the children, because the children are the ones who are going to continue the world that the ancestors made (Robert Bly, Utne Reader, 1996).*

I had an interesting visit with Dave Desjardain, a fellow who works with First Nations people who are facing death (field note, May 28, 1996). He has read many a poem written by men who, through their writing, are grappling with death. Dave suspected that women are writing about death, too, but maybe metaphorically. At the time of our talk, I had not really encountered such a poem. Later I did.

Judy Bear's poem, *The Journey's Beginning* (1995), is fascinating to me because it feels as though she is finding her connections through anticipation of death. Yet in anticipating death, Judy anticipates life: eternal life through a journey which will bring her back to her ancestors, back to a place of belonging. In this poem, she speaks of reconnecting to her culture and her people through all of the paths previously discussed: through sacred activity, through symbolism, through her spirituality.

In my passing  
 to the journey of my ancestors,  
 those who went before me,  
 respect the request  
 to bury me in moccasined feet  
 pointing to the east,



my head pointing to the west  
 so that I may see the sun rise  
 but never see it set  
 as life continues above me

I have knowledge not  
 of how I fare on Mother Earth  
 my life is but a whisper  
 blown by the winds  
 to be carried over to a stone  
 but the journey I make  
 will show me and teach me  
 that which I've yet to learn.  
 The longer I fail to love  
 the longer my journey will be (Judy Bear, *The Journey's Beginning*,  
 1995, pp. 49-50).

She wants to continue in her healing and emotional growth so that she is better  
 prepared for her journey.

We must all leave this earth  
 and I accept the fate chosen for me  
 In my passing take care...  
 Let not blood flow from my veins  
 I must be as I was in life  
 Take nothing from me.  
 Dress me in traditional garb  
 Cover my feet with hide  
 Wrap me in my people's blanket  
 Place me in a simple box of wood (Judy Bear, *The Journey's Beginning*,  
 1995, pp. 49-50).

She is anxious that the sacred traditions and rites associated with death be  
 carefully observed and that she be protected from the desecration of her body.

What's best for me  
 is that which I ask  
 Should my journey start before yours  
 my friend, ask them to sing,  
 to send me on my way.  
 Let the drum beat as my heart beats  
 to the rhythm of life

Say a prayer to the Great Spirit  
to have pity on me  
Never forget that we will meet again (Judy Bear, *The Journey's Beginning*, 1995, pp. 49-50).

So, is this poem about life or is it about death? It is both. In my understanding of the First Nations world view, life and death are not polar opposites but, rather, related places in the same circle. Judy speaks not of leaving her loved ones behind but of meeting them again. Through her spirituality, Ms. Bear anticipates connection and an eternal sense of belonging following her death.

#### Reconnecting to Our Mothers

Mother poems: I think that if I were ever to return to poetry in search of insights into women's worlds, I would look at nothing but Mother poems. These, above all others, spoke to me. I certainly am not the only woman to recognize how utterly and relentlessly driven we are to seek resolution and closeness in our relationships with our mothers. I only *thought* I was - until I read these poems.

When First Nations women write, they tell us of that search for the original bond: that first and most fundamental of all bonds; that of the Mother. They speak of that tireless struggle to make peace with their mothers. They tell of their endless yearnings to be near and reunited, reconnected with their mothers. For each, the experience is so entirely her own.

#### Forgiveness

For some, there has been tremendous loss, hurt or grief yet, there remains this bond to Mother. In writing about, or perhaps to her mother, Joanne Wood is candid about the hurt and pain in their relationship. Clearly alcohol had

taken its toll in their lives, separating them spiritually, emotionally and physically. Yet in her mother's death, Joanne seems to find a way to embrace her mother, through forgiveness and acceptance. In her writing, Joanne tells us of this bond, held together by love and forgiveness,

YESTERDAY DOES NOT MATTER  
 I UNDERSTAND WHAT YOU WENT THROUGH ALL THOSE YEARS  
 THE LOST THE ANGER AND THE PAIN  
 YOU RAN TO ESCAPE THE BAD MEMORIES  
 YOU DRANK TO FORGET AND TO SEEK COMFORT  
 YOU LIVED ALONE BECAUSE YOU WERE AFRAID  
 YOU STAYED BECAUSE YOU WERE ASHAMED  
 YOU RAISED ME THE BEST WAY YOU CAN  
 YOU LOVED ME IN YOUR OWN WAY  
 YOU CALLED WHEN I NEEDED TO HEAR YOUR VOICE  
 YOU GAVE ME ALL THAT YOU HAD  
 AND ALL YOU ASKED IN RETURN  
 WAS MY LOVE AND FORGIVENESS  
 I LOVE YOU MOM  
 AND I HAVE FORGIVEN YOU A LONG TIME AGO  
 I WILL MISS YOUR SMILE  
 YOUR LAUGHTER  
 AND THE WAY YOU EXPRESSED YOURSELF  
 I PRAY THAT YOU HAVE AT LAST FOUND PEACE AND HAPPINESS  
 MAY THE CREATOR RELEASE YOUR PAIN AND EMBRACE YOUR  
 SOUL (Joanne Wood, *FORGIVENESS*, unpublished).

