

Ontological Security, Movement, and Well-being: Teet'it Gwich'in Experiences of Life Transformations

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
University of Alberta

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Abstract

Based on ethnographic field research in a northern Aboriginal community, this thesis explores Teet'it Gwich'in experiences of personal transformations from suffering to well-being. Literature on Aboriginal health largely approaches social suffering as trans-generational trauma, and strength in terms of resiliency. The process of how individuals within their communities overcome the effects of adversity and restore a sense of well-being, however, is not well understood. This thesis represents a critical exploration of the concept of ontological security, which denotes a sense of existential integrity that allows people to act in the face of adversity.

The material presented here was collected during my twelve-months stay in the community of Teet'it Zeh, or Fort McPherson, in the Northwest Territories. As my primary methodological approach, I followed local Gwich'in pedagogy in conjunction with phenomenology, focusing on learning through experience and collaborative research. Specifically, this approach included staying with, working alongside, walking with, volunteering, travelling, sitting, and visiting with community members, as well as conducting open-ended life story interviews, semi-structured interviews, and recording video clips.

Guided by the theoretical question of what constitutes ontological security in Teet'it Gwich'in narratives and practices, I trace how people speak about experiences of strength and a sense of control in the face of adversity over time. First, stories from "long ago" tell about Gwich'in heroes who become leaders after surviving life-threatening situations by using embodied knowledge of moving and working on the land for their own and the group's benefit. Second, stories of the "old days" explore the meanings of strength in Teet'it Gwich'in memories of travelling and working on the land from their parents' lives and their own youth. I follow with a discussion of how political-economic processes in the colonial context threatened aspects of Gwich'in ontology through policies affecting education, housing, local economy, and governance. I argue that the colonization of bodily movement, skill, perceptions, and relatedness limits the experience of existential mobility, which in turn challenges ontological security.

The focal point of this thesis is the question of how people transform such experience of existential threat into lives well lived. Central to this discussion is the story of life transformation of Elizabeth Colin and her subsequent work at the Peel River Alcohol Centre, a community-based volunteer-run alcohol-counseling program. Ms. Colin and other Elders' narratives of past experiences, as well as their lived healing practices, directed my attention to movement and mobility as characteristic of experiences of renewal and ontological security. Finally, two aspects emerged as contemporary reflections of positive life transformations in the community: volunteering and working on the land. The importance of contemporary volunteerism is rooted not only in a strategic discourse that safeguards local practices against state intervention and bureaucracy, but it also offers people a space to engage in movement and purposeful work and to restore a sense of ontological security within their community. While personal engagement with the land is varied, common to many people's experience is an increased sense of agency and well-being while working and travelling on the land.

As kinesthetic experiences are foundational for the formation of a sense of a continuous and competent self within a field of relations, I argue that bodily practices such as walking, volunteering, travelling, and working are pivotal to inducing a shift in experience from existential threat to ontological security and are characteristic of personal experiences of renewal and healing.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Thea Luig. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name “Change, Health, and Policy in Northern Aboriginal Communities”, No. Pro00014474, 04/13/2011.

This work is largely based on interviews and life story recordings with people of Fort McPherson. These narratives have undergone a necessary transformation process from the original speech event to what is printed in this thesis. First, as is common with audio recordings, a small percentage of words became unintelligible when played back through the recording device. These passages have been marked in the verbatim transcripts; however, since they may render the meaning of the context uncertain, these sentences have been excluded. Second, I transcribed all recordings verbatim, including characteristics of speech delivery such as inflection, tone, accent, emphasis, volume, speed, pauses, and vocal noises. These original transcripts will be stored at the archive of the Gwich’in Social and Cultural Institute in Yellowknife as long as the interviewees gave their consent to release the transcript. Upon consulting with the interviewees during a follow-up visit, many expressed their wish to not only omit pauses and vocal noises in the transcripts, but also to edit sentence structure and grammar to conform to standard English. I have done so to the best of my ability with minimal editing and without changing words or meanings of the sentences. To improve readability, I have omitted all transcription symbols that were not pertinent to my analysis.

Markers of speech delivery that are present in the following thesis include *italics* signifying emphasis of words or phrases through accent, increase in volume, or change in tone; brackets [...] to mark passages that I excluded to achieve a balance between preserving the original flow of the narrative and keeping quotes concise; clarifying information in brackets; vocal noises in brackets, such as [laughs], to reflect the mood with which the speaker narrated a certain passage; and hyphens to signify noticeable pauses.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the result of the contributions of numerous people to whom I would like to express my deeply felt gratitude. Most importantly, I would like to thank and sincerely acknowledge the people of Teet'it Zheh who have been amazing teachers, each person in their own way. I came to the community with the desire to understand something about how people live good lives and overcome hardship. It is not me, but them, who are the experts on this topic. I am grateful for all that people shared with me and taught me along the way. Encountering people, travelling with them, listening to their life stories, and witnessing community life have left deep impressions on me, changed me in many ways, and left me with great respect for Teet'it Gwich'in.

First, I would like to acknowledge the late Elizabeth Colin (1936-2014). I am honoured to have known her a little, and I am deeply grateful for the time she spent with me, her teachings, her smile and humour, her understanding, and guidance. She taught me much more than what is reflected in this dissertation, and her memory will be with me always. She combined strength and wisdom with such kindness and compassion, which had a great impact on many peoples' lives, including mine. I am equally grateful to Dorothy Alexie, who taught me not only how to sew mittens, to pound meat, the difference between the right and wrong snow for water, to clean a caribou skin, and many other skills that I mastered more or less badly but also gave me most valuable lessons for life. This thesis owes much to these remarkably strong, highly skilled, and very humble women.

A very special Mahsi Cho goes to Gladys Alexie as well as her sisters Victoria Villebrun and Dawn Alexie. I am forever thankful for their kindness, hospitality, knowledge, humor, for the many trips up the hills, and support throughout. There are many Elders whom I would like to thank and acknowledge for their teachings and guidance, their time, stories, humour, and for their patience with me through my mistakes and shortcomings: Mary Effie and Charlie Snowshoe, Jane Charlie, Ida Stewart, Laura Firth, Mary Teya, Bertha Francis, Hannah Alexie, Abe Stewart Jr., Abe Stewart Sr., Elizabeth Mitchell, Doris Itsi, Robert Alexie Sr., Joanne Snowshoe, Walter Alexie, and others.

A special thank you to Liz Wright for her tireless work coaching children for the Arctic Winter Games, and for including me in many of her activities; to Georgina Vaneltsi-Neyando for her contagiously positive way of looking at life and for sharing her experiences with me; and to Spencer Trennert for sharing his insights and friendship. Mahsi cho to the staff of the Band Office, especially Chief W. Koe, G. Neyando, S. Blake, and J. Kay; to the T'loondih Healing Society, especially to Mary Ross; to William George Firth at the Language Centre; the staff at the Wellness Centre; staff at the Hamlet offices and former Mayor Hazel Nerysoo; the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute, especially to Ingrid

Kritsch for her valuable comments and edits; and the Aurora Research Institute. Mahsi cho to research assistants Alexandra Neyando, Charlene Alexie, and Deborah Peterson as well as to translator Eleanor Mitchell-Firth. My thanks goes to many others who have shared their time, experiences, insights, and friendship - all the small and big gestures of kindness are very much appreciated and not forgotten. Although I cannot list each and everyone, I am thankful and filled with respect for all whom I have met and spent time with. I am sincerely grateful for and deeply changed through having experienced Gwich'in land, the mountains, the Peel River, the long darkness, and the crisp cold, the fragile wealth of the land, and the many facets of community life together with people from Fort McPherson who will always occupy a special place in my heart.

Within the Department of Anthropology I am indebted to Dr. Christopher Fletcher, my supervisor before his move to Université Laval and co-supervisor after that. He has inspired me to read phenomenologists and challenged my thinking with his helpful, critical questions. I am also extremely thankful to my supervisor Dr. Mark Nuttall. He has been tremendously supportive in every way, and I have benefitted much from his advice and insights. Many thanks also to Dr. Andie Palmer, Dr. Brenda Parlee, and Dr. Sangita Sharma, as well as for the work of the Chair of the defense, Dr. Ruth Gruhn. I am honoured and grateful for the detailed comments and questions given by my external examiner Dr. Jean-Guy Goulet. A special thank you to the most amazing graduate student adviser Gail Mathew.

Thank you also to all friends and fellow graduate students for their company in this journey; most importantly, Jodie Asselin and Hillary Sparkes for their great help in preparing me for the defense process. I would like to acknowledge and express my heartfelt gratitude to Bonnie Yule and Alan Sparkes for their help with editing.

This research was made possible through the generous support of the University of Alberta, the Canadian Circumpolar Institute, and the Network for Aboriginal Health Research. I would also like to acknowledge the Department of Anthropology, the Faculty of Arts, and the Graduate Student Association for providing funding for professional development.

Last but not least, I am thankful for my family and friends who have supported me throughout the years in many different ways. Thank you to my family in Germany for their understanding and acceptance of my professional choices, which, for the most part, meant great distances and rare home visits. A very heartfelt thanks to Ruth Sorochan, Jiro and Tina Ooishi, Tak Ooishi, Thomas Foster, Lidia Jendzjowsky, and Benita Urban. Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Terry Tran, for his quiet efforts to free my time for writing, for teaching me some balance between work and life, for including me in his wonderful family, and for believing in me.

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Introduction

How is it that some people transform the experience of adversity and social suffering into positive lives while for others recovery remains unattainable? When circumstances deny either material, social, emotional, or physical basics of existence and threaten to negate one's humanity, by what means do people reconstruct their lives and relationships, re-summon their drive to be an active member of their communities, salvage their sense of being, or at least gather the strength to keep on struggling along through everyday hardship? Such questions have occupied the social sciences increasingly in the past decades. The groundbreaking work of Aaron Antonovsky (1979; 1987) attempted to understand how Holocaust survivors continued with their lives. He proposed that the decisive factor for mental health following a traumatic experience is a "Sense of Coherence", meaning a sense of continuity as a person. The theme was investigated and tested further by psychologists showing that the ability to frame a traumatic experience in a coherent narrative reduces measures of distress, stress, and depressive symptoms as well as physiological markers of chronic stress such as inflammation and compromised immune response (Lepore and Smyth 2002; Pennebaker 2002; Ulrich and Lutgendorf 2002; Herbette and Rimé 2004). Parallel to writings in psychology, medical anthropologists set out to understand how difficult experiences that disrupt someone's life routine, goals, values, and aspirations, such as accidents or severe illnesses are transformed in narrative to integrate suffering into one's life in a meaningful and purposeful way (Becker 1997; Jackson 2005; Linde 1993; Mattingly 1998; Ochs and Capps 1996; Swora 2001). In much of this research explanations are sought in verbal expression of experience and how a sense of coherence, continuity, and identity is constructed and transformed in narrative. Since the 1980's, phenomenologist and existential anthropologist Michael Jackson has dedicated much of his scholarly work to understanding and theorizing how people salvage their humanity in the face of immense tragedy and adversity. Based on fieldwork in conflict-ridden Sierra Leone and in Australian Aborigine communities where people struggle with the legacy of colonialism and ongoing disenfranchisement, he proposes the centrality of leveraging one's own terms of living against the dominating terms of another as the existential imperative that allows people to live through suffering with a sense of ontological security. Exploring ritual, human-object relations, place, and narrative as strategies to achieve such balance between acting and being acted upon, he calls for further cross-cultural investigations of experiences of suffering and renewal and the

loci of ontological security (Jackson 1998; 2005; 2009). It is from this question that my research departs.

Long before I encountered Michael Jackson's work or even considered studying anthropology, my life was steeped in related questions. Much less violent and severe than the atrocities and their consequences that these writers address, but nevertheless affecting the people around me at an existential level was the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the subsequent political, economic, and cultural transformations. After a relatively carefree childhood, during which I more or less seriously practiced standing apart from the majority in my views and rebelling against the status quo, I lived through adolescence in the confusion of post-socialist transition in East Germany. My family taught my sister and I to question the claims and propaganda of the socialist party that dominated not only the political but also family life of East German citizens and to be aware of the malicious and ubiquitously present ears of the state security system. My parents had accepted disadvantages and missed opportunities because of their refusal to join the all-dominating socialist party. Despite growing up in this milieu of critique of the dominant view on reality and engaging in everyday practices of resistance against the regime throughout my childhood, when the wall came down and the initial ecstasy of finally being "free" subsided, the extent to which everything that life as we knew it was composed of dissolved, became untrue and void of any previously held value took us all by surprise.

During the East German communist employment in a white-collar position required one to be a member of the one socialist party. Under pressure many were recruited to work undercover for the state security system and report on others, especially on potential or suspected dissidents. After the wall came down and the files of the security system became accessible, public anger and suspicion against everyone formerly associated with "the party", and potentially with the security system, led to mass lay-offs of teachers, administrators, and public service employees. Many of my schoolteachers were fired on grounds of their political past and replaced by teachers from West Germany.

The majority of blue-collar workers faced the same issue as previously state-run factories and collective farms closed. Unemployment was all-pervasive and a large part of the population was either sent home without any prospect of finding new work or found themselves enrolled in re-training courses by the state employment agency equally disillusioned that their six or twelve months course would ever get them a job. As the economy collapsed in the East,

many had to move and search for work in the western part of the newly united country. Not only was it difficult to adapt to this kind of mobility, but also to realize that East German credentials were met with disregard outside of East Germany. Further, once people arrived in West Germany, they realized that their joy over the unification of the country was not necessarily shared by people there as they anticipated the tremendous amounts of public funds that would have to be spent to re-build the moribund eastern half of the country.

For the first time, people had to compete in a labour market that was not prepared to absorb millions of East Germans and that did not recognize their education and experiences. Neither the high regard for solidarity and re-distribution of resources nor skills of improvisation that East Germans were familiar with were of any use in the capitalist society that the united Germany already was in the West and suddenly became in the East. Now, each individual had to learn to promote themselves against all others to succeed. In the small town in which I grew up the disillusion and depression that followed dominated the conversations of adults around me. Many were unemployed for years and succumbed to depression and alcoholism. Many lamented the disappearance of solidarity between neighbours and colleagues. Many realized that in capitalism everything was available but most could not afford the things they had hoped for. Many had not anticipated that unification would mean a negation of much of the East German way of life and that everything, from groceries at the store to the familiar bureaucracy and ways of interacting with people would change. In comparison with the insecurity and existential challenges unification brought, the freedom and material abundance that everyone hoped and fought for almost shrank to irrelevance in people's minds.

A deeply existential insecurity about how things work, over what is good and true, and how to adapt to the new circumstances characterized the period of my teenage and young adult years for myself and many people around me. In my own family we dealt with depression, addiction, and an inability to handle even routine tasks of daily life. Some were able to set goals and navigate through the chaos to work towards them while others struggled to face life on a day-to-day basis. For myself, I started on a path of seeking situations that are unfamiliar and uprooting, moving to new cities every two or three years, travelling, and pursuing unconventional professional paths. Moving to Canada in 2000 – 2003 was just another step of starting somewhere new, this time, however, without knowing the language or ways of life of my new home. These three years abroad shook up some more fundamental assumptions and institutions that had characterized my life before and I started to ponder existential questions

finding resonance of my thinking in reading the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Tim Ingold, and in studying anthropology.

In Canada, I connected well to Aboriginal people who were introduced to me through friends. Conversations about their experiences of alienation, depression, apathy, and addiction were eye-opening lessons in history and ongoing inequalities. Although by no means comparable, the accounts of social suffering reminded me somehow of the people back home who seemed to struggle with a similar sense of disenfranchisement and existential insecurity. I started to read and learn about Canada's First Nations and chose my undergraduate courses accordingly. It was not until my field work with Dene in the Northwest Territories for my Masters degree in 2006, however, that I was struck by the strength, innovation, and drive of some individuals who had experienced tremendous suffering, yet had been able to transform their experience into positive lives that they lived with a sense of well-being and with positive repercussions for those around them. Instead of producing merely an analysis of discourse that reveals ongoing power differentials in the relations between Canadian institutions and Aboriginal communities, my master's thesis became a reflection of the creative innovation, ingenuity, and confidence of individuals who are working to leverage these power relationships to the benefit of their communities. My interest was sparked to explore what enabled these people to act with creativity and a sense of well-being in the face of unpredictability and disenfranchisement.

Existing literature on well-being in Aboriginal communities focuses largely on the socio-political causes of ill health, on the meanings of healing for therapeutic practice, and on "historical trauma" and its transmission through generations in the Aboriginal context. The process of how individuals within their community overcome the effects of suffering and restore a sense of existential integrity that allows them to act in the face of unpredictability, however, has not been sufficiently considered. Inspired by the Dene people I met during my Master's research, by the readings in phenomenology that my supervisor Christopher Fletcher urged me to engage with, and addressing the questions that my life experiences gave me, my doctoral work is an exploration of what constitutes existential security which enables people to transform experiences of suffering and to recover a sense of well-being as well as agency in the face of oppressive circumstances. Michael Jackson's description of ontological security as a sense of existential integrity and control achieved by balancing being-for-oneself with being-for-others including embodied relations to self, community, human and non-human beings, land

and place, the past and the future (Jackson 1998, 16-22), will serve as a reference point for exploring the way in which Aboriginal people in a northern Canadian community navigate through complex social and cultural transitions at the political and social margins of Canadian society.

The place where my question resonated with community leaders and Elders is Teetł'it Zheh in the Northwest Territories. This community, with the English name of Fort McPherson, lies along the Peel River, between the Mackenzie Delta to the northeast and the Richardson Mountains to the west and is home to about 800 Teetł'it¹ Gwich'in. The community is known for its active volunteerism, in particular the radio station CBQM² and the yearly Midway Lake Music Festival. During two consultation visits the objectives and methodology for this research emerged and plans were made to collaborate on a project that would document the community's history of volunteerism, as well as investigate healing practices such as sewing and going out on the land. At the same time, I would be learning from volunteers and seamstresses about how they had overcome suffering and were able to build positive lives. In June 2011, just in time for the second National Event of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Inuvik, I arrived in the Mackenzie Delta to live, work, and volunteer with people in the community for one year, record life stories, and produce video material for community use.

My theoretical background in medical anthropology, phenomenology, and narrative theory led me to pay attention to what is at stake in interactions between people, in how people remember and narrate their experiences, and in how differing abilities to control the outcome of things are negotiated in the interface of the individual, the social, the natural world, and the larger political context. The experiences, memories, and stories that people shared with me and that in a continuous dialectic with my engagement with the work, the land, the people, and their laughter have shaped my understanding led me to pay attention to the kinesthetic experience of travelling and working as fundamental in transforming experience.

I explore this proposition in three parts. Part I delineates my theoretical and methodological approach. After a short introduction to the community and how it presents itself to the newcomer, Chapter 1 outlines the phenomenological and anthropological sources of

¹ There are various spellings in use. I will adhere to the spelling that the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute uses, which is Teetł'it Gwich'in, unless an alternative spelling is part of a corporate name, such as in "Tetlit Service Co-op".

² "CBQM" by Dennis Allen (2009) is a documentary portraying the radio station and the community. It can be watched online at <https://www.nfb.ca>

my theoretical thinking on experience and perception as well as defines relevant concepts that I use as analytical tools throughout this work. This theoretical orientation and, most importantly, local ways of knowing, teaching, and learning require a specific methodological approach which I will describe in Chapter 2.

Part II traces the meanings of strength and existential security in stories of suffering and renewal. In Chapter 3 I introduce the reader to Teet'it Gwich'in narratives of hardship and strength in the context of oral history and historical records of early explorers, traders, and ethnographers. Chapter 4 illustrates what constitutes strength and existential security through stories of contemporary Elders remembering both the lives of their parents and the days of their youth. Following these remembered accounts of security and well-being, in Chapter 5 I address the assault on the Gwich'in way of life through colonial policies such as residential schools, settlements and housing programs, and the infringement on Gwich'in land by industry and development. This section will also investigate to what extent constitutional elements of existential security were challenged and threatened by the larger political and social context. Chapter 6 engages with the particulars of individual lives and tells stories of remarkable Elders who were involved with the Peel River Alcohol Society, a volunteer-run addiction-counselling center that operated in Fort McPherson for over 20 years until its integration into the Government of the Northwest Territories' Health and Social Services Department. These stories inform what I have come to understand as fundamental for a sense of ontological security in the memory of Teet'it Gwich'in.

Finally, Part III will turn to the articulations of these dimensions of ontological security and healing in contemporary community life, as I was able to witness it. Chapter 7 deals with contemporary volunteerism and Chapter 8 discusses the role of the land in ontological security and well-being.

As such, Teet'it Gwich'in stories of life transformation inform the conceptualization of ontological security as a contribution to the debate on the experience of suffering and renewal in medical anthropology. Specifically, this work contributes to a "literature of recovery" (Fletcher and Denham 2008) and responds to the desire of Teet'it Gwich'in to make their stories heard by others who are "out there still struggling" as well as to highlight Gwich'in strengths instead of deficits. The phenomenological approach has the potential to illuminate the constitutional processes of ontological security and well-being in the Gwich'in context and adds to Jackson's call for cross-cultural investigation of this concept within existential anthropology

(Jackson 1998, 2005). My research builds on recent developments in the anthropology of experience and emotion and aligns itself with Throop's (2010) argument for greater analytical attention to the ambiguity of experience. Lastly, the project intends to contribute to a better understanding of the role that local healing practices play in meeting contemporary challenges in social and individual health in Aboriginal communities.



Figure 1: Gwich'in places in the Northwest Territories and the Yukon. Canadian Museum of History. Map produced by Kristy Benson, Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (GSCI) from place names data on file with GSCI. <http://www.historymuseum.ca/gwichin/introduction/the-gwichin/>

Part I: Being “right in with the people” – Theoretical and Methodological Approach

Prologue – Arriving in Teet’it Zheh

When the plane approaches Yellowknife and the small crooked spruce trees come into view I cannot help but feel like I am coming home in some sense, each and every time I make the brief stop in the capital of the Northwest Territories before travelling on to Norman Wells and then Inuvik. Travelling in the Northwest Territories is much more enjoyable than on the world’s busier travel routes: generous luggage allowances, no security checks, meals on each flight segment, passengers and flight attendants who are on familiar terms, chatting, catching up and laughing with each other along the way. Arriving in Inuvik is an equally pleasant experience. Family members and friends fill the waiting area, people arriving and people departing know and greet each other, stop for a chat, play with the children, and exchange news. Inuvik is the administrative centre of the Mackenzie Delta region and with a population of 3,463³ offers a hospital, a recreation complex with gym and pool, a high school, a community garden, several stores, a library, a coffee shop, a few restaurants, hotels, the regional branch of the Aurora College, and quite a busy community life. Inuvik is also the political centre of the Gwich’in Settlement Area where the Gwich’in Tribal Council represents the approximately 3378 Gwich’in in Inuvik, Fort McPherson, Tsiigehtchic, and Aklavik.⁴

Despite the amenities of town life, when in the company of people from Fort McPherson Inuvik is never worth staying longer than necessary. The town is a place to pick up groceries and make quick stops at friends’ or family members’ houses and then hit the Dempster Highway to Fort McPherson. Most of the time, I was lucky to find a ride with someone who had come from Fort McPherson to Inuvik for one reason or another, and we would stop at the NorthMart, at Stanton, and then at a few houses to either pick up or drop off things, such as meat, fish, sewing, more passengers, or boxes that needed to change owners. The last stop was often at the News Stand, a convenience store, to pick up coffee and snacks for the two to three hour trip back to Fort McPherson. On July 2nd, 2011, Gladys Alexie picked me up in Inuvik and, together with her son and his girlfriend, we started on the Dempster in the heat of a late afternoon summer day. It was a beautiful day, the air conditioning kept us cool inside the truck, the short announcements through the radio kept us informed about trucks travelling the

³ Census 2011. Bureau of Statistics, Government of the Northwest Territories.

⁴ [Http://gwichintribalcouncil.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Annual-Report-2014.pdf](http://gwichintribalcouncil.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Annual-Report-2014.pdf)

highway, and we enjoyed the country music and greetings on the radio for a while until we lost reception. Once past the Inuvik Airport the highway turns into a gravel road and the dust covers the drunken trees⁵ along both sides of the road. Road conditions are a constant and important conversation topic as dust, mud, deep gravel, ice or snowdrifts all require special driving skills that only locals exercise with ease and that, according to local people, tourists, who populate the Dempster during the summer months, often lack.

Gladys Alexie is a middle aged Gwich'in language teacher who was born and raised in the bush along the Peel River until her parents moved to Fort McPherson to keep the family together while the children went to school. She grew up speaking the Gwich'in language, learning the skills of bush life, and, at the same time, valuing formal school education. After working in the community for several years, she decided to leave home and pursue a college education. Upon her return to the community, she started working at Chief Julius School where, today, she teaches Gwich'in language as well as the Gwich'in style of sewing to the children. Gladys is an energetic and busy woman. After work, she takes care of her house, her truck, her son, nieces and nephews, as well as her father. For many years she volunteered on various boards and committees in town. On top of all that, she agreed to let me stay with her during my fieldwork. That first day in her truck, she was surprised to find out that I am staying for one whole year. Laughing heartily, she agreed to it anyway.

Travelling on the Dempster Highway, the view opens up once in a while to allow the traveler a glimpse of the Mackenzie River and its vast valley to the west of the highway. At kilometer 143 the highway crosses the Mackenzie River at the confluence of the Arctic Red River. The ferry transports vehicles and passengers from the Inuvik side of the Dempster to Tsiigehtchic at the banks of the Arctic Red River and then to the southern side of the Dempster. From there it is only about 45 minutes to Fort McPherson.

If the weather is good, the Richardson Mountains lying to the west soon come into sight on the horizon. Just before the highway crosses the Peel River, by ferry in the summer and by ice road in the winter, we turn off into the community. The "main road" leads straight through town from the southern to the northern end of the community and runs parallel to the banks of the Peel River. Driving down⁶ main road, we pass residential houses, the Tetlit Service Co-op

⁵ Randomly leaning spruce trees that are underlain by permafrost and characteristic of the Mackenzie Delta are known as "drunken forests" (Vitt, Halsey and Zoltai 2000)

⁶ Local ways of referring to north and south in terms of "down" and "up" parallels the flow of the Peel River.

store and the Gas Bar, a large wooden building which houses the William Firth Health Centre, then the Charles Koe Building with the Band Office and various other offices. Across the street is the Francis J. Francis Curling Rink, the Hamlet administration, the Youth and Elders Centre and the radio station CBQM. Further down the road, we find the RCMP station, the recreation complex, the canvas store, Chief Julius School, Saint Mathew's Anglican Church and, close to the north end of town, the NorthMart store. The roads are busy with pick-up trucks, four-wheelers, children on bikes in the summer, or Skidoos in the winter time. People are out and about at all times to visit friends and family, pick up Bingo cards in the evenings, or just to go for a ride and stop here and there for a visit. Arriving at Gladys' residence, right at the banks of the Peel valley overlooking the river with the mountains on the horizon, we unloaded the truck and quickly re-arranged the rooms to allow the four of us to sleep in the three available beds in two bedrooms of the small bungalow that is her house.



Figure 2: Street view in Fort McPherson. Foto: T. Luig

Fort McPherson is home to about 800 people,⁷ 93 % of whom identify as Aboriginal. Most of them are enrolled as Teet'it Gwich'in with the Gwich'in Tribal Council. Some Inuvialuit have family ties in the community and have settled here. Many people's ancestry includes traders of European descent but identification as Gwich'in is generally stronger than as Métis. This is reflected in how people responded to the 2006 Census of Population: only 3.9 % identified as Métis and another 3.9% as Inuit, while 83.9% identified as "North American Indian" which is Gwich'in in the case of Fort McPherson. Slightly more than eight percent responded as being non-Aboriginal (Statistics Canada 2007⁸). These are mostly transient Canadians, often from the eastern provinces, who hold RCMP, nursing, teaching, and managerial store positions.

From my first day in town to the last, I was impressed with the busy community life that Teet'it Gwich'in engage in. I had not expected so many community events in a small town and had certainly not experienced this anywhere else. There is a calendar of celebrations and festivities that includes not only major holidays such as Easter and Christmas, but also events that are specific to the region or to Fort McPherson, such as the Peel River Jamboree, which is a weekend of games, competitions, dances, and feasts in March, the anniversary of the radio station CBQM, and the Midway Lake Music Festival. Aside from these yearly events, there are game nights for youth and/or Elders, soup and bannock lunches, workshops, various athletic events and tournaments, dances, feasts, sales and casino evenings to raise funds for various activities, talent shows, concerts, film nights, ladies spa nights, and much more. Almost every day, there is an event that is open for community members to join in one way or another. As someone who desired to learn how Gwich'in people live and what life in Fort McPherson is like, I was encouraged to be "right in with the people" and be there whenever something was happening in the community.

My second Sunday in town, July 10th, 2011, was a regular Sunday for most people in town. For me, it was one of the first Sundays to try and join in the activities that are commonplace in Teet'it Zheh, as I captured in my field notes:

"It's a quiet morning. Gladys' nieces, who camped on the living room floor, are still asleep. Gladys cooks up a big breakfast with pancakes and bacon, together with a sauce made of berries. She is really busy all the time. At 11am we all - Gladys, her sister Vicky, her nieces and Vicky's children - go to church for service. Hannah Alexie, Mary Teya, Joanne Snowshoe and Rebecca Blake hold service, today it is Joanne Snowshoe's turn to

⁷ 792 in the 2011 Census. Bureau of Statistics, Government of the Northwest Territories.

⁸ Percentage calculations by author.

do the sermon. The service follows closely a book made in Old Crow that is based on Archbishop Robert McDonald's Book of Common Prayers. All prayers and readings are printed in both languages, on the left page English, on the right Gwich'in. Much of the call and response prayers are read from it and the service follows the guidelines of the book closely, varying only in accordance to the church calendar. There is little improvisation. Many of the songs are sung in Gwich'in. After church, Gladys and Vicky talked about the need for new stairs for the church building. When I asked whether the Diocese would pay for the construction, Vicky just laughed and explained that all of it will be done and funded by volunteers.

We all get back in the truck and stop at Walter Alexie's house. Walter is the father of Gladys and Vicky and in his early 80's. Another sister and brother were there. The food is cooked and everyone is prompted to help themselves. Walter Alexie tells stories from long ago. About how he travelled by dog team all over, through the mountains, even to Dawson, which is about an eight-hour drive from Fort McPherson south-west on the Dempster Highway. How he walked and walked and never got tired. Today, he is 83 and his knee is giving him trouble. His mother language is Gwich'in, which he speaks whenever he has the chance. I still have to get used to the accent in people's English, I understood only half of what he said, unfortunately.

Then at 2 o'clock a triathlon! The recreation worker had organized this event and a few teams had signed up to compete. I went down to the Recreation Complex and thought I would perhaps videotape the event. But since I had nothing else to do, I was given watches to stop the time. It turned out pretty hard to handle the watches and the camera, so luckily there was someone else to take the responsibility of keeping track of time. But there was doubt in me whether I should have just packed the camera away to be able to help out. First, the participants ran from the complex to the airport, perhaps 5km. I caught a ride with Joyce Blake, the organizer of the event. Numerous trucks followed, everyone cheering and honking. For the next section, the athletes biked from the airport to 8 Miles, approximately 6km. For this, I hopped on another truck with a lady by the name of Rosalie Ross. As a mature student, she is doing a two-year Aboriginal Language and Cultural Instructor program at the Aurora College in Inuvik. She said she would like to teach children how to live and work out on the land. We passed the bikers, some on pretty old bikes that were not made for racing at all, but everyone seemed to enjoy themselves and gave their best effort.

At 8 Miles, where the highway hits the banks of the Peel River and the ferry crossing, participants prepared their canoes to race down the Peel back to town. One participant, an athletic lady in her 50's, asked me if I paddle, since she needed one more person to complete her team. I was just in town for a week and aside from a very relaxed and slow canoe fishing trip I had never really paddled a canoe. So, feeling a bit shy and nervous, I declined. I have to start practising, I guess. Much joking and laughing wherever small groups of people stood together.

While we were standing there watching everyone getting ready in their canoes, Elizabeth Wright and her husband stopped on their way to Midway Lake. They offered me to come along, which I gladly accepted. So we went and the ride was just beautiful: the land, the vast valleys and open views. Midway Lake is just like another town. The Midway Lake Music Festival takes place here every year. Over the past years, people have built themselves cabins to have a more comfortable stay during those four days in August. In July the grass grows high, so it needed to be cut in preparation for the festival. I volunteered to cut the grass while Liz prepared some snacks for everyone to

share. Some other people were there too, hammering away at their cabins. There had been a big storm some time in the winter and many had to repair their houses. Others were building new ones. Another couple, which was working on their new cabin, came over to Elizabeth's camp and we had some food.

On our way back we stopped to enjoy the view and to pick some Labrador tea, which in Gwich'in is called "lidii masgit".

I was astonished by how a Sunday in such a small community could be so filled with activities, sharing food, working, volunteering, and laughing. A regular occurrence, as it seemed, for McPherson people; for me, however, it was a first step into what it means to be involved in community life, to spend time and effort on things communal, as well as to find the space where I could be useful and contribute. Volunteering used to be a large part of my life as a teenager and young adult. With pursuing a master's degree and working part-time jobs to make a living, volunteering became impossible. Immersing myself in community life in Fort McPherson, I was again confronted by a way of being that includes volunteering as a normal and regular part of life. Volunteering is also an important aspect of the community's self-presentation that leaders emphasize vis-à-vis the public. When I first visited the community in the summer of 2010 to consult with leaders and Elders about my research interest, one of the first things that was brought up in relation to my question was that the community's volunteers would be the most important consultants for me in order to understand how people overcome hardship in their lives. In talking to Elders, however, I could not help but have the impression that "volunteering" is a rather insufficient term for the kinds of things these Elders did.

The English word "volunteer" is derived from French "voluntaire" and Latin "voluntarius" meaning "willing" or "of one's free will" and was first used in the early 18th century (Merriam-Webster online 2013). Originally used in the context of voluntary military enrollment, today the term refers to a variety of services that people provide without financial reimbursement. There is a sense of altruism, moral superiority, or moral obligation of the wealthy toward the less fortunate associated with the practice. The German word "Ehrenamt" directly links voluntary services with "honour" ("Ehre"). The idea of volunteering emerged from a sociopolitical context that includes social stratification, capitalism, and status differences in terms of wealth, morality, or humanity.

Today, calls for volunteers often advertise benefits for the individual volunteer that are much less altruistic, as volunteers in the European past might have liked to see themselves. Such benefits include greater chances for employment, skill development, fun, travels to foreign

places, or increased confidence. At the time when people in Fort McPherson founded a community addiction-counselling centre and ran it mainly through volunteering, they did not call themselves “volunteers”. Rather, their stories talk about an existential shift from a sense of confinement and addiction to a space of potentiality where unexpected abilities to work and speak for themselves and others were unleashed. In these stories of personal transformations, “volunteering” seems to be a by-product of a process that can be described as recovery, renewal, or healing. I started wondering what meaning people had in mind when using the word “volunteer” and how that compares to the ideas I associate with the word. Elders used the term often to emphasize that much of what they did for others was volunteering, implying that they worked without pay. But the way they used this word within their narrative suggested that in the past no one considered the extent to which they cared for others and invested time and effort into community well-being as extraordinary. A particular concept that distinguishes working or helping without the expectation of payment became only necessary in the context of the increasing importance of the monetary economy and economic stratification. Often people would tell me stories of what they had done in their lives or what they do in the community today and end their narrative with the exclamation: “That was all volunteer!” I started wondering what it was that people wanted me to understand with this emphasis on volunteering. Further, what led people to make an almost instant connection between my question about overcoming hardship and volunteering? What is at stake when Gwich’in talk about the strong “tradition” of volunteering in the community, and when they remind their fellow community members in speeches at feasts or over the radio that Fort McPherson people are known for their volunteering? Living, working, and speaking with many Teet’it Gwich’in who are known for their volunteering, I started to comprehend some of the connections that people make between working without the expectation of financial return and living a good life. This thesis reflects my exploration of how people link volunteering and well-being in their memories of experiences of hardship and strength, of life transformations, as well as contemporary narratives of suffering and renewal.

Chapter 1

Phenomenology and the Anthropology of Experience

Understanding how people live through disruptive life situations and suffering as well as how they remember and talk about these experiences necessitates a conceptual foundation of the complex interrelationships of self and the environment as well as perception and experience. Understanding how phenomena in our environment are perceived in consciousness, how experience relates to perception, and what role temporality, sociality, and physiological processes play is a central occupation of phenomenology.

Founded by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), phenomenology is both a philosophical movement and a methodological approach, and has come to influence a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, and psychology. While it cannot be considered a clearly defined philosophical system with delineated methods, there is a common effort to describe human existence as “embodied and socially and culturally embedded being-in-the-world” (Zahavi 2008, 662). Robert Desjarlais and C. Jason Throop (2011), both phenomenologically inclined anthropologists, defined the approach as the “study of phenomena as they appear to the consciousness of an individual or a group of people; the study of things as they appear in our lived experience.” (2011, 88). While this definition speaks of “phenomena” as objects of perception and the “consciousness” of people as subjects of perception, phenomenology is concerned with neither the subject nor the object of perception and experience alone, but with the intersection of personal sense-making of what is perceived within processes in the social, political, and natural environment (Barral 1965). The second part of the definition points to the phenomenological method. “Things as they appear in our lived experience” necessitates a suspension of assumptions and judgments about the world and the phenomena in order to describe a diverse number of human experiences and the process by which people make sense of their lives. In fact, it is the central aim of phenomenological description to “destabilize those unexamined assumptions that organize our prereflective [sic] engagements with reality” (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 88). In Husserl’s terms the phenomenological ‘epoché’ requires the researcher to “bracket” everyday attitudes in an attempt to experience things as they appear (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, 114). However in doing so, phenomenologists highlight that all

perception is based on previous relations to the world and all cognition is shaped by its historical and practical context (Zahavi 2008, 664).

Two of the most influential twentieth century phenomenologists, who are foundational to my own thinking, are Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Heidegger's work is a cornerstone for much of contemporary phenomenological anthropology by conceptualizing existence as "being-in-the-world", hence dissolving the analytical boundaries between subject and object. Heidegger writes: "Self and world belong together in the single entity, the Dasein. Self and world are not two beings, like subject and object, or like I and thou, but self and world are the basic determination of the Dasein itself in the unity of the structure of being-in-the-world." (Heidegger 1989, 422 quoted in Zahavi 2008, 674). Merleau-Ponty's outstanding work focuses on perception and the role of the body paving the way for a wealth of anthropological work on embodiment. Embracing seemingly contrary aspects of human experience, phenomenology strives to understand the invariant aspects of human perception, embodiment, consciousness, and experience, but also grounds these reflections in actual experiences as they are given. As such, phenomenology has inspired anthropological work increasingly in the last three decades. Applying what has been termed an "ethnographic epoché" (Throop 2010) phenomenological anthropologists aim to identify and confront their own cultural and theoretical ways of engaging with and thinking about others with whom they live and work during fieldwork. In that, phenomenological thought had a decisive influence on the reflexive turn in anthropology that began in the 1970s and 1980s (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 95). Further, the intersubjective focus of phenomenological enquiry concurs with the empirical ambitions of anthropology to attend to "life as lived" as well as to the tangible and ambiguous realities of everyday life while, at the same time, contextualizing experiences and meanings in the cultural, political, and historical context of local communities within a web of relations in a globalized world. Lastly, building on Merleau-Ponty's work on the role of the body in human perception and cognition, the influential field of phenomenological anthropology of embodiment emerged, spearheaded by Thomas J. Csordas (1994).

Such phenomenologically inspired approaches have resulted in significant contributions to understanding human experience and broadened the scope of thinking in anthropology through introducing and describing concepts such as intersubjectivity, embodiment, temporality, intentionality, and perception. Anthropologists have used these analytical tools to understand a wide range of topics relevant to the questions of this thesis, including violence and

suffering (Das 2007; Jackson 1998 and 2002; Kleinman and Kleinman 1996; Kleinman 2000; Throop 2010), healing (Csordas 2000), displacement (Jackson 1995), liminality (Jackson 2009), experience and narrative (Mattingly 1998; Throop 2010; Desjarlais 2010), subjectivity (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007) as well as place and human-environment relations (Feld and Basso 1996; Ingold 2000, 2008). Further, these insights have promoted critical investigations of theoretical concepts such as subjectivity, experience, and personhood.

Reflecting on topics that resist clearly structured models of social behavior and allowing for existential and ambiguous richness of everyday encounters in their writings, phenomenological anthropologists have often been criticized for favoring subjectivism and neglecting the political-economic determinants in people's lives (Throop and Murphy 2002; Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 94-97). This critique, however, stems from a misinterpretation of the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of the approach. Not only does the phenomenological approach often work in concert with other approaches, such as political economy or discourse analysis, it has itself sparked the move towards reflexivity and the focus on intersubjectivity in anthropology (Clifford and Markus 1986). Indeed, by paying attention to the relations that orient perception within the broader context of historical and social processes, phenomenology makes visible the intentionality and intersubjectivity of experience.