Joanne told me that she wrote this poem upon arriving in Vancouver to make arrangements for her mother's final remains. She made her peace with her mother.

...the past 26 years of her life she lived in Vancouver and she lived like a street person. Her and I connected I think about '91 or '92... so from the time I left home at 11 years old... that's a long time to be without my Mother. But even prior to that I used to be angry at her and I thought that mothers are supposed to watch over their children, protect them, nurture them, love them... I used to hate her for that ... that she wasn't there... and then when I saw her in '92 and the way she lived, I started to

understand what alcohol does to a person ... and where she's at with her own feelings and how affected she was by the death of our Grandmother. And she carried that with her all those years... she was really close to her. And we got to know each other. I was able to love her and bond with her. She was able to love me and hold me... I think each time I went to visit her I used to love going down to Vancouver and live like her...see the world through her eyes... and the people on the streets. I think that's where I came to understand where these people are coming from. During that time just before she passed away, I knew I forgave her. And I was able to tell her 'I love you'. And I was able to give her some of my energy and how I felt and she ... it was hard for her to express her feelings... but I showed her forgiveness and said that I loved her (Joanne, pp. 9-10).

I described to SkyBlue Mary Morin what I have seen in these poems regarding the 'mother struggles'. I asked her if she could relate to this. She certainly could. She told me the story of how it was the priest was fetched to give her last rights at the age of three. SkyBlue was dying. She was dying of malnutrition and neglect but somehow survived the critical time. I asked SkyBlue how she had come to resolve her anger toward her mother for this woeful neglect which brought her to the brink of death. She understands the complexities of family disruption and the impact it has on children,

Well I know when I had to.. when I looked at my mother's total neglect for me, I thought what was the cause of that. To me, she had an addiction to alcohol and she could have had an addiction for men. She could have had issues with her father, you know. So when I look at that, I see compassion for my mother. She was in a relationship where she was beat up for 7 years. She drank. I have a lot of compassion for her,

having to go through that experience. And it gives me understanding too, that, you know, perhaps she couldn't provide that love, the addiction was in the way, the violence was in the way, the fear from the violence was in the way. She was coping the best way she knew how and it's like, and it wasn't just her. It was probably family. I think most of her sisters were battered women. And I even went back as far in my family history to learn that my Grandmother was a battered woman and that my Grandfather was an alcoholic. He beat his horses, you know. I mean, there's a lot of history of violence there, going through generations, mostly caused by alcohol. I call alcohol 'fire water', cause that's what it is. It's just something that burns inside and burns up families, burns up community and it just spreads. So when I look at my family history and I look at my mother's addictions and what she's had to go through, I love her, you know. I love her, I'm grateful I don't have those experiences. I have had to make those choices. I have a lot of love for... what she had to go through (SkyBlue, p. 17).

I pressed her for more. How had she arrived at this place of forgiveness, I wanted to know.

In the 70's, I was asked to write a poem of forgiveness for my mother from one of the nuns I went to school with...I think I was in grade 11 or 12, and ... grade 11, we had to write our story, our family story? As part of English. And mine came out *angry*, cause I had nothing good to write about. And we had to get up in front of the class and read it and people were writing about castles, you know, beautiful things that they had, ivory towers or real nice family and stuff. And I refused to read mine. And I thought "I don't care if I flunk this grade" (laugh) but the sister came up to me after and she looked at my story and she says "It's okay, you don't have to read it" but she said "Well, you know, what do you think you need to do?" And I didn't know. She says.. I liked to write, I liked to write poetry and she said "Why don't you write a poem of forgiveness for

your mom". So I did (SkyBlue, pp. 17-18).

Corey is not so close to resolution. For Corey, the struggle to restore the Mother connection is painful even to read. Earlier in this text, I drew on Corey's words and explanations to develop an understanding of the devaluing experiences associated with abuse and family violence. Corey was hurting and she was angry with her mother who had not been available to her as a nurturer nor as a protector. Several months later, I met with Corey again. She had been working through some of these hurts and scars and had moved into a different place where she was exploring some new feelings toward her mother, long deceased. Corey, too, was looking to find a way to forgive her mother. In her poem, the memories of hurt and humiliation are still very much at the fore for her yet, she is moving toward reconciliation and forgiveness, recalling some of the more loving moments as well.

WHEN MY THOUGHTS COME AROUND  
AND BRING YOU FORTH, MOM,  
SOMETIMES ALL I REMEMBER  
IS THE BEATINGS, THE HARSH WORDS  
WATCHING YOU GET RAPED  
EXPLOITING ME IN FRONT OF YOUR FRIENDS  
WATCHING YOU DIE IN FRONT OF MY EYES.  
SEEING YOU WITH MEN  
OTHER TIMES ALL I CAN REMEMBER  
IS BEING HELD IN YOUR ARMS  
YOU TELLING ME YOU LOVE ME  
FEELING SO GREAT AND HYPED UP INSIDE  
THE STORIES OF YOUR CHILDHOOD  
OF YOUR PAST, OF DAD  
SPENDING TIME WITH ME (Corey Cardinal, 1996, untitled, unpublished).

Having unearthed this deeply buried memory of love and comfort, Corey begins to feel guilt and shame. She should have done more. She should have tried

harder. We watch Corey move through this mine field. First the hurt and anger, then love and forgiveness and finally stepping into that deadly terrain of guilt, self blame and despair:

AND OTHER TIMES I REMEMBER  
 WHAT I DIDN'T DO WITH YOU  
 PLAYING CARDS, HELPING AT HOME  
 LEAVING YOU BY YOURSELF,  
 NEVER TELLING YOU I LOVED YOU  
 NOT EXPLAINING WHY I SAID YOU DIED,  
 HEARING YOU CRY AND WALKING OUT ON YOU.  
 AND NOW HERE I AM.  
 VERY ALONE -  
 VERY LONELY -  
 IT'S LIKE I CAN'T GROW UP  
 I'M STUCK BEING THE CHILD YOU LEFT BEHIND.  
 I MISS YOU SO MUCH  
 IT HURTS INSIDE (Corey Cardinal, 1996, untitled, unpublished).

Finally, as Corey desperately reaches out to grasp the hand of the mother who is now gone, we cannot help but feel her utter despair. So urgent is her need to rejoin her mother that death seems welcome:

IT'S LIKE EXISTING  
 WAITING TO DIE TO BE WITH YOU.  
 I WANT SO MUCH TO HUG YOU  
 TO TELL YOU THAT I LOVE YOU.  
 TO SHOW YOU THAT I LOVE YOU.  
 I NEVER WANTED YOU TO DIE.  
 I'M REALLY SORRY FOR ALL I'VE DONE  
 FOR ALL I DIDN'T DO, FOR ALL I SAID  
 AND FOR WHAT I DIDN'T SAY  
 I'M WAITING TO BE WITH YOU (Corey Cardinal, 1996, untitled, unpublished).

In wanting so desperately to restore this mother-child relationship, Corey searches longingly for resolution and forgiveness and, in the end, directs the blame toward herself. If she can take responsibility for all that went wrong in

this painful relationship, then she can forgive her mother. It was not all her mother's fault, she justifies. It was her own. This is how Corey begins to set this dreadfully painful relationship right in her own mind.

Connected by Love

Emma LaRocque's (1990) bond with her mother is very different from the previous two. This bond was woven, from the very beginning, from the threads of love, kindness and stability. Yet, like Joanne and Corey, Emma searches for a way to reach out and touch her mother. For her, to have a still moment in which to recall her mother and relive precious moments which they had shared, is a sacred experience.

Under a hot summer sun  
By a sloping hill  
Misty, mauve blueberries  
made me stop  
To pick a few  
In Loving Memory  
of my mother,  
the fastest berry picker around  
so her children would eat.

"I will never forget"  
I said in Cree  
in Cree I know she hears.  
I ate the berries  
reverently  
and drank the wine of tears  
Under a hot summer sun (Emma LaRocque, *Communion*, 1990, p. 145).

How revealing our memories of our mothers truly are. Some of us remember our Mothers in their aprons, making cookies on the old bread board. Others of us close our eyes and see our mothers, fingers busy always with the knitting needles which appeared to be inextricably attached, as though a natural part of



the female body. For Emma, Mother is nestled among the berry bushes, quietly carrying out the work of providing for her children. She is at one with the natural gifts offered by the misty hills. The strength of this relationship binds Emma to her culture, her mother tongue and to Mother Earth. In communing with her mother, Emma is connected with Mother Earth. In speaking her mother tongue, Emma is ensuring that, not just this bond, but her sense of identity and belonging will never end.

#### On Loving our Children

When First Nations women write about their children, there is love and joy. Lena Aviugana (1995) describes the love she has for her daughter. Although she hints at pain and anger, she does not disclose whether it is her's or her daughter's; or whether it is in the past somewhere or perhaps anticipated in the future. What she does tell us, however, is of the love and the bond that she experiences with her Rose.

This beautiful single rose that was sent from above.  
                                     Was a gift given with love.  
 I held the gift with tenderness as I look at my beautiful rose.  
       With big brown eyes and out-stretched hands that clench  
                                     My finger tight.  
 With sunshine love and showered with care and tenderness  
                                     My rose starts to bloom.  
       The anger, pain, tears and hurt of years of growth.  
       Fade away as the smile on my rose blooms  
 I thank the Lord for my beautiful rose that was sent from  
                                     above.  
 As a precious gift of love (Aviugana, *My Rose*, 1995).

Never ending is the way in which Velma Cardinal (1995) describes the love she has for her son. So simple and so uncomplicated is this love of child.

Cuddly and joyful

Always wanting to play  
 Running around the house  
 Screaming when he's mad  
 Older he will get  
 Never ending his love (Velma Cardinal, *My Son*, 1995).