According to Desjarlais and Throop (2011, 92-93), the anthropology of experience, in fact, has been advanced by phenomenologically inclined anthropologists in the 1980s as a response to anthropology's emphasis on "questions of meaning, discourse, structural relations, and political economy to the neglect of the everyday experiences, contingencies, and dilemmas that weigh so heavily on people's lives". There are also anthropologists who subscribe to a critical phenomenology that stresses the political, discursive, and economic influences on people's experience (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007; Good 1994; Scheper-Hughes 1993). Since, there has been a fruitful debate on "experience" as a theoretical concept resulting in the contemporary understanding that the concept is, at once, a fundamentally useful category in anthropological research and a culturally constituted notion that, if used unreflexively, imposes western ideas of self and agency (Desjarlais 2010). Yet another orientation in anthropology that relies on phenomenological thought is "existential anthropology" (Jackson 2005). This line of work strives to engage in "radical empiricism" (Jackson 1998, 36; Goulet 1998, 254) and "lateral displacement" (Jackson 2005, 32) to produce accounts of "existential demands, constraints, dilemmas, potentialities, uncertainties, and the 'struggle for being'" that reflect both, particular

lives within their specific social and cultural environments as well as universal aspects of human existence (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 93-94; Jackson 2005).

In my attempt to describe experience at the crossroads of suffering and renewal within a context of political and economic marginalization of First Nations in northern Canada, phenomenology as an approach that strives to explore perception and experience without neglecting existential aspects such as relationality, intentionality, and embodiment provides an effective framework for the ambiguity, fluidity, and unfinishedness of experiences and the fragmented way in which they are shared during fieldwork. In the accounts and analysis of the following chapters, I will draw and build on the various phenomenological perspectives within anthropology, including existential anthropology, critical phenomenology, and the anthropology of experience. To lay the conceptual foundation for my reflections on how people transform their experience and how self, other, time, and movement connects to that, in the next three sections I will elaborate on key concepts that I use as analytical tools: intentionality, relationality, intersubjectivity, and temporality as dimensions of perception and experience; the relations of experience and narrative; as well as the role of embodiment, movement, and enskillment in experience. These intertwined dimensions make up the background in which perception and experience arises. I draw on philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, linguist Mikhail Bakhtin, as well as anthropologists, most prominently Michael Jackson, and use their insights on experiences of suffering and renewal to guide my understanding of the question at hand. I am aware that this is a very selective treatment of their thought and does not do justice to the complexity of their arguments. However, I owe much of my understanding of perception, experience, and intersubjectivity to these authors. To conclude, I will elaborate upon my research question and situate my investigation within phenomenological anthropology.

1.1. Experience and Perception: Intentionality, Relationality, Temporality, and Intersubjectivity

According to Geertz (1973) social and cultural processes are constituted by the movement of significant symbols that “impose meaning upon experience” (Geertz 1973, 45, quoted in Throop 2003, 225). The perception of experience is thus an act of *recognition*, an identification of a

phenomenon with an existing cultural signifier. The phenomenological perspective conceives of human existence, perception and experience, as embedded in previous relations to the world.

[...] the subjectivity that is related to the world only gains its full relation to itself, and to the world, in relation to the other, i.e. in intersubjectivity; intersubjectivity only exists and develops in the mutual relationship between subjects that are related to the world; and the world is only brought to articulation in the relation between subjects. (Husserl paraphrased by Zahavi 2008, 681)

For Heidegger (1960) *being* is first and foremost a matter of *relations*: being-in-the-world, being-with-others, and being-towards-death. These relations direct perception, thought, and action towards relations in the world, be that objects, people, or the natural environment, and towards the finiteness of life. This directedness is what Heidegger and subsequent phenomenologists refer to as intentionality.

Merleau-Ponty's reasoning, in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002), is equally based on the fundamental assumption that human consciousness, the body, and the world are intertwined and mutually engaged. Perception and experience, according to him, are in a perpetual dialectic relationship that is given direction by relational projects which are simultaneously temporal, social, and spatial in character. Just as Heidegger conceptualizes *being* as directed towards relations in the world, with others, and with the finiteness of life, so are perceptions, according to Merleau-Ponty, "*intentions* of our whole being" (2002, 92, my emphasis). Merleau-Ponty views this as a paradox, which applies to all being-in-the-world: "when I move towards a world I bury my perceptual and practical intentions in objects which ultimately appear prior to and external to those intentions" (2002, 95). As relations to objects become habitual and render the bodily processes unperceived, so can combinations of perception and meaning in the context of life projects become sedimented into individual, or collective, habitual projects (Moran and Mooney 2002, 424-425). However, as perceptions are oriented toward relations they proceed and change with each experience including the potential to contradict or expand previous experience (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 20). Hence, ideas express truth only in the context of one organism-person and its capacity to attain knowledge at one particular moment (1964, 21). With continuous perception, truths are constituted as stable, only to be broken up by other experiences (Moran and Mooney 2002, 101; Merleau-Ponty 1964, 20-21). This also includes shifting between ways of being and meaning in differing social and physical contexts (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 88).

While meaning and ideas are malleable with continuing engagement in the world, in every present experience there is recognition of past experiences and anticipation of future possibilities. In combining relations and knowledge that spring from experience in the past, the present, and the anticipated future into perceiving, thinking, and acting towards life projects, temporality is created and becomes at the same time the basis of being. As Merleau-Ponty explains, perceptual experience “gives us the passage from one moment to the next and thus realizes the unity of time” (1964, 13). Perception and thought in the present always have both a future and a past horizon. Experience, then, is not merely a simple succession of phenomena but is saturated with human attempts to make sense, retrospectively and prospectively. Building on Husserl’s terms for temporal aspects of experience of retention, present, and protention, Throop (2003, 234) expands this to four temporal orientations that shape the experience of being-in-the-world: first, the orientation to the immediate present that is characterized by unfulfilled protentions, which are indeterminate anticipations of the future; second, the orientation to the future which is sustained by anticipations based on past experiences; third, the retrospective “plotting of beginnings, middles and ends” of a past succession of experiences; and fourth, a consideration of possible futures and possible pasts.

The question that contemporary thinkers are debating in this context is whether or not this dynamic interplay of retention and protention creates coherence that renders experience meaningful and intelligible to self and others (Antonovsky 1979, 1987; Mattingly 1998; Garro 2003; Throop 2010; Linde 1993; Becker 1997; Kirmeyer 2000; Desjarlais 2010). Part and parcel of this debate is the difference between fragmented experience and retrospective assignment of coherence to experience in memory and narrative, which will be discussed below in section 1.2. While these authors give much evidence that people experience their lives with a sense of coherence that is shaped by residues of past engagements and by future goals and desires, there are also many cases, especially with regards to suffering and pain, when taken-for-granted expectations about the self and world are threatened, rendering experience unintelligible and fragmented. Throop (2003) suggests that the varieties of temporal orientations mentioned above possibly align with expressions of experience as ‘coherent’ or ‘fragmented’. More so, that different ethnographic methodologies of recording articulations of experience favour one over the other temporal orientation and, consequently, privilege one over the other variety of experience structure. Mattingly (1998) studies the narrative structure of illness experiences and suggests that experience as lived is already ordered by anticipation based upon a remembered

past. Desjarlais (2010) on the other hand, drawing on his work with homeless people, questions the assumption of the universality of experience and describes a way of being that evades temporal structuring and orients the person towards stasis and eventlessness. He describes this way of being as “struggling along” (Desjarlais 2010). Experience, he argues, is “not an existential given but rather a historical possibility predicated on a certain way of being in the world” (2010, 160-161). By bracketing the category of experience, the relationship of a certain way of being-in-the-world to social, cultural, political, and material forces comes to the foreground. He proposes that the “reflexive depth, temporal integration, and a cumulative transcendence” ascribed to experience stems from the aesthetics of the modern industrial era (2010, 172). In contrast, his understanding of social suffering that is located at the margins of such an aesthetic suggests that experience of the former kind might become “a relic of the past” (2010, 172). While I agree with the necessity of a critical examination of the historical and local situatedness of the concept *experience*, his move to tie certain articulations and meanings of experience to historical eras or socio-economic categories of people might be problematic.

With the aim to bridge this debate, Throop (2010) challenges the separation between experience as fragmented, or *granular*, and as meaningfully formed and temporally structured, or *coherent*. This distinction neglects the ambiguity that experiences on the fringes of the ability to articulate carry (2010, 6-8). Joao Biehl’s (2005) evocative description of a woman ostracized through erroneous psychiatric diagnoses, her reflections and the narrative transformations of her experience is a fitting example for the need of a more complex view on the intersubjectively constituted and continuously evolving perception of being-in-the-world, which we call ‘experience’.

The recognition of the artificiality of the subject-object divide has been named the “intersubjective turn” in anthropology (Jackson 1998, 6). At the turn of the century and early 21st century, medical anthropologists, including Biehl, Good, and Kleinman (2007), called for a perspective on experience as “one in which the collective and individual are intertwined and run together and in which power and meaning are not placed in theoretical opposition but are shown to be intimately linked in an intersubjective matrix” (2007, 14). Interpretation of personal experience emerges in communication and interaction with others shaping cultural knowledge and identities in the process, which then become resources that can be used, contested or changed in the face of subsequent intersubjective experiences (Sørensen 1996, 59).

The phenomenological attitude with its focus on intersubjectivity, intentionality, temporality, and, as I will discuss below, embodiment, strives to overcome dichotomies between subject and object, between the individual and the social, the past and the future, as well as between the body and the mind. However, while attention is paid to what happens in-between, ethnographic fieldwork also attempts to trace difference in thinking of categories, such as the *person*, the *social*, or the *environment*. Writers such as Tim Ingold, David Anderson, and Jean-Guy Goulet, who lived and worked with Indigenous peoples, have illustrated the inseparable interrelations of human beings with all elements of their environment, be they other humans, non-human beings, or non-beings (Anderson 2000; Ingold 2000; Ingold and Kurttila 2000; Goulet 1998). Anderson coins the term ‘sentient ecology’ to describe the “solidarities and obligations between people and certain places and animals” in Arctic Siberia (2000, 116). Relationships between humans and other elements of the environment are conceived as being mutual, communicative, and reciprocal. Following Anderson, as well as Heidegger’s notion of “dwelling” (1971) and Merleau-Ponty’s concept of perception through intentional movement of the body-subject, Ingold (2000) builds his work concerning environmental perception and knowledge on the construct of the “organism-person” as “agent-in-an-environment” (171). As all elements of the environment are constantly forming and transforming, beings that inhabit the world live through a world coming-into-being, which “affects their moods and motivations, their movements, and their possibilities of subsistence, even as they sculpt and erode the plethora of surfaces upon which inhabitants tread” (Ingold 2008, 1802). This is where Ingold clarifies that the interface between transformative medium, be it weather, erosion, tectonic forces, or human building, and the substance of all elements of the environment is not a line of separation, but a “vaguely defined zone of admixture and intermingling” (1803). If considered together with the unwrapped meanings of intersubjectivity above as well as the movement and growth of human life paths, intersubjectivity depicts a “fluid space” of being-*in-the-world* within a “meshwork” of intertwined trails along which humans live their relationships (1806-1807).

Perception and experience are oriented towards relational projects that include person-within-their-environment, past, present and future. I have discussed intentionality, relationality, and temporality as aspects of experience and as well have expanded the concept of the social to include all elements of the environment, such as land, place, animals, and other non-human beings. Reminiscent of Merleau-Ponty, Jackson argues: “Analytically, inter-existence is given

precedence over individual essence. Relation is prior to relata.” (1998, 3). This concept, which Jackson refers to as interexistence or “inter-est” (1998, 3), synthesizes the relationality, intentionality, and intercorporeity of perception, experience, and narrative. In order to sustain a perspective that allows for a wide horizon of perceptual and interpretative possibilities for what is at stake in experiences of suffering, transformation, and renewal, I will follow Jackson in his premise of *inter-est*.

1.2. Narrating Experience

Such dialogic understanding of intersubjective encounters, including interrelationships between the individual and the structural, is further supported by Bakhtin (1981) who applies a similar approach to interpersonal communication, including everyday narratives and socio-ideological discourse, and frames this in his concept of *heteroglossia*. According to him, discourse articulates intentionality of an individual in relation to an ‘other’; both considered purposeful actors at a certain point in history. From this Holquist (1981) concludes in his introduction to an edited translation of Bakhtin’s work that the development of personhood can then be defined as:

Gradual appropriation of a specific mix of discourses that are capable of best mediating their own intentions...Thus each will seek, by means of intonation, pronunciation, lexical choice, gesture, and so on, to send out a message to the other with a minimum of interference from the otherness constituted by pre-existing meanings. (Holquist 1981, xx).

Language, therefore, is always meaning, always uttered to somebody else; even if this other is one’s own inner self. Communication, according to Bakhtin (1981), is characterized by two aspects: *centrifugal* and *centripetal forces*. The former account for our experience of articulated language as intrinsically particular: they stress the fragility, fluidity, and historical nature of articulations whose meanings come, change, and fade. The term Bakhtin uses for the sum of the influences the particular context of any utterance has on adding to, refracting to, or subtracting from meaning, is *heteroglossia*. This concept is critical for the consideration of diversity between individual experiences. In contrast stand *centripetal*, which are unifying, forces and are derived from a complex ontological status. The centripetal aspect of discourse limits the particularities of heteroglossia and strives for a maximum of mutual understanding (Bakhtin 1981, 271-272). It is in this space, between the uttered word, the speaker, and the environment that speech,

narrative, or stories are individualized and given shape. Bakhtin concludes that any discourse, no matter if professional, everyday, formalized storytelling, scholarly, or inner dialogue, is oriented towards existing discourses, directed towards an answer, and influenced by the response it anticipates (1981, 280). The response, therefore, has precedence over narrative: “primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle [...] Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other” (282). In such a dialogic encounter differing conceptual horizons and social discourses come to interact in order to allow the speaker to get a reading on his own narrative, to enter into a dialogue between his ontological background and that of the listener. Therefore, the arena for communication is not the content of narrative, but rather are the conceptual horizons and ontological assumptions of speaker and listener.

Of importance here is that the relationality in narrating experience does not only refer to responding to others, but also to one’s own past experiences and future projections as well as to the dialogue between one’s own ontological horizon and the challenging thereof that any experience might engender. Formulating experience in language, hence, opens a transformative space each time it is told and re-told within ever-changing contexts of being-in-the-world. Medical anthropologists Cheryl Mattingly and Linda Garro have applied this dialectic to experiences of illness and the disruptions these affect in people’s lives. According to Garro (2003), narrative is a way of ordering, interpreting and transforming disruptive experiences into manageable, acceptable, and socially intelligible occurrences. By narratively constructing or re-constructing their experience, people negotiate views of self and others within the world and orient themselves along their pathways through the past, present, and future (Garro 2003, 6). From the flow of socially mediated experience, events are selected and “presented in an order that itself intentionally or unintentionally conveys significance” (Mattingly and Garro 2000, 260). Narrative reflects ideas about ‘normal’ behavior and feelings, about what it means to be a good person, and, therefore reflects local moral expectations. Stories that recapitulate experience provide “a window in the processes involved in aligning an individual’s experience with one or more of these pre-existing models and how these alignments change in the light of continuing experiences and new information” (Mattingly and Garro 2000, 28). Narrative then always carries the potential for both a confirmation of belonging and making one’s experience intelligible but also space for transforming experience to align with changing ontological horizons.

Throop's (2010) research on physical pain in a Yap community demonstrates how experience sometimes evades verbal representation and resists meaningful conceptualizing. This observation has also been made by Kirmayer (2000) who suggests that articulations of illness experience are "fragmented and contradictory, taking the form of potential stories or tentative metaphors" (2000, 174). At the same time, such fragmented experience is still subject to "culturally shaped systems of categorization, classification, and narrativization" (Throop 2010: 6). He points to the ambiguity in suffering experiences as they vacillate between coherent and granular forms, as well as between psychical and bodily idioms. The latter is a crucial aspect to consider since in culturally available articulations for suffering narrative temporal and moral reframing might not be favourable, while somatization is (Kirmayer 1984 in Throop 2010, 7). The distinction between social suffering and a person's response to it has been exemplified by Denham's (2008) discussion of "historical trauma" and "historical trauma response" in North American Aboriginal people. Both Throop and Denham explain how a locally specific morality, or ethic, works to direct the attention away from suffering and toward a response of perseverance. While Throop is concerned with chronic pain, Denham examines the interplay of personal and intergenerational memory, narrative and an "ethic" of strength in the face of transgenerational experiences of discrimination, murder, warfare, and abuse in residential schools (Denham 2008). The recollection of disruptive experiences within the particular family he worked with was linked to a self-identification with values such as strength, orientation to the positive, and the gaining of knowledge from difficulty. This ethic was seen as transmitted through many generations, each suffering experience adding to or detracting from its constitution (2008, 405-407). In this case, the change in focus facilitates the affirmation of a strength-based identity, of family relationships, and of a sense of unity between past, present, and future.

The particular value Yapese put on concealment and privacy leads Throop (2010) to pay attention to silence. In this context, silence is part and parcel of the morality to which people attempt to conform in order to maintain what matters to them within intersubjective space. Such silence is different from "speechless terror" (van der Kolk and Fessler 1995, quoted in Denham 2008, 408), which pertains to fragmented memories that resist narrative integration and thus may negatively affect identity and well-being. Fiona Ross also describes examples in which silence is a form of "conscious agency" (2001, 272). Fletcher and Denham (2008) provide evidence for the situatedness of the effects of talk in local modalities of being and relating to the world. In a study on healing in an Inuit community in Nunavut the authors found that social

interaction, rather than talk, is paramount in bringing about a “healthful” sociability (2008, 103).

In conclusion, the meaning and role of talk and silence in enduring, transforming, or breaking in the face of physical, emotional, and social suffering is locally and historically situated. To what extent disruptive experiences require narrative re-ordering into a coherent, socially intelligible form, or transformation into the fulfillment of a moral status, or re-orientation towards social action and ‘healthful’ sociability in order to restore or maintain well-being emerges from intersubjective processes in a specific place in relation to its wider socio-political context.

1.3. Embodiment and Enskillment: The Primacy of Movement

Intersubjectivity is a relation between embodied creatures. And our bodies are present in every project and in every perception. (Zahavi 2008, 681)

Despite arguing against boundaries between self and other, subject and object, and taking a perspective of intersubjectivity, these relations nevertheless involve embodied beings. As Zahavi (2008, 681) points out by paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty, “the subject realizes itself in its presence to the world and to others – not in spite of, but precisely by way of its corporeality and historicity.” Every perception and experience is made from an embodied point of view. Phenomenology pays attention to the body not as a medium between the mind and the world, but as the existential condition of being-in-the-world. Experiences of the world are bodily, and the sensuous and kinesthetic aspects of the body are revealed to a person only through bodily exploration of the world (Zahavi 2008, 682). Embodiment, one of the major theoretical contributions of phenomenology to contemporary anthropological work, is understood as the “bodily aspects of human beings and subjectivity” (Desjarlais and Throop 2011, 89).

Merleau-Ponty argues that movement is a way of entering into a relationship to the world, the resulting experience in consciousness is “not a matter of ‘I think’ but of ‘I can’” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Baldwin 2004, 122). More recently, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2011) elaborates the foundational importance of bodily movement in her work *The primacy of movement* (2011). She argues that the tactile-kinesthetic consciousness of one’s body in movement is the basis of human primal sense-making and conceptualizing. Ingold and Jo Lee

Vergunst join in this rather recent focus on movement in anthropology in their volume *Ways of Walking* (2008). Drawing on Sheets-Johnson, they argue that movement, as the “mother of all cognition [...] forms the I that moves before the I that moves forms movement.” (Ingold and Vergunst 2008, xxi-xxii). Developing a sort of evolution of subjectivity, Sheets-Johnson (2011) proposes that if the kinesthetic sensation of movement (“I move”) comes prior to the realization of one’s ability to move or do something (“I can do”), then it follows that movement is not only fundamental to an awareness of being able to do and accomplish something, but also to a realization of the self as alive (“I can”): “Spontaneous movement is the constitutive source of agency, of subjecthood, of selfhood, the dynamic core of our sense of ourselves as agents, subjects, selves” (2011, 119). As range of movement and “I cans” increases people move along their path of continuously becoming and making sense. What is important in this perspective is the focus on movement and becoming as continuous change and not as mere movement from one position to another.

Two more points are relevant here: first, repeated movement in relation to space, time, and objects result in the experience of regularities with regards to kinesthetic sensations. These regularities engender “reliable kinesthetic expectations” (Sheets-Johnstone 2011, 125) without which one’s ability to move intentionally and consistently would be seriously hampered. Second, these reliable kinesthetic experiences involve integrity of the whole body, be it in movement or in a balance of stillness and movement. Reliable experiences of movement and bodily integrity are, therefore, intrinsic qualities of our sense of agency along the continuously revolving path of becoming a person. Such kinesthetic reliability does not only support a sense of existential security, it also makes it possible for skills to accumulate.

Ingold (2000) describes these skills as the capacity of perception and action of the embodied person within the environment arising from active engagement with their surroundings. He further defines skill as acting and being involved with an environment that is structured by current and past presences of others. In this way, becoming skillful and knowledgeable is not only an intersubjective process that involves other sentient beings but also includes past and anticipated future presences. Ingold refers to this process as “enskillment”. A person, according to Ingold, is the “locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships” (2000, 4). Continuity of self is the ability to go on, grow, innovate along this path, and to become knowledgeable through practical engagement with the environment (Ingold and Kurttila 2000, 192).

In summary, movement is a fundamental condition of perception and subjectivity, of ideas of self within space and time, of a sense of aliveness and agency, as well as a source of knowledge. The dynamic interrelationship of movement and sense of self and agency is qualified by three qualities of kinesthetic experience: change, reliability, and bodily integrity. With continued engagement and movement within the environment persons become enskilled with embodied knowledge that is dynamic and based in the inter-existence of environmentally, temporally, and politically situated agents.

1.4. Summary and Research Question

I have headed Part I with a quote I heard over and over again during my stay in Fort McPherson as good advice on how to learn and how to experience what life is like for Gwich'in in the community: "Get involved, be right in with the people". At first glance, this relates to ethnographic methods which will be the topic of the following chapter. However, as I hope to have illustrated above, *being right in with the people* reflects an understanding of experience as intersubjective, intentional, and embodied. It points to the idea of knowledge and enskillment in the phenomenological sense as arising from continuous engagement with one's surroundings. Phenomenology provides a dynamic and encompassing theoretical framework for the description of a wide variety of human experiences within their surroundings. It takes into account that perception and experience emerges within an environmentally and historically situated embodied person who is growing and becoming enskilled through continuous movement through and engagement with the world. While early phenomenologists described dimensions of experience such as intersubjectivity, intentionality, and temporality, I adapt a position more recently described by phenomenological anthropologists that focuses on relations, embodiment, and movement as primary conditions for perception, personhood, and knowledge.

In my questioning of how people transform experiences of adversity, suffering, and disenfranchisement into positive lives, I will consider all of these dimensions of experience following Jackson's concept of inter-existence and inter-corporeity. However, particular emphasis will be given to the role of movement and enskillment in transformational processes of personal lives within their environment. Literature on Aboriginal mental health emphasizes

that the root cause for social suffering in Aboriginal communities lies in the continuing effects of colonial politics and relations. During two preliminary field visits in the summer and winter of 2010 I found this reflected in the discourse of people in the Gwich'in Settlement Area (GSA). According to Elders and leaders in Fort McPherson, prevalent mental health issues, such as anger, depression, addiction, and violence, are the effects of the disruption of relationships in families, between generations, to land, language, and knowledge. Nevertheless, in each community several individuals can be found who are able to break the cycle of suffering and responses to it that are detrimental to their own and to social health. Fort McPherson sustained several volunteer initiatives in the 1970's until the 1990's that dealt with addiction (Peel River Alcohol Society) and suicide (Concerned Citizen's Committee). These initiatives were led by women who went through a period of addiction and recovery and subsequently felt the need to care for others. Today, volunteering is perceived as a reflection of a person who is doing well in their life and is often used as a signifier for healing or an ongoing personal transformation to living a good life.

In my attempt to share what I have learned about the experiences of suffering, transformation, and living a good life, I will illustrate the intersubjective, intentional, temporal, and embodied aspects of experience. Central will be the life story of Elizabeth Colin and her experience of suffering, renewal, and subsequent engagement and enskillment as a volunteer. I will allude to the past and future presences in her experience by tracing shared ideas of strength and well-being in Gwich'in oral history as well as memories of "long ago", the time of people's youth and the lives of their parents. I will consider the primacy of relations and intersubjectivity by contextualizing her experience in broader communal and national social, political, and economic processes. Most importantly, however, what struck me was the emphasis people gave to mobility, work, volunteering, keeping busy, and travelling in their stories. For this reason, I will focus on the role of movement and enskillment in perception and transforming experience.

Chapter 2

Gwich'in Pedagogy, Apprenticing, and Collaborative Research

Teet'it Gwich'in feel strongly about teaching outside researchers in their own way (Loovers 2010; Wishart 2004), which is travelling and working on the land, as well as visiting and helping in the community, rather than by giving formal interviews. Loovers (2010) wrote extensively about this pedagogy and how, as an anthropologist in Fort McPherson, he was expected to use both Gwich'in pedagogy and his academic training in his learning and writing. He suggests an amalgamation of both ways of knowing to produce a "more fully elaborated account of being" (2010, 47). Through previous research with Dene in the Northwest Territories (Luig 2011), I was acquainted with the ways of learning that are thought of as useful in northern Aboriginal communities as well as with the issues and concerns that stem from historical-political relationships in which the research encounter is embedded. Some critics argue that anthropological research has been preoccupied with what Jackson calls: "a consoling illusion passing itself off as a privileged glimpse into the hidden workings of the world" (1996, 5). As part of a politically and economically dominant knowledge system, anthropology has lent the results of its descriptive and theorizing work to inform and reproduce relationships of inequality and oppression (Nadasdy 2005; Caine, Davidson, and Stewart 2007; Irlbacher-Fox 2009; Coulthard 2007; Smith 1999). An important thinker in the anthropology of northern Dene as well as in the re-consideration of the anthropologist's role in fieldwork, Jean-Guy Goulet attributes such shortcomings to the failure to jointly live people's day-to-day lives on their own terms (1998, xvi-xviii). Such engagement allows for an appreciation of the ambiguities of experience and practice as well as of the limitations of anthropological knowledge. As a newcomer to Fort McPherson, people took an interest in what I was doing and often added a story or two about researchers who wrote about Gwich'in, claiming expert knowledge about them, without having been part of their lives. Or about researchers who had worked with the people and published about them, were said to have become wealthy as a result, and never gave anything back. It was these two disappointments that I heard when Elders told me stories that reflected their experience with research. At the same time, people would remind me of the most recent positive example of how research in the community should be approached. Peter Loovers, or "Gwich'in Peter" had been travelling with Elders on the land and stayed with men in bush camps for extended periods of time. As such, the encounter of researcher and the researched is

entangled in historical and political processes as well as in experiences of previous encounters with research that are invoked in every new encounter. Every new engagement of a researcher within a community is perceived through residual experiences and disappointments as well as expectations and hopes that the research would contribute to addressing local concerns. Tensions with regard to reciprocity within a research relationship are a reflection of such past experiences and future projections. Over time, a continuous, open-ended, and fragmented dialogue in between encounters of differing perceptions, embodied and storied knowledge, as well as ways of relating as a person to one's surroundings emerges. In this chapter I draw mainly on Jackson's and Goulet's work to argue for using an apprenticeship approach, life story recording, and collaborative video storytelling as primary research methods. In the second section I will discuss practical aspects of fieldwork, such as preliminary fieldwork, consultations, reciprocity, knowledge validation, as well as how these delimit "the field".

2.1. Gwich'in Ways of Learning: Apprenticing and Sharing Stories

As others before me (Wishart 2004; Loovers 2010), I found that Goulet's observation that "true knowledge is personal knowledge" (1998, 247) resonates with Teet'it Gwich'in ways of knowing. Gwich'in hold high regard for formal instructions and training and support everyone's educational success. Nonetheless, there is a widely held understanding that to *know* something one has to live it and be engaged with it. This is apparent in all of Gwich'in teaching whether it is of children, of southern Canadian teachers at Chief Julius School whom they take out on the land, whether it is in their preference for peer counsellors who have their own experience with alcoholism, or in their teaching of a researcher who enters the community with the desire to learn the "Gwich'in way of life". In his description of his fieldwork encounter with Dene Tha in northern Alberta, Goulet (1998) discusses primary experience as the most valid basis for knowledge for the Dene Tha, as well as the methodological implications this entails for the ethnographer. Epistemological emphasis on personal experience, observation, spending time on the land, and working renders any inquiry seriously limited if it is not based on full engagement with the life-world of the other, and continuous interaction with individuals and their world. In what Jackson terms "radical empiricism" (Jackson 1989, 2) the role of anthropology is re-conceptualized as an account of culture contact mediated by personal relationships and embodied experience (1998, 5). Intersubjectivity in ethnographic research blurs the lines

between researcher and the researched which “implies a reciprocal and analogical relationship not only between singular persons ... but between persons and a world of ideas, attributes, and things that are held in common without any one person having complete control over them or the last word on their meaning” (Jackson 1998, 7). Otherness and self in the fieldwork encounter is “an outcome or product of intersubjective engagement, not a given property of existence” (1998, 11). Intersubjectivity, identities, and ontologies, therefore, are continuously adjusted, lost, and recreated, necessitating a temporal perspective that traces connections of past, present, and future.

Intersubjectivity, thus, is the point of departure for what Goulet (1998) names *experiential ethnography*. Such ethnography is a “constantly situated, negotiated, a contingent outcome of ongoing processes of interpretation and reinterpretation” (1998, 257). What might be understood as *culture* in the ethnographic account is the potentiality of patterns that are practiced and legitimized in a specific place and time and that are continuously evolving and uncertain (Jackson 1998, 13-16).

Phenomenology translates into a methodological approach that parallels such experiential approach to knowledge (Goulet 1998) by gaining an understanding of experiences through experiencing alongside people and allowing the encounter to transform perceptions, subjectivities, and knowledge. Thus, the researcher takes on the role of an apprentice of the people he or she lives with in an attempt to experience what is at stake in people’s everyday experience of making a living. Learning is a matter of interacting within the environment, of “sensory participation with human and non-human components of the dwelt-in world” (Ingold 2000, 195), or, as Jackson calls it, “praktognosis” (Jackson 1998, 68). Gwich’in Elders’ teaching often consists of facilitating immediate relational and embodied experience. As Barral explains, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty: “Therefore, I cannot really reflect on a doctrine - and make it mine by assimilating its meaning - unless I “live it” in some way.” (Barral 1965, 38). Building on these foundations, I applied Goulet and Jackson’s proposition of “radical participation” (Goulet 1998, 2007) in people’s way of life, which at the same time corresponds to local pedagogy (Loovers 2010), as a method for answering my research question. My anthropological understanding, thus, emerged in the context of walking, travelling, sitting, working, talking with, and listening to people. As an apprentice in the community, I experienced narrative and dialogue in the context of the intersubjective processes that I am a part of as well as of social action and practices as embodied processes of transforming experience.

As I was interested in people who are known for their positive life changes, I connected to women who had a history of suffering, renewal, and helping. At first I compared myself unfavorably to previous anthropologists and their extended stays on the land, but I quickly realized that anthropological knowledge grows from the continuously emerging intersubjectivity that is necessarily in flux and varies according to the shifting situational and intentional backdrop of the encounter. My research question and focus, as well as aspects of my personality, led me to be immersed in the work, volunteerism, and household activities of women that to a large part took place in the community, not on the land. In particular, these activities included helping out at community events and with fundraising, participating in wellness workshops, visiting, sewing, cooking and baking, working with meat and fish, helping at the Band Office, and being at 8 Miles⁹ with women in their cabins. Most of my “data” consists of memory notes taken at night after a day full of encounters, work, and conversations. These notes contain descriptions of people, work processes, the unfolding of events, fragments of dialogues, as well as reflections of my experience of things. While memory notes are necessarily a selection and interpretation of events and dialogues, they are an accepted strategy of recording experiences when apprenticing requires an anthropologist to be fully present in engaging, working, and communicating with others.

Aside from these notes, which I took daily for the majority of the year, I conducted eight semi-structured interviews with wellness professionals, recorded 14 informal interviews that recount transformative life events¹⁰, and 21 stories reflecting on meanings of strength. I started recording life story interviews only after months of becoming involved in community life, making closer connections to some people, and hearing their stories. These stories and the narratives contained in them have to be understood not only in the context of people’s lives and circumstances, but also of intersubjectivity that the research encounter entails.

In anthropology, the analysis of narrative of experience serves the goal to understand how people negotiate views of self and others as well as how they orient themselves along their

⁹ 8 Miles, or *Nataiinlaili* in Gwich’in, is situated approximately eight miles up the river or 11 kilometres on the highway from the community. Here, the Dempster Highway crosses over the Peel River by ferry in the summer or by ice road in the winter. The area was used by Gwich’in for centuries for fishing and was also the site of frequent battles between Gwich’in and *Singlit* (Inuvialuit). Many community members have cabins and smoke houses here and use these places to enjoy a quieter life away from the community, set nets and work with fish, tan hides in the spring and summer, work with meat, have a cook-out or some quiet time to sew.

¹⁰ While being fully aware that these are not life histories but narratives concerning selected events, I will refer to them as life stories throughout this work.

pathways through past, present, and future. As I have pointed out in section 1.2. on narrating experience, narrative arises from a specific but fluid intersubjective space that includes the narrator's own ontological horizon, past, present, and future, immediate and imagined audiences, as well as the wider historical and socio-political context. I will follow Ochs and Capps (1996) in their definition of narratives as "verbalized, visualized, and/or embodied framings of a sequence of actual or possible live events" (1996, 19). Stories are a narrative genre among others, such as explanations, chronicles, diaries, legal testimonies, or opera (Ochs and Capps 1996, 19). What is most crucial to consider is that narratives not only communicate a sequence of events but also use "discursive evaluative devices" (Ochs and Capps 1996, 26; also see Linde 1993, 21) that make a point about the speaker, orient the audience's perception and understanding of the narrative, and reflects one version of reality that arises from the intersubjective space of the communicative event (Ochs and Capps 1996, 21-26; Linde 1993, 72). Thus, narrative includes not only the plot of an experience but also the presentation of the event, which means the order and form given to the presentation that draws on socially meaningful signifiers (Culler 1981, quoted in Mattingly and Garro 2000, 12). In this view, narratives affect stories, distort content in various ways, distance the story from lived experience, and shape it according to values, forms, as well as styles shared within a group of people. Narrative, therefore, never simply reflects experience; it is "a constructive process, grounded in a specific cultural setting, interaction, and history." (Mattingly and Garro 2000, 22). The coherence that is created in a story is less found in reality, but rather of a fictional character, one that speaks to what matters in a certain social context. In that, stories shape conduct, behavior, and move to act. This points to the performative aspect of narrative. Narratives can be enacted in behaviour and be seen as "unfolding personal and social drama" (Mattingly and Garro 2000, 17). This embodied aspect of narrative is reflected in Foucault's concept of discourse, which circumscribes a whole body of communications, including practices, between and within groups (Linde 1993, 223). The analysis of such discourses pays attention to power relations that constitute, shape, and affect discourse as well as to its historical dimension. I will use the term discourse in this sense when referring to the discourse of volunteerism or the discourse of certain socio-political groups or professional settings throughout the text.

Narratives also demonstrate ways in which humans construct temporality and make sense of the past as well as the present in order to orient themselves towards the future. Jason Throop (2003) identifies four different temporal orientations within experiencing and narrating

self: first, toward the present which consists of open possibilities in an unknown future; second, an anticipation of an imagined determined future that follows from residues of the past; third, an orientation towards the past which facilitates the construction of beginnings, middles, and ends of an experience; and fourth, the “subjunctive casting of possible futures and even possible pasts” (234). The latter point is reflected in Portelli’s (1991) argument that what is most important is that stories reveal what people intended to do instead of what they actually did. In choosing one alternative representation of a past experience over the other people re-negotiate their relationship to their history (50). The distance, that this casting of possible pasts and futures creates from lived experience is, according to Portelli, perhaps the most valuable source for a better understanding of people’s imagination, symbols, and desires (51). Hence, stories are always variable, partial, and unfinished. Changes in narrative might reflect changing politico-historical circumstances, identities, relations, and life projects; depending on these shifts some narrative elements might be added or emphasized and others may be hidden (53). Silence, what is not said, what is left out of a story, is just as important to consider as an intrinsic part of narrative. Jackson (1996, 2002) concludes that what drives storytelling, including its performativity, its silences, and its temporality, is the reconstruction of a sense of agency in intersubjective relationships.

Stories emerge in a negotiation of intentions, anticipations, and positions of the self and past, present, and future relations of both the narrator, the anthropologist, and imagined audiences. Palmer argues that Elders’ life stories in an Aboriginal community in British Columbia are passed on to other individuals not according to chronological temporal order but at “shared intersections of experience and place” (2005, 157). Place, experience, the relationship with the audience, as well as the intentions, understanding, and attention of the audience are therefore crucial elements in the collaborative production of a written account of a life story. This collaborative aspect of life story approaches has been exemplified in an exceptional way by Cruikshank’s (1990) work on life histories with Yukon Elders. She points to the importance of the narrative and cultural context for the analysis and understanding of stories as “their social meaning is linked to how they are actually used to discuss contemporary events” (1990, 346).

People in Fort McPherson, as other Indigenous peoples, have experiences with the impact of the writings of transient professionals on political processes that at times were perceived as harming and, at other times, as benefitting them. Telling their story to me, knowing that I would write for an urban professional audience as well as for the community, involves a

re-negotiation of agency that spans across our relationship, relations within the community, as well as with the larger society and policy makers. The dialogue in which these stories emerged is, therefore, not finished and the writing of this thesis is part of this ongoing conversation. Knowing that this text will be read not only by academic readers but also by the community and especially some of the people about whom I am writing, I am also partially addressing the narrators of these stories. Many times I shared my reflections with Elders, especially with Elizabeth Colin whose story is central to this thesis, in order to get a reading of my understanding through her response to my thoughts. Only recently, in February 2014, I travelled to the community with my first draft and discussed my interpretations with people. Some of this communication takes place through non-verbal cues which I understood at times and did not at other times. My interpretation in this thesis is an articulation of the extent of my understanding of what was at stake when mimic and gesture expressed what could not be said or written in words. As Crapanzano (1977,4) explains: "It is to these paralexical messages that we often, wittingly or unwittingly, respond" with an understanding that is as much product of communication as it is of the anthropologist's life experiences and extent of learning in the field. As writing a thesis involves selecting experiences, stories, and narratives that contribute to answering the research question, and this selection process is limited by the scope of the thesis as well as by matters of confidentiality and ethics; there are silences in this text that nevertheless shape my interpretations and conclusions.

My attempts to "be right in with the people" were at first seen as being "shy" by some people, a characteristic that is not positively connoted in Fort McPherson. After months of being at every event, trying to serve at feasts, visiting people in their homes, trying to square dance, eating everything, laughing and chatting, sewing and walking up and down main road, I had become, in all awkwardness and in some sense, "part of it" (see also Hastrup 2004, 465), as some people told me just before I left. This I am to this day, the intersubjectivity is continuous, on the one hand expanding the dialogue to an academic audience in writing this thesis, and on the other in my continuing relationships with people in Fort McPherson. People from the community come to Edmonton for a variety of reasons, medical appointments, conferences, shopping, rock concerts or hockey games. Visiting people at the hospital or going shopping with them has become part of my urban life and my friends and family have met several community members. My life has become interwoven with people's lives. Never before was I attentive to and keen to purchase shoe-laces (used as laces for canvas shoes and hard to come by in Fort

McPherson), ric-rac (decoration for canvas shoes), beads, tarps, arthritis ointment, dried apricots, or second-hand shirts for quilting. Now, however, my perception has become sharpened to what is needed to make a living in Fort McPherson.

In a similar way, people in the community wonder what I am doing now, where I am, and what I am writing. Loovers (2010) wrote how Charlie Snowshoe told him when he first met him not to “write any ‘bullshit’” because “we read everything” (46). This is exactly what I witnessed on several occasions as Chief and staff would sit together at the Band Office, reading Loovers’ dissertation, looking at the pictures, and commenting on how well he described things. Gladys Alexie, with whom I stayed, spent some of her evenings reading the about 300-page dissertation as well and kept it on her bookshelf. People in Fort McPherson engage with research and hope for its outcome to be useful for local issues. The concerns and hopes attached to this project were varied. Some community leaders wanted me to document the community’s past and present volunteerism. Over time political messages were added by others, a third party prioritized the documentation of Gwich’in “traditional” way of life. Knowing that academic texts are scrutinized and used by the people in the community, I wrote this text with both audiences in mind: academic readers as well as community leaders and others in Fort McPherson. Not only is my experience and understanding of ontological security, the role of movement, and well-being shaped intersubjectively, but so is this text a co-created narrative. I give considerable space to people’s own “voice” as requested in the Gwich’in Tribal Council Traditional Knowledge Policy (2004), further I share people’s stories as they emerged in a particular situation with me to considerable length, and finally, I have read pertinent passages of my first draft to people and adjusted my writing according to their wishes. I have discussed my interpretations and theoretical connections with people to ensure that the final text reflects shared experience and shared agency in producing anthropological knowledge. Following Jackson (2002, 15) in that “storytelling is a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances”, I aim to reflect this narrative imperative in this thesis without allowing interpretation and theoretical reflections to subvert the sense of agency communicated through their stories.