What we see in these poems is the universality of the human condition: the mother's love for her child, uncomplicated by any other factors or detractors.

### Reclaiming the Self

As I neared the final stages of my writing, I reflected back over the path I had travelled. Were things fitting together? Did they make sense? Was there a nice parallel between *What we have Lost* and *What we are Reclaiming*? Something was missing. What about Reclaiming the Self? Surely if the Poets have commenced to reclaim their spirituality and cultural identity, there must be those who speak of reclaiming themselves. Yes. I returned to the pages and pages of poems and found Shawna Panipekeesick. My first reading of her poem left me thinking that perhaps her sense of Self was a little tentative, still in its early beginnings. In the next readings, however, she felt more and more strong to me. She knows exactly what it is that makes for health and wholeness. Shawna is making an announcement, "I am the one who can best care for me!"

Who cares enough to accept me as I am,  
 Who does not condemn me for my shortcomings,  
 Who helps me to learn from my mistakes.

Who cares enough to accept me as an individual  
 with the right to learn and grow at my own pace  
 and in my own unique fashion.

Who will stand by to help when I need it,  
 but will release me from my own guilt,

and help me to find constructive ways to deal with reality.

Who will encourage me to explore the world about me,  
Who will open my eyes to beauty and my ears to music,  
Who will listen to my questions and help me find answers.

Who cares enough to help me achieve my full potential,  
and who has faith in my ability to develop into a worthwhile person.  
Could this someone be me? (Shawna Lynn Danielle Panipekeesick,  
*Wanted: Someone Who Cares*, 1990, p 231).

SkyBlue Mary Morin was able to describe for me how it was that she reclaimed herself from being lost.

I could have been lost, but I made the choice to go and find my culture and my teachings, to get my name cause that's where I find understanding, that's where I find strength. I went to church, but it didn't make sense to me. The punishment component of it, penance and all that kind of stuff. Then I found the Sweat Lodge and you get what you put into the Sweat Lodge. If you go in with a negative attitude, you come out with a negative attitude, you know. You're taught in there, you could be taught gently, you're taught gently, although it might be hot, but nobody's telling you that you have to sit in that place and say your rosary over and over again until it doesn't make sense to you anymore. In the Sweat Lodge you're kind of experiencing... to me it's gentler. It's gentler, it's kinder (SkyBlue, p. 23).

I wondered how it was that she was able to make this choice for herself when so many others were going astray. SkyBlue said,

I think for me, it was the impact of Chief Dan George's death. He died and I remember that part. He was a really recognized Elder, very spiritual person and now he's gone. I was still, I hadn't even begun my journey at that time. That was when I... plus the way I was living, I felt something lacking in my Spirit. My Spirit was not happy. My emotions

might have been okay, my mind might have been okay. I was taken care of, or I was materially okay, but my Spirit was lacking something and that's why I had to go searching. I was... although I had everything around me, I was unhappy. There was an emptiness and that was my Spirit. My Spirit was wanting something. So I'm on a journey. For me, how it started was going to Pow Wows. Pow Wows are celebrations. So I'd go to those and I'd watch and then I bought a shawl and dance along, you know. I didn't know what I was dancing, but I'd try. And I remember the first time, when my feet danced, finally dance to the beat of the drum... I quit at the same time as the drum, I knew I had it. In fact, it was just uplifting. I was smiling when I got off the ring, the dancing ring, because before that, when I'd be dancing, um, the drum sound would be over and my feet would still be going, or I'd finish and the drum was still going. Like I wasn't in tune with the drum. So the first time that I was in tune with the drum, I knew I had it, it was clicking in and from there I went for my Indian name. That's...you know everything sort of follows... and then I went to Sweats and then I got married and then the Pipe came to me and then the Sweat Lodge came to me. It's coming (SkyBlue, p. 23-24).

As we reflect now upon the words and visions of the women in this project, it becomes apparent that theirs is a dynamic system. They are in the process of change; they are in motion. We have followed them not only down the dark paths of loss, anger and despair but also up the steep slopes of healing, reclamation, and renewal.

## CHAPTER 6: DELIBERATIONS

### Introduction

As I came to an ending point with this research project, I reflected back upon several aspects of the inquiry. Firstly, I assessed whether or not my objective had been achieved in conveying to the reader, insight and understanding into the community of First Nations women. Had I answered the question, "How do they inform us of their realities"? Had I explored the contexts of their worlds? Secondly, I reflected upon the value of poetry as a primary data source. I reflected upon the value of poetry more generally and wondered how else this form of expression might be useful in the helping fields. I wondered what insights or contributions this project might offer with regard to future research. Finally, I asked myself, "What have I learned?"

### The Circle

Many of the ancient stories told by the Elders describe life as it should be, life as it ought to be when all creatures exist in harmony with one another and the universe. The Elders' lessons in living describe the harmony, balance and symbiosis which constitute an ideal existence for us all. They call it the Circle of Life. The Circle of Life tells us where each earthly phenomenon, each life form and each person *belongs* in the larger scheme of the universe.

The Circle of Life has been variously conceptualized and diagrammed by numerous writers and thinkers who strive to bring visual understanding to the interrelationships of living systems, the cardinal directions, the balance of the human experience, and the medicine wheel (Bopp, Bopp, Brown & Lane, 1985;

Dana, 1993; LaDue, 1994; Storm, 1972; Young, Ingram & Swartz, 1989). There are, of course, countless other ways of interpreting and conceptualizing this Circle of Life. That is the gift of the Poets and poems of this project. Their images and messages form the basis of yet another way to conceptualize the Circles of Life. The Poets of this project invite us to think about their search for belonging in the Circle. Their poems tell us that they are in search of belonging to their Land, to their People and to their Families. That is what they contribute.

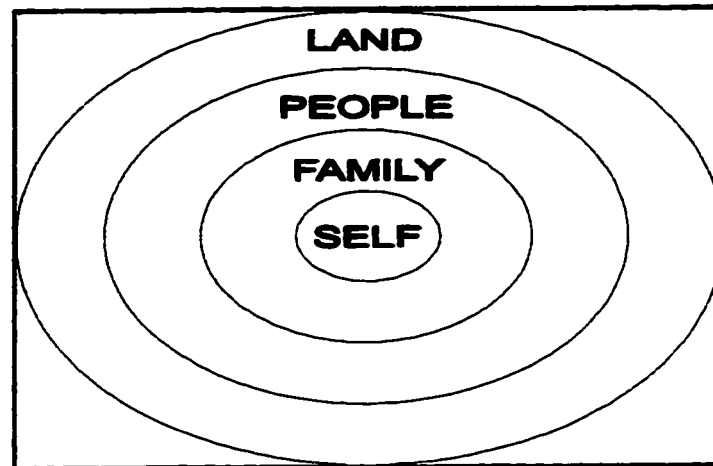
### The Circle and a Search for Belonging

When First Nations women write, they tell us of their sense of loss and disconnection from many aspects of their lives; disconnection from the Circle. They tell us also of their search for reconnection to the Circle of Life. When I reflect upon the themes which have emerged from this project, I envision them as three circles around the Self as shown in Figure 1.

Ideally, all is in harmony and balance when the Self is completely surrounded by the support of the Family which, in turn, is surrounded by and supported by the People (larger culture group or community) which is surrounded by and supported by the Land. This conceptualization of the Circle of Life parallels those stories and narratives of the Elders which describe what life is intended to be when all is in balance and harmony. When the individual person is surrounded and supported by her Family, her People and her Land, she is in balance and she belongs. She knows where she belongs and she knows how she belongs.

Figure 1

**Belonging: The Relationship of Self, Family, People and Land**



The health and vitality of the People as a unit depend upon the vitality of the Circle outside and the Circles within: the Land, the Family and the individuals. The strength of each Circle is related to the strength of all the others. As we see in a repeating pattern, each Circle is interrelated and dependent upon all the others.

**The Circle of Family**

What becomes of those who were disconnected from their families? Several Poets paint horrific pictures of their violation and exploitation in the residential schools where they had been disconnected and isolated from the normal protection and safety afforded by the family unit. They survived their childhood years without the support and care of their parental figures. When First Nations women write, they tell of the enormous grief associated with the loss of their mothers. They have psychologically lost their mothers to the

traumatizing effects of colonization and the ensuing alcoholism, neglect, family violence and grief. They have often physically lost their mothers through the separations of residential schooling or through the separations of family break down. The poems go beyond a chronicling of events, however, and deliver to us the force and meaning of the mother relationship to these women.

Others describe the pain and sense of abandonment which they experience in relationship to their male partners. They describe assault, humiliation and alienation. They have been disconnected from their partners and that sense of belonging in the relationship.

If we look at the place of the Family within the wider Circles, it is easy to see how the disruption of the structures of the People and the Land will have significant impact upon the family unit. When the traditional roles and functions of the family unit are disrupted and severed from the security of the People and the Land, it has ramifications for the health and well being of the individual person and for all, the Poets have said. They belong nowhere and to no one.

How well I remember a young Inuit girl who used to come and visit me; no more than fourteen years of age. Happily she announced over and again how she was trying to get pregnant and just could not await the day. To my discouragement and displeasure she replied, "My baby will really love me". She needed someone to love her and someone to whom she could belong. The baby would be her family.

Several of the Poets in this project speak of the strength and the rebuilding of family connections. How are they doing this? There are those who



write about their journeys of forgiveness for their mothers. They are learning to appreciate the impact that cultural disruption has had upon their own mothers and in so doing, they forgive. They reconnect. Others are rejoicing in the love of their own children. They write poetry to say nothing more than how much they love their children. They are connected. Others revel in the love and passion of their partners. Those who are connected to the Family have a sense of belonging which is that most crucial foundation upon which one can build a sense of Self.