2.2. Collaborative Research

As Caine, Davidson, and Stewart (2009) pointedly argue, preliminary fieldwork enables researchers and community partners to explore topics that are meaningful to the community as well as fit the skill set and leanings of the researcher. With a broad research interest in mind, I travelled to the Northwest Territories in the summer of 2010 with the hope of finding a community where these general ideas would resonate. I first went to Yellowknife and used the opportunity to bring my M.A. thesis to the Aboriginal leaders of the region. In various conversations I was advised to try Lutsel'ke, Tulita, Fort McPherson, Inuvik, or Colville Lake. Based on the literature I had read throughout my studies (Parlee et al. 2007; Helm 1961 and 1976; Bielawski 2004), I had my heart set on Lutsel'ke. However, during my three-day stay in the community I realized that community leaders were interested in a line of research that I did not have the skills to conduct. Since I had been in Inuvik years before, volunteering for the Gwich'in Renewable Resource Board, I decided to fly to Inuvik next. Again, my knowledge of the literature led me to contact Alestine Andre from the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute to meet about the possibility of doing fieldwork in her home community of Tsiigehtchic. As a very small community of circa 180 people, she did not feel that there was enough support for research. However, she did point to Fort McPherson as a better option.

I had not considered Fort McPherson as a substantial amount of anthropological work has been done in this community. However, I had heard about the Midway Lake Music Festival and, since I was there at the right time, I caught a ride to check it out. We arrived late and I put up my tent in the dark in what I thought was a good, empty spot. The next morning I realized that I had set up my tent just behind someone's camp, in the middle of a patch of berries. I went over to apologize and ask if I could stay there and learned that the owners of this camp were from Fort McPherson. During the next couple of days at the festival I met numerous Teet'it Gwich'in who all expressed a genuine interest in what I was planning to do. Shortly after I visited the community again to meet with leadership and Elders who were recommended to me to discuss how my question related to what many in the community thought should be done. When I explained that I was interested in understanding how people come through hardship, people answered by saying that it would be good if I documented past and present volunteerism. They also listed further names of Elders that I should speak to. Volunteering had not been on my mind at all when I started to think of a potential project. My previous research had sparked my interest in working on the land as a healing practice (Luig 2011). A more recent

engagement with a Gwich'in researcher from Inuvik who I met during an internship in Yellowknife had intrigued me with her interest in sewing as a healing practice for women. Volunteerism as a research focus was quite an unexpected turn. However, in listening to Elders sharing their first thoughts on my question, it quickly became apparent that most of them could personally speak to my topic of suffering and renewal and that their lives had been filled with volunteerism. Pondering these aspects I prepared a research proposal, negotiated a Research Agreement with the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (GSCI)¹¹ and visited the community again in winter for approval. In December 2010, the Teet'it Gwich'in Council as well as the Hamlet Council approved my project with the objective to investigate how people transform suffering into positive lives through embodied practices, such as volunteering, sewing, and working on the land.

As mentioned above, leaders and Elders in Fort McPherson are interested in research that might contribute in some way to addressing local concerns. Political process, such as the negotiation of the Comprehensive Land Claim, the implementation of co-management boards, and the second round of community consultations for the Mackenzie Gas Project, sparked research interests that focused on land use, subsistence activities, plants, and Gwich'in ways of relating to the environment. The research of Wishart (2004), Parlee (2006), Murray (2002), and Loovers (2010)¹² responded to these needs. The latter's main focus was Gwich'in pedagogy and language, two central concerns that have increased in importance in Fort McPherson within the past decade.

These political concerns had shifted again when I first visited the community. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission¹³ (TRC) had taken up their work, the Common Experience Payments had been distributed in 2007 and individual claims against abuse in residential schools were being processed. In the year of my preliminary fieldwork, the funding that maintained healing programs at the T'oonih Healing Lodge 20 miles up the Peel River had been cut. The second national event of the TRC was planned in Inuvik for 2011. Residential school experiences, social suffering and healing had moved much more into the forefront for people in the North. In

¹¹ See GSCI (2004) Traditional Knowledge Policy

¹² Loovers' (2010) dissertation follows a different focus. He does, however, elaborate on Gwich'in relationships with the land and emphasizes the importance of travelling and knowing the land and the river.

¹³ See TRC website at <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3>

such context documenting positive stories of healing as well as emphasizing the strength of the community volunteerism was a good fit as a research project at that time.

During the two preliminary field visits, I also was able to consult with leaders and Elders about research methods and found that people were not only fatigued from giving interviews and participating in surveys, they also were firm in their knowledge that in order to learn about Gwich'in life one has to be out on the land with people and get involved in the community. Complementary to this general approach, leaders and Elders appreciate the recording of life stories as well as any video material of community life as documentation for future generations. In drafting a Research Agreement with the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute I was able to draw on the valuable input of this preliminary fieldwork.

While these objectives focused my attention on certain practices and methods during fieldwork, the learning that I experienced to a great extent emerged from the relations that developed throughout my stay, rather than from my own direction. First, my initial motivation to understand sewing as healing practice gave way to working and volunteering as I became more involved in the community and the narratives that were shared with me pointed me in that direction. For this reason, sewing does not play as important a role in the argument of this thesis as originally planned. Second, women are the most active volunteers in the community and play a critical role in maintaining or caring for community well-being. Most suffering and the need for these women to become active takes place in the community. Hence, I was engaged much more with community activities than with travelling on the land and most of my examples come from women's lives. Third, all aspects of my research question and elements that promised to lead to partial answers seemed to cluster in Elizabeth Colin's life story, her present experience, as well as in our shared work and conversations. She was not only willing to share her experience with me, but we also felt comfortable with each other and I spent considerable time with her. Thus, it is her story that I came to understand best and chose to place at the centre of this thesis.

Reciprocity is an important aspect of research in Fort McPherson, as it is in other Aboriginal contexts (Anderson 2006), and one that continues to concern me as well as community members. Broader discussions on Intellectual Property Rights also take place in Fort McPherson and people expect their information to be valued and respected. The Traditional Knowledge Policy (2004) of the Gwich'in Tribal Council states the need for compensation of knowledge holders for their time working with the researcher, but does not determine the type

of compensation. In this case again, reciprocity is relational and negotiated between the researcher and community members. Such negotiations are non-verbal and require a certain understanding of community life in order for the chosen compensation to be appropriate. At first, I gave people completely inept gifts: tobacco had been a welcome sign of gratitude and means of compensation during my M.A. research in the Yellowknife region, in Fort McPherson, however, that was uncalled for. Many times I would give women Elders beads only to find out that they did not sew because of their poor eyesight. Over time, I learned what people liked and, besides financial compensation for recorded stories, I started bringing oranges, sewing supplies, tarps, coffee and tea, or whatever else could be useful. As one of my questions during my presentations at council meetings was how my work could be of tangible benefit to the community, the young community members of the Youth Council came up with the request to involve the local youth in creating visual material. In January 2012, I started planning what could be done with the Youth Council and the young councillors decided on a digital storytelling project in the form of a video competition. I purchased cameras for participants and organized workshops that taught basic knowledge of video storytelling as well as video editing. The Gwich'in Tribal Council lent laptops for the duration of the project and the Hamlet Council generously donated funds to purchase a camera as a first prize. Five young community members completed their stories and presented them to the community in June 2012. People in Fort McPherson have a keen interest in film and video and expressed their feelings that video and film are useful contributions that researchers could give back to the community. Based on this I made about ten videos about community events, recorded 21 "Stories of Strength" (Luig and Teet'it Gwich'in Elders 2013), and a documentary video on the Peel River Alcohol Centre (Luig and Teet'it Gwich'in Elders 2014). While I produced these videos mainly as my way to give back to the community, this thesis partially draws on the narratives of these videos as well.

As summarized by Castleden et al. (2008) collaborative research is an attempt to address power differentials in research. Engaging in preliminary consultations and paying close attention to what community members thought was important for answering my question as well as to address their own local concerns were aspects of collaboration before and during fieldwork. After fieldwork, this collaborative approach was maintained to the extent possible. I transcribed all audio and video recordings and presented them to the storytellers either in person during a follow-up visit or through a local research assistant. I made changes according to participant's wishes in both the audio recording and the transcript. Some community partners

requested parts of the recording or the transcript to be deleted or some preferred that I changed their narrative to conform to proper English grammar and style. Despite my best efforts, however, I was not able to reach all of the participants. After this process, I repeated a consent procedure to determine whether or not participants wanted the transcript and recording stored at the archive of the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute as my research agreement requests. I also presented rough and final cuts of the videos to everyone involved and sought people's approval before manufacturing DVDs. Further, in February 2014, I travelled once again to Fort McPherson to bring back the DVD set "Stories of Strength" and to consult with key community partners about my draft and my use of their voice. While these strategies are meant to give community partners control over what is written, over the accuracy of my understanding of their message, and over how their narrative is embedded in the overall argument, they also are time-intensive, demanding of people's motivation to engage with the research process, and might at times be experienced as overbearing.

Part II. Memories of Strength, Crisis, and Transformation – The Role of Ontological Security

Chapter 3

Long Ago: Movement, Enskillment, and Relatedness in Gwich'in Oral Tradition

Experience emerges at the interface of past, present, and future, of relations to others and to the environment, is oriented toward personal life projects and reflects intentions which are embedded in the social, historical, and idiosyncratic life world of an individual. Perception and experience become possible in active engagement with the world and, therefore, necessitate bodily movement. As the temporal dimension of experience that shapes perception not only contains intentions towards the future, but also always contains residues of past experience, I need to consider Gwich'in past and history, their movement and travel, transmitted knowledge of their relationships among themselves and with others, notions of what a good and strong person is, and what role a person should play within the group in order to understand how people experience hardship and transform their experience to live a good life today.

Gwich'in transmit accounts of important events, remarkable people, behavior of animals, warfare, and travel orally through generations. Their stories reach into a past where humans and animals were said to interact directly, through a common language, and through marriage and reproduction (see Heine et al. 2001). These stories often begin with the words "long ago" (Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Smith 2009) to demarcate a period of time that is prior to the speaker's own or their parents' and grandparents' experience (3). Gwichya Gwich'in Elders explain in *Gwichya Gwich'in Googwandak* (Heine et al. 2001, 3-4) that *Ts'ii deji* (long ago) days mean a time from the earliest days until around the time when the first Europeans came to this land. Stories of events and people which originate from an eyewitness' memory, either living Elders or their parents and grandparents, are categorized as stories from the "olden days". Slobodin (1962), the first ethnographer to conduct extensive fieldwork with Teet'it Gwich'in, heads his discussion of the "post-contact period" of 1840-1898 as the "Old days". At the time of his fieldwork in Fort McPherson in 1938-39 and 1946-47, this period would have been remembered by living Elders and the stories they heard from their parents and grandparents. Stories from the old days will be the focus of the section following the present discussion of legendary Gwich'in, their experiences of hardship, survival, and strength in *ts'ii deji* stories.

These stories have been collected and published only recently in their own right (Kritsch and Andre 1993; Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation and Smith 2009; Heine et al. 2001; Sax and Linklater 1990; Beaumont 1998; Simon 1982). Oral history stories are told in a certain context, prompted by an occasion, with a particular audience in mind, as well as in variations depending on experience and understanding of the storyteller. As such, they differ in details in various publications. Earlier sources include *The Book of Dene* (1976), a collection of stories told to the oblate priest Emile Petitot (1838-1916), and several stories that Slobodin (1915-2005) included in his ethnographic writings. In much academic and political discourse until the late 20th century, however, a different history has been written, one that is based on descriptions of European explorers, traders, and missionaries who thought of themselves as ‘discovering’ isolated ‘primitive’ people.¹⁴

Fabricated in academic and political arenas, these descriptions are drawn from accounts of fur traders who have worked in the country, but who have excluded what they have learned, or had taught to them, from their journals and articles. [...] These crafted images have continued to emphasize a linear historical expansion of Western civilization. (Loovers 2010, 104).

While Alexander Mackenzie, who delivered the first written record about the Gwichya Gwich'in, is generally seen as representing the beginning of European Gwich'in contact, Loovers (2010) traces several accounts of materials, trade goods, and prophecies from Gwich'in oral history that preceded Mackenzie's first encounter with the Gwichya Gwich'in in 1789. Nevertheless, Mackenzie's report and description of the region opened up this part of the North for intensified trade and, subsequently, for missionary efforts of the Catholic and Anglican Churches. It was followed by letters and publications of fur traders, missionaries, and explorers who came to the area in the name of colonial trade enterprises such as the Hudson's Bay or of different variants of European churches (Loovers 2010).

These written historical accounts of Gwich'in life cover less than 200 years and are written from the perspective of European professionals who were invested in the colonial enterprise and who produced texts that were filtered through their own understandings of social life, their own experiences and upbringing, as well as their judgment of ways of life that were unfamiliar to them. These texts reveal ontological and philosophical perspectives of the

¹⁴ For an extensive discussion of how Gwich'in history has been written by Europeans as a story of discovery of superstitious and barbaric people in need of help and civilization while ignoring the Europeans' experiences of being taught and helped by Gwich'in see Loovers (2010).

time and reflect as much about the way of being of the authors as about Gwich'in understandings of the world.

To privilege European accounts of history over indigenous peoples' own histories would again re-tell a colonial tale of conquest of the northern frontier. For this reason I attempt to balance Gwich'in oral history with historical ethnographic accounts. While a discussion of the "crafting of histories" is extremely valuable it has been done elsewhere (Loovers 2010) in a most intriguing way and will not be the focus of this present work. Thus, throughout this chapter, I will explore Gwich'in oral history that is available to me in textual form, and glean from these narratives what was crucial in living through hardship and through good times, as well as what is at stake when people recall these stories as accounts of their past. While I chose oral history as my point of departure, I will refer to some of the relevant debates in academic writing and situate the stories in their political and social context.

The first story explains how Gwich'in in the Northwest Territories, Yukon Territory, and Alaska are related and stems from one wise and strong woman. The second speaks about the legendary leader Atachuukajji who travelled Gwich'in land and is responsible for many features of the land and for the relationships Gwich'in have with many animals (Heine et al. 2001). The third story provides insight into crisis and survival in everyday relationships between the individual and the group. Although the intersubjective, situational, and intentional background is lost by taking these stories from the context in which they are told as teachings, the way these events are recounted still offers insight into how Gwich'in talk about the following topics: individual and collective strength, coping with crisis and hardship, movement and travel, relationships to the land and places, Gwich'in livelihood, as well as the relations of Gwich'in ancestors within their surroundings.

3.1. Mother to all Gwich'in

The following story was told to Effie Linklater from Old Crow and has been recorded in *Jijuu. Who are my grandparents? Where are they from?* (Beaumont 1998), a genealogy of Fort McPherson families and family names published by the Gwich'in Enrollment Board under the lead of Sharon Snowshoe and written by Susan Beaumont. This story explains how Gwich'in relate back to one family, how their family names come about, and why these names change over time (1998, 27). Effie Linklater's great-great grandmother was a woman by the name of

Shhdaiinuvent. She was one of the six grand daughters of *Tthaa nan dahk'wan*, which means "chews the backbone of ground squirrel" (Beaumont 1998, 29). She also used the name *Tl'in Nagwivee Dal'e*, which refers to her clothing made from rabbit skin. The story is not only about how this woman came to have these two names, but it is a narrative of an existential crisis, survival, extraordinary strength, and skill.

A long time ago, in the days when Indians and Eskimos fought and killed each other, a special woman lived around the Tanana or Fairbanks area. She was very powerful, wise, and strong, and she worked just like a man. Her tribe, which included between 200 and 300 adults, respected her so much that they made her their leader, like a chief.

One summer and fall, there was no food. The caribou did not come, and people soon ate up the dried fish, rabbits and other small game they could find. Without caribou, people were getting very hungry. The leader realized that her people were in great danger. So she organized two teams of young people. One team was made up of eight young, fast and wise young girls. The other team included eight young men, good hunters, who were as reliable and dependable as the young girls. She looked after these young people as well as she could. But despite her best efforts, all the people died off, including her young people, and she was left alone.

She was becoming very weak by the time spring arrived. She decided to go towards the mountains. She had to crawl sometimes because she was too weak to walk. Finally, she reached the foothills of the mountains. The sun was shining brightly and the ground squirrels were beginning to come out. She crawled towards the holes where the squirrels lived and she set her snares of sinew and fine babiche. She caught one ground squirrel. She cut up the squirrel and put it in her birch bark pot, along with water and snow. She put in some heated rocks that were so hot they would bring the water to boil. She kept on taking out the rocks that had cooled and replacing them with hotter rocks so that the water would boil and the meat would cook, making a good broth. [...] People say she brought herself back by eating the ground squirrels. [...]

One day, two hunters were canoeing up the river and stopped at her camp. [...] As was the custom then, they moved into the woman's hut and lived with her, so she had two husbands. They went out hunting for her, and she worked with whatever they brought home. The woman had two sons and a daughter. The daughter became the ancestor to man across the North; she had six daughters of her own. Five of these daughters married men from other regions and had many children. So they multiplied all over the place in the North. All of the people in this cold northern country came from the same family. But because it was so hard to get food in those days, everyone split up and went different ways. Wherever they settled, they stayed – that's how it is in our country. (Beaumont 1998, 27-29)

Today Gwich'in live in several communities in what is now interior Alaska, northeastern Yukon, and the Mackenzie drainage in the Northwest Territories. There is evidence that groups of Gwich'in speakers travelled and hunted these and other regions further west since millennia (Ives 1990; Osgood 1936a,b; Raboff 1999). Since the earliest written records Gwich'in have been described as perceiving themselves as a group distinct from their Athapaskan speaking

neighbors. Because of their relatively similar life ways, this is usually attributed to Gwich'in representing a special case within the Athapaskan language family. According to Krauss and Golla (1981), Gwich'in is rather unintelligible to neighboring people with the exception of the Han. This story talks about one woman from whom all Gwich'in descend. She lived in what today is Alaska and the story refers to her as "Indian" to contrast her from neighboring enemies, the "Eskimo" (Inuit). Conflicts with Siglit (Inuit) are prominent in Gwich'in oral history and raiding went on well into the 19th century.

The land Gwich'in travelled offered rich game and fish populations. The main sustenance for Gwich'in to this day is *vadzaih* - caribou, which play an extremely important role in the Gwich'in life world. People feel related to caribou in such a way that it is said that caribou have part human hearts and humans have a part of the caribou heart ever since the time when humans and caribou stopped speaking the same language (Fafard and Kritsch 2005). To substitute caribou meat, fish were harvested and dried in large quantities for food for humans and dogs. In addition, small mammals, such as beaver, hares, muskrat, squirrels, and porcupine, were trapped. Seasonality and flexibility of resource availability made travel and movement, as well as flexible organization into different size groups, foundational to Gwich'in lives. If caribou were hunted on a large scale, numerous hunters engaged in the effort using surrounds or corrals to trap the animals. In other instances, depending on the season and the region, men would follow the animal tracks individually or in small groups (Slobodin 1981, 515-517). The summer was the season for larger gatherings with the purpose of trading, ceremony, dance, and games. Most of the year was spent in smaller, what Richard Slobodin called "local groups" (1962, 1981) consisting, ideally, of three generations of one family, frequently paired up with the family of a sibling or a friend.

Caribou, moose, and fish are plentiful sources of food in the subarctic environment. However, the vast areas that animals and humans cover in search of food sometimes prevent their paths from crossing. Many stories tell of starvation and, at times, of exceptional Gwich'in who, through cleverness and determination, survive and go on to save others from certain death.

Such is the case in the above story: the caribou did not migrate through the region where people expected them leaving a group of 200-300 adults hungry over summer and fall. During the summer fish in the rivers are plenty and people dry and smoke large amounts as food for themselves and their dogs. The story recounts that people ate up the dry fish and started

living off rabbit, a type of meat with little fat or nutritious value. To ensure the continuity of the group, the leader selected and trained sixteen of the best, most reliable, and strong youth, eight girls and eight young men. These youth were hoped to be the survivors from whom the 'tribe' could reproduce and grow after the starvation was over. They embodied the most valuable qualities: speed and wisdom for the girls, as well as excellent hunting skills and reliability for the boys. The leader herself comprised all of these characteristics. People chose her as leader because she was "powerful, wise, and strong, and she worked just like a man." (Beaumont 1998, 27). Personal strength and authority in this story is based on work, on exercising skills that are built from being engaged in a diverse range of tasks. In her example, she had become knowledgeable in skills customarily performed by women as well as tasks primarily performed by men. As a wise leader, she selected a group of young people who exhibit all qualities that ensure successful survival of the group. The first quality, "fast", refers to physical and mental agility, an ability to move swiftly, to travel wide areas in search for food and good camping grounds. Becoming fast necessitates constant movement and training as well as a light, strong body.

As the second quality, the girls were considered "wise". During my conversations in Fort McPherson, the word "wise" was used in connection with Elders who teach, give advice, and make good decisions. Being "smart" on the other hand was used for people who practise skills, who learned how to tan hides, who knew how to cut meat, how to fish and hunt, how to sew. People with such skills are known to be "smart". The word *wisdom* appears to have meanings that go beyond being skillful and include a relational dimension that applies to an understanding of social processes, an ability to make decisions for the benefit of all, and to think with foresight. The young men were all good hunters and able to support families with food. All of the youth were reliable and dependable, thus, maximizing security and survival for everyone. Is it interesting to note, that these youth, selected for the best qualities as a foundation to renew the group, comprised females and males in an interlinked manner, with a male focus on subsistence skills and a female focus on cognitive, social, and physical excellence. All, however, had to be dependable and reliable, indicating the imperative of using one's strength and social intelligence for the benefit of the group.

Despite the leader's choice of the best youth she is left as the sole survivor. By continuously moving and working her skills she was able to survive starvation in an environment where isolation from others means certain death. She is portrayed as emerging even stronger,

independent from others, confident in her ability to live off what the land and the animals provide. When the men arrived on the river, she did not need them to rescue her. Instead, the woman welcomed them to stay with her, to help and hunt for her. From then on she referred to herself as *Tthaa nan dahk'wan* – chews the backbone of ground squirrel. Her identity, articulated in her name, was rooted in her experience of moving through crisis and renewal.

According to this story, Gwich'in trace their origin through matrilineal descent to this woman (Beaumont 1998, 29). She had six granddaughters who all married men from other regions and moved around different ways in search of food. Five of them had many children who multiplied all over the north, along the Peel River, in the Gwichya area (today's Tsiigehtchic), and around Fort Good Hope; others in the Yukon (around contemporary Dawson City and Old Crow), and some around Eagle and near Arctic Village, Alaska. Early 20th century anthropologist Osgood (1971), who was interested in categorizing Gwich'in along the now obsolete lines of the contemporary unilinear evolutionist perspective into stages of social complexity, wrote that there were three "clans" among the Gwich'in, and that membership in a clan was determined matrilineally. Although subsequent anthropologists did not confirm the existence of Osgood's clans, Slobodin (1962) also discusses Peel River group organization as "matrilineal". Emphasis on matrilineality is expressed mainly through initial matrilocality of newly married couples. If the parents of the bride are relatively well off, the young couple might stay with them for longer. Shepard Krech, III (1978) supports this argument by stating that there is no evidence for patrilineality and patrilocality before trade with Europeans began and that Aboriginal matriorganization is most likely.

In contemporary community life, women continue to occupy decisive roles. Households are centered around women, often comprising several generations of mothers with their children. While men are more actively involved in political negotiations, either on the community, the regional, or national level, and are more frequently out on the land hunting and trapping, women are leading in planning and organizing community events, in occupying most of the community's administrative and other professional positions, cooperating in raising children and leading efforts to perpetuate the "traditional way of life", heading community church life, and in innovating ways to promote community well-being. The stories shared here will underline the unique role of women in shaping Gwich'in community life. As others have pointed out (Osgood 1936b, 131-132; Babb 1997; Fast 2002; Parlee, Andre and Kritsch 2014), early written reports of European colonizing agents about the subordinate role of northern

Athapaskan women might involve misperceptions that perhaps reflected European attitudes towards women at the time and Krech (1978, 722) suggests represent changes in social organization due to starvation and disease in the 19th century. Slobodin (1962, 56-57) for instance writes about a senior woman who was the leader of a local group at Husky River. He also observed women acting as leaders of extended family groups. In his description of a “trapping party” he mentions two women who were “strong and competent travelers” (1962, 48) one of them working as a trapper and teaching her husband the necessary skills of hunting marten. As will become apparent in the sections below, Teet’it Gwich’in women have been actively engaged in the whole range of subsistence activities that characterize life in the North. They travel long distances, drive dog-teams, build shelters, hunt, fish and trap, work with meat and hides, sew clothing, prepare medicine for the sick, as well as act as spiritual and political leaders.

The story of *Tthaa nan dahk’wan* also explains Gwich’in sense of belonging to the land they inhabit: “Wherever they settled, they stayed – that’s how it is in our country.” Thinking of themselves as all related and belonging to one family, Gwich’in groups referred, and to this day refer, to themselves according to the landscape where they stayed and travelled as opposed to a descent indicator. The word *Gwich’in* is a linguistic fragment meaning “one who dwells” (Osgood 1936b, 13) and is usually combined with a geographic location. Teet’it Gwich’in, for example, refers to the headwaters of the Peel River (Heine et al 2001, 48). The number of other historical Gwich’in groups is debated. Cornelius Osgood, based on interviews with Gwich’in from different regions that he conducted in Dawson, settled for eight “tribes” which are listed in the following according to their respective regions from west to east¹⁵: Yukon Flats Gwich’in (Gwichaa Gwich’in), Birch Creek Gwich’in (Dendoo Gwich’in), Chandalar River Gwich’in (Neets’ajj Gwich’in), Black River Gwich’in (Draanjik Gwich’in), Crow River Gwich’in (Vuntut Gwich’in), Upper Porcupine Gwich’in (Dagudh Gwich’in), Peel River Gwich’in (Teet’it Gwich’in), and Mackenzie Flats Gwich’in¹⁶ (Gwichya Gwich’in). Slobodin (1981) and Krech III (1978) list nine, adding the Di’hajj, a group which was suggested by Hall (1969 quoted in Slobodin 1981, 515; McKennan 1965 quoted in Raboff 1999). Burch and Mishler (1995), as well as Raboff (1999), analyze evidence from archaeology and oral history to support this hypothesis. The latter author, who is Gwich’in herself and able to use genealogies provided by her late father, argues

¹⁵ I have provided the Gwich’in language name in brackets based on the spelling in Heine et al. (2001, 48)

¹⁶ Arctic Red River Gwich’in in Slobodin (1981, 514)

for a 10th group, the K'iit'it on the western fringe of Gwich'in territory. Both groups were dramatically reduced in the second half of the 19th century by epidemics, became displaced by warfare with Inupiat, and eventually integrated into other Gwich'in groups (Raboff 1999). The book *Gikhyi* (Sax and Linklater 1990), which is part oral history, part archival material, adds yet another two: Ketsi and Tunon. The Birch Creek Gwich'in became extinguished through disease by the turn of the century. The Yukon Flats Gwich'in numbered only one family when Osgood met them in 1932 (Osgood 1936b, 14-15). In the Boasian tradition of the time, the attempt to separate Gwich'in speaking people into a number of "tribes", or "bands", has been of considerable importance for ethnographers of the first half of the 20th century. However, as early as Osgood (1936b), such undertakings have been described as difficult because of the continuous movement of people and the flexibility of their group organization (1936a, 5). Raboff makes the important argument that an essentialist treatment of Gwich'in groups is fruitless as Gwich'in tended to identify themselves by their hunting territory rather than by their descent (1999, 20). Examples for the fluidity of group identity and membership have been given by Slobodin (1962, 66) and Sax and Linklater (1990).

What is at stake in telling this story of origin is that Gwich'in descended from an extraordinary woman who was the leader of a large group, embodied the skills of women and men in one person, went through an existential crisis, and was able to renew her life and become the mother of a nation based on her persistence, enskillment, continued movement, independence and encompassing knowledge of the land, its resources and its dangers. In the liminal period of isolation from any relatives, near death, she continued moving and relying on her skills. She is portrayed as secure in her knowledge and skills of how to engage with her surroundings to renew her life and rebuild her people.

3.2. *Without Fire*

This story was first recorded by Emile Petitot (1976) at the end of the 19th century. Later, Richard Slobodin (1962) included a similar narrative in his notes during his fieldwork in Fort McPherson in the 1930's and 40's. Finally, the version I am using here is told by Eliza Andre of Tsiigehtchic in a collection published by the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute (Heine et al. 2001), as well as by Elders in Old Crow and published in *People of the Lakes* (Vuntut Gwichtin First Nation and Smith 2009, 21-35). It is a story of Atachuukajj, a legendary leader and traveller

known to many northern Athapaskans¹⁷, who is said to have lived in the Mackenzie Delta area (Heine et al. 2001, 19) and whose life is reflected in places in the Gwich'in territory (Tseenjoo's Hill east of Trout Lake, Heine et al. 2001, 19). It is a story of war and survival under the conditions of violence, loss, and deprivation.

Raiding and revenge between groups, for example as a consequence of murder or a dispute over women, was not uncommon for Gwich'in groups (Slobodin 1960a; Heine et al. 2001). Although the main enemies were Inuit who came up the Mackenzie and then the Peel River from the coast during the summer months, this particular story is about ongoing fighting with an "invincible" leader of a Slavey band (Heine et al. 2001, 19-26). According to Elders from Tsiigehtchic, the fight was about a wise and beautiful woman who became the wife of whoever won the fight, which is reflected in her name *Lete'tr'aandyaa* "moving back and forth" (2001, 19). After one of these fights, Atachuukajj was the only survivor of his group after he barely escaped, without clothes. Even worse, it was winter and he had no means to make fire. He survived by eating the still-warm intestines of the rabbits he killed along the way. Heine et al. (2001) explains: "It would have been extremely difficult for a single person to survive the winter all by himself, under the best circumstances. Without fire, this must have been almost impossible. [...] The fact that Atachuukajj was able to endure under such difficult conditions shows that he truly was one of the great leaders of ts'ii dejj days." (22). Only at the end of the winter he found another group of his people. After being safe, he chose the name *Kwan ehdan*: "man without fire". This story tells of an extreme demonstration of individual strength: Atachuukajj proved himself independent of people, of any material possession, and even of the life giving energy of fire. That these are attributes of the highest admiration is manifested in the frequency with which he is the main hero of northern Athapaskan legends. This legendary Athapaskan leader exemplifies the qualities of heroism that allowed him to survive the dangers of being separated from the group. Similarly to *Tthaa nan dahk'wan*, the exemplary woman from whom all Gwich'in descended, the hero Atachuukajj embodies the enskillment, knowledge, and agility that allow him to act in the face of hardship and unpredictability.

Atachuukajj is known not only for his great skills but also for his great travels. There are places that can be seen from the Dempster Highway that tell of his deeds and sometimes when I was travelling with people they would point that out to children, to each other, or to me. Travelling as an attribute of heroism calls attention to the role of mobility and travel in the

¹⁷ The Sahtu Dene know him as Yamoria.

Gwich'in way of life. Oral history, such as in the stories presented here, speaks of Gwich'in following caribou in the winter and finding good fishing sites in the summer. Stories speak of people leaving camp to move on, walking long distances, hunting, working, and living along the way. At the time when Richard Slobodin lived with Teet'it Gwich'in in the 1930's and 40's, he experienced them as always moving: "Summer or winter, the visitor will find people travelling. In cold weather he sees women and girls moving camp by dog team; a group of teen-agers on their way to a hunt; a party of older men, dog-teams secured at the end of timber, moving across the open high tundra on snowshoes at a shuffling, mile-eating pace that looks leisurely until one tries to keep up with the hunters." (1962, 14). In another context, Slobodin describes Peel River people as expressing high value for mobility and travel as well as a curiosity to explore other places. In the "old days", according to Slobodin, Teet'it Gwich'in territory covered roughly twelve thousand square miles in the mountainous area around the head of the Peel, between "Bald [sc. Mountain] Lake" to the southwest, the Peel River to the west, and south of Caribou Lake (Slobodin 1962, 26-27). Within this area, people moved around establishing hunting camps wherever caribou were close. After spring breakup, people built moose hide boats (see Fafard and Kritsch 2005) and travelled down the Peel River to the Hudson's Bay trading post established in Fort McPherson in 1840. Travelling from the mountains in the winter, to the river in the summer, and, increasingly since the mid 19th century, to Fort McPherson for church holidays, trading, and celebrations shaped the seasons, experiences, learning, and way of being for Teet'it Gwich'in. Loovers (2010) expands Slobodin's proposal that travelling is a way of being and of becoming a person and argues that travelling *is being and knowing* (2010, 56). This argument resonates with my theoretical foundations outlined above that presume movement as a primary mode of perception and experience. Thus, attention to movement and travel will be my point of departure for understanding ontological security and personal transformations from experiences of suffering to a sense of well-being. As one of the primary dimensions of perception and sense-making, kinesthetic experience, travelling and moving is seen here as an existential backdrop for being, becoming a person, becoming knowledgeable, and a sense of existential security.

3.3. Bella Alexie: An Old Legend ... About a Newlywed Couple

The last story in this section is another example for the way legendary strength and excellence is narrated in Gwich'in stories of long ago. The outstanding qualities that make this woman the hero of this story are her skill to make do with what is provided by the land and animals, her ingenuity and creativity in the face of unpredictability, her unremitting work and commitment to the community despite being abandoned, as well as her assertiveness vis-à-vis others. As seen in the two previous stories, separation from the group is equaled to impending death. The heroine of this story faces that same existential threat which she overcomes by recourse to applying her knowledge, skill, and tireless work to new and uncertain circumstances. This not only ensures her personal survival but also makes her instrumental to the survival of the group. The story was told by Bella Alexie, who was the grandmother of Gladys Alexie.

The temperature was very low in the middle of winter. People were moving through the mountains in search of food. The young wife jokingly said, "I will take a long time to sew the soles onto these boots." The foolish young groom became unhappy. He was so angry that he took her warm parka off of her and left her to freeze in the cold. Word went around the camp like wildfire. Everyone was busy packing to move on. They all minded their own business. Fortunately for the young woman, she had a friend in the camp. As the people moved on, ignoring her, the friend stopped by her long enough to inform her of the hot coals she had left under the bushes for her. She also left some sinew for her. (Thompson and Kritsch 2005, 4-5)

From the coals she was able to build a fire, and with the sinew she made snares to catch the many ravens that were gathering at the abandoned camp. She skinned the ravens and made a warm coat for herself. She moved along and found a river where she caught rabbit and porcupine. She made herself beautiful clothing from rabbit skin, decorated with dyed porcupine quills. In spring, after the ice moved, two men came in a canoe. She took both as her husbands. With them, the woman continued to work hard and made good outfits, dresses, and parkas. In fall, her people came to this area and they were starving. The three invited the people and prepared food for them. She was able to save the people who had deserted her before.

The hero of this story is again a woman who is skilled and confident in making a living on the land. Rejected by her husband and abandoned by the people of her camp, she was expected to die in the cold of the subarctic winter. Yet, with a minimum of resources, some coals and some sinew, she was able to feed and clothe herself. During this period of crisis and liminality, the ability to make use of unusual material (raven skin and feathers), to sew a warm coat for

herself, to keep moving, to inhabit and use the land became the basis for her survival. Sewing is one of the main tasks of women and, even though men also learn to sew and often are able to repair their own shoes and clothes, today, sewing is a matter of pride for women in Fort McPherson. However, sewing is only one of the many responsibilities of women in Gwich'in communities. Elders remember how women would work and be busy all day, from the time they got up until they went to sleep. In charge of the camp, while the men are out hunting, women would take care of children, keep the shelter clean, maintain the fire, gather and cut wood, bring in ice and snow for cooking and washing, set snares for rabbit and other small game, set nets and work with fish, prepare the meat, cook meals, tan hides and make clothing for the whole family (Heine et al. 2001, 141-153). Women also gathered plants and berries in the summer months for food and medicine (Parlee, Andre, and Kritsch 2014). When it was time to move the camp, it was the women who pulled sleds and carried children as well as most of the family's belongings while the men went ahead to break trail and hunt along the way.

Her knowledge of the land was not limited to the familiar and tried, but embodied in active engagement with her surroundings, no matter how dire the circumstances. Moving around the land and creatively using her skills allowed her to survive, even thrive, and accumulate wealth that she, eventually, shared with the people who had abandoned her before and now were starving. When her husband attempted to take her back, she rejected him but did not withhold the food and shelter he needed to survive. Resting assured in her ability to live self-sufficiently she reinforces the value of interdependency that had been breached before through her husband's actions.

3.4. Movement and Enskillment in Gwich'in Oral History

All three stories depart from the same situation of existential threat: isolation from the group, which, without the cooperation of one's relatives and in the cold of the winter, amounts to the negation of one's humanity. It is a situation that, even under the best conditions, often meant death. The heroes of these stories, however, not only succeed in surviving the extreme temperatures, hunger, and dangers of bears or wolves – they supersede their contemporaries and rise to the status of legendary ancestors, heroes, and saviours. *Tthaa nan dahk'wan* becomes the ancestor to Gwich'in and her grandchildren and great-grandchildren travelled and stayed all throughout the north. *Atachuukajj* is remembered as a great hero, leader, and traveler

whose legacy is reflected in places and stories. The young woman in the last story, even though her name is not transmitted in this story, becomes the one to save the people from certain starvation. In these instances, when the existence of the people was at extreme risk, it was through one skilled and wise person that the Gwich'in re-emerged and reproduced. As an individual becomes separated from the group and survives the existential challenge of isolation, she or he becomes the source of renewal.

Slobodin (1960b) discusses in depth what he understood about Teet'it Gwich'in feelings towards individuals who had become separated from the group and survived on their own in the bush. His choice of "anxiety" as an analytical concept to understand Gwich'in understandings of what it means to be isolated from others reflects the debates of cognitive anthropologists working with northern indigenous peoples in the 1960's. Despite borrowing a concept from psychology and potentially evoking unwanted connotations, his writings offer an ethnographically-based response to what scholars of the subfield of Cognitive Anthropology, which was prominent at the time, suggested. Using four stories that he was told by eyewitnesses he concluded that the simultaneous fear and solidarity that is shown towards the lone survivor or isolate illustrates first, an equation of physical distance with social distance and, the converse, the expression of social solidarity by physical nearness. Second, uncertain emotions towards solitude are rooted in a voiding of social status that is caused by an individual's isolation, and is therefore, understood as dehumanizing. Third, people are willing to reintegrate an isolated individual into the group, although not without caution and ordeal (1960b, 132).

In light of the stories of isolated individuals that this section presented, I agree with Slobodin in that separation from the group equals the negation of one's humanity. Personhood emerges in intersubjective space of engagement with humans and one's environment. Rejection or isolation from the group likely means death. However, the idea of Gwich'in social fabric that these stories transmit is one of a web of skillful and contributing individuals, who are able to transcend constraints of wealth or age ranking by their ingenuity and effort. Using individual knowledge, skill, and effort, such people play a decisive role in the survival of the group.

Mary Effie Snowshoe, a Teet'it Gwich'in Elder, was adamant in her conversations with me about lone survivors that these were highly skilled individuals rather than people in

situations that were cause for fear¹⁸. As an example she offered a story from her youth¹⁹ when she lost contact with her travel companions and was caught in a storm on a trip from Fort McPherson back to Snare River where her family was staying. At 18 years old she was sent with her dog team from Snare River, today in the Yukon Territory, to Fort McPherson to get supplies. It was in February when the days are still very short and the temperatures drop far below 30 or 40 degrees Celsius. She and a few others arrived in Fort McPherson, bought all their groceries, and stayed a few days. On their way back, however, Mary Effie encountered bad weather: storm and snow so strong that neither she nor her dogs were able to find the trail: "And I knew it was a lot, a lot of wolves around, but again I prayed and I started walking. I tied a rope to my leader and I start walking. I just walk, walk, I don't even know where I was going. What I was really scared of – what if I was on top of a mountain and it was bad snow there? I was worried about snow slide." (M.E. Snowshoe, 16/03/2012). Finally she came across an area with some trees. She applied the teachings of her father and dug out the snow to make a fire that is protected from the wind:

And I thought to myself, I have to do something to overnight here, I can't go any further. I couldn't even tie my dogs, it's blowing so hard that I couldn't even tie my dogs. But I had good axe, I dug a snow and made a teepee with little trees and I put one of my blankets around it and put snow on it and inside I put brush from trees and big fire right by my teepee there and I made my bed inside, but I sat to the fire most of that night. And then I built a big fire again and I crawled into my teepee, I took my rifle in there. And I crawled into my blanket, I had my caribou mattress there and I went in my teepee and I tried to sleep but the sound of the wind, that's all you heard. From the trees, you could hear the trees going back and forth in the wind, you could hear the sound. And I lie there and next thing I hear wolves howling from the mountain, here and there, you could hear, sometimes is more, you could hear it's a bunch because it's more than one wolf howling. A lot of wolves was howling on the mountains and that's not very far. And, I finally fell asleep. (M.E. Snowshoe, 16/03/2012)

The next morning she made fire again, put some tea on and ate frozen bannock. The leader of her dog team stood up too and barked at her, both happy that the other is alive and well. Mary Effie fed her dogs dry meat. She put her snowshoes on and started walking ahead of her dogs in the direction of where her sled was pointing. Hours after that she hit the trail leading back to her family's camp at Snare River. Reflecting back at how she survived such an threatening

¹⁸ Others did agree that people had to be careful of some individuals living in the bush alone for various reasons. One reason that was offered was that these solitary men were soldiers trying to avoid military service (pers. communication).

¹⁹ For full story see Appendix.

situation, she said: “And, I think, I knew all this, how to survive out there, if I get into danger, if I know I am stuck, is because I had a teacher and that was my dad. But I made it back to Snare River with all the things that he wanted.” (M.E. Snowshoe, 16/03/2012)

I suggest that these stories of isolation and survival demonstrate both the importance of self-sufficiency that is entangled in relationships with the land and the animals as well as the collective orientation of individual work and effort. Further, continued movement and creative action that is guided by the embodied knowledge that emerges through previous engagement with the surroundings is crucial to survive extreme existential threat. To keep moving, even if crawling, bears the chance to continue living, the possibility to thrive, and eventually, to share and show compassion to others who have harmed before. Lastly, such demonstrations of individual strength and skill are concluded and made meaningful by the individual’s re-integration into the group. It is from such individuals that Gwich’in see themselves descended, and it is these qualities that are emphasized in these stories as the basis for continuity of life.



Figure 3: Mountains along the Dempster Highway around the border between Northwest Territories and the Yukon on a clear winter day. Photo: T. Luig

Chapter 4

Stories of Strength – Memories of the Old Days

Telling good stories is an important aspect of Gwich'in life. Sitting with Elders, I did not need to ask a lot of questions as memories of the old days would come and be told to an attentive listener. Elders share stories to teach or to entertain. What story is told and how much is revealed depends on the understanding of the listener, relationships with the audience, and other situational factors. Too many questions, especially when interrupting a story, are perceived as offending. No questions, however, might be perceived as a lack of interest. I was properly confused about this during the first few weeks of my stay in the community. Following well-meaning advice from another anthropologist who is very familiar with the community, I tried not to ask questions. I would introduce myself, perhaps comment on the weather or events in the community and then sit in silence. After several very awkwardly silent visits, I decided to drop the advice, engage with people in a way that came more naturally to me, and express my interest, curiosity, or astonishment in the conversation, while refraining from interrupting as much as I could. Fortunately, that made the people I visited and myself more comfortable, and the conversations became lively and engaged.

I enjoyed these hours of quiet conversations, sitting with Jane Charlie, with Laura Firth, with Mary Effie Snowshoe, with Ida or Abraham Stewart, and especially at 8 Miles with Elizabeth Colin or Dorothy Alexie. With a hot fire going in the stove, bellies filled with a delicious and nutritious soup made from caribou broth and oats, candle light and ready to crawl under the heavy blankets – that is when I heard much of Elizabeth Colin's life story, about her childhood up the Peel, about her mother, her uncles, and about how strong people were in the old days. They walked far, they worked all day, they got up early in the morning, and they were smart in all they did, "nothing was hard for them" (Elizabeth Colin, 05/09/2012). I wondered much about child rearing practices and what qualities of character were promoted in children and youth to prepare them for a life in the subarctic. I was interested in how women managed to live by themselves in the bush with small children while their husbands were away hunting, sometimes for weeks at a time. How did they do all the work, make enough wood to keep warm, get snow for drinking, cooking, and washing, clean the tents, renew the brush on the floor, catch small animals, work with hides and meat and much more? How did they face the dangers of bears and wolves? How were they able to travel at 50 or 60 degrees below zero, carrying their children

and belongings, setting up camp every night, giving birth along the trail in the winter time? How did people think about strength, what it means to be a strong person and to be able to overcome hardship? I started thinking of these stories as *stories of strength*, since Elders would refer to people as strong and smart, and in conversations with Elizabeth Colin the idea emerged to record some of these stories on video. One morning at CBQM I ran into Mary Teya, a very respected Elder, church leader, and community leader. I told her that I would like to record stories of strength hoping for her thoughts on this idea. She said: “stories of how they didn’t depend on anyone!” (Mary Teya, 12/01/2012). After I went home I wrote down everything I could remember of what she had said:

Then she started telling the story of how her father brought two big sled loads of meat down from the mountains to their camp in winter, just to go right back up to this one big mountain where it could start blowing at any time, and he made camp there for the night. He travelled until late night and got up early in the morning. They used to be able to dig out camps in the deep snow. They always were prepared, took good care of their axes, their guns, and always had their tent and stove ready. They did not depend on anyone. If someone didn’t have something, they would talk to others and join together and one would bring in the stove, someone else a tent, or whatever was needed. But they didn’t depend on anyone but themselves.

She also made a remark on how much was going on in the community these days. Last night it was just busy: people walking around going to watch the youth play hockey at the complex, there was a curling tournament, and Bingo. She said there was a good kind of excitement in the air and that felt so good.

(field notes, 12/01/02012)

Aside from descriptions of such conversations in my field notes, I have recorded stories that reflect on strength and strong people. After providing a broader historical context and a review of the ethnography of the time, I will draw on both of these sources in the following discussion on how strength is narrated in stories from the Old Days.

Most stories are memories of Elders’ youth in the first half of the 20th century. At the time, Teet’it Gwich’in had been actively involved in the fur trade and in Christianizing efforts of the Anglican Church for several decades and, while most lived on the land year-round, many included Fort McPherson into their annual rounds for trading and festivities such as Christmas and Easter.

In 1804²⁰ the first post was opened at Fort Good Hope (Fafard and Kritsch 2005). Teet’it Gwich’in made occasional trips to trade at this post, but tensions were high at the post due to

²⁰ 1810 in Osgood (1936b, 17).

ongoing conflicts with Siglit (Inuit). John Bell of the Hudson's Bay Company encountered Peel River Gwich'in in 1839 at their summer gathering place and established a fort in 1840 several miles downriver in proximity to both Peel River and Arctic Red River Gwich'in (Slobodin 1962, 19-20). In honour of Murdoch McPherson, the chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, the Peel River Post was named Fort McPherson in 1848. The Gwich'in word for the fort is Teet'it Zheh meaning "headwaters of the Peel house" (Fafard and Kraitsch 2005). Trade picked up slowly and consisted mainly of meat and grease, the reason being the rather meager supplies of the fort for exchange in the first years. The most popular trade items were firearms and beads (Fafard and Kraitsch 2005, Ives 1990). Only after 1880 did the fur trade start to become a main activity at Fort McPherson. With an established post, Fort McPherson became a destination for both Catholic and Anglican missionaries.

For several years, missionaries of the two churches engaged in a fierce competition for the souls of the local Gwich'in, which is traceable in the tense and unflattering communication record (Mishler 1990). Most interestingly, according to Mishler (1990), Gwich'in repeatedly attempted to stage a public debate, "a test of powers" (124), between the two churchmen by transmitting provoking, but false messages between Catholic and Anglican missionaries. Eventually, the Anglican Robert McDonald became the most influential missionary in the region, the reasons for which are varied. First, the Hudson's Bay Company supported Anglicans, not Catholics, with translators, room, and board. Second, McDonald, part Aboriginal himself, stayed, learned the language, and married a Gwich'in woman. Thirdly, he translated the bible, a prayer and hymnbook, and trained lay readers among the camp leaders (Mishler 1990). To this day, the Anglican service in Fort McPherson is held by local lay readers as well as local deacons. Teet'it Gwich'in proudly tell stories of how their own people learned to read the bible, to write, to teach, and how several outstanding men were ordained as deacons (Sax and Linklater 1990).

The Klondike Gold Rush brought a new dimension to Gwich'in life and economy. Between 1905 and 1910 few people came to Fort McPherson, instead many went to trade at Dawson (Slobodin 1962, 31). The men mainly hunted and fished to provide food for the miners. They cut wood for the steamboats, worked as carpenters, cooks, or interpreters at the mining camps. There was a generation of young Teet'it Gwich'in men, the "Dawson Boys", who stayed several years working in the gold-rush economy (1962, 33). Fur prices started to rise with World War I and muskrat became the most valuable trade good. Since ridding was done in spring and in the Mackenzie Delta area, families started to go downriver from the mountains earlier in the

year than before. This and the increasingly celebrated holidays, such as Christmas, New Year's, and Easter, were the reasons why many families started spending the second half of the winter at the settlement (Slobodin 1962, 36).

With the discovery of oil at Norman Wells in 1920 the Canadian government became interested in clearing land title in the Mackenzie Valley to prepare for resource development. In 1921, Treaty 11 was signed with the Teet'it Gwich'in and all other Dene groups of the Mackenzie region. Now each band was required to name a chief and a headman, as a rule the "fur trade chief" was chosen (Slobodin 1962, 40). "Taking treaty" meant accepting the money that was given to each person per year. Treaty Day became the most "inclusive and celebrated of the yearly band assemblies, and the occasion for ceremony, feasting, and sports" (1962, 41). Throughout the early contact period, Gwich'in groups were decimated by epidemics. Reports of whooping cough, scarlet fever, measles, and the flu tell of many deaths among the people, either by the disease or by the resulting famine (Krech 1978, Slobodin 1981). People in Fort McPherson today remember the last major flu epidemic in 1928.

Shortly after, in 1932, Cornelius Osgood began his fieldwork with Gwich'in, mainly working with two Peel River informants. In the Boasian tradition of the time, he aimed to collect as much information as possible in order to compare different Gwich'in groups and to reconstruct what he believed to have been an intact, stable Gwich'in culture. The evolutionary paradigm of anthropology of the early 20th century entailed the assumption that the introduction of Western technology and economic models induced the destruction of and overrode earlier forms of socio-cultural organization. Such ethnography informed assimilationist policies in Canada and elsewhere in the world (Wishart and Asch 2009). Osgood, the first of the professional ethnographers to publish a comprehensive ethnography of the eastern Gwich'in in 1936, was no exception. Although he ascribed the Gwich'in a strong and autonomous identity, which separated them from their neighbours and qualified them for constituting a "nation" (1936b, 13), he remains firmly within the materialist evolutionist culture stage paradigm and declares that Gwich'in life had ceased to "function as a complex of social activity years before the period of my visit" (1936b, 21). Choice and agency were not accorded to the subjects of ethnographic investigations in that framework and dependency on the larger market and the mainstream society was predicted by Osgood as the future for Gwich'in. For example, he believed that conversion to Christianity proceeded without difficulty and that notions of a spiritual world had been "thoroughly crushed by the impact of the new culture" (1936b, 174).

His concern for documenting what he believed was in the process of vanishing and his lack of actual engagement with people in their everyday lives precluded him from exploring local meanings, interpretations, and strategies.

Richard Slobodin's (1962) careful description of Gwich'in life reflects quite a different conceptual and methodological stance. He travelled to and stayed in Fort McPherson first in 1938-39, an experience which caused him to change careers from education to anthropology (Preston 2009). Due to World War II he had to interrupt his PhD program and was able to return for fieldwork with Teet'it Gwich'in only in 1946-1947. His interest in social organization led him to pay close attention to cognitive and psychological processes. He published an article on Gwich'in anxiety and co-edited a book (Mills and Slobodin 1994) on reincarnation beliefs, both with the aim to explain how a society without "stable leadership" or explicit and enforced law functions. Slobodin spent time with people on the land and described them as making conscious choices for the betterment of the community, which renders his observations at times in stark contrast to Osgood's. For example, he understood the conversion to Christianity not as an overwhelming process that left people to obediently repeat what they have been trained to say (Osgood 1936a, 153), but as a political strategy to maintain social organization. Lay readers, or catechists, were always also group leaders, sometimes even shamans and likely to direct economic and ceremonial activities. Their training with the missionary did enhance Christianity's influence among the dispersed people, but mostly, it was a means for leaders to maintain their position instead of giving it up to foreigners (Slobodin 1962, 26). Another example is the shift in economic activities to increased muskrat trapping after World War I. Slobodin interpreted this development not in terms of the inevitable substitution of subsistence with the market economy, but as a result of a strategic shift to exploit the most valuable resources available. This theme becomes explicit in his account of how, towards the end the 1930's, trappers started to send their furs to auction in Edmonton (1962, 39). This was not a forced process but a method to achieve greater independence from the local trader and to receive the highest return possible.

Child rearing practices are of considerable concern to Slobodin as they seem to contain clues to cognitive processes or personality development. He does not mention "emotional rejection" of children of a certain age that was noticed by others (Honigmann 1975) but rather emphasizes that age groups take on a very important role in the preparation of youth for their respective gender roles and the responsibilities they entail (Slobodin 1962, 43). In his view, such

independence training has a positive function and is seen as perfectly beneficial. Slobodin describes a good leader as having “hard qualities” of independence and a touch of ruthlessness combined with the “soft qualities” that ensure group cohesion: generosity, concern for the common wealth, light-heartedness and modesty (Slobodin 1962, 45). Neither wealth nor descent would suffice for someone without these qualities to achieve high status. Attitudes towards band membership appear in a similar vein: residence and lifestyle take priority over descent, which renders group membership rather fluid. Whoever participates in community life is considered a member, a part of a unit in which everyone takes responsibility for himself and for others. Perhaps in an attempt to contrast his observations with the trend in the emerging field of cognitive anthropology to portray the supposed individualism of northern Athapaskans as motivated by fear, Slobodin ends his monograph by quoting a Peel River man pondering the individualism of the White man: “Every man for himself – I see lots of white men don’t think so. For us, we got to stick together, that’s our way” (1962, 89).

4.1. Travelling and Walking

After my first experience of a funeral in the community, I walked the short distance from the recreation complex where the service had been held with Walter Alexie to his house. One of the last “Old Timers” had passed away; the last of eight brothers who had all grown up in the bush, lived off the land, and raised their children and nephews in the same way. Rebecca Blake who led the service said, she felt like a whole era was gone with the passing of this Elder. Walter Alexie walked briskly towards his house, along the banks overlooking the Peel River valley. He talked about how he used to walk all the time and “all over”, in any weather, and long distances but now with the pain in his knee he could not walk so easily anymore. I was surprised at how fast he did walk and expressed my respect for his agility despite suffering the pain of arthritis in his knee (field notes, September 6, 2012). Later, at his house, he explained that he used to walk up to 50 miles in one day or travel with his dog team as far as Dawson, Yukon. It was a good life, hard but healthy and good. Being an avid walker myself, I was intrigued by Elders’ stories about walking and travelling as well as the way that they often linked such an active and mobile life to well-being, physical, and mental health. Sometimes I would ask directly about people’s experiences of travelling and walking, but mostly such accounts would emerge unasked for in the context of any conversation on well-being, strength, or the good life.

Elders in Fort McPherson make it a point to walk. Many are plagued by arthritis and other ailments; nevertheless, they prefer to walk rather than to catch a ride. Many times I met Elizabeth Colin walking from her house on the south end of town to the store on the north end and she would explain that she really tries to walk a bit every day despite pain and breathing problems. Jane Charlie is the same way; although the pain from her rheumatoid arthritis is at times debilitating, she walks to church or to the store as often as she can. In her experience, movement and travel has a healing effect. I visited her for the first time in July. She was in bed, the pain keeping her immobilized. She said, only four years ago she was still paddling the river, she loved to dance and participate in snowshoe races. Jane Charlie was married to the well-respected and renowned Chief Johnny Charlie who passed away in 1998 after his battle with cancer. Jane and Johnny had nine children of their own and adopted another three. All of them had “their education” and most work out of town today. She loves to sew but with the pain in her hands she cannot do too much.

Jane Charlie was born in 1930. When she was a toddler, her family went to Dawson by dog team. They camped along the way, hunting caribou or moose, and passed spring at the Blackstone River. Other families were travelling this area also and stayed with them at Blackstone. Jane remembers Walter Alexie’s parents were there too, and Walter was born in this area (J. Charlie, 30/04/2012). In the summer, they went from Blackstone to Dawson with dog packs – walking. Their destination was Moosehide, the settlement where Aboriginal people of the area were relocated to while the Gold Rush took over Dawson. In September, the family went back to the Blackstone area with their dog team and the other families kept going to Fort McPherson, but Jane’s parents stayed at Blackstone with her and her two sisters. Jane Charlie speaks highly about her mother, Annie B. Robert. She describes her as a very strong and wise person. One of her qualities was her resolve to walk even in old age and harsh weather.

My mom passed away a week before she was hundred and she was in good spirit yet, how old she is and she know what she’s doing and she said she’s blind but she can see, she said, but I always caught her sewing with machine too but she always leave it as soon as I come in, ah [laughs] and I always tease her about it and she even thread needle, *how old* she is, I can’t believe it, she just run around, everybody in town knows her she run around and - I used to go down and tell her, when it’s cold “Don’t go out, it’s too cold, you might get sick” one morning there my husband told me, “It’s really snowing, north wind out there, you should check your mom” not to let her out, so I got up and I got ready and I went down to her - she was gone! I went outside, I don’t know where she went but it’s snowing and blowing – back door! There was a snowshoe track [laughs] so I went up to Northern, she was gone, so I came back to her room and next

thing she came in, she said, she went to - canvas shop, she has two couple there for friends, ah, and she was there and from there she went up - I went all around from Northern I went back home to her, her place, *here she went up that way with snowshoe* up to Northern and she came back down on snowshoe – and that's how lively she was.

(J. Charlie 30/04/2012)

She remembers others too who were practicing their skills in old age despite pain and suffering. One woman Jane admired for her skill was Neil Colin's mother, Enna Colin. She had the ability to sing loudly and well, inspiring the wish in Jane to sing like her. Only in retrospect, and knowing the pain and illness of old age, Jane realizes how extraordinary her singing was while she was suffering pain and illness:

"Neil Colin's mother – really sing, my auntie, sing *loud*, and I don't know she had arthritis I think, she was sick all the time too, she always lay on the bed, I remember as little girl I see her and when I, I just go there to listen to her sing, ah she sing loud, I just *wish* to her. Here today everybody say I sing good – and loud, maybe my wish came true! [laughs] Since I lost my eyesight – little, since that time I *can't* see but I could memorize and that's the way I sing"

(J. Charlie 30/04/2012)

Now that Jane is an Elder and suffers from arthritis herself the 'liveliness' that she admired in her mother and in other women of her parents' generation has become part of her own way of dealing with hardship and suffering.

In 1975 she started to "get sick". For two years in a row she was sick and had to be hospitalized. After she came back home the illness continued: "I couldn't stand going out in public, was nervous like" (J. Charlie 05/06/2012). She suffered from pain in her muscles, which prevented her from sewing or completing other tasks. One day, she said, she had the idea to teach her children the dances of the "Old Time" – in the old days people were jigging on their toes and there were differences between men's and women's styles of jigging. So she started with her own children, two boys and two girls. The children liked it and soon they each brought another child: "... pretty soon it was getting more and more, towards the end I had sixteen of them! And then one day I said 'we should show them at the complex!'" (J. Charlie 05/06/2012). The dance group became popular and other women in the community started to support them by sewing headbands, dresses for the girls, and vests for the boys. Over time, the group was asked to dance in various communities across the north:

I don't know how many years we - I don't even keep track of how many years, ah, anyways I went to Aklavik, Inuvik, Coppermine, Fort Smith – and Old Crow – and Arctic Village, all that I went to and I *don't* remember getting money for them too, nothing, I

just went along with what we had and wherever we go they always give us a good place to stay and sleep but other than that we never, I never got money for them – but – *that didn't bother me too* cause I like doing it.

(J. Charlie 05/06/2012)

For ten years she volunteered as the leader of the dance group until the tragic death of one of the members affected everyone in a way that the group felt unable to continue. However, inspired by Jane's work the dancing started up again after several years under the lead of others, such as Mary Effie Snowshoe, Annie Kay, James Herbert, and Mary Ross.

I asked Jane how working and travelling with the dance group affected her illness, she said: "Oh! I got better! I went out with them, I went any place, really." (J. Charlie 05/06/2012). She started the dance group to help her deal with suffering and in doing so she was able to widen the boundaries of her life world, to overcome her sense of illness and immobility and engage her wider environment. Not only leading the dance group helped her in this shift, but also a variety of other activities had a positive impact on her well-being. For example, after all her children were grown and left the house, she adopted another baby. She remembers: "I get pain in my – not like now – I get pain in my muscle and all that, I couldn't sew and everything like now. Once I got – I adopted this baby, I start sewing for him, I pack him, all that just gave me strength." (J. Charlie 05/06/2012). Other activities came to her mind when thinking about what made her feel good:

1970 I went to Northern Games first time – they call it Northern Games, ah it was *lots of peoples!* that time, it was good too. 1970 [...] you go for Good Woman – when you do everything good, ah - and I went and there was 75 womens, with me 75 and we skin rats, 25 each, three times and – out of that three who win, three of us we got together and I won it! [laughs] It was really good – duck plucking, rat skinning, making dry fish, making tea, bannock, all that we did and I – I never got sick that time again.

(J. Charlie 05/06/2012)

In recent years, Jane Charlie often has to rest in bed when rheumatoid pain and weakness become unbearable. However, with astonishment in her voice she recounts occasions when her pain disappeared – this is when she can travel.

Jane: and then – they start going on that skidoo trip, that's when I tell everybody even when I'm like this – take off with skidoo I just leave *everything behind* [speaks laughingly] I'm so *healthy, lively*, I do anything on that trip – and my kids are so worried I'm gonna get sick, I'm too *old*, I say "I'm – I know I'm old but I think I could do it!" But I know one thing I never gave nobody problem, nothing! So I'm gonna be 83 on – on the 3rd.

Thea: Oh ya? Your birthday coming up?

Jane: Next week. I think I could make another trip! [laughs] That's the way I feel, I tell my doctor that and he said "If you think you could do it, you're gonna make it. Just go ahead and go" They wouldn't let me now! [laughs]

(J. Charlie 30/04/2012)

Every year in February or March Jane Charlie's daughter Liz Wright organizes a skidoo trip to Old Crow in honour of her father, the late Chief Johnny Charlie. Parts of the Charlie family live in Old Crow and Liz's grandfather Alfred Charlie travelled between Fort McPherson and Old Crow regularly with his dog team to visit friends and relatives. His son Johnny continued, at some point substituting the dog team for a snowmobile. However, in the 1970's and 80's these trips were not made as regularly. In 1992, Liz Wright recounts, her father Johnny D. Charlie started preparing for this trip again. He was concerned that the old trails would be forgotten if people do not use them. That year, 52 skidoos made the journey across the mountains to Old Crow and back. Since then, every year, weather permitting, a group of people make the trip, especially encouraging young boys to participate and get to know the way their ancestors travelled. After Johnny Charlie's passing, his daughter Liz Wright continues what has become a tradition²¹.

The multi-day trip in the cold is hard on everyone's body. Driving a skidoo across the hilly landscape requires strength, skills, and stamina. Young people who have done the trip talk about how hard it is. Jane Charlie, approaching 80 and affected by arthritis had no plans to join; instead she was preparing bannock and lunch for the others. She said:

Jane: [...] I'm *not ready* at all – but I, I got skidoo just day before that, my grandson sold me this second hand skidoo, so next thing just booming out here, peoples out here with skidoo, they're gonna start from out here. Oh I want to go, I want to cry [laughs] "Ah I'm gonna go!" I said, I came in here, got dressed, got things ready, I had bannock, donuts. I went out there, I took my bag and my sleeping bag and my lunch bag out there. My oldest son took my one bag and my youngest son took one bag and I went out there and Annie said "Mom, you're gonna get *tired!*" But I'd be so stubborn! [laughs] but I'm gonna go anyway, so I had no skidoo that time, I just went on her skidoo and stand on there and then I go on Liz's one, like that all the way we - nobody knew I was gonna go this time too! And then when I bought that skidoo, second hand, that one too, they're all going, I made mukluk, don't know how many mukluk I made, made about 500 donuts

Thea: [laughs]

Jane: [laughs] just crazy, just all over in here and here I got that skidoo out there. I'm gonna go. Liz – really didn't want me to go, she said "It's not that we don't want you to go, you're old now, you might get hurt, might get sick!" [...]

Thea: You had your arthritis already that time?

²¹ Elizabeth Wright: <http://www.oldcrow.ca/johnnycharlie.htm>

Jane: Ya. And - but I never listen. I'm just gonna go anyway [laughs]

(J. Charlie 27/04/2012)

Another year, joining the skidoo trip helped her deal with her pain and illness as well:

Jane: [...] I was *sick!* Laying here, I was thinking to myself "I wonder if I should go" oh! I don't know what to do – I want to go and I don't want to [laughs]. Here I – next morning I got up and got ready, load up, somebody load up for me and we went, we got to that cabin, I sat near the stove and somebody gave me tea. I was drinking that tea and that's when, oh that's when I didn't know I was gonna go and I had – some noodles, case of noodles and hot chocolate – I just – threw them in there – in the bin where I had my grub, *lots too!* I was thinking, I wonder if I'll use it? And when we got to that cabin, oh lots of them in there, just standing all over while that I'm sitting here and drinking tea and this little boy came around, some of them call me "Grandma", some of them call me "Ma", "Mama" [laughs] – different way, him he call me "juju" [*sic*] [laughs] "Juju, I want – hot chocolate" he said, that lady she's standing there – *just stand there!* and watch me, I know she's looking at me, ah, I told her "Bring that big pot down" is boiling, fill it up with hot chocolate and then I told her to put some cold water in it and I told that little boy "Tell your cousins and that to come in" Oh, they all run in, just *down* it, just finish the whole [laughs] thing. [speaks laughingly]

Thea: Oh ya, after the long skidoo ride.

Jane: a'ha! And then I told her "Put that noodles into that pot too" and then we took it down – Esiah his name, the one call me juju, I told him come, oh, he was *happy!* And then I took two bag of donuts and put it there, everybody start running in, those kids, nine of them, nine of my grandchildren were there too. I fed them and they went out, I told that lady "I'm the one that should be served!", "I know!", she said, "I was just watching you!" [laughs] [...] I *never get sick!* Everything they have lunch or gas up, I just don't sit on the skidoo, I get down and I go past every skidoo and I walk ahead and they catch up to me, I do that – maybe that help, ah, even Bella "Ma!" she call "Ma! How come you never get sick? While that my leg is so sore", she said, she start to get up "Auw!" she said, I told her "You don't *walk*, you just stay one place!"

Thea: you mean whenever you have a break, you go walking?

Jane: Ya!

Thea: So you don't get stiff.

Jane: a'ha! And I go far too!- with my cane [laughs]

Thea: [laughs]

Jane: ya, I remember one place there, we stop on the river too – *blowing cold!* Hu - it was in a, I got off for coffee I guess while that it was just blowing. I got off that skidoo, is high, so it looked like I'm jumping off I guess, one of the girls from here [...] She just swear at me "Auntie Jane, come here" she said, so I went over [...] "What?" I told her, "I can't even get down while that you just jumped over that skidoo!" - "I walk all the time, my leg is not sore!" I told her "You should run ahead all the time!" Just never *moved*, just *sit one place* – oh and from there we got to Old Crow, that was the only time is was in Lent, Friday we got there –

feast and dance and – my leg wasn't that bad that time, dance til 5 in the morning – me – I just pick my nephews up, all the Charlie's: Karl, you know Karl? Over here – my nephew, I [laughs] I pick him up and I waltz with him, I dance with him, square dance and all that and then I camped with one of my nephews, he had upstairs, got up in the morning, about 11 I guess, I got up, I come downstairs, all kinds of them downstairs, one of them call me "Auntie Jane, you're stiff?" I said "From what?", "From dance!", "You never sling me around like your uncle!" I said "How I'm gonna get sick?"[laughs]

Thea: [laughs]

Jane: [laughs] ha, they thought it was so funny [laughs] – I never got sick too, tired too! So we stayed there one day, next day we start back again

(J. Charlie 27/04/2012)

Commonsense - the tacit cultural knowledge (Geertz 1983, 73-93) that arises from being raised to recognize and participate in a shared way of being, perceiving, and judging – would assume several days of bumpy riding on a skidoo in -30 weather to be detrimental for an Elder's health. The cautioning and disbelief of Jane's children and family suggests that this assumption is shared by many in Fort McPherson, I certainly subscribed to it. However, Jane Charlie tapped into embodied knowledge and memories that directed her expectations in the present that she had the strength to participate in this trip and that it would do her good. Part of this is her skills and confidence in practices such as travelling the land or dancing the Old-timer dances. She knew, for example, how to keep her feet warm during these trips out on the skidoo. The first two occasions she wore skidoo boots with socks in it and had really cold feet, "almost froze it", she said. But the next year she told her brother-in-law to get her some rabbit skin next time he goes down the river because she needed them as duffel. He brought back four rabbit skins. Jane put it in her shoes and mitts and never got cold. Jane could rely on years of reliable embodied experiences of how to safely travel through the mountains. As Sheets-Johnstone (2011) argues, such reliable kinesthetic expectations constitute one's sense of existential integrity and agency.

Another aspect is her re-orientation towards relational projects, towards her children and the community in the case of the dancing group, and towards her family and her late husband in the case of the skidoo trips. Her perception and experience of herself and her well-being transform while her orientation and intention shift to intensified relationality and engagement with her surroundings. In all of her stories she transforms immobilizing pain and illness into mobility, agency, and reaps a sense of well-being. In the examples she shared with me, it is herself who initiates this shift, sometimes against the resistance of family members. The "I can" of this shift results in a profound renewal of her sense of subjectivity and agency. Once

engaged in moving, working, and travelling she experiences freedom from pain and a level of physical and mental energy that is extraordinary for people her age. In her narrative, she speaks of her experience in contrasting terms: travelling and moving as an antithesis to illness. Considering how movement constitutes the foundation of perception and experience, I suggest that such a radical shift from immobility to movement is pivotal for engendering a shift in experience. Further, the kinesthetic experience of reliable bodily skills engenders a sense of existential integrity, security, and agency.

Jane Charlie is not the only Elder who speaks of the relationship between movement and well-being. One man who continues to live in his camp year-round on the banks of the Peel River a few miles up river from the community remembers his grandmother as having astonishing amounts of energy:

And all they did was just walking! And picking berries. I remember my grandmother and her other friend there, all of them, every day, they check net and cut fish, that's early in the morning. After they say they're gonna go for berries, they'd be gone all day! Maybe about six in the evening - and they come back, it's all walking, carrying all the berries and whatever. After they come back, you figure they'll be tired, net had to be checked again, a lot of fish these days. And then they start cutting fish, only after all that is done 'let's sit around and tell stories!' [laughs] just have tea with each other. Day to day that's the way they lived, they didn't complain or anything. Every day.

(R. Elias, 03/09/2012)

Walter Alexie remembers how he enjoyed travelling on the land and how it was the way of life for Gwich'in to walk and travel:

When you live in the bush, you do everything, you walk everyday, you hunt, you eat meat and you get strong with it. And especially walking, every day! I can walk 50 miles in a day. Sometimes I remember how I did that, how I'd walk that far? So we went to Dawson, we went over Caribou Mountain, head of the Peel and went to Hungry Lake where people used to move long ago.

[...] we used to *walk and walk and walk* – go on the mountain, you gotta take snowshoes and gun, little bit something to eat, go out and hunt, walk all day, sometimes we come *back late*, sometimes we come back around 10 o'clock at night and – if we get meat, caribou, we skin them, cover them - and then walk home – pitch dark and then 10 o'clock at night we get home. That's way in the mountains and you gotta *know* the country to walk around there in the dark. But I had good life! Never been sick in my life.

(W. Alexie, 05/09/2012)

After having spent much of my year with women, recording the stories of strength gave me the opportunity to hear Elders such as Walter Alexie and his brother Robert Alexie Sr. speak

about what came to their mind when thinking of strength. Walter and his brother Robert Alexie Sr. both spoke about the year when they went from Fort McPherson to Dawson with their dog teams. Both emphasized the pivotal role that walking played in their lives before the highway, trucks, and skidoos came to the north.

At that time, a lot of walking! You got to walk on snowshoes ahead of dogs, make trail. You know, it was life that time. You start from morning til night. Today, I look back there, you know it's a lot of work, but we never say, oh goodness sake that's hard, no way a guy is gonna say that. No, that's life, it was life that time. As long as you got good dogs, you're ok. [...]

I think it was the land keeping us up. Seeing the country and where people have been before and the story old man tell us about it and – you know this is the greatest thing old man has done with us, for us, is showing us the land. [...]

We look back now – I look back now – gee, I don't know, a lot of walking, get tired and all that but no – never complain. It was life them days – you know. But it was good. And it was life them days compared to now. Now is too easy, everything is easy. [...] Today is way different, oh, much too easy! Just the machine is doing the work. That's all. [...] Well, everything is too easy today. Too easy. Them days it was work, but nobody complain too, it was life them days and it was good life. Better life than today them days when you're young.
(R. Alexie Sr. 03/09/2012)

Movement, travel, and mobility appear as intrinsic features of what these Elders remember as a good life. The sense of well-being that is associated with walking, however, is constituted by other factors as well: seeing the land and making one's trail through the landscape, sensing continuity and relatedness with the past and one's ancestors, the proximity of caribou and other animals that provide subsistence, as well as the health of one's dogs. Travelling in winter was dependent on dogs well into the 1970's. In order for them to be strong and healthy, they had to be taken care of as best as possible, sometimes receiving better food than humans. Travelling by dog team rarely meant for people to sit in the sled. Sleighs were filled with the family's household belongings as well as dried meat and fish to feed both humans and dogs. Both men and women would drive dog teams, which often required "running ahead of dogs in snowshoes" (R. Alexie Sr. 03/09/2012) to make trail. In the summer, people walked and used "dog pack" to help carry their belongings.

As life was lived along seasonal rounds of moving and settling up until the early 20th century, along paths of caribou migration, and along patterns of coming together and going separate ways, experiences and memories are inseparable from the interwoven pathways that people, animals, and materials are moving along through the environment. When thinking back to the days before the highway was built and before trucks became available, people stress that

walking and travelling by dog sled was “a way of life” and that it was a “good life”. Mary Effie Snowshoe explained it very clearly: “Then they call us Teet’it Gwich’in, that sounds like we are staying one place. We don’t stay one place! We move around! Like everyone else!” (Recording of Mary Effie Snowshoe at Chief Julius Professional Development weekend, March 2012). She perceives the descriptor Teet’it Gwich’in, Peel River Gwich’in, as a name that is at contrast with Gwich’in ways of being. The *normal* mode of existence is one of movement and mobility. She is one of the women I had the honour to get to know a bit more closely and who travelled extensively by dog team. Many times, I asked women whether or not it was normal for them to go hunting. Often I was told that women worked around the camp and went out to fish, snare small game, and pick berries, but did not hunt very often. Mary Effie Snowshoe, however, had a different experience. Her mother had been a “very strong women” who went hunting as well as working around the camp, tanning hides, working with meat and fish, sewing and more: “My mother was a hunter and she could shoot a gun good too.” (Mary Effie Snowshoe 09/2012). In her life experience mobility is an intrinsic feature of Gwich’in existence, an existential aspect of Gwich’in identity, and the foundation of enskillment and strength.

In much of European and North American day-to-day life walking has ceased to be a mode of travelling or getting around. It has become either an unpopular necessity or a leisure activity, something to do when “normal” life is on hold, on Sundays or holidays. The sedentarization of urban and rural life in post-industrial states as well as the transformation of travel to fast and far-reaching destination transport gave rise to walking as a subject of anthropological reflection (Ingold 2001, 38). Tim Ingold, a phenomenologist working at the University of Aberdeen and one of the most prominent current thinkers on human-environment relations, is at the forefront of the shift to paying attention to walking in anthropological analysis and theorizing. He traces the metamorphosis of pedestrian movement from travel to leisure and situates it in the context of changing socio-cultural and historical environments. What is important here is his discussion of the relationship between movement and perception and the process of severing this link through technologies of travel. According to Ingold (2011), movement occurs in response to the ever-changing conditions of the environment as well as the unfolding of whatever task is at stake. Walking, therefore, is an inherently intelligent activity “distributed throughout the entire field of relations comprised by the presence of the human being in the inhabited world” (2011, 47). Movement, thus, is not only foundational for the study of perception and cognition, but consequently also for the study of sociality. The traveller on

foot, or the *wayfarer* in Ingold's terms, continuously engages with the environment that opens up along his path in order to sustain himself. He is constant movement, growing and developing skills, in response to his environment, resting and renewing (Ingold 2011, 150). Becoming a person happens along the path, memory is created, and knowledge integrated.

Being someone who loves to walk and sometimes regrets the immobility of much of my urban life, I was particularly attentive to mentions of walking in people's stories, memories, and current lived practice. That I am someone who walks, or rather "marches", is one of the things people noticed about me too. Every day on main road, Fort McPherson, I met children, teenagers, and Elders walking to the store, the snack shack, to get Bingo cards, or to visit with their friends and relatives. Most young or middle-aged adults who own a truck are usually driving. Sometimes simply driving around, without much of a destination but with the purpose to see what is going on. In winter everyone is "flying around" on their skidoos. Either by feet, skidoo, or truck, people are moving. Especially in the winter, peoples' movements become visible by the countless trails in the snow that create shortcuts through town. Winter reduces distances between places as the ground is frozen and covered in snow making it possible to cut across small lakes and ponds or swampy areas that are more difficult to cross in the summertime.

However, today travelling has become more difficult on one hand and easier on the other. Whoever can afford it owns a truck and makes good use of this more comfortable mode of mobility, both in town and on the highway. Highway travelling, however, limits the traveler's range of land that can be covered or monitored for caribou. Motorized travelling does not require as much of the physical effort and stamina that Elders such as Robert and Walter Alexie remember about their youth. While travelling on a skidoo is still a physically taxing activity, Robert Alexie Sr. vehemently declared that it is "too easy" since "the machine is doing all the work". Some of the intensity of the kinesthetic experience of moving by one's own physical power is lost. Thus, opportunities to develop skill and to engage with one's environment and one's path in a bodily way, as well as the experience of being able to rely on one's body and experience the existential security that results from bodily skills are diminished. However, for others travelling has become a difficult to realize endeavor as it requires income to purchase vehicles and gas, as well as free time from work or family duties. Yet, travelling is highly valued and much benefit is expected from going on a trip.

4.2. Always Busy – Enskillment and the Importance of Work

Walking and travelling is one theme in past and present life of Teet'it Gwich'in that illustrates the relationship between movement, enskillment, and well-being. During my time in Fort McPherson, I was lucky to experience for myself a profound sense of well-being when I set out with people to travel in the mountains. In the summer and fall, Gladys and her sisters would try to go for a drive up the Dempster Highway and check for berries as often as their busy work and family life allowed. Berry picking is much enjoyed by women of all ages and soon I joined them in travelling on the Dempster Highway through the mountains, looking for good berry patches, and finally sitting in the soft muskeg for hours filling our pails with *nakal* (Arctic Cloudberry), blueberries, or cranberries. In my notes I wrote:

Saturday morning. We wanted to go for berries and the weather looked alright, but turning. On the radio we heard that the ferry is closed due to high waters. Too bad.
August 14, 2011: We left around 2pm. Stopped at the "fruitman" [a truck that brings fresh fruit and vegetables approximately every three weeks into the communities in the Delta area from B.C.]. Hannah Alexie and Liz Wright were there too, all wanted to go for berries. Then we checked at Vicky's sale and I was talked into buying one of the boy's old shirts. It will serve me well. After we picked up Gladys' sister, we finally were on our way, Gladys' auntie Hannah in the back seat. Vicky, Gladys' younger sister, came in her own truck with her two boys. Both, Gladys' aunt and sister had boiled caribou meat for snacks. Gladys had bought cupcakes at Vicky's sale. Lots of food. We went past the "gorge" and then checked on several places for berries. We were looking for *nakal* and blueberries, it is too early for cranberries. Lots of women all along the highway! Everyone is picking berries. We stopped at several places, but one berry patch was particularly good and we went just about crazy filling up our pails in no time. We saw a grizzly mom and three cubs. After we got back, Vicky came by and told us about some women who were saying they wanted berries. So she offered them some of hers, but what they really wanted was to *go* for berries because it makes them feel good. Everyone agreed that it was a good day.

(field notes, August 13 and 14, 2011)

Berry picking is one of the favorite things to do for many women and some men as well (see Parlee et al. 2007). Long before berries are ripe, women will start talking about how good of a year it will be for berries, and at the beginning of August they will start going on the highway to check for *nakal*. Gladys and her sisters have an eye for good berry patches. Just by scanning the muskeg on both sides of the highway they are able to say whether there is a place worth stopping. They take not only the amount of berries into account but also the distance of the patch to the highway as the ripening of berries and the arrival of caribou attracts grizzlies that,

at that time of year, have cubs and can become a danger. Finally, when the women spot a good patch it is often “just orange!” with big, juicy *nakal*.



Figure 4: In a berry patch with “nakal” in the mountains on a cloudy fall day. Photo: T. Luig

While walking and travelling is linked to a sense of well-being in many women’s accounts, keeping busy and working are even more so. Many people in the community would answer the question “How are you?” with the exclamation: “Busy!” At home with Gladys I often tried to take some of the workload off her. However, partially because of my inadequate attempts at cooking and perhaps partially because she understands keeping busy as her way of life, she would still be busy from the time she came home from work until the time she went to sleep. Apart from watching the occasional “Coronation Street” episode on TV, she would cook, often for her extended family, sew and bead beautiful ornaments, clean, drive her nieces and nephews to where they had to be, help her father, or work outside cleaning her truck or around

the house. Hardly ever, she would sit still and relax. While working at home, we would listen to CBQM and Gladys often had a melody on her lips. In the past, she volunteered a lot on various boards and committees in town, but now she feels her priorities are with her family. She values hard work and has always been taught to be independent. At 15 she started working at the Hudson's Bay Store. When she first went to college in Calgary, she worked and at the time when her grandfather passed away, she was able to pay her own way home for the funeral. Growing up, she always had chores to do. She was taught to do everything: cooking, washing, sewing, and cutting meat and fish. Most importantly, she had to do it right. As many other women would repeat to me, Gladys too learned how to sew by having to take everything apart and start anew whenever she made a mistake. Today, she appreciates this and emphasizes doing things carefully and thoughtfully enough to ensure they turn out right.