### The Circle of the People

What becomes of the People, the cultural identity, when the members have been separated from the Land? What becomes of the cultural group when the family unit is in disarray? Who will pass on the cultural knowledge and tradition when the family is no longer intact and the Elders' role among the People is diminished?

For those who have been separated from a sense of belonging among their People, there is alienation, anger and despair. The Poets have described this alienation, disconnection and the resulting loss of their sense of belonging.

When First Nations women write, however, they also speak a strong and forceful message about reclaiming their cultural identities and returning to being at one with their People. They are seeking their People. How are they doing this? They are returning to their People through returning to their Sacred traditions, their ceremonial activities and rituals. Some write about reconnecting through the power of their cultural symbols. Others seek reconnection through

the ancestors. They are making themselves healthy as individuals, reclaiming their bodies, spirits and lineage, and, in so doing, reclaiming who they are as People and who they are in relationship with their People. They rediscover who they are as individuals in relationship to their Families, their People and the Land from whence they came. The Circles are all connected.

### **The Circle of the Land**

What happens to the individual who no longer feels her connection with the Land or, perhaps worse, that the Land is being taken from her People? The Poets have described for us their anger and despair with regard to the degradation of their Lands and the erosion of their rights to these Lands.

No doubt, reclaiming the Circle of the Land is more difficult and complicated than reconnecting to the Circles of the Family and the People. The geo-politics of the majority culture group offer considerable opposition and resistance to First Nations people reclaiming the immense tracts of Land upon which they once moved about freely. Currently, the political will of the dominant culture in relation to Land rights and ownership is far more visible than it is in relation to indigenous cultural practises and family structure.

But as we reflect upon the poetry of First Nations women, we see that they are finding new ways to reconnect with and be in relationship with their Lands. They are asserting their rights to the Land through their writings, their poetry. Some are seeking political power through the written word. Others are reaffirming their connections through spiritual activity and ritual. SkyBlue Morin explained how she connects to the Land by touching the Spirit of the Land

through sacred activity. By restoring spiritual beliefs and practices, they are reasserting their relationship with the Land as the Mother of all. They are rediscovering a sense of belonging to Mother Earth as one of her children.

### **The Circle of the Self**

For those who do not find a way of belonging within the Family, among the People or upon the Land, there is isolation and despair. They are the ones who experience the Self as disconnected from all of the outer Circles which are intended to support Life and meaning. Some of the Poets express their disconnection through self loathing and blame. Others are resigned to despair and the loss of control over their own lives. There are those who are disconnected from their own bodies, experiencing their physical presence as shameful, contemptible or simply numb.

For those who are reconnecting to themselves and embracing their own bodies, there seems to be a reconnecting to the outer Circles. Some Poets describe a journey of reconnecting to the sacred traditions and rituals of their culture, their People. Through the support and spiritual comfort of the ancient ceremonies and customs of their culture, these women are supported in reclaiming themselves, who they are and where they belong in the scheme of the universe.

### **Creating New Circles**

The Poets have described for us a number of different ways in which they are seeking reconnection and their sense of belonging. They are forming new Circles.

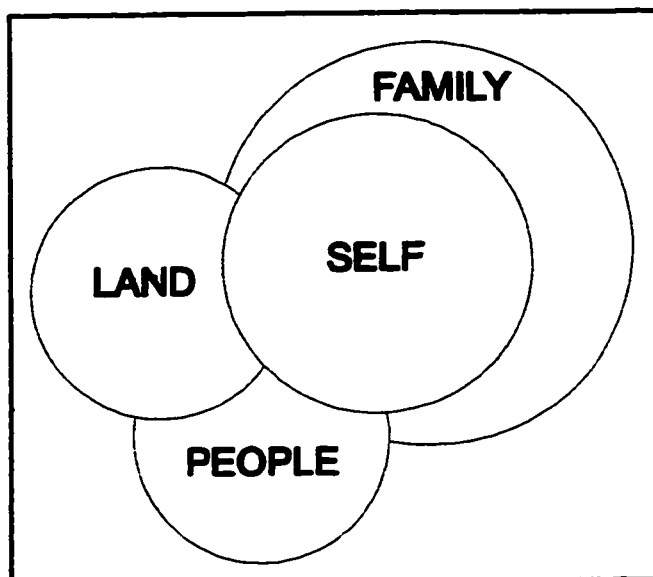
### Reclaiming the Land

Some are writing of their struggle for reclamation and reconnection to the Land. Their's is a struggle to reclaim that which belongs to their People and provides a sense of belonging. To be connected with the Land is to be connected with all else that is sacred, meaningful and this creates a sense of belonging for all of their People. For some of the Poets, their Circles of Self are highly associated with the Land and it is often through their efforts that the political rights of the People are asserted and heard by the dominant culture.

Figure 2 represents the connections of these women to the Land.