Many times during my year in the community I wrote in my journal something like "people here are busy", or "there is so much going on", or "busy day". I was so impressed with how many events were organized in the community, especially considering the small amount of people who usually took initiative and responsibility. First, there are a number of councils, committees and boards that meet regularly and need the required quorum to make decisions. Then, there are a variety of sports clubs and events, such as basketball, hockey, football, curling, snowshoeing, and volleyball that are maintained and coached by volunteers in the community. There is a Youth and Elders Centre with regular programs, such as soup and bannock lunches for Elders, sewing, film nights, and much more. Further, the community raises the funds needed for events such as the New Years fireworks, travel to tournaments for sports teams, the Peel River Jamboree, and many other initiatives through fundraisers such as loony auctions, bingos, casino evenings, bake sales, and dinner sales. On top of that, organizations such as the Justice Committee, the Tl'ooondih Healing Society, or the Language Centre, as well as individuals who are dedicated to improving community well-being bring regular workshops into the community. I participated in a grieving workshop, a traditional skills workshop, a suicide first aid workshop, youth leadership workshops, to name just a few. There are games nights, dances, feasts, funerals and weddings, as well as numerous creative contests, such as snow sculpture contest, window decorating contest, or the Santa Claus parade. Volunteers take care of daily radio programs and bingo events²².

²² Full discussion on contemporary volunteerism see Chapter 7.

Despite their steady busyness in town, people think of Gwich'in life before the 1960's as more work-intensive but also as more admirable and healthy. They remember old people as keeping busy at all times, yet as stronger and healthier than elderly people today. One Elder, whom I asked to speak about what strength means to her, remembered her mother, Sarah Simon, as being a very strong woman:

She's always busy – mom was always busy! All week she's doing things like that. Saturday, she's very busy, my dad is busy, hauling his meat, caribou meat, hauling wood to keep us warm or else he's gone to his fish nets bringing home fish or he's gone to his trap line bringing maybe two or three mink home, or lynx, or two or three fox. They're just steady going, working. I don't know what else we do, my sister was older than me, we go out and get snow, that was our water too. We pull snow in little sled or else we would use snowshoes, tie a piece of string on it if we don't have little sled, tie string on it, put our little bag of snow on it and bring that home. We're always told to do this as we were growing up "Do this, do that, bring in wood". We always had something to do. [...] When I think of her [her mother], I wonder if she ever had rest? But I don't think so, she was just steady going. [...] So that was the way we were brought up, you know. It was hard, but we never thought it was hard! It was life and we enjoyed it.

(Doris Itsi, 07/09/2012)

Working from early morning until bedtime was familiar to me from previous research with Dene in the Yellowknife area. For a few months I took part in the daily routine in a bush camp that included rising early, making fire in the stove, putting on coffee, tea, and oats, a full day's worth of work and then, in the bright northern summer evenings some sewing, cooking, or berry picking. With this experience I was hoping to be useful if given the chance to join an Elder in her camp at "8 Miles". However, I had much to learn. Despite my shortcomings, two Elders were so kind to invite me along to camp with them several times throughout the year.

I met Elizabeth Colin and her sister Dorothy Alexie during my preliminary research visits. I had been told that if I wanted to know about how people come through hardship and about volunteering than I should talk to these two women. I did and both became not only contributors to this work but also invaluable friends and mentors. When I arrived in the community in July 2011, Elizabeth Colin was in the hospital in Inuvik. Her sister was worried about her and kept me informed on how she was doing. Finally, she was released and I was able to visit her. When I was at her house she was still feeling weak but she said that she could not wait to go to 8 Miles. She wanted to work with fish, needed to fix her cabin, and wanted to get the floors painted (field notes 09/07/2011). 8 Miles, or *Nataiinlaih* in Gwich'in, is situated approximately eight miles up the river from the community where the Dempster Highway

crosses over the river by ferry. This place was used by Gwich'in for centuries for fishing and also the site of frequent battles between Gwich'in and *Siglit* (Inuvialuit)²³. Many community members have a cabin here and use these houses to enjoy the quieter life away from the community, set nets and work with fish, work with hides in the spring and summer, work with meat, have a cook-out or some quiet time to sew. The cabins are sometimes small log houses, sometimes ply-wood structures, all equipped with wood stoves, several beds with heavy blankets to sleep whole families. Many have a smoke house next to their cabin, which is a wooden structure to hang whitefish or coney to dry and smoke. It was always a treat for me to go to 8 Miles with either Elizabeth or Dorothy, doing things around the cabin, making fire, washing dishes, trying my best to cut some wood, set some snares, get snow or water, sew, and eat delicious food.

My first chance was when a language workshop was held at Elizabeth's camp. She asked me if I wanted to go with her the day before, help her set up, and prepare the cabin and the food for the other Elders who would gather over the weekend to tell stories in the Gwich'in language. I was asked to prepare some food for the workshop as well, so all Friday, October 7, 2011 I spent working in Gladys' kitchen. Six o'clock in the evening Elizabeth Colin, her son and her daughter-in-law came to pick me up. The first snow had fallen and in the mountains there was enough snow to drive a skidoo. This is what her son came to 8 Miles for; he needed to get his skidoo ready to go hunting in the mountains. As soon as we arrived, however, he started splitting wood so that we could make fire in the house. After the two younger people left, I had my chance to practice cutting wood and, although I never really became efficient at it, I did enjoy it tremendously. After the cabin warmed up and we were able to heat up water on the stove, we started to wash the dishes that somebody who had been using the cabin over the summer had left behind. Elizabeth made supper. Since it was dark and we were tired from all the cleaning up, we went to bed and chatted until well into the night. Elizabeth was very interested in my travels and how I had grown up in a socialist country. I was supposed to wake up during the night to put more wood in the stove but, being so used to alarm clocks, I slept through and in the morning the fire was out and the cabin freezing cold. Elizabeth even woke up earlier and started to make fire – I knew that this should be my job, but without a word of blame she told me to start the fire in the second stove. We put on water for tea and oats and had breakfast. Then I cut some

²³ Pers. communication with M.E. Snowshoe. Also see Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute: <http://www.gwichin.ca/Research/placeNamePeel.asp?num=20>

more wood and we started preparing the food for the workshop. We kept the place hot and put lots of food on the table until around 11 o'clock in the morning when people started to arrive. The day went by and after everyone left, Elizabeth and I started cleaning up and then went out on the trail behind the cabin to set snares for rabbit. Elizabeth found rabbit trails and cut some willows to hang the snare from while I set up the snare and blocked the rabbit's way with little branches. We set three snares and came back to the house. After that we went for a little walk down to the banks of the river and met a of couple men. Elizabeth invited one of them for supper; the other gave us two geese. One of the geese was his son's first shot; customarily the first kill of a young boy has to be given away. After it got dark, I tried to sew by candlelight, something that many Elders told me they used to do. It was so hard; I could barely see my needle and the beads. I gave up soon enough and we went to bed chatting about this and that. She talked about the tracks that she saw around her and her sister's cabin. Wolf, Dorothy thinks. After a while, Elizabeth started telling me about her life, the hardships she went through and the way she changed her life for the better. Deeply moved by what she said, I started to understand why it was that people immediately referred me to her and her sister when I first explained my question to community leaders. Both women had gone through tremendous difficulties and dealt with them in a way that not only allowed them to restore a sense of well-being in their lives but also had an immense benefit to others in the community. The story I heard that night I could only write down from my memory a few days later when I was back in town, but it would not be the last time she told me about her life (see Chapter 6).

On Sunday morning I managed to get up first, get the two fires going, and put on water for tea and oats. I caught myself being awfully proud of getting up without an alarm clock, while in Elizabeth's view, I am certain, it was completely normal. After breakfast I continued working with wood to get enough to keep the fires going all day. While Elizabeth cooked a meal, I plucked the two geese we were given the night before. It was hard to pull the feathers out without ripping the skin. She said, it would be best to dip them in boiling water for a minute, but then people arrived for the last day of the workshop and we cooked the geese and moose kidneys for everyone to eat. At the end of the day, there was so much food left that everyone was able to take lots home. We cleaned up the house and eventually caught a ride back into town.

A few weeks later, on a Friday afternoon, Dorothy Alexie called me at Gladys' house and said: "We're running away!" After a short pause, in which I was hoping to be asked to come

along (still trying not to ask questions), she did ask if I wanted to join her and her sister Elizabeth:

I had 10 minutes to get ready. Elizabeth Colin phoned as well shortly after. So I rushed, packed, and then my ride was already there. Dorothy's husband, Robert Alexie Sr., drove the truck to 8 Miles but then left back to town. Elizabeth was already there and had started the fire. Outside was some wood, so I got busy splitting, but failed pathetically with the bigger pieces. I brought the wood in and cut some of it into smaller pieces that would fit the kitchen stove. Dorothy and I went out to set some snares, she found rabbit tracks right away. Dorothy also got the right kind of snow, "sugar snow", for drinking water. The land used to be so clean, they were able to take snow from everywhere and melt it as drinking water. Tea made from snow is considered good and healthy. Elizabeth cooked some fish and potatoes. Elizabeth gave grace before we ate and then we all had a good meal. After cleaning up we retired to talking and sewing. Both sisters talked about how they used to sew to the light from an oil lamp, a grease lamp. My attempts to sew at candle light failed again and soon we went to sleep. There are three beds in the room with piles of blankets, so we each had a warm bed to sleep in. We tried to keep the fire going all night. Out of fear I would miss it and let the fire go out, I barely slept and got up several times to put wood in the stove. At some point though I did fall asleep and, sure enough, the fire went out. When I thought it was morning, I got up and tried to start the fire. The wood was wet though, so I had a hard time, so Elizabeth got up and helped. She got some tea and went back to bed to wait for the room to warm up. After a while we all got up and Elizabeth busied herself with making breakfast. She is someone who barely sits still, always working on something. She made pancakes, oats, and put homemade bread out. We gave grace and had our meal.

The two Elders were noticing the amount of trucks that were waiting at the ferry. Throughout the day they were wondering about all the trucks going into town but not the other way, into the mountains. Then Elizabeth's daughter-in-law came by with her two boys to go hunting. The Elder gave her money for gas and hoped that she would come back with meat.

I sat down with some sewing. In time, I made a mistake and Dorothy said: "Usually these things happen when you try to do things on a Sunday!" We all laughed.

Dorothy and I went to check the snares. One rabbit. We went back and got busy right away with skinning and gutting it. [...] After Dorothy had skillfully cut it all into pieces, Elizabeth put it in a pot with water and beef soup mix. When the meat was cooked, she took it out and added oats to the broth. She said that oats are a very important food when out on the land. After that we went back to the trail to set some more snares. This time, Dorothy tied a piece of orange plastic bag to the trees by the snare, which was meant to scare the crows. The crows had been making noise that morning, which I never noticed. The two Elders, however, had heard it and had stepped outside looking where they were. They knew the crows were making noise because there was a rabbit in the snare.

After skinning we cleaned the table outside, however, there was some blood left and Whiskey Jacks came to pick on it. Elizabeth went outside to add some bannock and cheese to the feast for the birds. She said, she always brings some things from town to give to the Whiskey Jacks. Birds are honoured in that way.

(field notes, October 15 and 16, 2011)

Elizabeth's and Dorothy's cabins at 8 Miles are places that are created by these women. Dorothy built her cabin herself, she explained to me, from any money that she could put aside she bought some more ply-wood until it was enough for a house. Elizabeth refers to the house at 8 Miles also as "my house", while her husband spent more time at "Mouth of Peel" where he had a camp²⁴. While other family members, especially their adult sons or daughters, would occasionally make use of the cabins, the Elder women certainly had dominion over what is to be done at 8 Miles. Elizabeth Colin has sons who set net and fish during the summer months. She has a smoke house next to her cabin and dries and smokes fish. Dorothy has an extra tent frame, a square wooden structure that is covered with tarps, and other necessities needed to tan hides. This differential focus of their 8 miles occupations reflects how the two women were raised. Elizabeth was raised as the "inside girl, meaning that I had to – we stayed in tents so – set brushes about every day in the tent, so everything is tidy, dishes need to be washed, at an early age too! I start making bannock and cooking, she gave me meat to cook, I do that because she's working with meat, making dry meat and cutting up meat. And then in spring time, she's working with moose skin, so I have to do all that [inside the tent], so she doesn't have two jobs" (E. Colin 05/09/2012). Dorothy was the "outside girl" working with wood and hides and being responsible for chores outside the shelter: "And Dorothy's job was to go outside and work with wood. Again, no chainsaw, no saw, she had to cut wood with axe and haul it with dogs and cut the whole thing up. She gets snow and ice. [...] nobody sat around doing nothing, everybody was involved in something" (E. Colin 05/09/2012). While both women are excellent cooks and seamstresses, both have their special spheres of knowledge and skills according to their roles in their youth.

When I asked her what she thought of *strength*, Elizabeth talked about her mother Mary Vittrekwa. Mary was born in the Blackstone area and raised by her grandmother and her uncles. This family used to travel the Blackstone and Hart River area: "there was a camp for winter, a camp for spring, a camp for summer and fall, just like that, and they made a big circle and that by dogs! [...] That's their way of living. They didn't have a place to call home but they're always moving and that area there, it's a big country. You know, when you're coming you see that big area and you just wonder how they travelled in it." (E. Colin 05/09/2012). As an orphan, her

²⁴ This is where Peter Looovers (2010) spent much time with Neil Colin. Because I engaged much more with women and also since Neil Colin had become ill during the time of my stay in the community, I never had the opportunity to speak much with him, let alone visit "Mouth of Peel", his camp down the Peel river.

mother started working and helping her grandmother at an early age. She was taught by her uncles and learned fast: “She did really good, she had a good dog team, when she was a little bigger she had good dog team. And she did everything for herself and that old woman. Like wood, getting wood, cutting wood. There’s no saw, it’s just axe. That means they have to have sharp axe and they got to be strong to work like that.” People in the family of her mother were strong and smart people. Elizabeth explains what it means to be smart:

And she had uncles that were *really* smart, her brother too! They were really smart, nothing was hard for them, there were strong people. If they want to go on a long trip, they went, come back, nothing wrong with them! And that’s the kind of people – I can’t find the name for it in English – but in Gwich’in we call it *Gijaht’aii*, meaning they’re just smart in everything. Nothing was hard for them.
(E. Colin, 05/09/2012)

And whatever they want to do, they did it, because it was no problem to do it for them. No chain saw! But they always had to have sharp axe, sharp knife, you know. We never ever seen them cut themselves or hurt themselves! They have to know how to handle it.
(E. Colin, 05/09/2012)

Today, working with wood is considered hard. Although people generally own chain saws, not many women would cut their own wood today. She remembers people doing these things without difficulties, even with perfection. Many tasks require one to handle sharp knives. In contrast to today, she remembers people never cutting themselves. I had been always confident about working with knives and axes. My first profession involved daily work with sharp knives, wood, and machinery. Later, making a living during my studies in a restaurant kitchen I again relied on my knife skills. Even though working with knives has become a skill for me that I use with confidence, while working on hides and doing other things in the camp I cut myself a few times causing uproar and worry in the Elders around. Being raised not to make a fuss about little injuries, I tried to downplay my cuts in these situations. However, for Elders it was something that should not happen. Someone who knows how to do things does not hurt themselves. “Being smart” means not only being able to complete the tasks at hand, but also to perform with ease and perfection.

When Elizabeth’s mother was still young, her uncles took her and her grandmother to Fort McPherson, left them there and went back to the Yukon without the girl and the old woman. The young Mary had to make a living for herself and her old grandmother. Her dog team suffered because people along the Peel River fed their dogs dried fish, which her team was not used to. Eventually though, she brought her dog team back up and regained her mobility:

And she could go any place she wanted, do whatever she wanted to do. But I don't think she shot anything, though, she didn't bother guns. But when somebody shot caribou or moose, they would ask her to go and get it and she did that too! Nothing was hard for her! You know and I remember her, she did a lot! And she learned to tan [hides] at an early age, like Dorothy [Alexie], and she was always tanning, I remember. [...] She was a strong woman. I got to say she was a strong woman because of all the things she learned to do. And she kept that tanning up right until in her 80's, you know! (E. Colin, 05/09/2012)

While work in and around the camp dominated women's life worlds, mobility and travel still played a crucial role in these women's lives. Similar to Mary Effie Snowshoe's mother, as described above, Elizabeth's mother was able to rely on herself to make a living and to travel where she needed to go. Maintaining her dog team and taking good care of her dogs meant she was mobile and could go wherever she desired. During my time in Fort McPherson, I experienced the lack of my own means of transportation as limiting, at the same time, though, this experience of limitation and immobility gave me an understanding of the value and necessity of mobility for people's sense of well-being and agency. Often Elders would have liked to go on the highway into the mountains and talk about places and stories, however, we did not have a truck to do so. People would like to go for berries in the summer, go for a boat ride up river, or go to Whitehorse for some affordable shopping; however, many do not have the means to go. I was dependent on people to take me along, in their truck, on their skidoo, in their boat. Elders mentioned to me that they feel uncomfortable asking others for a ride. It is better to be mobile oneself.

Like Robert and Walter Alexie who emphasized the amount of walking they used to do, Elizabeth remembers her mother as a great walker as well: "And she liked to walk, walk, walk and she doesn't stop and we're just running! Some of us are scared, so we have to keep up with her." (E. Colin 05/09/2012). Her father was a very "good walker" and very good on snowshoes. Just as Elizabeth's mother was raised to work from an early age, men were "trained" to walk long distances with a minimum of food and water. Elizabeth recalls her uncle:

"He remembered sleeping in the morning, his dad would grab him and just throw him to the door! Training! And he said, he would always fall down and start crying but he would be told to go out and run! Towards the end, he would wake up when his father is getting ready to throw him out and he would jump to the door, you know! That's the old time way if training. And they had squirrel head [...] that's their cup. [...] And they don't eat lots too, they just eat little, just little so that they don't get too big. [...] And they get used to all that and that's the way he was raised, the old time way, you know. And he had to learn at an early age to start living and I remember when we were home, he would go in the morning – walking, rather than taking the dogs, he would start walking.

When we had to get caribou, long ways until we get to the caribou that he shot by walking. And late at night he would come back and have something to eat and then he would go outside and do something else. Even though the wood is cut, you know, he would do something else. Just like they don't know how to relax, you know, they have to be just going, going until they go to sleep. Then early the next morning, they're up again.
(E. Colin 05/09/2012)

Walking and working, moving, becoming knowledgeable and skilled are inseparable aspects of being in these examples. Being “smart” refers to an ability to do whatever is needed without strain, in Elizabeth’s words: “nothing is hard for them”. Such skills have become embodied aspects of being, are practiced with confidence, and provide a sense of existential security through accumulated experience of reliable results. Another articulation of being “smart” is the ability to go wherever one wants to go by means of one’s own physical effort or one’s own well-maintained means of transportation, such as a dog team or, today, by truck. Following Ingold (2000), skills do not only refer to the mastery of certain bodily tasks but also to the ability to perceive and act appropriately within one’s surroundings. Enskillment, thus, is inherently relational and denotes the growth and “embodiment of capacities of awareness and response by environmentally situated agents” (2000, 5) through movement and engagement within their surroundings. Loovers (2010) has described the accumulated experience and intimacy with the unfolding processes of a locality for Teet’it Gwich’in as “borne knowledge” (2010, 33-36) derived from the Gwich’in word *gahgwidandaii*. He uses his term “actioning” for the continuous engagement with emerging and diverging elements of the environment that is the foundation for borne knowledge to arise. Borne knowledge is set apart from learned or taught knowledge by encompassing a collective aspect (Loovers 2010, 33-34) and connotations of past knowledge that is transmitted through generations. His use of the term largely parallels Legat’s (2007) *becoming knowledgeable* which is based on experience, is nurtured, and incorporated into being, but with an emphasis on the kind of knowledge that is shared with others and passed on. Loovers’ use of “borne knowledge” arises from his concern with pedagogy, knowledge, and language and is supplemented and qualified by the term “actioning” to reflect the processual and lifelong character of accumulating borne knowledge²⁵.

²⁵ Since the emphasis that emerged from the stories and experiences I encountered during field work was on the accumulation of skills and knowledge through moving and working, I prefer using Ingold’s (2000) “enskillment” or Legat’s “becoming knowledgeable” (2007). Both terms clearly connote process and allow for the inclusion of both personal experiential knowledge as well as transmitted collective knowledge.

While Loovers' discussion of different Gwich'in variants on the English concept of knowledge is extremely important and well founded on translations and interpretations of local Gwich'in experts, Elizabeth Colin's expression of "being smart" and "being strong" seems to well reflect the aspect of being that is constituted by continuous active and relational engagement with one's surrounding as well as the accumulated experience of "I can" and results in a sense of secure expectation for present and future, perhaps unfamiliar, situations. Thinking with the stories of long ago and the memories of the old days when people met familiar and unfamiliar challenges by applying their skills, continuously moving and working, and by creatively making due with what was at hand, I have come to understand "being smart" in the sense of Legat's (2007) "becoming knowledgeable" and Ingold's (2000) enskillment, which signify the process of accumulating and integrating skills that engender the ability to go on, grow, and innovate along the path of one's life. Such enskillment, Ingold and Kurtilla suggest (2000, 192), constitutes the foundation for a sense of continuity of identity. What is important in the context of overcoming crisis and hardship, however, is that the examples above illustrate that the ability to go on and innovate in the face of difficulty and unpredictability within a continuously emerging field of relations is rooted in the sense of existential security that grows from repeated experiences of reliable skills.

Another aspect that is pronounced in the Elder's stories and that appears crucial for a sense of well-being and existential integrity is having liberty to move that allows for experience and enskillment. Speaking of such liberty or mobility, however, we need to apply caution as the idea of freedom to move and act with creativity and innovation might invoke a notion of individualism or independence as it is familiar to post-industrial, urban ways of being. While there is certainly an emphasis on self-sufficiency and personal initiative, both mobility and enskillment are embedded in a field of relations that include family, community, the land and animals, the spiritual world, as well as considerations for past and future relations. This suggests the importance of striking a balance between a personal sense of control over one's own life course and activities and being part of a meshwork of relations, obligations, and responsibilities. Both Mary Effie Snowshoe and Elizabeth Colin name their mothers as examples of strong people when asked what strength means to them. Both mothers had grown up as orphans, under difficult and insecure circumstances that limited their sense of having a say over how their life should be. Both had to work hard at an early age and learn faster than other children at that time. However, both were able to balance this limitation by their exceptional investment in

enskillment, in learning how to “be smart” which consequently allowed them to experience a sense of existential mobility and security. Such balance of living for oneself and living for others, as Jackson (1998) frames it, is remembered as being a foundation of well-being and healthful sociability:

And everybody just had a good time, I don't remember anybody getting mad because they expect somebody else to do this and that but everybody just get involved in what you have to do. And the whole family helping one another, you know. So it was really, really good. (E. Colin 05/09/2012)

Today, Elizabeth suffers a number of health issues that often keep her from doing the work she would like to do. With age and illness and the resulting decrease in movement, mobility, and agility she misses this sense of agency and well-being that consolidates with moving and knowing. In her house in town Elizabeth cooks and sews for her children and grandchildren, but heat, water, power is provided and does not require anyone's physical initiative. Living with and caring for an ill and unpredictable family member in her house in town exposes Elizabeth to high levels of stress and insecurity. At 8 Miles however, she works by herself or with one of her sons, brings in wood, water, snow, makes fire, cooks, and cleans, she sews and rests, she visits and listens to the radio. This brings her joy, satisfaction, and a pronounced improvement of her physical well-being.

Lots of things I can't do now that was nothing for me to do. Again that's your strength. And I think that's with your medical problems, that's the difference, cause the worst part for me what I'm having is diabetic and COPD²⁶, that's the two – I have other things, arthritis and that, but I think that's the two that really putting me down. Especially that COPD. But even that I try to continue. Little every day, but sometime I take a whole day off. So that's how I can remember my parents - they did a lot and they taught me a lot too. I had to do a lot of things I couldn't do, like I had to do it until I learned it. I know they were pretty strong for their age. They even drive dogs and all that you know. And when we're moving they set tent, that's nothing! Everything was nothing for them until they were getting older, it was different story. (E. Colin, 05/09/2012)

Most importantly, when she is at 8 Miles her pain disappears. Again and again, Elizabeth reported to me how bad she felt in town, pain in her body, constant coughing, and difficulties breathing, but as soon as she went to 8 Miles she felt better and the pain was gone. After coming from the hospital she would wish to go to 8 Miles to get better. Even after my return to Edmonton when we continued to talk on the phone, she still told me each time, with surprise in

²⁶ Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease.

her voice, that all her pain was gone as soon as she had the chance to spend a weekend at 8 Miles. As a place, 8 Miles is imbued with a multitude of meanings for many Teet'it Gwich'in. The area has been used historically by Peel River Gwich'in as opposed to the town site of Fort McPherson. The site is good for fishing and, especially the area south of the river offers year-round access to hunting in the mountainous area southwest of Fort McPherson. Importantly, people built and own their houses at 8 Miles, which allows for a sense of achievement, agency, and self-governance. Another aspect that makes time spent at 8 Miles different than community life is that people can apply their knowledge of how to get clean water in the summer, use ice or snow for water in the winter, how to cut wood, and make a good hot or steady fire. Elizabeth often said that only at 8 Miles she can be both, active and working all day long but also relax and enjoy a good rest. A sense of peace and relaxation seems to be facilitated by not only all the physical work that gives her a sense of achievement and satisfaction but also the relative freedom from social pressures of community life.

There are multiple facets of living at 8 Miles that can be linked to people experiencing a sense of strength and well-being. One of them certainly relates to the history of the area as a fishing site and a place that embodies many aspects of Gwich'in identity and continuity of a "Gwich'in way of life". While it is an important anthropological consideration to investigate the role of place in well-being, the aim of this section has been to show how the practice of embodied knowledge in order to provide for one's own comfort and necessities of life engenders a sense of strength and well-being. 8 Miles provides the space for people to experience themselves as knowledgeable and capable.

4.3. T'aih – Gwich'in Meanings of Strength

The ethnographic examples in the previous sections illustrate meanings of "being strong" and "being smart" in oral history as well as in contemporary Elders' memories of the Old Days, the time of their parents and their youth. There is a considerable body of research in anthropology, cross-cultural psychology, and public health that, using descriptions of local practices of subsistence, bush activities, or storytelling, illustrate the importance of cultural practices for identity building and well-being as well as the crucial role that the land and place plays for

Aboriginal people's well-being (Denham 2008; Wilson 2003; Chandler and Lalonde 1998; Gone 2008b). Teet'it Gwich'in Elders, however, have directed my attention to movement, mobility, and enskillment as foundational for a sense of existential security and integrity that is articulated in a way of being that people perceive as "strong" and "smart". The examples that made individual strength in this sense salient to others involve an element of adversity that arises from a disruption in social relations: isolation from the group in the case of the stories of Gwich'in heroes, growing up as orphans in the case of Mary Effie Snowshoe's and Elizabeth Colin's mothers, and isolating and immobilizing illness in case of Jane Charlie. The "strength" that allowed these individuals to live through hardship and adversity includes continued movement and active engagement with one's natural and social surroundings, enskillment, and a balance of self-sufficiency and simultaneous orientation towards working for the benefit of the collective. In the memory of these Elders, the shift from a state of immobility and relative inactivity to movement and working for oneself engendered not only mental well-being but also pronounced improvement of physical pain and ailments. In Jane Charlie's case, this shift involved increased social interaction with others in the community; in Elizabeth Colin's case the shift orients her activities towards working for herself in her cabin at 8 Miles. Both examples relate to an imbalance of living for oneself and living for others that is countered by their respective mobilization. In summary, meanings of strength as gleaned from Gwich'in Elders' stories include facets of mobility, enskillment, and intertwined balance of individual agency that allows self-sufficiency and an orientation of working for the good of the collective.

Fast (2002) mentions three Gwich'in terms for strength that she documented in Gwichyaa Zhee in Alaska: *vat'aii* which she translates as personal mental or physical strength, *dat'aii*, public demonstration of strength, and *yinjih*, acting with one mind (2002, 158). The root *t'aii* stands for the union of individual and collective strength integrating personal autonomy with collective strength through interdependency. Fast explains *t'aii* as embodying skills and values, which includes a way to think that is transmitted from the ancestors. *T'aii* appears as a meaningful category that binds individual humans engaged with their human and non-human environment in strength. Wondering whether Teet'it Gwich'in are familiar with these terms and agree with Fast's translation I asked Eleanor Mitchell-Firth, who is known in the community as "being smart" for she is one of the few younger women who are learning the art of tanning hides and, especially, for her fluency in speaking and writing the Gwich'in language. She confirmed that the root *t'aii* is understood as including personal and collective strength, the

pronunciation however is somewhat different: “t’aih is how we say it, it is a powerful word in itself” (pers. Comm., 17/01/2013). Dorothy Alexie explains the meanings of the words vat’aii (possessive: someone’s strength, t’aii is “some powerful thing”, vat’aii is someone is strong, someone has strength) and dat’aii as meaning how you use your strength and showing your strength. Bertha Francis explained it as “with his strength he is doing something”. *Yinjih* refers to mind and Bertha said “yinjih ijlak gatsii” as meaning “they make one mind”. To explain to me how that means strength, she used an example: When men go hunting, they meet up and talk with each other about what they are going to do to get caribou. They make up one mind. Only then they go and get caribou all together. That is what makes them strong. The word that Elizabeth Colin was using in recounting her mother’s family is *gijaht’aii*, translated as “they are strong” (Eleanor Mitchell-Firth, pers. Comm., 17/01/2013).

Elizabeth: She was smart in every way for me. She did a lot of things, and I think that’s where most of us learned from her that nothing is impossible like. First time I didn’t know how to do things, because I was in school and I had to learn how to work all over again. It was a hard time for me at that time, but I just kept at it.

Thea: How do you call that in Gwich’in? Like being smart in every way and doing everything for yourself is that a different word than what you used before? Same word?

Elizabeth: Same, same. But [one strong person] mean is one person, and I used the other one [*Gijaht’aii*] for bunch of them before. So, that’s why today – for myself I feel really terrible some days because I can’t do nothing. And I used to do things like nothing bothered me, no health problem. When I want to do something, I just did it, you know? (E. Colin, 05/09/2012)

Besides recapping enskillment and continuous engagement as foundational for personal strength, a sense of well-being and agency, this quote also points to the resulting effect of providing a sense of security when faced with unpredictability and existentially threatening situations. On the other hand, it becomes clear that with diminished mobility and activity this sense of well-being also greatly decreases.

Chapter 5

The Colonial Encounter and Ontological Security

While many stories and memories of the Old Days emphasize the strength, health and independence of Gwich'in life in the 19th and early 20th centuries, they also bear witness to the increasing encroachment of government policy in Gwich'in lives. The goal of this chapter is to bridge the narratives of strength in Chapter 4 with accounts of life transformations that imply a period of suffering and existential threat in Chapter 6. After the previous chapter established meanings of being "smart" and being strong in Gwich'in stories and memory, sections 5.1. to 5.3. demonstrate how colonial policies posed serious challenges to local life worlds by subjecting children to education in residential schools, advancing government housing and settlement life, as well as promoting the development of resource industry in the North. These components of Canada's politic towards Aboriginal people and the land they inhabit have been held responsible for the disparity in health and well-being between Euro-Canadians and Aboriginal people in Canada. In section 5.4. I discuss several constructs that authors in medical anthropology, cross-cultural psychology, and other disciplines have offered to explain and theorize this link as well as the various perspectives that anthropologists working in the Gwich'in settlement area took on issues of social change and well-being. Finally, I introduce the construct of ontological security as another perspective to understanding how such disruptions can pose a threat to people's sense of existential integrity and well-being. With that, chapter five builds the historical and theoretical foundations for my exploration of ontological security and life transformation stories in Chapter 6.

5.1. Residential Schools

Jane Charlie remembered that when her family stayed at Moosehide in the Yukon, two men came to the house to take her two older sisters on the steamboat. They told her parents: "You got two big girls here, they need to go to school – we're gonna take them." (J. Charlie 30/04/2012). The family dressed the girls and they were taken away the same day. The girls left on the boat to Whitehorse and then further to Carcross. Years later, in 1937, again two men came to see the family. This time it was Jane and another sister who were told they had to go to school. At that time, however, two schools and hostels in Aklavik had opened, so Jane and her

sister were brought to All Saints Anglican School in Aklavik. Jane's sister contracted tuberculosis during the first year and died in the hospital in Aklavik in 1945. Because Jane's father saw what condition one of his daughters was in during his visit to Aklavik after one year, he took Jane back home and only brought her back to school in 1944. In 1946, the family passed spring in Old Crow in the Yukon, when they were told that their two older daughters, who had been taken away by steamboat in Moosehide nine years earlier, could come back. However, they were released only if the family paid the fare for the boat. Jane's mother was desperate to have her daughters back but she did not have the amount of money that was requested for them to leave the boat. As their relations in Old Crow heard of this situation, they collected money to help the family:

So the people there, like they do here, they collect money for them. I don't know how much money. [...] Steamboat came, lots of peoples living there at the time [at Fort Yukon], she [Jane's mother] said they were all standing at the shore, ah big boat came, way up there was room, two girls came out – *how* many peoples, they point at my dad! *nine* years! Nine years after they went to school, they had to pay, fight to get them back!
(J. Charlie 30/04/2012)

In the following winter, the family moved back to Fort McPherson across the mountains. After nine years at residential school, the two girls had to relearn the skills needed to live on the land: "These two, they're just like oonjits [Gwich'in word for white people] like, don't know nothing" (J. Charlie 30/04/2012).

Canada as a Confederation came into being in 1867 with the signing of the British North America Act. This constitution was drafted and modeled after the British parliamentary system by a colonial elite who hoped that a Canadian state would counteract threats to market and capitalization by American expansionism and the decrease of economical privileges provided to colonies by Britain. From these early days on, the Canadian state saw its mandate in state interventions to ensure capitalist development according to values and principles of British "Tory" conservatism (Abele 1987, 311). Although the Dominion, as the new federation was named in the British North America Act, purchased the northern territories from the Hudson's Bay Company in 1870, attention to the north was given sporadically and on a crisis basis, in the case of conflict between migrants and indigenous populations or in case of mineral discoveries (Abele 1987; Milloy 2008). However, the Indian Act of 1876 spelled out the government's intentions with regards to indigenous peoples throughout Canada. Rooted in the colonial heritage of the new state, in principles of the developing market economy, such as private property, as well as the idea and rhetoric of the "whiteman's burden", the Indian Act explicitly

stated the assimilation of indigenous populations as its goal (Milloy 2008, 3). Further, provisions for education were included to aid this process. The Indian Act established the Canadian governments' intervention policy that would separate children from their families in order to provide "civilized care" in church run boarding schools (Greenwood & Leeuw 2006, 175).

Analyzing historical government documents, Greenwood and Leeuw (2006) argue that "the family was the site of paramount focus in imperialist and colonialist interventions" (174). The destruction of families as social and economic networks, separation of the generations, disruption of knowledge transmission, and consequently the replacement of local knowledge, language, and ways of being by education in mission schools was meant as an effective tool to "finally overcome the lingering traces of native custom and tradition" (Duncan Campell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of the Department of Indian Affairs between 1913 and 1932, quoted in Greenwood & Leeuw 2006, 174). This belief shaped government and church interaction with indigenous peoples and certainly dictated educational policy. The result was a school system that suppressed Aboriginal ways of being, language, and spirituality, as well as damaged family and community relationships. During treaty negotiations Aboriginal peoples were promised schools for every community, but instead of taking on this responsibility, the government arranged financial support for various churches to run boarding schools that separated children from their communities. Day schools were considered ineffective since they left the children to the care and influence of the parents for part of the day. Milloy (1999) summarizes the goals of this educational project as first, "resetting the child's cultural clock from the 'savage' seasonal round of hunting and gathering to the hourly and daily precision required by an industrial order", second, instructing children in Christianity to replace previous beliefs, and third, disorienting children in disrupting the symbolic ordering of the world and re-orienting them in a place filled with European meanings (1999, 36-38). Expressing Euro-Canadian attitudes of superiority, these objectives were intended to supplant Aboriginal subjectivity and humanity.

Convinced of the fact that boarding schools would be most efficient to achieve these goals, government and churches engaged in rapid expansion of their educational influence throughout the country. Amendments to the Indian Act in 1884 facilitated this process (Stout and Kipling 2003): it made attendance at boarding schools mandatory for all Aboriginal children under 16 and allowed children to be removed from their families and put into re-education programs at residential schools (General Synod Archives 2008). By law, authorities had the power to arrest and detain children at school, and to punish parents who did not cooperate

(Stout and Kipling 2003).

In the Northwest Territories, missionaries of both the Anglican Church of England as well as the Roman Catholic Church had set up mission houses and schools throughout the second half of the 19th century. The region was divided among the churches into Anglican and Catholic territories while each tried to win over people from the other denomination. The competition between the Anglican and the Roman Catholic churches in the Northwest Territories had several consequences: first, it fueled the schools' eagerness to establish themselves among First Nations in the north. Second, children were kept at school year-round in order to avoid the influence of both their parents and missionaries of the other denomination. Some residential schools saw yearly vacations as a necessary evil to ensure attendance, but often children were kept permanently for up to 10 years (Milloy 1999). Third, religious instructions were regarded as more important than secular teachings and focused on memorizing hymns and prayers, as well as on participating in a variety of religious activities (Stout and Kipling 2003). Aside from religious teachings and basic schooling in English reading and writing, discipline, often in the form of military drills, was much emphasized at boarding schools (Ibid; Heine 1995). Obedience to authority, punishment, and competition (Heine 1995) were elements of boarding school education that profoundly contradicted the life that Aboriginal people of the North lived on the land. In addition, children were strictly separated into male and female areas so that siblings could not talk to each other despite attending the same school.

In the early 20th century, government and churches started to doubt that Aboriginal children could be assimilated into "White" society. Reports to the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) mention the expectation that the students would ultimately go back to a rural lifestyle (Stout and Kipling 2003). For this reason, schools started teaching skills such as farming, or the care of cattle and horses. The intention was to prepare children for a life in the lower ranks of Canadian society. Students graduated after Grade 8 with skills that were supposed to enable them for potential jobs in the North: sewing and cooking for the girls, carpentry and gardening for the boys (Ibid). Secular education was kept to a minimum and the classes were dominated by religious instructions (Carney 1991). The education provided by the schools was further limited as teachers were selected by the churches and often had no teaching certificate. Instructions were interrupted for health reasons or in order to gather and produce food. As a result, the schools left children with few skills to use in their home communities or to succeed in mainstream Canadian society.

By World War I, the government established a set per capita payment to support the schools, a measure that motivated schools to increase enrollment. Prior to the treaty in 1921 the Roman Catholic Order of the Grey Nuns operated two residential schools in the southern Mackenzie District: St. Joseph's at Fort Resolution and Sacred Heart at Fort Providence. After a group of Dene settled at the mouth of Hay River in 1892, the Anglican missionary Thomas Jabez Marsh established St. Peter's Mission and in fall 1893 held day school classes for local children. A year later a dormitory was added and the first seven boarders from the recently closed residential school at Fort Resolution moved to Hay River. After the federal government started to financially support mission schools, St. Peter's Mission Indian Residential School in Hay River (1898 – 1949) was able to house 30-40 children of the region as well as from as far as Fort McPherson (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1907, 391). The annual reports to the Department of Indian Affairs state that the school enrolled children from three or four to eighteen years old (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1907, 389). Between 1902 and 1935, 172 Gwich'in children from around Fort McPherson and Inuit children from the Mackenzie Delta region travelled more than a thousand miles to attend the school in Hay River (Heine 1995). The available records mention two Tukudh (term for Gwich'in used at the time) children in 1908, 20 in 1916, and 26 in 1919 (Annual Report to the Diocese of McKenzie River). In 1906 Inspector J.A. Markle wrote in his report to the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA) that some of his pupils come from as far as Fort McPherson, that these children are kept year round, and that finding employment and recreation for them during the summer adds to his and the school staff's labour (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1907, 391). In the annual report he writes:

“In reflecting upon the work in this far northern part of our land, it may be of interest for the readers of this report to know that some of the children under our care have been brought from Fort MacPherson [*sic*], on the Peel River, which is at least one thousand miles still farther north and west than we are at this place. Our pupils are almost all drawn from distant posts, which means that they have to remain with us throughout the full period of their school training, which in some cases reaches out into the sixth or eighth year. This necessitates our having to provide for them, both during school terms and holiday times. Whilst, in many ways this arrangement may be best for the child, it makes the work of the staff endless and deprives them of any change or rest such as is enjoyed and so eagerly looked forward to by those who labour under circumstances where the regular summer and winter holiday are secured to them.”

(Indian Affairs Annual Report 1907, 391)

In 1908 the report gives specific numbers for where children are coming from: “It may be of interest to the readers of this report to know that our pupils are representatives of the following

tribes of the north: - (1) Eskimo, (2) Tukudh, (3) Slavi, and (4) Chipewyan. Some come as much as 1,200 miles northwest of here; some from Fort Macpherson, 1,000 miles from here.” (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1908, 400). Again, the purpose of mentioning the origin of the students appears to be a complaint about the workload for school staff. On other occasions, educators were clear in stating that they regarded the influence of parents and their cultural environment as an education “in the darkness of ignorance and superstition” (Dominion of Canada Annual Report 1907, 391).

From the perspective of the Gwich'in parents, the immense distance meant that they were not able to visit their children, or monitor their education and health for many years. Letters with news from the “Hay River Scholars” arrived at Fort McPherson only once per year by means of the steamboat that carried Hudson's Bay supplies down the Mackenzie River in the summer (Heine 1995). Too often these letters would bring sad news. The measles epidemic in 1902 took its toll on the pupils, and J.A. Markle, the Inspector for the Mackenzie River District, reported in 1906 that “a great deal of sickness” among the children took three lives during the year as the aftereffects of the epidemic continued (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1906, 427). Between 1924 and 1935 at least 11 children from Fort McPherson died at St. Peter's Residential School (Heine 1995).

While in 1915 the report to DIA complains about the worsening conditions of the school buildings, construction of a new building was already underway, led by Reverend Alfred James Vale (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1915, 192). A new school and hospital were opened in 1917. The Diocese of Mackenzie River oversaw the school's operation starting in 1911 and in 1923 responsibility was transferred from the Church Missionary Society to the Missionary Society of the Church of England in Canada.

To better reach children in the northern regions around the Mackenzie Delta, St. John's Mission at Shingle Point was set up in 1929. This experimental school operated until 1936 when a new Anglican school (All Saints Indian Residential School) was opened in Aklavik, a community that had become a centre of trade and government activities. After that in 1937, St. Peter's Residential School in Hay River was transformed into a day school and administered by the Anglican Diocese of Athabasca.

The 1908 annual report to the Diocese of Mackenzie River mentions the subjects taught at the school which include cattle, dogs, horses, gardening, hunting, fishing, house work, needle work, cooking, and light carpentering. Instructions in reading, writing, and arithmetic were

mentioned in the 1906 report to the Department of Indian Affairs (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1906, 426). Much emphasis was given to religious teachings and services, which were held every evening after dinner (Heine 1995). Chores in house and garden had to be fulfilled in the morning before classes started at 9:00 am and after school ended at 3:30 (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1907, 389). Since food imports were insufficient and delivered only once a year, the Hay River school soon supported itself with agriculture and fishing. According to the reports to the DIA the staple diet consisted of fish and potatoes (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1907, 390).

The northern regions of the Mackenzie District were dominated by Anglican missionaries, particularly noteworthy is the work of Robert McDonald who was based at Fort McPherson. On his initiative, a day school was established at the mission. Initially, the day school served Teet'it Gwich'in children only seasonally (General Synod Archives 2008). The missionary Robert McDonald, who founded the St. Matthews Mission in 1862 at Fort McPherson, played an enormous role in its operation but his extensive travels, as well as rampant epidemics during the 1860's limited the regularity of instructions. Starting 1902 many children were sent to St. Peter's Residential School at Hay River. They are first mentioned in the Annual Report to the Department of Indian Affairs in 1906 (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1907, 391). The records of the Anglican Church of Canada, however, claim that this practice started in 1917 (General Synod Archives 2008). With the signing of the treaty in 1921 children were increasingly sent to Hay River and after 1936 to Aklavik, as the Indian Act required mandatory schooling. The day school at Fort McPherson instructed children who were on the waiting list for the larger residential schools.

Yukon Aboriginal children were sent to the Anglican school at Carcross, which was opened in 1902 by Bishop Bompas. The Annual Report to the Department of Indian Affairs of 1910 mentions that apart from students from Carcross, Moosehide, and Forty Mile, there were also two children from Peel River at Carcross (Indian Affairs Annual Report 1910, 341).

In the first quarter of the 20th century, the Catholic Church increased their numbers in the northern regions and was the first to open a residential school in Aklavik. Aklavik had become a centre for fur trade and administration and was, therefore, chosen for both a Roman Catholic and an Anglican school. The Catholic Immaculate Conception Indian Residential School was opened in 1925, but because of the onset of the Great Depression the Anglican All Saints Residential School opened only in 1936. After that Anglican Gwich'in and Inuit children were transferred there from Hay River (Carney 1991). With the school being closer to where people

lived, children could be brought in every year either by barge, dog team, or plane. The Catholic school at Aklavik enrolled Inuit children, Gwich'in from the area around Arctic Red River, and Slavey children from Fort Norman and Fort Good Hope (Carney 1991). All Saints Anglican residential school enrolled children from Anglican families such as the Teet'it Gwich'in from Fort McPherson starting from 1937 to 1959. The hostel had a maximum capacity of 100-150 pupils. The building received electric lightning in 1938. For many years, however, heating and cooking had to be fueled by wood. About her time at All Saints Anglican Hostel in Aklavik, Elder Jane Charlie remembers:

Jane: [...] they cut our hair too – mine was really long [laughs], that's where I was hurt, oh awful! And then they took all what we had, we had nice clothes, nice moccasins, beaded moccasins, they took all that away. I don't even remember if we got it back, we just wore school stuff, ah, and is not even good too! [...] I remember we had bread with lard on it. Peoples, girls and boys that are - rich, I could say, my parents weren't poor but they weren't rich, just in between, so we were ok, but my husband – his parents were well off and he had money in school and he had toast and butter on it!

Thea: Oh they had different food depending on what the parents paid for?

Jane: Ya! And me I had bread with lard. [...]

Thea: What did they – what did you do in school all day long? They made you work too?

Jane: Yes! They made us work! Like me I said, I think I go to class once a day. I mop the floor, I sweep the floor. There is so many rooms in there for staff, they let us clean that place. *And I don't know what we get for it? Nothing! Nothing.* Ya, so that's how come I said I went only to grade two. I was 14 years old, just work, and then go in the kitchen and make bread, mix it in big tub [laughs].

(J. Charlie 30/04/2012)

In 1952 many more students stayed at All Saints Residential School as the government opened a large integrated day school. Instructions were then held at the federal day school and the classrooms at All Saints were closed. The hostel soon became too small for the additional students. Around this time, the government considered moving the entire community of Aklavik to another location in the Mackenzie Delta because spring floods and the town's poor sanitation threatened the health of the population. The new town was named Inuvik in 1958 and with the establishment of its new school and hospital the All Saints Residential School in Aklavik was closed. In the new settlement a large combined day school was built with two separate hostels: the Roman Catholic Grollier Hall and the Anglican Stringer Hall.

The situation in Fort McPherson changed in 1945 as Bishop Fleming lobbied to re-open the day school that had been founded by Robert McDonald (Carney 1991, 384). Because all local

children were Anglican the government agreed and the first federal day school opened in 1946 with a teacher by the name of Miss Hershall and about 25 students. Because of the existence of this school, some Teet'it Gwich'in families started to stay in the settlement longer than usual so that they could be near their children. In the early 1950's a larger, two-storey building was built, however, no hostel was included. The old mission house served as a hostel for the boys, while the girls were sent to Aklavik in September and returned only in June the following year. At the request of Chief Julius a hostel was built in the late 1950's and in 1958 Fleming Hall opened with 100 beds (General Synod Archives 2008). Both, school and hostel, were now large enough to allow girls and boys to stay in Fort McPherson and attend Peter Warren Dease School. This enabled parents to go on the land while their children attended school. In 1969 the government took over responsibility for the residential school from the Anglican Church (General Synod Archives 2008). Trapping became less and less profitable so more families stayed in town and the hostel was closed for a few years until it was demolished in 1980. A new school was built during the 1970's and completed in 1976. Following suggestions from the community and the students, this new school was named after Chief Julius (Macpherson 1991).

High school students were enrolled at Sir Alexander Mackenzie School in Inuvik and stayed at either one of the two separate hostels, the Catholic Grollier Hall and the Anglican Stringer Hall. Both Inuvik hostels had a capacity of 250 beds. While Stringer Hall (1959-1970) was completely filled, Grollier Hall (1959-1997) never reached its maximum capacity (Carney 1991). Instructions were held at the federal day school "Sir Alexander Mackenzie". The school separated children at the elementary level according to denomination, at the high school level the classes were combined. Stringer Hall also employed Aboriginal teaching aides who, at least on some occasions, spoke with the students in their mother language (Gaver 2011).

As early as 1922, Dr. P.H. Bryce, the DIA's former Chief Medical Officer, condemned the government for failing to safeguard Aboriginal children enrolled in residential schools from tuberculosis. A "trail of disease and death has gone on almost unchecked by any serious efforts on the part of the Department of Indian Affairs" (Milloy 1991). At the time, it was alleged that approximately half the children who attended residential schools did not live long enough to make use of the education they received. After WWII the government started to question the arrangement with the churches running the schools in the Northwest Territories. A series of inspections and critical reports led to the government taking over responsibility for the schools, the curriculum, and for hiring teachers. In 1955 an agreement was signed between the

superintendent of Indian Affairs and the Commissioner of the Northwest Territories that transferred control of education for Aboriginal people to the Commissioner. In 1969, responsibility for education was transferred from the federal government to the territorial government. Nevertheless, for some schools it took years to complete the transfer. The northern situation was unique in that the schools admitted Inuit, First Nations, Métis, and non-Aboriginal children. However, separation according to religious beliefs was still upheld with respect to the hostels and residential institutions. The “Stringer Hall” hostel continued to be operated under church control until 1970 when the government assumed full responsibility over facilities and staff. “Grollier Hall” was operated by the Roman Catholic Church until 1985. After that the government took over responsibility for the residence. It was closed in 1997 and demolished in 1999. As was the case in most residential schools, boys and girls were housed in separate parts of the building. At Grollier Hall boys and girls were additionally divided by age into junior and senior residences. The Grey Nuns were in charge of the girls' and the junior boys' areas, while Oblate brothers administered the senior boys' residence.

When the residential school program slowly started to fade out, the government's interest in intervening into Aboriginal families found another outlet: child welfare agencies were keen to identify child neglect in Aboriginal families. By the end of the 1960's, 30% to 40% of all children in foster care were Aboriginal (Kirmayer, Brass and Tait 2000, 609). In contrast to other Canadian families, there was no family-reunification scheme for Aboriginal families, which resulted in adoption in the majority of cases (ibid). The displacement of children from their socio-cultural context and the disruption of kinship and wider social relationships was legitimized by the combined efforts of a discourse marking Aboriginal people as being deficient in some way and in need of Euro-Canadian intervention and a policy approach aiming for their systematic socio-economic and cultural marginalization (Greenwood and Leeuw 2006). Under the mantle of child welfare, the “Sixties Scoop” continued for over three decades with detrimental results for many children and their families (Kirmayer, Tait, Simpson 2009, 10).

Starting in the 1970's Aboriginal people across the country were better able to access effective channels to express their concerns and organized to have their perspectives heard. Many stories were gathered during the hearings of the Berger Inquiry that was conducted for the Mackenzie Gas Pipeline. This process, in concert with many other factors, eventually led to the negotiation of the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim. During the 1980's people started to come forward with their experiences of abuse and trauma in some residential and day schools.

Since then, several former residential school students have written about their past and ongoing suffering in touching and eye-opening books. One example is “Porcupines and China Dolls” written by the late Robert A. Alexie, Gwich'in writer and well respected president of the Gwich'in Tribal Council until his passing in 2014 (Alexie 2002).

The Catholic Church in 1991 and the Anglican Church in 1993 reacted with apologies and funds for healing initiatives (Gaver 2011). In 1996 the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples Report recommended the investigation and documentation of the abuses in Indian Residential Schools. These processes encouraged some former students to bring their charges to the courts. In 1997/1998 four supervisors at Grollier Hall in Inuvik were found guilty for sexual abuse in dozens of cases and sentenced to prison. However, some people emphasize to remember that, apart from the many painful experiences and the imperialist political motives, some students had positive experiences, were well cared for, and appreciate the education they received (Gaver 2011; pers. communication with several community members).

In 1997 the Assembly of First Nations began negotiations with the federal government for an out-of-court settlement for the residential school abuses. This led to the establishment of the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (AHF) with a fund of \$350 million for survivors of residential schools (AHF 1998)²⁷. In order to facilitate the out-of-court settlement of abuse claims, the Department of Indian Residential Schools Resolution Canada was set up in 2001. Two years later the attempt was made to solve the issue with an Alternative Dispute Resolution program, this process, however, was found to be seriously flawed (Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada). The Assembly of First Nations suggested a different process in 2004, one that included compensation payments, a truth commission, a healing fund, and a fair settlement process for individual cases of particularly serious abuse. These suggestions were the foundation of subsequent negotiations and in 2007 the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement was finalized and implemented.

It was not until 2008 that the Prime Minister of Canada made an official statement in which he acknowledged and apologized for the government's role in the abuse done to Aboriginal children and their families. In the same year the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was launched with the mandate to educate Canadians about the history of residential schools, to gather testimonies, and to inspire renewed and respectful relationships for families,

²⁷ AHF funds were cut by 2010, since then all projects initiated under these funds had to resort to other funding sources.

communities, religious organizations, government, and the general Canadian population. Seven national events were organized that aimed to contribute to healing and to telling the history of Aboriginal people who were and still are affected by the residential school system to the Canadian public. The first of these events was held in Winnipeg in 2010. The 2011 event in Inuvik was the second and was followed by further events in Halifax, Saskatoon, Montreal, Vancouver, and finally in 2014 in Edmonton.

As this section demonstrates, Teet'it Gwich'in attended and were affected by residential school policy from as early as 1906. While not all people in Fort McPherson report negative experiences at these schools, all students experienced separation from their parents and siblings, loss or partial loss of their language through mandatory use of English at school, lack of opportunity to learn skills needed for subsistence life on the land, subjugation of Gwich'in identity and ontology, as well as forced labour. Many Teet'it Gwich'in highly value school education in order to effectively engage with social and economic changes, however, residential schools often provided only the bare minimum of academic skills leaving graduates at a disadvantage on the employment market. The focus on class-room education and religious teachings additionally severely limited students opportunities to practise the skills and accumulate the knowledge needed for both life in the community as well as life in the bush.

5.2. Government Intervention in Settlement and Housing

The introduction of government housing came up in many conversations as having had, in retrospect, a particularly negative impact on people's sense of well-being. As people settled permanently in town, the time they spent on the land decreased drastically, often leaving the men going by themselves, while the women stayed in town with their children. Many daily chores, such as cutting wood for the stove, or hauling water, snow, and ice became obsolete. Homes were pre-fabricated and the interior designed according to southern living needs. Before government housing, people built their own log houses if they wanted to stay in town. With the housing program, however, people did not own their houses anymore but had to pay rent and deal with the housing authorities if they needed anything changed or repaired. Housing and settlement design also affected social mobility and connectedness, both within the family and between community members. In this section, I argue that the introduction of government housing represents a second wave of assault on enskillment, mobility, and agency of Gwich'in in

the Mackenzie Delta. While this effect runs contrary to official intentions to improve the welfare of northern Aboriginal peoples, it is coherent with previous policies that regulated Indigenous peoples' lives according to national economic interests and colonial ideologies.

While residential schools were under the control of churches and their education efforts reflected denominational as well as practical priorities of the respective institution, government policy at the turn of the century up until 1939 was not focused on intervening in northern Aboriginal lives unless there was conflict or the potential of mineral exploitation (Fried 1964). Abele quoting Judd (1969) explains that government policy towards northern peoples preferred them to "follow their natural mode of living and not . . . depend upon white men's food and clothing which are unsuited to their needs" (Abele 1987, 312), an attitude that Christensen describes as "active, paternalistic discouragement of northern Aboriginal centralization" (Christensen 2011, 70). The economic interest in the north was still based on fur trading which required the mobility and the skills of Gwich'in land-based life. Traders encouraged people to continue their land-based way of life as they saw their fur and meat supply threatened if people stayed around the post for too long (Christensen 2011, 70-71). Contact with federal institutions was slight, education and health care was provided by religious institutions and that at a minimal level (Abele 2009). Nevertheless, interactions with these outsiders resulted in the spread of infectious diseases, which led to epidemics that decimated Gwich'in groups throughout the north (Krech 1978; Abele 2009; see page 62).

Occasions of increased government interest in the north included the Gold Rush after 1898 in the Yukon and the lucrative fur trade in the 1920's, especially with regards to muskrat furs from the Mackenzie Delta area (Abele 1987; Fried 1964). During both of these periods, Teet'it Gwich'in made use of the economic opportunities that arose within reach of their homeland. Between 1905 and 1910 few people came to Fort McPherson. Instead, they would trade at Dawson (Slobodin 1962, 31). The men mainly hunted to provide meat for the miners or they would fish for the market, cut wood for the steamboats, work as carpenters, cooks, or interpreters at the mining camps. There was a generation of young Teet'it Gwich'in men, the "Dawson Boys", who stayed several years working in the gold-rush economy (Slobodin 1962, 33). Aside from the economic opportunity that mobile young Gwich'in men were able to embrace, the Gold Rush also had effects that eventually limited mobility, control over their lands, and kin relations of Teet'it Gwich'in: "The presence of the migrants and fears in Ottawa of American annexation led to the creation of the Yukon Territory and the establishment of a

territorial government in the Yukon” (Abele 1987, 312). The Yukon-Northwest Territories border divided a region that Gwich’in groups travelled through, hunted, fished, and gathered for centuries into two separate jurisdictions. As a consequence, hunting rights, land use rights, as well as social and political relationships between different Gwich’in groups across the two territories were eventually affected and limited.

Fur prices started to rise with World War I and particularly muskrat fur became a very valuable trade good. Since trapping was done in spring in the Mackenzie Delta area, families started to go downriver from the mountains earlier in the year than before. This new orientation towards the delta as well as the increasing importance of celebrations such as Christmas, New Year’s, and Easter were the reasons why many families started spending the second half of the winter at the settlement (Slobodin 1962, 36).

With the discovery of oil in 1920 in Norman Wells (Bone 2003) the Canadian government became increasingly interested in clearing land title in the Mackenzie Valley to prepare resource development. Treaty 11 was negotiated hastily and signed in 1921 with the Teet’it Gwich’in and other Dene groups of the Mackenzie region (Abele 1987). According to the treaty, Gwich’in ceded “all rights, titles, and privileges” to the Crown (Department of Mines and Resources, Indian Affairs Branch 1921, 1922 quoted in Slobodin 1962, 40). The document provided for the right to pursue subsistence activities, which, nonetheless, came under government regulations. This meant the introduction of hunting seasons and later, in 1946, the registration of trap-lines (Slobodin 1962, 41). Regulation especially affected muskrat trapping in the Mackenzie Delta. Later, in 1950, trap-lines had to be registered in the Yukon as well which concerned the upriver part of Peel River Gwich’in trapping territory (Slobodin 1962, 88). Slobodin observed that this was perceived as a restriction in mobility and in flexibility with regards to land-use by the Peel River Gwich’in (1962, 41). For the treaty negotiations each band was required to name a chief and a headman to act as negotiators. Councillors were chosen in addition to that. This process (re)-enforced the provisions made in the Indian Act of 1869 to replace local forms of governance with a “male-only elective system” with limited municipal law-making powers (Milloy 2008, 7). According to Slobodin, however, before World War II the treaty mainly affected Peel River Gwich’in lives through annual treaty money and Treaty Day. “Taking treaty” meant not only accepting the small amount but had “social and legal significance” in that it signified who belonged to the Band (1962, 41).

While the government took an at arm's-length approach in the early 20th century, which enabled Teet'it Gwich'in to maintain a considerable amount of mobility and local autonomy to engage with traders, missionaries, miners, and utilize economic opportunities on more or less their own terms, Dominion policy makers continued to solidify the conservative, colonial approach to northern Aboriginal people that intervened in northern lives in order to ensure capitalist development in the federal interest. Effects of interventions included the restriction of Gwich'in mobility and autonomy by establishing territorial borders that disregard Aboriginal territories and kin relations, the disenfranchisement of land rights through a treaty that left Teet'it Gwich'in misinformed about the government's intentions. Effects through a lack of intervention due to the economic priorities of the government's relation to Aboriginal people include the epidemics of infectious diseases that claimed so many lives among the Gwich'in and left many seeking security close to the trading post and mission. Other changes in Teet'it Gwich'in seasonal movements, social, and spiritual life emerged through people's creative engagement with their changing environment and their active interest in Christianization, economic opportunities, such as the muskrat trapping and the Gold Rush, as well as social and cultural novelties, like trade goods, dance, music, foods, and alcoholic drinks. This period can be characterized as a delicate balance of increasing outside control factors and active local appropriation of changing circumstances in which Teet'it Gwich'in were able to maintain a sense of balanced agency and sufficient control over their lives. However, this balance began to shift with the drastic and important changes that World War II brought to the northern regions.

Starting with Japan's attack on the U.S., the western Arctic regions took on a strategic importance for American and Canadian sovereignty. American military activity sped-up the creation of infrastructure and technology in the Canadian north including the construction of the Alaska Highway, a pipeline and a refinery, and a winter road from the Mackenzie valley to Alberta. This activity not only redefined the western arctic and subarctic regions as strategically important to fend off feared attacks from the Pacific islands during the war and from the Soviet Union during the Cold War period but also funneled a tremendous amount of resources into establishing infrastructure that served both, military and economic interests (Christensen 2011; Abele 1987; Fried 1964).

This development had a further effect that accelerated changes in the lives of northern Aboriginal peoples. The increased presence of southern populations in the north resulted in greater awareness of Aboriginal living conditions in the Canadian south. Especially since the fur

market collapsed after the Second World War Aboriginal trappers were left without a source of income. After decades of trade relationships and use of southern commodities, northern Aboriginal people had become enmeshed in the cash economy to an extent that made a complete return to subsistence economy impractical. Additionally, diseases had decimated the population and residential school programs had left the younger generation lacking necessary skills to exclusively pursue a life on the land (Krech 1974).

As a consequence, Canada embarked on a national program to increase social welfare services in the post-war years. Parallel to the state's extension of infrastructure and technology throughout the north to exploit northern resources, the extension of welfare programs represented the introduction of "full-scale colonial administration" to the Northwest Territories (Abele 1987, 312). With the establishment of the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources in 1953 the push for economic development through mineral exploitation, the extension of government administration, and the introduction of social services became organized and implemented in a concerted way (Fried 1964). Contrary to the arm's-length approach of fur trade times, this development was characterized by the objective to settle and centralize northern Aboriginal populations. This shift in policy aimed at integrating Aboriginal peoples into the larger society and wage-labour force and, therefore, drastically increased Euro-Canadian control over northern lives (Christensen 2011, 73; Bone 2003). One of the first services extended to northern Aboriginal people were family allowance payments, later followed by old age pension, social assistance, unemployment insurance, and disabled and blind person's allowance (Abele 1987, 313). A system of nursing stations in smaller communities was established and supplemented by provisions for transport to larger hospitals in southern cities if needed. Church-run hostels and schools were slowly replaced by the public school system.

In Fort McPherson, a hostel with 100 beds and the federal day school "Peter Warren Dease" was opened in 1958 and allowed children to attend school in the community instead of Aklavik. In 1959 an Anglican and Catholic hostel opened in Inuvik housing children of high school age. During this time, many people decided to move to town in order to be closer to their children, to take advantage of some cash income opportunities close to settlements, and to receive welfare assistance and health care. As people started to settle in the community for most of the year and their lives became more immersed in and regulated by Euro-Canadian economic, educational, and political institutions, established family roles, relationships, skills, and ways of being became devalued and insecure. As hunting migratory species, such as

caribou, became complicated by a settled way of life, people increasingly relied on store-bought food, and, consequently, on cash income (Bone 2003; Fried 1964).

A most significant change in people's experience of these years was the introduction of the government housing program in 1962 (Christensen 2011; Krech 1974). Before, many people who had decided to settle in Fort McPherson had built and owned their own log houses. People went to pick and cut the logs themselves and constructed their own homes. Along with that, the tasks of cutting and packing wood to heat the house, as well as hauling water or ice and snow from the river for drinking water continued to be necessary daily chores (Krech 1974, 289). Previously, the younger generation was busy with these tasks most of the day. Young women and men both joined in this work from early age on. Today, people reminisce about this work as considerably hard physical labour. The experience they remember however, was enjoyable, a normal aspect of daily life, and not particularly difficult.

“But you know, it's just, we're just going, going! And we never thought we had a hard time.”
(E. Colin, Sept. 5, 2012)

“I do that too [setting traps] and I get two or three [muskrat] about every day, sometimes if I'm lucky enough I get four. And I'm cutting wood and I haul wood. And I had only four dogs and yet I get two loads every day. At nights I go up to the lakes and I get snow and sometimes I go down the bank and out the river and cut ice and bring that up too and I try to have lots of that”
(L. Firth, Aug. 29, 2012)

“You know it was life that time. You start from morning til night. Today, I look back there, you know, it's a lot of work, but we never say, oh goodness sake that's hard, no way a guy is gonna say that, no that's life, it was life that time.”
(R. Alexie Sr., Sept. 3, 2012)

Hard work as a character quality that Gwich'in identify with seemed to enter people's awareness only when reflecting upon and comparing it with the convenience of community life today. In their reflection on the past, however, people are not swayed to believe that their past life ways were poor or harsh. To the contrary, they remember this work as part of a “good life”, the strength and skill associated with it as desirable and admirable.

With the start of the geared-to-income northern housing rental program, which moved people into houses with furnace heating, running water, and electricity at a low cost, many of these daily chores became obsolete. This freed a lot of time, especially for the younger generation. One woman Elder reflected upon this change one day in a conversation with me and said that she remembers being apprehensive towards moving into one of the “modern” houses

and holding on to her own log house as long as she could. She said her fears were for her sons who would not have much work to do if there is no need for water or wood.

Others felt that the move to “modern” housing had a direct effect on their mental and physical health. One Elder remembers:

And after, when our kids finished school – that’s when we start staying in town [speaks laughingly] and they had log house too, our own down - we have our own house - and then they told us – we’re gonna have this kind of house, it’s *easier*, but that’s when we – I think I start getting sick! [...] When we had our own house, I still go out get snow and we used to drink that water in the creek, it was *good* that time – no white peoples around, so we go down the river and get water, we go out on the sand bar and get wood, all that we do, we don’t have washer, we have wash board, no pamper, we wash diaper [laughs] all that we did - we never – *I never thought it was hard!* But – to look back now, we had hard time [...] but since that time we stay in here - I got sick!

(J. Charlie 30/04/2012)

The process of setting up government financed and constructed houses left people with a sense of expropriation. After listening to Laura Firth’s stories I noted in my field notes: “She talked about how when the white people came, they just did away with the first houses that were built in town, she said, they just came and put it all down.” (field notes, L. Firth. 17/07/2011). The wellness worker Mary Ross reflected on the some of the root causes of social suffering and pointed to the introduction of housing as well: “There is a control issue though and that is housing. In the past, everyone had their own log house, burning wood. When I came home from school, they had built housing, now the rents are high.” (M. Ross, 09/11/2011).

The apparent benevolence of welfare services was implemented in a paternalistic manner and proceeded without consultation or consideration of the concerns and suggestions of local people. Dickerson (1992) includes a quote from a resident of Fort Good Hope, NWT, who raised his concerns at a conference of the Special Committee on Housing in 1984:

As was mentioned before, there has always been a problem with housing, especially since the territorial government got involved in it. If you look back to before the government moved North, I mean everybody owned and built their own houses and had responsibility for everything they decided. They did it for themselves. About 1968 or 1969, there was a big push by the government to change everything around [...] Along with that a lot of the old houses were destroyed. [...] They did not recognize the band councils. They did not talk to them. So a lot of houses were destroyed. Some of them were pushed over with cats. Some of these people still do not have houses. Their houses were never replaced. Also they would have no choice but a rental house. That means their houses were taken away from them and then they would have to rent from the people who took them away. (George Barnaby, Legislative Assembly of the Northwest

Territories, Special Committee on Housing, Final Report, June 1985, 30, quoted in Dickerson 1992, 139).

The seat of government for the Northwest Territories was Ottawa until 1967, when officials were relocated to Yellowknife. Decisions regarding community welfare were made thousands of miles away in southern cities without much knowledge of northern circumstances (Abele 1987). House exterior and interior design, for example, followed southern models using materials transported from southern Canada to the north (Thomas and Thompson, 1972). They featured separate bedrooms, a living room, and kitchen according to Euro-Canadian needs of daily living. However, Gwich'in and other northern Aboriginal peoples might prefer more communal sleeping arrangements, require spaces to work with meat and fish, repair skidoos and four-wheelers, and open cooking spaces. Based on fieldwork in Inuit communities Thomas and Thompson (1972) report in detail the difficulties that arose with the establishment of the rental housing program. Since the government was not able to fulfill all responsibilities as landlord directly, communities were requested to form housing associations and elect a Housing Authority that would be responsible for renting, maintaining buildings, and to mediate between government and tenants in case of conflict. This placed community members as employees of the Housing Authority in a position where they, at times, have to act against social obligations and values of sharing. By enforcing regulations, in serious cases this could mean eviction of a person from a housing unit, with regards to payments, maintenance of facilities, eligible household members, and such. As Housing staff are not only employees but also community members and family members they sometimes find themselves in conflicting roles and are perceived as violating social values and family obligations.

Today, the housing associations mediate between tenants and the Northwest Territories Housing Corporation, which is a branch of the territorial government that took over responsibility from Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation in 1999 (Northwest Territories Housing Corporation 1999). Many issues, however, remain. During my fieldwork I witnessed how in some cases urban rental regulations clash with the realities of economic and social life in Fort McPherson. Seasonal or temporal work leaves families with cash income in some months of the year, but not in others. Rent payments, however, have to be made regularly and consist of up to 30% of the household's income.²⁸ While tenants are called to report their income at the

²⁸ Pers. communication with residents. According to the 1999 Housing Corporation Agreement rent cannot exceed 30% of the household's income.

beginning of each month, a failure to do so results in assessment of maximum rent (Northwest Territories Housing Corporation 2010). Another difficulty is that welfare housing is assigned to Elders or others on the basis of their low income. Other family members might not be eligible to stay in those houses unless they pay rent. This leads to considerable concern and stress as such regulations contradict values of family obligations, sharing, and personal autonomy. The criteria, with which housing is assigned to individuals, are often not transparent to community members who, as a result, sometimes perceive decisions on housing allocations as unjust.

Housing and other social assistance programs also introduced new categories of difference. As public housing is subsidized, and rent assessed according to income, most northern Aboriginal people fell into a category of “poverty” and were in need for assistance as a result of the meager cash income opportunities in the region. The extension of social services transplanted a group of southern professionals into northern communities who were trained to identify needs and supply services they thought were needed, with or without asking (Fried 1964). Indeed, this group of administrators and professionals was invested in finding these needs to satisfy not only the system that provides them with employment and income, but also the humanistic ideals they subscribed to (Brody 1975). The difference between people who needed low-rental housing and Euro-Canadian staff and government employees was visible not only because they were often housed in separate parts of town, but also because the buildings they occupied were of a higher standard. Christensen (2011) argues that housing, “effectively became a symbol of inequity and difference between northern Aboriginal people and settlers” (81). Another result of urbanization of northern living was that the establishment of Euro-Canadian services, administration, and economy placed southern professionals at a perceived higher social status, as they brought with them the skills and familiarity needed to operate within the new parameters of town life. Because of the availability of urban amenities these professionals did not rely in any way on the skills and expertise of Aboriginal people with regards to bush life and survival. At the same time, Aboriginal people were too easily perceived as lacking skills in numerous areas of life, which led to further encroachment on local agency and control, one example is the aforementioned removal of children and adoption into non-Aboriginal families.

The advance of government housing and access to social services and financial aid in communities led many families to move into town for most of the year. This concentration of people in a small area under new economic and administrative conditions had considerable

effect on social and economic relations. Public housing, in particular, affected household composition by regulating who is eligible to stay in the house in order to receive rental subsidies (Thomas and Thompson 1992; Christensen 2011), social relations and organization within the community (Fried 1964), everyday routines of work and rest, decreased family control over their dwelling arrangements and the use of their income. Fried summarizes the effect of settlement and the provision of government housing as “drag on mobility” (1964, 58).

While this discussion highlights the shortcomings of social and welfare services introduced to the north in the post-war period, it is not meant to deny the need for and benefit of public housing, homeowner assistance programs, and other social services. I hope to have shown that the *manner* with which southern Canadian style housing was introduced and administered in northern communities was experienced as an infringement on local ways of governance, social relationships, and people’s sense of control over their living arrangements. Additionally, and especially in the first years of the program, the shift to public housing was accompanied with a loss of enskillment, loss of mobility and sense of autonomy for many. Family responsibility and control over their own dwelling has been removed and replaced by obligations to follow Euro-Canadian standards of urban dwelling. The lack of involvement of local people in these decisions resulted in unsettling effects on enskillment, sense of agency, sense of existential security and well-being.

5.3. Boom and Bust

With the policy changes of the post-war period and the increased involvement of government programs in northern communities, relationships between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian government grew tense. Military presence in the North continued and the beginning of the Cold War formed the backdrop for the construction of an extensive weather and radar system in the western Arctic. A project that some Fort McPherson Elders remember today was the DEW line (Distance Early Warning Line), a massive undertaking that brought southern workers to the north, attracted Aboriginal men into short-term wage employment, and accelerated the shift from land-based trapping economy to settlement-based wage labour for many northerners (Christensen 2011, 73, Abele 1987 and 2009). Robert Alexie Sr. remembers how he and his brother came across cut lines, cat roads, and workers associated with infrastructure development when they went to Dawson with their dog teams:

That was life that time and then we went up Hart River, gee - two, three days I think, four days maybe to Hart River, all the way up Hart River and then where Blackstone is, right past, little ways past – portage, you know? And then there was an old cut line that we bump into, that cat train road that was from Alaska that went to Norman Wells and to the DEW line they had done that in the '50's, old road, it's just four, five, six years old that road but, anyway. We hit Blackstone, when we got to Blackstone, we portage there, we went over Blackstone, there was a road there, cat train road, that's that road, they had a drilling rig at Eagle Plains where they're operating now. There was a rig move there and they haul oil and things like that, fuel oil – cat train coming through. First when we hit that road we set up camp, next day early we took off, way up this side where highway hit Blackstone, we camped below there. At nighttime we hear cats coming, not much snow on the road but really blowing west wind. Cat train was coming, the cats at the time, they haul fuel and that, they can't stop. Last cat that was pulling cabooses, and he stopped. He asked us if we're from Old Crow, we're from McPherson – “how many miles from here to Dawson”, we told him, “120 miles” – “Ok”. Anyway, next day we left early.

(R. Alexie Sr. 03/09/2012)

The link between resource development and the increasing control over Aboriginal life-ways is bluntly reflected in the name of a new government department founded in 1953: “Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources” and later, in 1966 “Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development”, both responsible for the extraction industry and the affairs of Aboriginal peoples. Oil and gas exploration activities were high throughout the 1960's and 1970's and mineral extraction was hoped to provide employment for an Aboriginal labour force (Abele 1987).

Three factors pressured the Canadian government to increase its investment in infrastructure, mineral exploration, and administrative presence in the North: first, the continued American military activity in the Canadian Arctic threatened Canadian sovereignty, second, newly constructed infrastructure allowed the consideration of intensified resource exploration, and third, developments on the global market fueled anticipations for profitable resource extraction (Abele 1987, 312). In 1957 Prime Minister John Diefenbaker revitalized the idea of the North as one of Canada's sources of export commodities. His “Northern Vision” program spelled out how northern resources were expected to fuel the national economy (Abele 1987, 2009). Resulting policies, such as the “Roads to Resources” (Abele 1987) from 1957 to 1963, led to the construction of a number of highways and a rise of urbanized centers that served as home bases for government and industry offices as well as the increasing number of southern professionals. Once exploration projects found oil at Eagle Plains, the construction of the Dempster Highway connecting the Yukon to Fort McPherson and later to Inuvik became a priority in order to allow access to development sites and promote further exploration (Abele

2009; Loovers 2010). Work on the highway stopped intermittently as oil reserves at Eagle Plains turned out not to be viable. It was resumed, however, after the discovery of oil in Alaska at Prudhoe Bay in 1968, which spurred fears for Canadian sovereignty over the resources of the Arctic seabed and further increased pressure for resource development. During the 1970's, according to Krech who did fieldwork in Fort McPherson at the time, "the whole country surrounding Fort McPherson is checkerboard with seismic lines and cat roads" (1973, 21 quoted in Loovers 2010, 168). The region experienced a "boom" in exploration activities that provided short-term employment for local men. Indeed, hoping to eventually find viable petroleum resources in Canada, plans were made to transport Alaskan oil with a pipeline through the Mackenzie Valley. However, Aboriginal people across the north had started to organize themselves politically in response to the "White Paper" of 1969 and had now a political platform to resist such a major development project within their homeland. After an inquiry about the impacts of this pipeline, the Berger Inquiry (1974-1976), stopped the proposed Mackenzie Gas Pipeline, and the Indian Brotherhood entered land claim negotiations with the Canadian Government, a process that continued over almost three decades (Abele 1987). Only recently has the Project been granted approval.

However, despite this beginning shift in political relations between northern Aboriginal people and the Canadian government, the world energy crisis starting in 1973 again intensified the focus on northern resources as the Canadian government decided to pursue national energy self-sufficiency (Abele 1987). This policy direction was accompanied by a range of subsidies to boost exploration and development of resources, especially petroleum (Abele 1987, 316). Again, decisions regarding northern lands were made without consultation of local forms of government or communities and without regard for environmental or social impacts (Dickerson 1992, 145). Only four years after the moratorium on the Mackenzie Valley pipeline construction a project was approved to expand oil production and the pipeline system of Norman Wells (Abele 1987, 316-317).

Charlie Snowshoe, a respected Teet'it Gwich'in Elder who was involved with the Indian Brotherhood to protest the Mackenzie pipeline project and later was part of the negotiations for the Comprehensive Land Claim remembers the time of increasing exploration and people's first experiences with wage work for the extractive industry:

[...] in the '60's I went up to Three Cabin Creek, I always repeat this story, went up to Three Cabin Creek between Christmas and New Year, I was poor and I had to go visit my

traps. Going up towards the camp, there was smoke in the bush and nobody is supposed to be out on the land unless a trapper [...] And I was really, really puzzled with what's going on and I was thinking negative, maybe some crazy fool is checking out traps while everybody is in town. Because, you know, is no other way I'm gonna see smoke and we never hear nothing about anything is gonna happen, so I don't know, so I went up the bank, crawled up the bank in the snow and here was a big road there! The smoke was coming from the truck. And I asked this guy "Hey, what's going on?" "Oh, we're looking for oil and gas, for oil company, we're doing seismic work". That's new word to me!

[...]

In the meantime the oil and gas are really booming, really booming. And I worked part time, in the summer time up the Peel there, in the meantime the group in Yellowknife, the young people are working there to form a group to start working on everything. I was working up, about 100 miles from here, a place called Caribou Creek, I was working there, come back and I went to Inuvik and I met Freddy Carmichael, he was a pilot, he was getting all the business out of oil companies and yet he asked me the question if I work for oil company, I said, I just come from one. He said "Are they looking after the land?" he told me, I told him "What?" and he said "There is garbage any place or anything?" We had our own little camp, we're cutting logs and willows and stuff like that, James Wilson and Neil, Robert and I. And he told that they were not supposed to be damaging the land, supposed to look after it, supposed to keep it clean – that's when I walked away from the oil companies, he made me think. In the meantime, George Erasmus, he came up, already he is involved in a group in Yellowknife and they were called Indian Brotherhood at that time and he was informing the people – pipeline word came out, putting a pipeline down, so he's informing the people that the pipeline they're talking about is not gonna do us any good and we better start doing something trying to stop it. So he went all over the Mackenzie Valley and had some support workers working for him and they go all across, up into Alaska, Yukon, Nunavut, today Nunavut, and right down across Canada [inaudible] support. So, they all got together and I always said that the Elders never knew how to talk English, they never been a day in school, and yet they spoke against that pipeline. And this is where the government had to come in, they couldn't walk away from it and he set up an inquiry, Judge Berger was there at the inquiry, took him four years and he put a ten-year-moratorium – freeze on the land, nobody is go on the land until the land claim is settled.

So that's what I call strength! That's what I call power is when all the people get together.
(C. Snowshoe 02/09/2012)

The booming exploration and resource extraction industry attracted local men to these cash income opportunities. Fur prices had been falling since 1947 and trapping did not provide enough income anymore to support the growing need to pay for fuel, rent, food, clothing, and other goods. Modern modes of transport began to provide communities year-round with commodities such as canned and preserved foods, clothing, tools, fuel, and luxuries such as candy, beer, cigarettes, and radios (Fried 1964). These goods, of course, required monetary resources making it necessary for people to pursue wage employment. As mentioned above,

public housing required people to pay rent and utilities. Krech (1974) observed that social assistance payments supplemented the shortfall in trapping income in parts of the year. Men also took advantage of temporary work during the winter in the growing settlement. Women played an important role in filling permanent positions in the community as they stayed in town to be with their school-aged children. In the early 1970's half of all employees in Fort McPherson were women (Krech 1974, 281). In contrast to hunting and trapping in family groups in the first half of the 20th century, men now were faced with either pursuing these activities by themselves or finding wage work in the settlement or in the expanding resource industry (Krech 1974). With new modes of transportation and employment opportunities outside the community a different kind of mobility emerged; one that required many men to leave the community and women to stay with the children.