Figure 2

### Seeking Reconnection to the Land



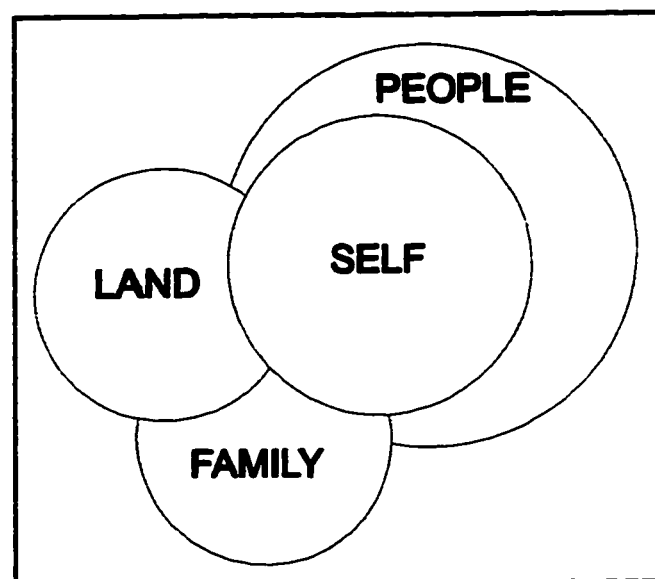
### Reconnecting with My People

Several of the Poets write about exploring their cultural identity, reclaiming

their own People. They write about their ancestors and their spiritual activities. Their sense of belonging and Self are highly invested in reconnected with their People, the cultural activity, knowledge and history associated with the People. Their Circles ally with a reconnection to the People as shown in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**

**Seeking Reconnection to My People**



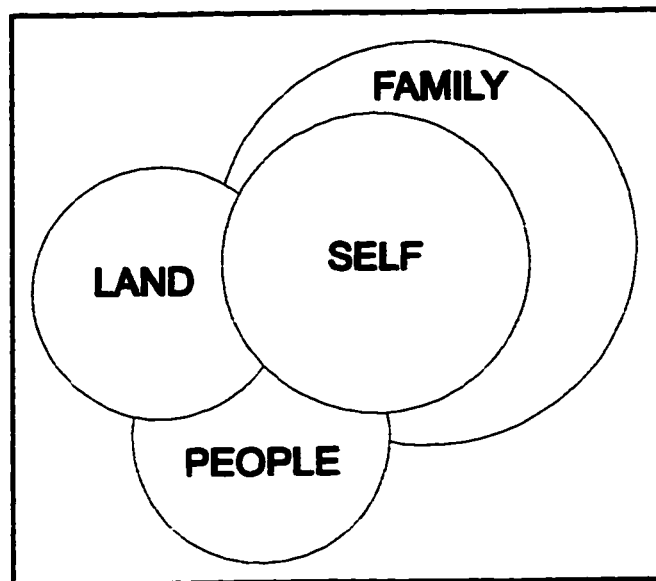
**Belonging to Family**

Several of the Poets write about their struggles to reconnect with Family and, in particular, with their mothers. As has already been discussed, this mother relationship seems crucial to the overall wellness of the individual. Struggling to resolve the mother relationship is, for some, central to reconnecting to the Circle of Self. Their Circles of Self very much overlap with those of the Family, this being what is needed in order to find a sense of belonging. Putting

energy into the Family relationships is represented in Figure 4.

Figure 4

Belonging to Family



**Reflections on the Power of Poetry**

*The material of poetry is human experience but it is human experience apprehended and re-created in a special way. It does not analyze life, or reason about life or merely describe life: it beckons us touch and taste and hear and see the world, and shrink from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories and sensations of the body (Elizabeth Drew p. 41).*

The Value of Poetry in Research

It is undeniable that poetry is a most powerful and profound medium of human expression. But is it an effective medium of inquiry? The psychological content found in this research project does, indeed, go beyond that which is ordinarily forthcoming in conventional, scientific inquiry. For example, the

images created by 'sasha slicing the flesh from her thighs' (Alice Lee, 1990) accesses for the reader an emotional response which approaches a bodily response. Many of the poetic images are startlingly vivid, forcing the reader to be a part of the inherent psychological response and emotionality of their writers.

Researchers investigating psychological phenomenon might do well to consider poetry as a vehicle of inquiry. It comes to my mind, for instance, that there might be tremendous insights to be found in the lyrics of adolescent, sub-culture groups or poems written by the terminally ill or recent immigrants. Might not their poems enrich our understandings of their realities as well?

### The Power of Poetry in Health and Healing

In consideration of the impact that reading this poetry had upon me, I can only wonder as to the power of its creation upon the writer. Writing poetry is an invaluable means of self expression, permitting the writer a voice for her most private life. Yet, in addition to finding voice, there is also the element of being heard. The two are not one and the same. I affirmed this for myself in reading the introduction to the poems from the (Inuvik) NWT Training Centre (1993) and their simple yet earnest desire to reach the reader, "Poems come from the heart not the mind...We hope that you too can experience the emotions that we felt when writing them" (no page number).

Writing poetry can be a therapeutic activity, providing a growth producing, healing or empowering experience to the writer. Facilitating this experience for clients, patients or students is a task limited only by the imagination. Lyman and Edward's (1989) poetry program for elderly Navajo people and the Inuvik

Training Centre's poetry writing program are but two examples.