Aside from the disruption of family life as well as familiar modes of mobility and economic activity, the emerging wage economy had yet another consequence. Although Peel River Gwich'in highly value education and many people emphasize that they wanted their children to have the education they were not able to receive, the quality of schooling has placed them in a less competitive position vis-à-vis transient southern professionals. Krech referred to this discrepancy in 1974 and to this day high school graduates often have to attend upgrading courses at institutions in larger towns elsewhere to become eligible for college or qualified for positions in town. As a consequence, goods and services were distributed by transient southern employees according to market economy and Euro-Canadian cultural standards (Fried 1964) rendering the local population in a position of mediated access to resources²⁹.

In many conversations people linked the increased cash flow, new means of transportation, and the influx of transient southern workers into the region to the increasing use of alcohol. Alcohol consumption occurred primarily in town, life at their fish or hunting camp remained relatively unaffected by drinking. The first liquor store was opened in Aklavik in 1958, before that people made their own homebrew but had no access to hard liquor.

Before then people were allowed to have a beer permit, they could make their own beer, and they had that. But later on in 1958 they decided that, I don't remember how it got started but I guess people talked about opening up liquor to First Nation people and – so that's what happened. Anyway people were drinking and it got to where it was a problem. (M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

²⁹ For a discussion of the role of Métis in the development of local enterprises and socio-economic differences see Slobodin (1964) and Krech (1974).

With a change of government in 1984 and the completion of the Norman Wells project, however, employment opportunities in resource development were lost at once – exposing northern Aboriginal people to the experience of boom and bust, a sudden increase in income opportunities and industrial activity followed by a collapse of the job market and abandonment of disturbed and contaminated landscape, a process over which communities had very little control (Abele 1987). As trapping had ceased to be a viable occupation due to increasing costs and decreasing returns in the 1980's (Dickerson 1992, 204), a return to the fur economy was not possible. Also, generations of young Gwich'in had missed years of learning on the land during their time in residential schools, and this lack of skills further hindered many men from pursuing subsistence activities (Krech 1974, 292 – 303). Employment options within the community were often filled by transient southern professionals or local women who stayed in the community to care for school-aged children (Krech 1974, 295).

Alcohol consumption became pervasive in the community and throughout a majority of the families. With it social suffering such as violence, suicide, and poverty became a reality in the community.

Before they set it up [the Peel River Alcohol Centre] his town was just booming with booze and everything. [...] at that time it was really booming and actually they didn't know what they were doing to themselves. (C. Snowshoe, 02/09/2012)

Remarkable in a way, and reflective of the ambiguities of the policy developments outlined in these sections and the relationships, intentions, goals, and effects that emerged in their context, is that – as I wrote these pages – news broke of Prime Minister Stephen Harper's visit to Inuvik to "hail start of Inuvik's 'Road to Resources'" (CBC News North, January 8, 2014). The day marks the official start of construction of the all-weather highway connecting Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk. Using the same rhetoric as Diefenbaker's conservative government did in the 1950s, the media broadcast statements such as "I think it's just a stepping stone to opening up the North" by business contractors and quote Harper evoking the "Northern Vision" and "Roads to Resources" program of 1958 promising improved lives, employment security, effective transportation of resources and goods, and "long-term prosperity for the North" (CBC News North, January 7, 2014). Business owners express their hopes for renewed progress for oil and gas development in the region (CBC News North, January 8, 2014). The extension of the highway and the potential jobs this project could bring for Gwich'in in the Delta region was part of the conversations

during my stay in the community as well. Many hope for work close to home and the income to support their families. Many also fear that benefits will not stay in the region but go mainly to southern Canadian corporations and businesses involved in the project. However, what is alarming is the explicit linking of this project to the economic policies of the 1950's and 60's, a time before northern Aboriginal people achieved political organization, negotiated land rights, consultation and review requirements for industrial development, and – at least to some degree – ensured their participation in the planning and monitoring of these projects.

The fur trade was the first economic expression of colonial objectives to extract resources of the north. However, because of the fur traders' unfamiliarity with living in the north and the government's lack of interest in administering northern people's lives, the fur trade allowed Gwich'in to negotiate something akin to a partnership with traders and maintain much sovereignty over their lives. With the advent of mineral development, however, aboriginal involvement in terms of an economic partnership was not necessary anymore from the perspective of government and industry. Nevertheless, as Loovers (2011) points out, Gwich'in never ceased to regard their dealings with the government in terms of a partnership. Increasing tensions in the 1970's led Gwich'in, together with other Aboriginal peoples across the country, to assert their position as partners as well as the rights they understood the treaties guaranteed them. Of course, this was experienced differentially on a local level and for individual people and their families. Some people flexibly engaged with new opportunities while trying to maintain continuity with their own and their family's values, some joined forces with others and began to actively assert themselves politically, others experienced these changes as restrictive and constraining, as well as a threat to their way of existence. The accumulation of experiences of displacement and disruptions of family relationships through residential schools, the challenges to enskillment and emplacement through alienation from living on the land and the settlement in government housing, as well as the increasing government control of community and family life gave rise to alcoholism, family violence, and suicide in the 1960's and 70's.

5.4. Social Suffering, Transgenerational Trauma, and the Resilience Perspective

When I first arrived in the Delta in June 2011 I witnessed the second National Event of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Inuvik. During the four days people shared painful stories of

abuse either in front of the commission or in sharing circles. Back in the community many people said that they were glad that these stories could be told and heard. Many realized that they were not the only ones experiencing abuse. It was also important to become aware that emotions such as anger stem from abusive experiences and individuals who are dealing with such issues in their families now are not to blame but could move forward knowing that it was not their fault. Others emphasized that they had good experiences at school as well and that they were glad to have gone through education. Feelings were mixed in the community as these memories were stirred up and experiences of suffering were much more present in people's minds and conversations. In the 1960's and 70's alcohol consumption became so common in the community that people remember this period as a time when "everybody" was drinking. Under alcohol influence people expressed emotions that they would contain otherwise, often in a way that was aggressive towards their family and others who were drinking with them (also see Goulet 1998). What started as fun and having a good time could easily turn into fighting and violence. Relationships among friends and family became strained as the need for alcohol became stronger than the sense for obligations towards one's relations. The stories I heard from these days reflect a sense of grief, loss, and pain that affected people at the base of their existence, their sense of being alive and having a place in this world. Sitting with women Elders, I heard especially about their suffering³⁰.

Before discussing contemporary approaches to understanding social suffering, I will first review how previous scholars interpreted the effects of societal changes of the 20th century. Slobodin, publishing his ethnography in the early 1960's more than ten years after his fieldwork in the region, reflected in his afterword about the changes that happened since he had last been in Fort McPherson. He made the prognosis that the age of the fur trade is over and trapping will never recover as a viable economic strategy. In 1955/56 28 families were registered trappers, two years later there were only five (1962, 88). Industrial development and roads contributed to the decline in trapping by disturbing the land and the animals. He wondered whether or not this intensified encounter of southern Canadian economic interests and Aboriginal life-ways would continue to be as "irrational" and "anarchic" as under the colonial rule. He was skeptical about

³⁰ I did not include these narratives of suffering in this thesis for various reasons. First, my research question focuses on transformative processes that result in a sense of well-being. Second, community leaders and Elders in Fort McPherson have repeatedly expressed their concern about negative effects of research that focuses on suffering. Their hopes for this project was that I would document the strengths and positive stories of community members. Third, including accounts of suffering would in all cases violate confidentiality.

financial assistance as a replacement for endangered land-based economy and warned of its “demoralizing effects” (1962, 88). Slobodin doubted that the promise of welfare through economic development would bring well-being and happiness to Gwich’in. With that, Slobodin clearly departed from earlier cultural evolutionist approaches in considering both, change and continuity, as well as the various interactions of global processes with local experiences. As the first anthropologist to conduct extensive fieldwork he acknowledged the fluidity and ambiguities in how people navigate through continuously changing social, political, and economic situations. The Peel River Gwich’in he knew keenly observed the contradictions of an individualized, competitive meritocratic economy and the disillusionment that many southern Canadians emanated. Slobodin ends with the assertion that while life is ever changing, there will be continuity in Teet’it Gwich’in ways of being that is “tempered by the past” (1962, 89).

With increasing popularity of Freudian psychoanalytical approaches throughout the mid 20th century anthropologists of a psychological leaning attempted to explain what was unfamiliar to them in their encounters with northern Aboriginal peoples in terms of personality traits that had been categorized through standard psychological tests (Waldram 2004). The Freudian assumption that the origins of personality lie in early childhood experiences is reflected in considerable ethnographic attention given to child rearing practices (Honigmann 1949, 1975). The reasoning that, while these are different between cultures, they are shared within one creating a host of common childhood experience, laid the ground for the idea of a ‘basic personality’ that could be identified for each culture. The Rorschach Test was thought to provide a ‘culture-free’ method to obtain information on personality types. Although the field of culture and personality came under critique and slowly disappeared by the 1960’s, the Rorschach Test was more persistent and still has its supporters (Waldram 2004, 67). Because these personality portraits, which were also used by anthropologists for Athapaskan peoples, informed the public image of Aboriginal people in relation to social change, I will briefly discuss the work of one major figure, John J. Honigmann (1949, 1975).

Honigmann (1949) was one of the main promoters of the concept of the “atomistic” Aboriginal. In 1949 he published on the Kaska and derived from his sample, which was rather small and only tested under great difficulty (Waldram 2004, 47), “the average Kaska” (Honigmann 1949, 242) as being practical, focused on details and unable to abstract, uncreative, inhibited, unimaginative, socially detached, affectively cold, an introvert with severe anxiety and distrust towards anyone (1949, 242-243). He labeled the high value on personal independence

as “egocentric” and uses it as a criterion to categorize Kaska as belonging to the “detached” personality type (251). Remaining firmly within the perceptual categories of the culture that produced his methodology, Honigmann’s work is a forceful description of personal autonomy, non-authoritarianism, and the value of non-interference, however, without any regard for Kaska meanings. In line with the psychoanalytical model he assumed the origins of the alleged Kaska atomism and individualism to lie in childhood experiences. Honigmann labeled the period when, after close and affective time for an infant and toddler, attention to a child is reduced as “emotional rejection” (1949, 307). Following from this, the display of independence was interpreted negatively as an active defense against the fear of being denied affection. He described interpersonal relationships as being only superficially warm, but inherently distrusting, hostile, and without social constraint. Waldram (2004) reminds us that Honigmann conducted his tests with the Kaska only with great objections from those whom he had chosen to participate. Yet, the fact that in 1975, after the culture and personality field had been criticized all around, Honigmann offered an article applying his ideas onto other northern Athapaskan groups, demonstrating how persistent these ideas were and with how few objections they were received. Honigmann also wrote about Fort McPherson Gwich’in following fieldwork in Inuvik (Honigmann and Honigmann 1970). The authors framed their observations in the context of an emerging “frontier culture” since the 1930’s that was, according to them, characterized by a trapping, hunting and fishing economy, a typical style of clothing, mode of travel (dog team), housing, music, dancing, drinking, and, as a personality trait, individualism (1970, 49). The authors ascribed the origin of this “culture” to southern men who came to the Delta region as trappers, whalers, or traders, especially their glorification of alcohol and heavy drinking shaped Aboriginal people’s use of alcohol. Aboriginal people’s “difficulty adapting” to the emerging economy was, to the Honigmans, unrelated to the political situation and the colonial relationships between southern Canadians and the local population. Instead, he argued for a theory of personality-based determinants of economic, health, and living quality inequities. The authors claimed to identify Aboriginal people of the Delta as “introverted” who overlook the “importance of external cues and standards” (1970, 76). They concluded that, by virtue of their personality, Aboriginal people tend to feel overwhelmed when faced with high demands and consequently be ridden with feelings of guilt and anxiety (1970,76). The Honigmans’ approach has a multitude of problems, for example, methodological shortcomings with regards to their use of psychological tests that are based on Euro-North American concepts and categories, or

theoretical drawbacks in that they neglect political and historical processes and the resulting production of structural power. Sadly, such Eurocentric distortion of research approaches, as well as neglect of historical processes and of local meanings and experiences, have served to legitimize paternalistic policies as well as antagonistic sentiments towards Aboriginal peoples in the general non-Aboriginal population.

Krech (1974), writing his dissertation a decade after Slobodin published his ethnography and a few years after the Honigmanns' volume *Arctic Townsmen* (1970), departs from both his predecessors. He is less attentive than Slobodin to matters of continuity and agency in Gwich'in lives in the context of complex societal transitions, as Krech's aim is to explain how and why trapping and fur trading was changing. He draws on Barth's idea of social behavior as "allocation of time and resources" (Barth quoted in Krech 1974, 9) and examines the determinants of change in such allocations. He observed that older men and women continued to trap and live in their bush camps because of preference even though the income they received from furs was very small (1974, 273). Old age pension had become the main source of income for this group and, at times, for their adult children. Other men, according to Krech, maintained fur trapping only if successful enough to achieve a similar income as wage or casual labourers. This had become increasingly difficult as the fur prices fell and other income options increased, such as expanding government bureaucracy, construction jobs such as on the DEW line or to build the town of Inuvik, etc. Krech concludes that this availability induced many to either stay longer in the community before winter trapping or to return early in hopes of wage employment (1974, 275). In the 1960's "winter works" programs attracted men to cut and haul wood for a sawmill in Aklavik. Overall, people oriented their lives more and more towards the settlement and the delta, which meant wage labour for the first, and mink, lynx, or muskrat trapping for the latter. In any case, such orientation allowed men to be closer to their families, as women stayed more often in town to be with their school-aged children and to accept social assistance payments that were tied to residence in town (Krech 1974). Nevertheless, during the peak of trapping season and during late-summer fishing most people were out on the land. Because women were in town more consistently, they had a higher chance of being employed in one of the few permanent positions. Krech argues that this led to tensions within families as men became "partially dependent" and had to choose between either going on the land by themselves or staying in town waiting for employment (282). Although he describes other aspects, such as decreasing bush-skill levels due to schooling in the younger generations, or continuing dislike for

authoritarian and rigidly scheduled work situation, Krech's analysis emphasizes economic considerations and portrays much of people's decisions and experiences with regards to residence, dwelling, subsistence, labour, and social life in terms of economically sound choices.

There was one attempt to investigate the affects of the colonialism and assimilationist policies on Gwich'in well-being and social suffering explicitly. Stanley Frank Hunnisett (1994) set out to understand how rapid social change could be used to explain high rates of suicide and alcohol abuse in Fort McPherson from the 1970's until his fieldwork in 1990-91. Unfortunately, Hunnisett passed away before he was able to complete his dissertation. However, I retrieved his incomplete work through interlibrary loans from the University of Iowa. His research was limited by what he perceived as the rejection of his person and most importantly his research topic, suicide, by many in the community. Drawing on June Helm and John Honigmann, among others, he outlined the changes that might have occurred in Gwich'in values and norms – clusters of shared attitudes he refers to as an "ethos". As factors of change that affected what he assumes to be Gwich'in "ethos" and caused "psychic pain" (Hunnisett 1994, 264-293) he lists: changing gender roles that left especially men without meaningful purpose as provider for their family, unresolved grief about the death of loved ones, reduced social closeness, reduced need for physical work, loss of humor, as well as disruptions in family and interpersonal relationships. Factors that contribute to successful coping with suffering include, according to Hunnisett, social support, religion, and responsibility for children. Visiting Fort McPherson at a time when negotiations for the Land Claim were well under way and required much administrative and bureaucratic adjustment in the community he focused on what he saw as "dysfunctional". Although he describes local initiatives that address alcohol abuse and suicide, such as the Peel River Alcohol Centre, he was disillusioned about their effectiveness due to the conflicts and decreased communal legitimacy that he witnessed in its activities in the early 1990's. In hindsight, and after extensive conversations with the founder of the Peel River Alcohol Society during my fieldwork, these issues appear to have been caused by a generational change in the society's leadership causing conflict over divergent ideas about training, program priorities, and leadership style (pers. communication with E. Colin, see section 6.1.). While Hunnisett's analysis remains sketchy due to the problems he encountered in the community as well as his illness and early death, he appears to conclude that the root cause of social suffering is to be seen in an incomplete adjustment of Gwich'in "ethos" to the new economic, social, and political circumstances.

Robert Wishart (2004) takes an opposite approach to Krech and Hunnisett, who are discussing change, and focuses his research in Fort McPherson on the continuity of life on the land and human-land relationships. His research took place after the Gwich'in signed the Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement and in a time when many other Aboriginal people were negotiating their own land claims. These political processes prompted a wealth of research on human-land relationships and traditional land use. While Wishart set out to study forestry practices, he experiences Gwich'in sense of interrelatedness within the environment in a tangible way. He illustrates the vital importance that the maintenance of a certain relationship to animals and the land has for "social sustainability" with examples of speech and actions (2004, 207). In the same vein, a continuing sense of the importance of personal and collective autonomy is conveyed in Wishart's writing. According to him, continuity in the way people relate to the land and to each other can be read as "acts of resistance to colonial impositions, and as proper actions according to Gwich'in understanding of their landscape" (2004, 207). One such "act of resistance" is linked to the contentious concept of "tradition" and "traditional knowledge". Wishart recalls another researcher asking an Elder at the Renewable Resource Board for approval of a project collecting "Traditional Ecological Knowledge". The Elder ended the conversation at a single blow by announcing that all tradition had died with the Elders a long time ago (2004, 151). This man does not only assert his community's autonomy in the face of various demands on their time and resources, he also decidedly rejects the discourse on "tradition". This discourse is linked to notions of past life ways reminiscent of the social evolutionist model that claimed the disappearance of Gwich'in culture and denies the intrinsic ability of people for innovation. In addition, "tradition" carries a connotation of folklore, legend, and unscientific knowledge. As Spak (2005) demonstrates in her detailed analysis of Indigenous Knowledge in Canadian co-management organizations, even in the Gwich'in Renewable Resource Board where the collaborative nature of the research is clearly regulated, the scientific-bureaucratic framework still takes priority in their operations despite serious efforts to include local knowledge (2005, 242-423). Wishart critiques the focus on drastic changes that renders Aboriginal identity without foundation in Steward's "cultural ecology" model and links it to political interests of the time. In contrast, he documents local conversations about weather and seasons, animal movements, or the best time to hunt different animals in order to demonstrate the continuity in how people experience these activities in their lives. He argues, and I agree, that interventionist policies of the Cold War period constituted a "massive

intrusion” of southern Canadian economic interest, social norms, and transient populations, which caused “tremendous strain” on Aboriginal ways of life and caused social suffering such as alcoholism, poverty, and violence but it did not result in a loss of, however fluid and situational, a distinctly Gwich’in identity and ontology (2004, 73).

Brenda Parlee’s (2006) dissertation contributes an ecological perspective to research on continuity of the intimate link of Gwich’in well-being and relations to the land. Her study demonstrates an intricate relationship between women’s well-being, their activities on the land, the health of their families and the community, as well as the health of the land (2006, 77). Her perspective is unique in that she, as a first among predominantly male anthropologists working in the Mackenzie Delta, focuses on women’s sense of health. Her results suggest well-being as an experience that is continuously connected to collectively engaging with the natural environment throughout political, economic, and social changes.

The most recent ethnography on the Teet’it Gwich’in (Loovers 2010) is concerned with language and pedagogy and, like other contemporary research in an era of political negotiations for self-governance, emphasizes the continuity that Teet’it Gwich’in perceive despite their acknowledgment of significant loss of language speakers and “borne knowledge” among younger people. His discussion of post-war and Cold War developments focuses on Gwich’in political participation and is not concerned with experiences of suffering or well-being since the policy changes of the second half of the 20th century and the resulting increased government intervention in northern lives. Starting with Wishart’s work, there is a clear shift in anthropological writing on and about Gwich’in from focusing on detrimental affects of change and attempts to explain dysfunction and social ills toward a positive approach to people’s creative ways to assert their agency and humanity in the face of a changing social, political, and natural environment. By picking up the theme of drawing together in crisis that has been described by Slobodin (1962) and Krech (1974), Loovers understands the Teet’it Gwich’in’ tireless events of feasting, dancing, sharing stories, and teasing as challenging the inevitability of further loss and suffering.

As becomes clear, anthropological perspectives have changed throughout the past century along with changing political processes and changing alignment of academic work with various relevant political interests. A positive development in this process is an increased sensitivity to local meanings, priorities, and ways of learning. Ethnographic work in the 21st century has taken a strength-based approach demonstrating positive local strategies of facing

new circumstances and active engagement of the past, “tradition”, and distinct ways of relating to the world with emerging opportunities and challenges. Aside from the bleak outlook that Hunnisett gave in his work on suicide in Fort McPherson, no research has been done on how the increasing substance abuse and suicide rates were experienced by individuals as well as how people, personally and collectively, were able to overcome suffering and build good lives.

Beginning with the settlement of the Gwich'in Comprehensive Land Claim Agreement in 1992, methods and focus of research with Gwich'in have not only changed considerably but Gwich'in themselves have taken initiatives to publish their stories, write their history, and record knowledge pertaining to land, subsistence, and various other skills (Wallis 2002; Gwich'in Renewable Resource Board 1997, 2001; Alexie 2002; Fast 2002; Remy-Saywer 2009; Andre and Kritsch 1992; GSCI 1997; Thompson and Kritsch 2005; Andre and Fehr 2001; Heine et al. 2001, Andre and Willet 2008). In line with Gwich'in pedagogy these books teach through stories, place names, descriptions of plant use, offer Gwich'in history, as well as stories about great leaders and travelers. Such stories, reflective of elements of Gwich'in identity, are good to think with and to live by (Heine et al. 2001). While a majority of the publications of Gwich'in scholars prioritize knowledge of the land, places, stories of long ago, and traditional skills, there are a few that address the legacy of colonialism and its effects on people's well-being today. Robert Alexie's moving book “Porcupines and China Dolls” (2002) is one example that illustrates the suffering that stems from experiences of separation, abuse, and oppression in residential schools in vivid and unembellished ways. Another young scholar, Elaine Alexie, writes about the detrimental effects that environmental and industrial impacts on the land have on people's physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Alexie 2009). Since the beginning of the indigenous rights movement in the 1970's indigenous writers throughout North America, and indeed all “post”-colonial countries, have labored to shed light on the effects of colonial policies on people across the world.

Another political process triggered much needed research that considers the role of political-historical factors in causing social suffering in Aboriginal communities from a critical perspective. In 1996 the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples submitted their Final Report that documented the violence and abuses that Aboriginal children suffered in residential schools. The Canadian government responded to this document in 1998 by launching a policy of reconciliation that included funding for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation with the mandate to facilitate residential school healing initiatives in communities (Corntassel and Holder 2008, 473).

The Statement of Reconciliation was limited to an apology to victims of physical abuse and was published on a government website instead of being included in legal records. A tangible shift in policy was made only in 2006 when the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement was approved, establishing a Truth and Reconciliation Commission over 5 years and allocating \$1.9 billion CAD in compensation for survivors (Corntassel and Holder 2008, 474). Stories of abuse in residential schools were heard and documented through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well as during hearings for compensation payments. Since, academic research has begun to understand current social health concerns through a historical lens and has identified the root cause of much of the social ills in Aboriginal communities as the experience of subjugation, displacement, and abuse through colonial policies.

Since Yellow Horse Brave Heart's seminal article on historical trauma response and substance abuse among the Lakota, the label "historical trauma" has become prominent as a way to encompass and articulate the experience of colonization, cultural oppression, dislocation, physical and psychological abuse. It is defined as the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experience" (Yellow Horse Brave Heart 2003, quoted in Denham 2008, 396). Historical trauma is a term that has since been used by researchers and Aboriginal spokespersons alike to articulate experiences of multiple disruptions of relationships that stem, in particular, from the separation of families and the abuse of children in residential schools.

The psychiatric label of "post-traumatic stress" has become widely used in the last three decades. Denham (2008) points out that "trauma" or "post-traumatic stress" is poorly defined since it simultaneously denotes the experience of cumulative minor stressors, single major stress events, as well as psychological reactions to such experiences (2008, 394-396). Describing such a complex set of individual, social, acute, and long-term issues, its use as a psychiatric diagnosis seems, therefore, unfounded. Other anthropologists have added to this critique and argued that; first, it redirects focus from the political origin of the problem to a medical issue and thus remakes "people as objects of technological manipulation without allowing for the possibility of remorse, regret, or repentance." (Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007, 11). Second, it serves to justify interventions that organize and manage such new social and medical categories with the result of an extension of state bureaucracy into communal and individual lives (James 2010, 484). This facilitates "cultural processes of routinization, legitimization, essentialism, normalization, and simplification through which the social world orders the flow of experience

within and between body-selves” (Kleinman 2000, 238) and perpetuates the subtle forms of social violence that have caused the problem. Third, the term “historical trauma” by definition fails to acknowledge continuing discrimination and disenfranchisement. Responding to such valid critique, many scholars now use the term intergenerational trauma to describe the “accumulated losses of extended family, culture, language and identity” in the context of forced relocation and abuses in residential schools (Chansonneuve 2005, 49).

Jo-Anne Fiske (2008), for example, provides an elaborate conceptualization by distinguishing between the trauma of being taken away into a residential school and the resulting “lateral trauma”:

Lateral trauma emerged as these students returned to communities where families mourned their absence and confronted new conflicts in identity and personal relationships with children who had been taught to abandon the ways of their people as they coped with the loss of language, essential survival skills, and inadequate knowledge of their cultural ways and beliefs. (2008, 50).

Despite its complexity as an academic concept, trauma has become used as a powerful means for Aboriginal people to name their experience of loss and grief as well as to explain the continuing suffering in their communities (Kirmayer, Brass and Valaskis 2009). Taking the active appropriation of this concept by many Aboriginal leaders and activists into account, Waldram (2004) concludes that historical trauma should be understood, not as a psychiatric diagnosis, but as a metaphor used to articulate previously silenced versions of history (2004, 236). Foremost, it serves to legitimize Aboriginal claims directed at government and the mainstream of society to acknowledge injustices and the suffering that results from historical and ongoing unequal relationships. Politics of recognition (Coulthard 2007) depersonalize and essentialize suffering in a similarly categorical way as a medical label. However, they are also a profitable strategy useful to Aboriginal leaders in the renegotiation of political, economic, and ethical relationships with the state. The signing of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement in 2007 which included compensation payments for ‘survivors’ is one example for such a process. The ambiguity inherent in individualized, financial compensation for social suffering is well documented by a study conducted by the Aboriginal Healing Foundation (2010) that shows the conflicting effects of the payments on personal and community well-being. However, as suggested above, considering its metaphoric aspect, the widespread use of the concept of

intergenerational trauma tells us what is at stake for intersubjectivity, from family relationships to national and structural relations.

Stephanie Irlbacher-Fox (2009) advocates for the concept “social suffering” as the best approximation to the experience of Canadian Aboriginal people. Naomi Adelson (2000, 2001), working with northern Cree, also subscribes to this concept as it best describes how such suffering “ruins the collective and the intersubjective connections of experience and gravely damages subjectivity” (Kleinman et al. 1996, quoted in Adelson 2001, 77). She expounds the problems of the terminology of “victim”, and I may add “survivor”, as it ties people to a particular part of their history which carries forward the connotations of being imposed upon and somehow being defective as a person and as a group. Instead, she argues that the regionally and internationally increasing discourse of Aboriginality, which includes an emphasis on “tradition” and a call for healing, is used as the matrix of a social response to suffering, which considering the current hegemonic discourse, is necessary as well as useful to validate claims for increased autonomy (Adelson 2001, 80). Fusing old and new, various practices from different indigenous backgrounds are employed as “traditions” in a practical and creative way to revisit the past and renegotiate a contemporary sense of Aboriginal identity (2001, 95). One result of this process, which parallels an international indigenous movement, is the aforementioned Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), and the financial compensation for survivors (Corntassel and Holder 2008, 474). Before that, the Canadian government had avoided acknowledging cultural, political, social, economic, and psychological impacts of the residential school policy and had sought to “facilitate an end point to their historic and legal liabilities regarding residential school survivors” (2008, 473). Previous failure to allow survivors to reestablish ownership over their past and actively participate in the telling of a socially agreed upon version of historical truth (Das et al 2000, 12) not only aggravated feelings of loss and involuntary passivity in Aboriginal communities, but also reinforced the hegemonic discourse of their supposed inability to self-govern.

In a study mentioned by Kirmayer and colleagues (2009) the most frequent associations with historical trauma were loss of language, erosion of family and community ties, loss of land, and broken treaty promises (Kirmayer, Brass, and Valaskakis 2009, 454). The concurrent symptoms linked to those were anger, fear, mistrust, and shame, all of which are played out within intersubjective space. Forced relocation, disruptions of familiar social ways of behaving and communicating, as well as the negative meaning that residential school pedagogy attached

to everything Aboriginal, severely deprived children of a sense of having a say in their lives and of the autonomy to make choices. This lack of agency, as well as symptoms of trauma response, is found among present generations of Aboriginal people without direct residential school experience (Chansonneuve 2005). Since the land, the environment with all beings and non-beings is part of intersubjectivity, the displacement of generations from their relationship with the land amounts to the disruption of yet another aspect of relationality (Fletcher 2006).

Rosalyn Ing (2006) presents a striking account of how a childhood spent in a residential school impacts parenting. In her study, she chose to interview students or graduates whose parents were residential school survivors, controlling for education levels and employment in order to minimize factors such as poverty as an explanation for potential family difficulties. All participants reported having experienced a considerable lack of affection, emotional disconnect from their mothers, communication difficulties or militaristic communication, overprotection, alcoholism, or physical abuse (Ing 2006, 161-162). The separation of children from their families cut kinship ties at a critical time in their lives. Within residential schools, Aboriginal culture and language was treated as inferior which seriously damaged self-esteem and identity shaping processes. In addition to this, requirements of strict discipline, punishments, and forced witnessing of other children's punishments amounted to what Ing calls "mortification of the self" (Ing 2006, 159). Emotional wounds suffered from this kind of humiliation and the lack of emotional nurturing resulted in learned suppression of feelings and a compromised ability to relate and communicate meaningfully which was reproduced by residential school survivors replicating these models of parenting in their own families (170). The suppressed ability in parents to articulate experiences, emotions, and affection in a socially accepted and intelligible way is 'inherited' by their children as they mimic and imitate parents behavior and so learn ways of recalling or articulating experience (Ochs and Capps 2001). Additionally, according to Chansonneuve (2005), abuse survivors at times unknowingly re-enact behavior that led to their own traumatization (58-59) This can take on forms of physical or emotional violence against others or against oneself. Other transgenerational effects of cultural oppression in residential schools include severe damage to individual and collective self-esteem caused by: "repetition of physical and sexual abuse; loss of knowledge, language, and tradition; systematic devaluing of Aboriginal identity; and, paradoxically, essentialising Aboriginal identity by treating it as something intrinsic to the person, static and incapable of change." (Kirmayer, Simpson, and Cargo 2003, 18). According to Ochs and Capps' (2001) socio-cultural model of how children

acquire and learn forms of intersubjectivity within family communication processes, such re-enacted and re-lived trauma would in turn expose the next generation to similar traumatic experiences. In addition to this, Denham (2008) mentions alternative theoretical approaches of trauma transmission which include psychodynamic theory, which suggests unconscious adoption of not-integrated parental traumatic experiences by the child; biological models that postulate predisposing genetic factors; and an encompassing approach which integrates a variety of factors (Denham 2008, 397).

Jo-Anne Fiske (2009) speaks about how the social production of place that emerged with ideological, political, theological, architectural, and structural underpinnings of residential schools created a sense of subjectivity in Aboriginal children, and subsequently adults, that is characterized by violence and separation. Drawing on Augé (1995, quoted in Fiske 2009, 142) she describes residential schools as “anthropological places”. This means that residential schools and their topography embody social identity, relations, and history; they are shaped by and shape the subjectivity of the colonizer and the colonized (2009, 142). Embedded in the social evolutionist perspective of the settler government and the people who led and operated these institutions, schools were hoped to be the “moral place” of “domesticity and civilization” that would eradicate Aboriginal subjectivity and replace it with European ideas of social, moral, and spiritual life. Spatial design of residential schools, according to Fiske, “marked a series of dichotomous domesticated social relations through inclusion/exclusion” (147). This assessment appears to apply to northern experiences of residential schools as people remember how staff and students lived in separate areas, male and female students were strictly kept apart, students had to perform cleaning duties for staff rooms, staff disciplined students, and older students dominated younger ones. Children learned gender roles through the spatialization of domestic work: girls were inside working in the kitchen, cleaning, and sewing; boys were outside doing work or playing sports. Academic teaching played only a minor role in church-run institutions while emphasis was laid on religious and domestic education. Thus, schools were imagined as training space for domestic behavior that was rooted in moral ideas of the late Victorian era (Fiske 2009). At the same time, schools were placed on the margins of community, separated through fences and strictly monitored interactions with others outside the school, a spatial and social containment that parallels imprisonment (2009, 151). Fiske argues that the school as a civilizing institution and its very placement apart from community life imprinted on children a subjectivity of marginality and deficiency.

Containment and restriction of movement, relations, and agency as well as authoritarian teaching, which precludes experimental learning, fundamentally counteract mobility, processes of enskillment, and the experience of purposeful work that sustains self and others. The stories of the Old Days, which I reflected upon in Chapter 4, illustrate how strength is rooted in continued movement and engagement with one's environment as well as the resulting process of enskillment. The sustained activation and growth of skills in interaction with changing demands of the environment constitutes a sense of existential security and well-being. Immobility and inactivity were associated with times of illness, while a shift to mobility and engagement engendered physical and mental well-being. Containment and restriction of movement, enskillment, and engagement as the principles of residential school training, therefore, represent an assault on the constitutive elements of a sense of existential security.

Reflecting on the introduction of housing and the changing gender roles in Aboriginal life, Fiske also argues that the private house represents a similar place of restriction, violence, and hierarchy, especially for Aboriginal women (Fiske 2009). Tanner (2009) presents evidence from his research with Quebec Cree that social pathologies are largely related to settlement and housing policies that induced Aboriginal people to live together in arbitrary 'communities' and 'households' (see also Kirmayer, Tait, and Simpson 2009, 8). He critiques the term "community" as transplanted from European and American agricultural context which, when used unreflectively, carries romantic ideals of how people should live together (Tanner 2009, 250 and 268). Tanner suggests that for the Cree permanent settlement was accompanied by "a major loss of both personal and residential group autonomy" with the resulting anomie causing "a dramatic increase in binge drinking and interpersonal violence" (2009, 252). Tanner explains: "Before sedentarization, the East Cree generally had living conditions that were consistent with their key cultural values, such as intimate knowledge of and involvement with their environment, use of manual skills, self-reliance, autonomy, generosity, and physical health. The move into settlements threatened all of these." (2009, 254). Temporary jobs and the reduced importance of hunting and trapping encroached on many people's imperative to sustain themselves and their families through their own work. Further, social assistance payments, housing regulations, and hamlet administration placed people under external authorities that hampered their sense of being in charge over their own lives. The proximity of all members of extended family networks in addition to many other families, who previously lived in their own camps on the land at least for parts of the year, complicated obligations to reciprocate and

possibly discouraged people to share what they had, be it from the decreasing amount of game meat or from financial resources. With regards to conflict, people no longer had the option to associate themselves with another camp to avoid aggression. A confrontation, more likely under the influence of alcohol, had more long-term consequences in the settlement and could not be dealt with through increasing distance. The rise in mechanization of hunting and trapping during the 1970's, the opening of roads and possibilities to travel, as well as the increasing necessity to purchase food at the store resulted in an increased need for cash income and overall lower mobility. As the examples from Fort McPherson above illustrate, the same policies led to similar social suffering in form of binge drinking, violence, and suicide.

Through processes such as the Berger Inquiry, Land Claim negotiations, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Aboriginal people were able to make their perspective heard and to make known a previously silenced version of history. Indigenous scholars started to challenge the role that academic method and theory plays in legitimizing and continuing paternalistic and oppressive policy towards Aboriginal people. Academic writing in anthropology, psychology, public health and other social sciences responded by exploring new understandings of health disparities and social ills and by developing above-mentioned models such as transgenerational trauma, social suffering (Adelson 2001; Irlbacher-Fox 2009), displacement (Sørensen 1996), and cultural continuity (Chandler and Lalonde 1998). While this increasing understanding of just how violent the effect of colonial policy and intervention was and continues to be today represents an important step, academic writing might run the risk of again misrepresenting Aboriginal peoples as victims in need of outside help (Waldram 2004, 301-306; Wishart 2004, 182). To counteract the perpetuation of an image of Aboriginal identity as rooted in loss, deficit, and brokenness, communities and scholars called for strength-based approaches to mental and social health. Research emerging from this perspective includes publications on the meanings of healing (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2008), the local significance of well-being and living a good life (Adelson 2000), and, most prominently, a host of research using the concept of resilience to individual and community health in the face of societal and environmental change.

Resilience has become a popular concept in this context through two pathways: first, social-ecological approaches that apply ecological models of adaptation to disturbance in social "systems", and second, the psychological concept of resilience where epidemiological studies are used to uncover protective factors and explanations for why some people cope well with catastrophic life events while others suffer various psychological illnesses. While research under

the heading of individual or community resilience has been en vogue, especially in public health, human geography and ecology, as well as psychology, it has received much critique from within anthropology (Nadasdy 2007) and also from indigenous scholars (Lavallee and Clearsky 2006). In the most general terms, resilience is defined as the ability of an object, a material, system, or person to assume its original state after having been under any kind of stress. As such this concept is used in material sciences, ecology, psychology and psychiatry. Ecological approaches emphasize resilience as the ability of a natural system to respond to stresses in order to restore a pre-existing equilibrium or to transform in order to adapt to new environmental conditions (Kirmayer et al. 2009). Resilience in both of these meanings has been applied in psychology to explain and measure people's ability to overcome adversity. More recently, this research has been expanded to include not only individuals but also communities (Kirmayer et al. 2009).

Nadasdy (2007) points out that this idea of "bouncing back" gives positive connotations to recovering and restoring a previous equilibrium and questions whether any previous state is necessarily the more desirable one. Especially with regards to improving health and well-being in marginalized communities, he cautions that promoting resilience in a context of political and social relations that produced marginalization in the first place would mean to implicitly legitimize that very system. A further critique point is that resilience is often operationalized as an amalgam of protective factors or buffering effects that are likely to produce desired outcomes (Wexler, DiFluvio, Burke 2009). Consequently, the meanings of what indicates resiliency are socially produced and cannot be easily transplanted from one context to another, or even from one person to another. The critical issue here is that the decision as to what exactly a favorable outcome is, is a political question. In Nadasdy's words:

How one evaluates resilience and/or the current configuration of the social-ecological system necessarily depends on one's position within that system. The more one has invested (ecologically, socially, or economically) in existing social-ecological relations and institutions, the more one is likely to view resilience as "good." Those who are marginalized or excluded are less likely to view a collapse of existing social/institutional structures as an unmitigated disaster. Indeed, they may even embrace the kind of radical socio-ecological change brought about by a system shift. The valorization of resilience, then, represents a decision – at least implicitly – to endorse the socio-ecological status quo. (Nadasdy 2007, 216)

Kirmayer et al. (2009), in contrast, advocate for the study of community resilience as a model that corresponds to Aboriginal values of interconnectedness and wholeness (65). The authors acknowledge that Aboriginal communities are a product of colonization but instead of defining

desirable community outcomes in terms of Euro-Canadian standards of functioning, they include three forms of resilience: resistance, recovery, and creativity. In this manner, resilience is not oriented on certain, predetermined outcomes but rather on supporting continuity depending on local definitions of desired outcomes. This approach to assess resilience of communities nevertheless encounters problems. First, the idea of a community as a “system” possessing a static quality of resilience carries connotations of a bounded entity and therefore runs risk to neglect a multitude of larger scale political, historical, and social linkages, as well as in-community diversity, that shape the situations of its members. Second, the various links between community and individual resilience are not fully understood and might be at odds with each other (Kirmayer et al. 2009, 67). On the individual level, resiliency research is equally complex:

Well-being, absence of depression or other symptom indicators may be taken as measures of individual resilience if the individual has a history of adversities that would usually lead to poor mental health. Behaviourally, resilience may be indicated by good performance in relationships, school, work, or other social roles. This makes it clear that social roles, norms and expectations are intrinsic to any definition and recognition of resilience. The strong normative aspect of resilience means it can only be defined in terms of specific cultural values and frameworks, and thus, may vary in different cultural contexts. (Kirmayer et al. 2009, 67)

Considering the diversity of local environs and experiences, definition and measurement of the criterion and indicators of resilience necessarily demand extensive understanding of specific situations or are at risk to be reductive and simplified. While resiliency research has produced lists of protective factors such as social support, spirituality, and cultural continuity (Kirmayer et al. 2009; Chandler and Lalonde 1998), it is not well understood why some individuals are able to use these resources to their benefit in times of stress and why others with similar resources at hand still struggle. Furthermore, the processes through which these protective factors work is not understood as of yet (Kirmayer et al. 2009, 70). This becomes particularly clear when interventions that are created based on resiliency research fail to achieve the desired individual or community outcomes. Decades of interventions to remedy issues such as alcoholism and suicide, violence, and incarceration rates have not resulted in lasting improvement and many interventions have, if at all, only short-term success (Kral and Idlout 2009). The issue I see is that top-down interventions based on resilience indicators are embedded in the very structural relations that maintain the marginalization of Aboriginal people and communities, render individuals and communities passive entities in need of outside help, and neglect the need for

strategic agency of individuals to negotiate changing circumstances.