SkyBlue Morin told me she is interested in collecting an anthology of poems from First Nations women in prison. I imagine this project taken one step further. Why not produce a video in which the women read their own poems and share with the viewer their thoughts and meanings in writing these poems? Discussions could be structured so as to deal with a number of issues which are germane to women in prison. I could foresee that a video of this nature might be of great value to other women in prison or to people working with women in these institutions.

#### **Future Research Possibilities**

##### **The Mother Relationship**

Given the relative wealth and depth of writings pertaining to the mother relationship, it would appear that First Nations woman are expressing a great deal of interest in and concern for this relationship. Scholarly literature offers very little with regard to how this relationship is currently, rather than traditionally, perceived by First Nations women. Perhaps, since the mother role is traditionally highly revered and honoured, it may be beyond reproach in daily discussions. Exploring the mother relationship through research would not only provide insight but, perhaps, valuable information with regard to therapeutic intervention at both the mainstream therapy and tribal levels.

##### **Comparative Analyses**

In reading various collected works of First Nations poetry, I stopped also to read the verses written by men. Informally, I was often struck by the parallels



which these poems seemed to have in relation to the women's. In fact, I was quite touched by the compassion in Richard van Camp's (Maki, 1995) poem which describes a young boy's accidental witnessing of the sexual abuse of little girls. He understood. An inquiry designed to make between-gender comparisons of issues expressed through poetry might be highly informative and interesting. A project of this nature could have the potential to make an important contribution toward fostering understanding and acceptance between the genders.

Similarly, it might be valuable to undertake a cross-cultural comparative analysis of poems. What might we learn by analyzing and comparing the thematic findings of poems from North American First Nations people versus those of South America or those of the Aboriginal people of Australia?

### Serendipity

Stumbling upon Marie Joki's near death experience was like digging up gold when mining for diamonds. Although a discussion of near death experience is beyond the scope of this project, the fact that a blind person reported having clear vision during this experience is certainly significant. This sighted experience in a sightless person is a phenomenon which certainly warrants further investigation.

### My Learning

The fruits of this project have enormously enriched my understanding and insights into this community of people. In reflecting upon how my thoughts and understandings have evolved and matured through this process, however, there

are several insights which stand out from the others.

Firstly, the poems and Poets of this project have facilitated my understanding that the historical events of colonization and missionization are not entirely events of the past. For many people, the impact of this history is felt in their lives today and every day. I have come to more fully appreciate that the sense of being culturally overwhelmed and threatened is a persistent and daily issue for many people. Being more sensitive to this reality is of great importance to me.

Secondly, the poems and Poets of this project have raised my awareness of those ways in which they are returning to their traditional cultural teachings for health and recovery. -Robin Melting Tallow (1990) said, "The written word has given us our voice, and we have begun the healing process. We are writing the circle" (p. 294).

Finally, and most important for me, I have had great cause to reflect upon my own perceptions and experience of spirituality and belonging. Where is Home for me? How will I know when I am there? What about my People and who are they? I feel as though I have only begun to think about my place in the bigger scheme. I know now that to be connected and to belong is sacred.

When First Nations women write, they teach us about that need to belong to a Place, a People and a Family. " 'All My Relations,' [is] an ancient invocation and recognition of the fact that everything that has ever come and gone or will ever be is all around us and affects us profoundly" (Maki, 1995, p. 2).

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## APPENDIX A: CONSENT (POEMS)

1) I, (name) \_\_\_\_\_, consent to participate in a study concerning the experiences and realities of First Nations women. I give permission for my poem(s) to be used in this project and for these poems to be reproduced in the final research document. I understand that I am free to choose to participate or not without any penalty. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time.

2) I give permission for my name and identity to be handled as marked below. (Please check ONE choice only):

\_\_\_\_\_ a) My name and identity must not appear anywhere in this project.

OR

\_\_\_\_\_ b) My name may appear in a list at the end of the document but must not be associated with my poem. My poem itself must remain anonymous.

OR

\_\_\_\_\_ c) My name must be used wherever my poem is directly quoted so that I may have credit for being the writer. My name may also be used in a list at the end of the research document.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



**APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM (INTERVIEWS)**

1) I, (name)\_\_\_\_\_, consent to participate in a study concerning the experiences and realities of Native women. I give permission to be interviewed by Nina Wyrstok regarding the poems I have written and their meaning to me. I understand that the interview will be tape recorded. I understand that I am free to choose to participate or not without any penalty.

2) I give permission for my name and identity to be handled as marked below. (Please check ONE choice only):

\_\_\_\_\_ a) My name and identity must not appear anywhere in this project.

OR

\_\_\_\_\_ b) My name may appear in a list at the end of the document but must not be associated with my poem. My poem itself must remain anonymous.

OR

\_\_\_\_\_ c) My name must be used wherever my poem is directly quoted so that I may have credit for being the writer. My name may also be used in a list at the end of the research document.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C: THE POETS AND POEMS

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