The use of the concept has been further developed by increasing participatory research with Aboriginal communities and scholars such as Kirmayer propose that resiliency approached from an Aboriginal perspective is “consonant with Aboriginal values” (2009, 63). However, the hope for a useful application of the concept is not shared by all. Indigenous scholars, such as Lavellee and Clearsky, assess resilience research as reductionist, based on Eurocentric epistemological bias, and perpetuating “the myths of Aboriginal inferiority” (Lavellee and Clearsky 2006, 5). In the Aboriginal context, the authors suggest, the only meaningful application of the term resiliency is when it is equated with self-determination (2006, 5). A similar insight results from research into the meanings of healing. Tanner (2009), for example, demonstrates that what is understood as healing in the context of the Cree he worked with is the practice of community-building in distinctly different ways than most therapeutic programs designed by psychologists or public health professionals. Local collective control has been identified as one factor that is foundational for community well-being (Chandler and Lalone 1998, Kral and Idlout 2009, 326), and top-down interventions aiming to address resiliency are inherently at odds with this insight. It is here, however, where resiliency research can contribute to improving health policy: by demonstrating that local control and a sense of having a say in community and one’s own life is crucial for overcoming suffering and adversity. The integration of health, wellness, and healing initiatives into the Department of Health and Social Services in the Northwest Territories in the 1990’s, however, demonstrates that psychological and public health research often is invested in maintaining a system of top-down interventions and services that denies communities the ability to lead their own healing journey.

While all approaches discussed here have relevance to understanding how colonial relations and policy throughout history have affected individual and community well-being and how people currently navigate options and constraints to live a good life, the question of how some people overcome hardship and suffering remains unanswered. While the effects of colonial practices and continuing discrimination are pivotal to understanding any phenomenon on a local level, Teet’it Gwich’in have in many instances emphasized how they retained a sense of agency negotiating changing circumstances with the best intentions for the future of their families, children, and the land. Examples for these can be found throughout the literature on Gwich’in. Mishler (1990) demonstrates how the Gwich’in repeatedly attempted to stage a public debate, “a test of powers” (124), between the two missionaries by transmitting provoking, but

false messages between Catholic and Anglican missionaries. In addition to the paternalistic attitude of missionaries towards Aboriginal people and local spirituality, Teet'it Gwich'in succeeded in saturating the form of Christianity that took hold of the region with their own values and practices (Loovers 2010). Loovers also makes the argument that Gwich'in relations with traders was characterized by a sense of partnership rather than passive exploitation: "Gwich'in have emphasized partnerships and have both included and challenged the fur trade, evangelisation, settlement, and resource initiatives." (Loovers 2010, 105). Many people in the community mentioned to me that they valued the opportunity to learn how to read and write overall. As soon as children went to residential school in Aklavik or later in Fort McPherson, parents who did not agree with their treatment in many occasions took their children out of the hostel and raised them on the land. Wishart (2004, 192, 205) speaks explicitly about Teet'it Gwich'in preference of looking at beneficial options in every situation and asserting their own agency in what is happening in their lives. In line with this, community leaders and Elders guided me to document the strength reflected in the community's history of volunteering and local healing initiatives. Using the example of the foundation and operation of the Peel River Alcohol Centre as well as the life story of one of its founders, Elizabeth Colin, I will explore what is at stake in telling this experience of suffering and renewal. Mrs. Colin had a clear understanding of my research question and I understand much of what she shared with me and what she invited me to do with her as her response. Her answer not only to my question but also to me as a person, to my ambitions and weaknesses, my struggles and my strengths, my willingness to learn and my failures, my position as a student coming from abroad, as an apprentice in a socio-political system that created her suffering, and as a woman. This multiplicity of answers to explicit or unspoken questions, of unanswered questions, and unspoken answers is infused, to the extent I am capable of, in what follows in her life story.

What constitutes the strength that allowed her to salvage a sense of agency in the midst of life-negating suffering? The stories from long ago spoke of people who tirelessly moved and engaged within their environment and thus were able to overcome crisis and become legendary ancestors. The strong people who are remembered by Elders today strove to such an ideal: always moving, always working, always "going, going". Once national economic interests turned the spotlight onto the subarctic, such a life of mobility and self-reliance was not only an obstacle to the colonial project of 'civilization', it was also portrayed in the media as foreign and inhumane. Consequently, government developed policies that tackled precisely these areas of

Gwich'in way of life, seasonal mobility, subsistence economy and self-sufficiency, housing and communal arrangements, as well as local governance, and aimed to fit them into mainstream Canadian bureaucratic models. Michael Jackson has described what he understood as the existential imperative in people's lives and what is at stake when this existential integrity is under assault throughout his extensive work (1995, 1998, 2002, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2012). The stories of navigating through suffering and renewal that he witnessed in war-ridden Sierra Leone, among refugees in London, or among Aborigines negotiating with settlers, farmers, and policies that are encroaching on their lives, show parallels to the circumstances in which Gwich'in experience crisis, social suffering, and healing. In evoking what is imperative for individuals within their communities, whatever that entails, he uses the concept of ontological security. As I believe this notion of a sense of existential, or ontological, security that enables one to wrestle off a sense of agency in the face of unpredictability and suffering is also reflected in the stories of life transformation that I was told and the practices of healthy persons that I witnessed in Fort McPherson, I will outline the theoretical foundations of the concept in the following section.

5.5. Ontological Security and Existential Mobility

The work of Michael Jackson is one of the most comprehensive approaches to the interplay of the social and the individual in experiences of crisis, loss, and renewal. His writing stands out in that, despite his engagement with the particularities of everyday life and his attention to minute details of intersubjective experience, as an existentialist anthropologist he consistently directs the focus back to the dialectics of being: the tension between fate and choice, between the public and the private, between loss and control, between acting and being acted upon. His work aims to understand how it is that people achieve, maintain, and restore existential integrity. This question is at the heart of experiences of social suffering, pain, and healing. According to Jackson (1996, 1998, 2005, 2009), a preoccupation to restore existential integrity, or "ontological security", is imperative to transforming experiences of suffering through narrative and action.

Jackson arrives at this conclusion through an analysis that centres on the primacy of *relata*, which is the fundamental inter-existence, inter-experience, and intercorporeity of being.

He frames the continuous negotiations within intersubjective space as the attempt to strike a balance “between one’s experience of the world as something alien, external, all-encompassing, and overbearing, and one’s experience of having some place in the world, some say over its governance” (1998, 137). Sociality then is based on a dynamic balance and reciprocity, a “ceaseless cybernetic adjustment of contending needs and interests” (1998, 20). To have a sense of such balance is what Jackson calls “feeling at home in the world” (1998, 137). From this it follows that, in order to feel at home in the world, people have to be actively engaged, work, create, and recreate physical and social being. Jackson adopts Laing’s (1961) term “ontological security”, which he often uses as synonymous with *existential integrity*, to express how such generative intersubjective activity defines people’s sense of who they are (Jackson 1998, 16). Laing conceptualizes ontological security as having “a sense of presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, continuous person” (1961, 40). For the ontologically secure individual this sense is maintained even in states of social, biological, ethical, or spiritual hazards of life.

In the 1990’s Anthony Giddens (1991) applied this concept to his sociology of modernity to explain the practical consciousness that enables humans to handle the unpredictabilities and dangers of modern life. In order to stem the threat of anxiety and resume everyday life, non-conscious monitoring of practices and reliable day-to-day interactions enable people to free themselves from questioning their existence, others, and objects in the environment (Giddens 1991, 36-37). This existential trust in the reliability of routines is, according to Giddens, rooted in the mother-infant relationship. Equipped with this basic trust in persons and practices, an ontologically secure person is able to respond innovatively to challenging or threatening disruptions of familiar situations. Jackson’s contributions to this concept are based on his fieldwork on different continents, emerging himself in unfamiliar worlds, attempting to see how intersubjectivity reveals itself in his encounter with others, a method which he calls “lateral displacement” (Jackson 2005, 32). Although his grasp of ontological security contains some of the elements of Laing’s and Giddens’ understanding, such as having a sense of presence, of being whole, continuous, and being able to act creatively in challenging situations, he emphasizes the necessity for active engagement, communal usefulness of one’s work, and efficacy in one’s strivings *without* depriving others of their comparable needs (Jackson 1998, 16).

While his equation of a loss of ontological security with an “inability to act” (1998, 17) parallels Giddens’ argument, Jackson, at least partially, disengages from the notion of the

mother-infant relationship as the origin for this kind of existential integrity. According to him, the “loci” of ontological security differ depending on the unfolding intersubjective space in a locality. He found in his work in Sierra Leone that for the Kuranko this locus is kin relations, family, children, and being cared for. In New Zealand, he understood the Maori as basing ontological security in “the place where one has a right to stand” (ibid, 17). Similarly, for the Warlpiri in Australia secure being in the world is found in the country to which one belongs. Jackson’s use of the term “loci” to categorize the various foundations of ontological security suggests place as an inherent factor. Place, as discussed above, entails more than a geographic location, it embodies the way people make a living, as well as it embodies history, morality, and parts of individual and social identity. Kinship and feeling cared for, as in the first ethnographic example, seems at first glance to differ from the local nature of ontological security, however, the basis for building family and nurturing life is equally tied to making place, even if the specific geographic location changes over time. Suffering and life-disrupting experiences might or might not entail a loss of ontological security, might or might not be place-based in the widest sense. If they do amount to a sense of losing one’s existential integrity, however, they represent a “dispossession of choice”, an inability to act (Jackson 1998, 17), and a “loss of balance and control over what are seen as the vital elements of one’s sociocultural identity” (1998, 162). Elsewhere he argues that “ontological security may be threatened equally by cultural invasion, bureaucratic subversion, and personal forces that work against an individual’s sense of integrity and well-being” (Jackson 1998, 154). The crucial question for the understanding of experiences of disruption, displacement and renewal is “how we salvage, affirm, compromise, or lose our humanity in the face of catastrophic interruptions to the routines that reinforce our ordinary sense of ‘normal’ existence” (Jackson 1998, 51). Integral to processes of maintaining or restoring a sense of ontological security is “practical activity, and projective and strategic imagination” or *intentionality* (Jackson 1996, 30). In order to implement intentionality, a certain amount of control, as a “dialectic in which persons vie and strategize in order to avoid nullification as well as to achieve some sense of governing their own fate” (1998, 19), is needed and thus, according to Jackson, a central human preoccupation.

Narrative transformation, as discussed above, is one way of recovering agency in experience and a sense of control. Another is ritual, including the manipulation of objects, which extends control to an intersubjectivity that transcends the human realm (Jackson 2005, 94):

When our subjectivity is swamped, inundated, overwhelmed by events over which we have no comprehension nor control, we need to get some distance, to stand back, to objectify ... whatever comes to hand, whatever is already there – and from these vantage points that are removed from the immediate subjective world in which we are floundering, we recover a sense of our ability to grasp, to manage, to act in the world. (Jackson 2005, 93)

A third, I suggest, is movement. Thinking with the stories of Teet’it Gwich’in, I argue, that attention to bodily movement and skill is crucial to understanding how colonial practices have had such devastating effect on people’s sense of ontological security and how people have been able to salvage it. The move from passivity to activity is decisive in these processes.

It follows that such situations of existential risk, of losing the balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar, bear not only experiences of destruction, alienation and being reduced to passivity, but also the “possibility of awakening or rebirth” (Jackson 2009, 50). For this liminal space Jackson chooses the image of the penumbral, an “interdeterminate zone ‘between regions of complete shadow and complete illumination’” (2009, xii quoting The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 2000). Disruptions of being-in-the-world contain at the same time the potential for new kinds of relatedness that transcends one’s previous imaginative horizon (Jackson 2009, 37). Suffering, therefore, from an existential perspective, not only threatens the ontologically secure basis of being that enables people to engage and act in their world, but also carries the potential for renewal and healing.

Jackson uses the term “existential integrity” at times synonymously to ontological security: a sense of self, which engages within the world in a balance between “being-for-oneself and being-for-others” (Jackson 1998, 16). So far, in the previous chapters I have used the terms *existential integrity* as well as *existential security* in a similar vein as a sense of being able to act in an unpredictable world and having some level of agency in one’s life. The qualifier *existential*, however, expresses only insufficiently the relationality and intersubjectivity of our sense of subjectivity and agency. In philosophy, existentialism is associated with individual existence in a chaotic, meaningless world (Jackson 2005, xi). Anthropology however, as Jackson points out, pays particular attention to how people’s sense of self, of meaning, and purpose is negotiated within an intersubjective field of relations with others, with past and future, and the spiritual world (Jackson 2005, xii). The term *ontological security* better reflects the relational character of how people make sense of themselves within their environment and of what is happening to them that is outside of individual control.

What exactly is *ontological*? Ontology, following its Greek roots “ontos” – the nature of being, describes the kinds of subjects that exist in the world and how they relate to each other. When I started to explore Jackson’s way to frame certain experiences of suffering and renewal in terms of threatening, losing, or restoring ontological security, I was fascinated by this idea that promised to shed light on experiential differences beyond social support, coping mechanisms, displacement, trauma, or resilience. I immersed myself in Jackson’s writings and sought out the application of the concept in other contexts, never giving much thought to how controversial the definition and usage of ontology is. Ontology, as I had come to understand it, was the way people understand their being in the world, their expectations of how the world works, or how it should be. Such understanding emerges from, and continuously changes with, every experience one makes within one’s particular and shared historical, cultural, and physical context.

At first I subscribed to the idea that different perspectives on the world are *social constructions*, depending on a complex interplay of personal, social, historical, political, and environmental factors, of what there is. In other words, people interpret one and the same thing in different ways depending on the mental categories they have been raised with. With further study however, especially of the writings of Tim Ingold (2000, 2008) and Philippe Descola (1996), as well as through my experiences of living with and learning from northern Aboriginal people, the lines between ontology (what there is) and epistemology (how we know what is) became more and more blurry. Blurry to the point that I doubt whether such a distinction is useful at all for the ethnographic description of experience. Are different ways of knowing the world just different views on the same reality or do they describe different realities? Indigenous scholars and anthropologists working with various Indigenous groups convincingly show how obsolete categories such as nature and culture, or in other words things as they are and people’s ideas of these things, are in the experience of life, in what matters, and in what is real (Hunt 2014; Stewart-Harawira 2005; Descola 1996; Ingold 2000). Thus rejecting representationalism, these approaches argue that people do not understand things as symbolic of some abstract or transcendent concept, things are not *as if* they were (Ingold 1993, 81), things *are*. Knowing does not only shape being, knowing is being. Such an understanding collapses epistemology with ontology and that is the approach I am taking here.

Using the term ontology in my conversations with fellow students of anthropology, however, I have encountered indifference, or at best, skepticism with regards to this term.

Nevertheless, within the past decade, and especially within the last few years, ontology has experienced a revival in anthropology, or – perhaps more to the point – the debate over whether or not ontology is a useful anthropological category, or perhaps just another word for “culture”, has become prominent among anthropologists (Venkatesan et al 2008). Some scholars have postulated that anthropological theory is taking an “ontological turn” or that there is an emergent field of “ontological anthropology” (Holbraad, Pederson, Viveiros de Castro 2014). The contested aspects subsumed under this debate are varied: first, the definition of ontology and its various uses among different thinkers; second, whether this intensified attention to ontology amounts to a new grand theory in anthropology or if it is in actuality a return to “past essentialisms” (Holbraad and Pederson 2014; Pederson 2012; Laidlaw 2012); third, what the political foundations and implication of such an orientation would be (Holbraad, Pederson, Viveiros de Castro 2014; Kohn 2013). Furthermore, there is a range of other facets of this debate, which I am neglecting here. While my knowledge of the various arguments is limited and largely stems from the position papers of contributors to the round-table discussion on ontology at the 2013 Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA), I will position myself within this debate to clarify my own use of the term ontology.

One of the contested matters is whether or not the two uses of ontology, one of which signifying “essence” or claim of what is, the other “model” or “view” of what exists, are contradictory or not (Pederson 2012, Laidlaw 2012). These two meanings of ontology correspond to the aforementioned distinction between epistemology and ontology, which, I would argue in agreement with Pederson (2012), marks an underlying theory of the anthropologist raised in the Euro-American philosophical and scientific tradition that claims the existence of something “really real” and various social constructions of it. In the ethnographic attempt to convey experience of others through the anthropologist’s experience, such distinction is beside the point and would reestablish the long obsolete gold standard of using the scientific worldview as neutral grounds for comparison. In contrast, I agree with Pederson (2012) in that ontology comprises both aspects, what is and what could be, without any attempt to decide whether there is a “really real”. In a definition of the anthropological take on ontology by Holbraad, Pederson, and Viveiros de Castro, ontology demarcates “the multiplicity of forms of existence enacted in concrete practices” where the anthropologist takes a political stance in eliciting such manifold of potentials in a “non-skeptical” way (2013). It is this reflexivity of one’s own theoretical, or ontological, footing that is the aim of ontologically-oriented anthropology.

Having said that, the “ontological turn” does not represent as much of a turn but rather a reinforcement of the heuristic method of “bracketing” assumptions of analytical categories and considering ethnographic experiences and realities as “relationally composed” (Pederson 2012). Kohn (2013) refers to this continuity in anthropology: “All good anthropology has always been ontological in that it opens up to other kinds of realities.” This hints at my position on the second point of the debate: whether the ontological turn constitutes a new theoretical paradigm or the heated debate surrounding it has inflated its intention (Pederson 2012). This intention, Holbraad, Pederson, de Castro (2013) postulate, is to develop a “technology of description” to “making the otherwise visible”. This aim, I believe, has been inherent to anthropology and the ontological turn appears to be an attempt to approach this task from a new angle, to ask questions in a new way in the hope to generate ethnographic writing that, in its imperfect way, does justice to the people it is about. This goal implies a certain ethical attitude that is inseparably tied to political processes which brings us to the third aspect of the debate on the ontological turn. If ontology used in an anthropologically meaningful way does describe a multitude of potential realities - what are the political implications of such anthropology? The discussion above shows that different stances towards the uses of the term ontology point to different ontologies of both the users and the critics of the term. Ideas of social constructions of reality or of multitudes of realities are inherently political stances in that they align with modes of knowledge that are legitimized or delegitimized by power relations. Even more, as the anthropologist’s understanding of his and other’s ontology emerges and is transformed in the encounter with people whose lives are constrained by politics on various dimensions, his description is necessarily political in that it gives “ontological weight” to alternative realities that would be discounted by hegemonic criteria. Viveiros de Castro has given this aim its manifesto with his declaration that anthropology is the “science of ontological self-determination” striving to promote “permanent decolonization of thought” (de Castro 2009 quoted in Holbraad, Pederson, de Castro 2013). As such, there is not only the potential in anthropological endeavors of an affinity with the political projects of the people that are involved in the making of anthropology but also this “very form of thinking” makes politics an inherent aspect of anthropology (Holbraad, Pederson, de Castro 2013).

How is this discussion related to ontological security and the question of transforming life experiences and the attention to walking and keeping busy that my experience in Fort McPherson led me to? The point of departure for ontological anthropologists is the dismissal of

“epistemic intermediaries” between subject and the world (Paleček and Risjord 2012, 4). Ontologically oriented scholars pay special attention to objects and material culture and their different manifestation in different groups of people, however, not in terms of different representations of the object in question, but in terms of what these objects actually do, constitute, or create as extensions of the mind. What has been coined the “extended mind hypothesis” (Hutchins 1995 quoted in Paleček and Risjord 2012, 8-9) serves as a foundation for treating objects as “either part of memory or part of the mechanics of thinking about” a category such as history, kinship, or health (Paleček and Risjord 2012, 9). While I am not able to describe Gwich’in ontology nor interpret Gwich’in material culture, the idea of objects being a part of the mechanics of thinking is worth exploring in the context of ontological security. What we think is not limited to what is in our mind, we think through engaging with what is around us. Handling of objects is an aspect of thinking and, therefore, partially constitutes thought about what is. In line with my previous theoretical argument, however, I would like to shift the emphasis away from the object and towards the bodily activity of handling things and engaging with one’s surrounding through movement. Movement and doing things are constitutive elements of thinking and experiencing, which supports my proposal that in order to transform experiences a shift in movement and bodily practice is decisive. Thinking of well-being and experiencing a sense of living a good life, thus, cannot be understood separately from bodily activity in terms of mental appraisal of resources, support, or positive outlook. As I have come to understand from the encounters and experiences with Teet’it Gwich’in, experiencing and thinking about suffering and renewal is constituted through bodily movement that arises, and is continuously transformed, within intersubjective space. The liberty to move with purpose within a field of relations is what Jackson describes as balance between being for oneself and being for others, a balance that is imperative for a sense of existential integrity in intersubjective encounters. When such liberty to move, or as I propose such *existential mobility*, becomes limited beyond a person’s capabilities to renegotiate or circumvent those limits, this existential imperative is nullified rendering one’s world inherently insecure, possibilities of experiencing oneself as whole and alive through enskillment and purposeful work with others shrink, and, as a consequence, one’s sense of governance over one’s life. While existential mobility as a crucial condition of ontological security does not explain why some people are able to transform existential threats and regain a sense of well-being, existential mobility as enacted in multiple

ways and articulated in the shift from being acted upon to acting is what appears to mark recovery and renewal.

5.6. Colonization of Movement, Skill, Perception, and Relatedness

If existential mobility within a field of relations is the condition for the emergence of ontological security, then we can understand the restriction of mobility, enskillment, and agency by way of government interventions in childcare and education, settlement, housing, and governance as an assault on ontology that results in challenging people's sense of ontological security. Residential schools profoundly limited children's movements and colonized Aboriginal ways of being in and relating to the world. Rigid control over children's nutrition, sleep, physical activity, and physical appearance, as well as over interpersonal contact exposed children to the experience of being acted upon that outweighed their ability to act. The teaching of information and skills in these schools was not only insufficient, but also inconsistent with the lives of their childhood and that of their parents. This further diminished children's sense of agency and hindered the process of enskillment that arises from experiential learning. However, even under such conditions humans are able to find ways to renegotiate the balance of being acted upon and acting upon, both in action and narrative. Trying to escape the nullification of self by being acted upon, children in residential school found various pathways to shift the balance. Strategies that would restore a minimum of ontological security for some, however, might have made matters worse for others. In this light it becomes clear why children and adolescents in hostels would sometimes turn against each other resulting in the lateral violence that is part of many stories of residential school experiences. It also sheds light on why many Gwich'in actively endorsed education and value their learning as something they find important for themselves and their children.

When traders and missionaries established themselves in the North they were dependent in many ways on Gwich'in willingness to trade meat or furs with them or to listen to their religious message. They represented a possibility to engage, to exchange, and to experiment with different and new aspects of being. Although trading and religious events did change the yearly rounds of Gwich'in people, Gwich'in invested in these changes based on their own volition and based on their principles of partnership. While institutions such as the

Hudson's Bay Company were clearly oriented toward economic profit and disregarded Gwich'in insight (for example the disregard of Gwich'in wishes for the location of the first fort), Gwich'in nevertheless were able to use their position and skills strategically to negotiate agency and control over the process. Loovers describes how Teet'it Gwich'in claimed their role as partners in the fur trade and actively resisted domination:

Thus, the Gwich'in were actively involved in strategically demanding trading posts and quality trading goods for competing prices. [...] For example, Fort McPherson was ignored by most Gwich'in for a long time as the Teet'it Gwich'in leaders and others had been critical of the position of the post (Sax and Linklater 1990). [...] Hence, the Hudson's Bay Company had thus become a partner with the Gwich'in, not a colonizer – or at least not locally. (Loovers 2010, 87)

Teet'it Gwich'in remember the most influential missionary of the region, Archdeacon Robert McDonald, as a wise and powerful man who contributed not only by teaching the Bible but also by using the Gwich'in language for prayers and hymns. Today, his translation of the Bible, prayers, and songs are an invaluable source for Gwich'in efforts to revitalize their language (Loovers 2010). While McDonald strongly opposed Gwich'in communication with spirits, belief in prophecies, or the activities of medicine people, Gwich'in also demanded his teachings and were eager to learn (Loovers 2010, 110-111). His practice of training local men as lay readers gave them the option to be actively engaged in the process of Christianization. In this process, the Christian faith was incorporated or, according to Loovers, synthesized with the existing ontology that included spiritual entities (2010, 116). Similar to Gwich'in relations with fur traders, their active engagement with and contestation of the process of Christianization precludes a simple colonizer – victim account. While missionaries opposed Gwich'in ontology and worked to prohibit their practice of medicine and relations with spirits, Gwich'in narratives of this time reflect local agency and control as well as a continuation of their own beliefs.

The growing settlement, at first, represented another potential for new partnerships and purposeful engagement that did not necessarily restrict existential mobility. However, when fur prices fell, children were obliged to go to school, welfare payments were tied to residence in the settlement, government housing was introduced, and people needed cash income to purchase things and pay rent – this is when the settlement was no longer an option to go to and to return from but became a forceful limitation of people's mobility and agency. Imposed administrative structures devalued Gwich'in governance and dispossessed people of the power to direct their own affairs. In particular, the negation of locally made houses and ways of making

oneself feel at home through the introduction of government housing, rent, and modern appliances represented a challenge to the sense of enskillment, mastery, and security that people experienced by living with more self-sufficiency. Prefabricated houses precluded people's own means of dwelling, devalued skills such as cutting the right wood for a good fire (Wishart 2004), bringing in sugar snow or ice for drinking water, maintaining the fire for warmth, to cook, and to dry meat. Again, despite the assault on ontological security that these measures represented, people strove to re-establish a balance of being acted upon and the existential imperative for agency. Part of this process is the increasing use of cabins at 8 Miles to live, at least part-time, based on one's own skills of building, working with wood, fishing, snaring small game, drying fish and meat, tanning hides and sewing clothing. Another expression of salvaging the sense of enskillment that arises from self-sufficient life on the land is the growing "city" at Midway Lake, the site of a music festival that is organized every summer for more than 25 years. Here, more and more families are building their own cabins by the lake to live on the land for one week every summer, to cook outside, to visit and share food without the walls, electricity, computers, and other elements of town life.

Other far-reaching structural threats to existential mobility and people's sense of governing their own lives occurred through policies such as the registration of trap lines, the imposition of hunting seasons, the White Paper of 1969, and development projects such as the proposed Mackenzie Valley pipeline. Again, while such interventions in northern lives represented an attack on people's existential security, Gwich'in individuals and groups explored new ways of asserting their humanity and organized politically to protest and redirect what was to affect their ontological foundations.

As I show in Part III, contemporary town life continues to reflect countless moments of people renegotiating their existential footing, rebalancing being acted upon and acting upon others, and asserting their independence from the structural limitations of the larger society. Although Elders surely lament a loss of self-sufficiency, my observations of volunteering, fundraising, and rapid community action in times of crisis document continuity in self-sufficiency and new ways of enskillment that strengthen people's sense of ontological security.

However, not everyone was able to salvage their sense of integrity in the face of adversity through these various assaults on ontological security. Physical and mental health concerns intensified since the 1960's at times sliding into an epidemic of alcoholism and suicide. The

following chapter will explore the experience of transforming such suffering and restoring ontological security.

Chapter 6

Transformations, Liminality, and the Rehabilitation of Ontological Security

6.1. Elizabeth Colin the Peel River Alcohol Society

“We got our money from the government but we ran our program our own way” (E. Colin, 04/09/2012)

On a stormy fall afternoon we sat in front of cheese and crackers, tea and cake in the Church room overlooking the Peel River and the mountains on the horizon. Bertha Francis smiled at the sight: “Just like the old Alcohol Centre – we’re coming to that, how nice! Because that’s what we used to have all the time. We used to eat together, just like a potluck. And we gather down there, and it was our second home.” (B. Francis, 04/09/2012).

Bertha Francis is one of the four remarkable Elders who joined me that day to remember the days of the Peel River Alcohol Centre (PRAC). She was one of the volunteers that sustained counselling and recreation programs for community members struggling with alcohol addiction: “That place opened almost 24 hours. And anytime anybody call you when you’re home sleeping, you get up, you listen, or you go or they come, which ever way, and we’re willing to listen to people. And that way I think we got through to a lot of people because sometimes people call at the worst time when they’re going through the hardest time and we’re sitting there listening to them.” (B. Francis, 04/09/2012).

In conversations with Elizabeth Colin, who together with her husband Neil Colin founded the Alcohol Centre, we had decided that a video showing a few Elders who were involved in the program sharing stories of that time would be best for use in the school and the community. The government of the Northwest Territories had come through the community in spring that year and the minister of the Department of Health and Social Services had spoken about the new mental health strategy he was working on. The elders who ran the Alcohol Centre felt that not only what they had done was forgotten, but also that contemporary policy makers and program designers should learn from their experiences. Much of what is being heralded as new in mental health programming (GNWT 2012), such as acknowledgement of the importance of the land for well-being or the relevance of local control over aspects of mental health services, was an integral part of the Peel River Alcohol Centre.

I had set up my camera and put snacks on the table while the women sat down and started reminding each other of how it was back then, when the Alcohol Centre was run by people in the community. With us also was Elizabeth Colin who, together with her husband Neil Colin, first started AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings in the community and worked as a counsellor for more than ten years at the PRAC. Further, Elizabeth's sister Dorothy Alexie, a dedicated counsellor and volunteer, skilled seamstress and tanner, as well as Jane Charlie, wife of the much loved and respected late Chief Johnny Charlie and former volunteer dance instructor, were present. All of the women's life stories were tied to the PRAC in one way or another. Mary Teya and Charlie Snowshoe also had stories to contribute and were recorded a few days later. For all of them, the Alcohol Centre was a place that embodied the positive changes they were able to affect within their own lives and their community. The following section is based on these recordings as well as my conversations with Elders throughout my stay in the community.

Mobility and New Beginnings

And it took a person like Lizbeth Colin to understand and find out right away, [...], she went up to them and asked them to give her help maybe to start up a program. And it happened!
(C. Snowshoe, 02/09/2012)

On a warm April Monday in 1973, Elizabeth Colin went to the local social worker asking for help to deal with the problems alcohol caused in her and her family's life.

I just got so tired of the drinking that was going on in my house, so one day there I just walked out, to this day I don't know where that week went, you know, I don't know where it went. When I come to, I'm sitting in a place, those days they had lots of brew pots, no liquor or things like that. When I come to, that's where I get up to, but anyway, I'm just from house to house, just like that, I just got so fed up, you know, that I did that. And my mom and dad said, somebody was at the door and dad went to open it, it was me. My hair – like that, don't know how I looked and they let me in and I start falling, fall on the floor, they can't pick me up, all they did was put blanket on me and that's what I woke up to. It was in April 1973, that's when I woke up. It was a way of life for us. That was the way life was for us and I felt really awful and I wouldn't go home too. It was on a Saturday that I woke up. Sunday, Monday – real nice outside, warm in April. I was walking down, I just had my head down, going down to see Phillip [Phillip Blake, Social Worker] and you know I always told him, "You should have took picture of me how I looked when I walked into your office." And I didn't know how to say it that I wanted help. And you know, I just said: "I want help for my drinking problem."

(E. Colin, 04/09/2012)

The words she chooses to express how she remembers those days paint a vivid scene of existential crisis and renewal: first, she describes a break from a “way of life” by her physically “walk[ing] out”, then she recalls a liminal phase in terms of existential disorientation and a vague sense of personhood, and finally she remembers the experience of perceiving the world as showing signs of potential for renewal, growth, and new possibilities. Liminality is thoroughly embodied in her experience: her hair and appearance in disorder, her body falling to the ground, and herself refusing to return to her previous way of life. This one week that went by between the day she broke away from tried ways of being and the day of her “waking up” to reassembling a new sense of self in relation to her environment is characterized by an usurpation of her experience of time and space. In absence of habitual thought and behavior, sense of time evades her grasp. Although her missing memory of time might or might not be due to her intoxication, in her story it marks an ontological void when the way she understood herself within the world ceased to hold up and the potential for an alternative ontology had not emerged yet. Liminality also finds its expression in her relation to place during that time. Walking out of her house and going from house to house to interact and drink with others also reflects an abrupt break with the roles that she herself and others defined for a woman and wife in Fort McPherson at that time. As a wife she was expected to stay home most of the time, care for the household and children, not go out to visit much, and above all not to object to her husband in any way:

We were just prisoners at home, I think, couldn't do nothing! (E. Colin, 04/09/2012)

I couldn't talk, I couldn't talk, or I couldn't talk back, I just took it, I had to do everything those days, I don't know why? (E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

These two statements clearly reflect that what Elizabeth experienced, speaking in Jackson's terms, was being acted upon that by far outweighed her possibilities to act upon others: she *could* do nothing (first quote), while she *had* to do everything. The circumstances of her life had left her immobile, muted her voice, as well as robbed her of existential mobility and a sense of agency. Moreover, narrating her experience she cannot find coherence or causality in how these circumstances came about. Her experience was not only overbearing but also ontologically inconsistent. After years of suffering such assault on her sense of governance over her own life

and her sense of ontological security, she enters a transitional phase leaving behind even the security of immobility and suffering by physically walking away from it. She is walking, or rather wandering, without direction, from place to place, house to house, encountering her environment and relating to others and their lives in a way that was radically different from the familiar. As Elizabeth Colin walked out of her house and went on to other people's places engaging in behavior that was not expected from her, yet widely common throughout the community, she resists to surrender to a way of being that left her immobile and unable to act. Before her story goes on to reflecting signs of hope and renewal, however, she experienced one week of complete loss of her existential grounding and her sense of self in time and space. Her shift from immobility to mobility, at first, leads her through ontological turmoil, or to "rock bottom" as many in the community would say today. As we will see in the following, this liminal phase bore not only complete chaos and destruction but also the potential for radically re-positioning herself within the tension of between being for oneself and being for others and as a person who asserts her agency through speech and actions in a way that previously was thought of as impossible.

After wandering the liminal time and space of breaking with significant parts of her ontology in a haze of intoxication, Elizabeth's awakening is narratively expressed in ways that contrast liminality and signify renewal. Her memory of time now is sharp, it was a Saturday when she woke up, a Saturday morning April 17, 1973. The weather was nice and warm; her perception of the environment reflecting the spring of potentiality when the sunlight warms and the water starts flowing to support new growth. Such fluidity and fertility parallels her entering an era of re-arranging the way she thought of herself in relation to others within the world. Her walk now has direction, from wandering from house to house, she now walks directly to where she finds support. Finding herself on new and unfamiliar grounds, she is not sure of how to communicate to others what her experience entails. Despite a sense of fear and shame embodied in her posture as she keeps her "head down", she embraces the risk of going against the grain of locally dominant ways of acting and asks the Social Worker for help. She walks and talks herself out of what she experienced as immobility and isolation into a way of being in which movement and speech are hers to initiate to a greater extent than before.

Chaos and unpredictability always carry the creative potential of renewal. In Elizabeth Colin's memory this sense of new horizons might shine through by way of how she pays attention to the esthetics of herself and her environment in her narrative, but did that emotion

colour her experience at the time? According to Linde (1993), narrative of past experience strives to create continuity in a temporal sense as well as continuity of causality in terms of meaning, purpose, and personal influence on what is happening (Garro 2003, Jackson 1998). This way of narrating experience is threatened when the assault on ontology (Portelli 1991) is so destructive as to render the construction of coherence impossible. Mrs. Colin's puzzled questions "I don't know why?" signifies how the negation of existential mobility and agency in her life before 1973 amounted to such a loss of ontological security leaving her experience fragmented.

To explore in more depth what is at stake in her recalling her experience of those days I would like to insert this story in her own voice again. Contrary to the quote above, which was recorded during the recording of a documentary on the PRAC, this conversation was between her and myself as part of my recording her life story as a whole. Parts of this more detailed account reflect the same experiences of liminality, which include a negation of her humanity, loss of sense of time and space, and a loss of her sense of who she is. However, this story goes further to tell about the challenges and surprises of the first few weeks and months of her transformation.

Elizabeth: I walked out of my house.

Thea: Oh!

Elizabeth: and I start drinking. I just come to - I don't even know *whose* house I'm in. *One week* just - I don't know, and sometime a whole bunch of womens together and sometimes just me, but anyway - when I woke up, I woke up on the floor in my mother's house. And my mother said, they heard somebody knocking, my dad went to open , it was me - look my *hair* was just like this [motions to show messy hair] just so *bushy*

Thea: mm

Elizabeth: It wasn't *me* that walk in and I start falling when I went in and they couldn't – they're ol[d], they couldn't do nothing, so I *fell* on the floor and they just left me there, only thing they did, they put blanket on me and that's what I woke up to – and it was on a *weekend* too, it was on a weekend – it was *April 17, 1973* that I woke up there

Thea: Ya – you remember the date and everything

Elizabeth: and – I wasn't gonna go home, no! I wasn't gonna go home and they never tell me nothing so I just stayed there. Come Monday - Phillip Blake – you know him? You seen him? Phillip Blake Sr.?

Thea: No, I don't know

Elizabeth: eh, he lives below the school, he's got a – he's got a place there, but he was a social worker at that time, you know and I was thinking I'm gonna go down and see Phillip – I was *scared!* I wanted to see Gikhyi [Gwich'in for minister] too, there was a minister there and I wanted to go see him but he might say I'm *too far gone* in *sin*, ah? And he

might not help me, so – and then I was thinking of that – there was two social worker, John was his name – I want to go to him but, you know, he might look down at me too, so I chose Phillip. I was walking - *real nice bright warm day sunny*, I was walking down and you know around where Edith – Edith Nerysoo stay? You know Paul Hanthorn’s lot? The house and then the next house at the corner that’s Edith’s. I was – I never look up to her, I just look down, just walking and then [...] look, lots of people was ahead of me and yet when he come out he told me to come in - Phillip

Thea: mm – oh ya!

Elizabeth: you know they usually take as they come?

Thea: ya.

Elizabeth: He told me to come in. So when I went in there, when he closed the door behind me - I always told him “Phillip you should’a had *camera!* “ to take picture of me that time how I *looked* because that was the first time I start talking and I – I was *scared* to talk [...] but he - he was *really understanding*, Phillip, he said “None of this what you’re saying gonna, [...] .. this is confidential” and that’s the first time I - I learned that word *confidential* too. He mean, he said “I mean what was said in here, stays in here [...]” So I cried and I talked and I laughed, you know? And I told him “I’m *not* going home! That’s it” and I told him “Take my kids”. Clayton always say “Mom, you remember you’re trying to give us away?” [laughs]

Thea: awe [laughs]

Elizabeth: He wasn’t that old, ah, cause Judy and Dempster was small and I said “I got *no place* to go with them - just take them” that foster care cause I said “I’m not going *home!* I’ve had it” and he talked to me, he said [chuckles] “I want you to try *one – more – time*” he said “I want you to go home [...] you have to try it first again” and, oh, as *much* as I hate to, you know, he told me “I will see you 5 o’clock after work” and he was the one who taught me to be on time when there’s interview or – you know, be on time and “5 o’clock I’m gonna see you after work” he said, I was staying at my mom’s place. 5 o’clock he’s coming, so I went out to him, it was really *nice* outside [...]

Thea: Ok

Elizabeth: You know when I went in to him and when I told him - I told him “I don’t know *how* to start it” but I said “Phillip, I *need help* for my drinking” I told him - then he start laughing too! He just and I felt *real* funny, look he’s laughing at me. After he finished laughing he said “I’m not laughing at you” he said “ I’ve been working here two and a half years, I seen lot of people drinking and you’re the *first one to admit* you have a drinking problem” he told me “You’re the first one to admit to me that you have a drinking problem and you want to get help – I’m gonna help you” he said - and you’re not – it was, it was, ah, many trips - many visit to him because we had to go to Edmonton, to Henwood, but you know it was something, it was very - it’s *different* today but at that time, was it – April? - May, June – end of June we finally went out there, there was no airstrip - they had to land on the – after ice go away.

Thea: Oh, they land on the water?

Elizabeth: they land on the water with pontoons, ah, there’s not even air – air, there’s no road to 8 Miles! We had to wait all the time but *big difference* - I tell you, big and, ah, and Phillip [...] was all there to help me

Thea: In that time you had to wait – you stayed away from drinking already?

Elizabeth: ah?

Thea: In all that time you had to wait until you could go – you already stayed sober?

Elizabeth: Ya. And that was April 17, 19 - ah 73 and never again did I. And in – well – a lot of time John Osburn that was the other nurse, I mean other social worker, and the nurses, we had two nurses too and I spent time with them and eventually I went to that Gikhyi [smiles] too and he really help me too, you know and I just go places where I never go, I start going out! No more – no more holding me back. And – ah – I just went where ever, where ever I needed to talk or just get together, you know, and – it was *hard*, a *lot* of people didn't understand and – ah they just call you name, how many times people calling me names, you know "Who you think you are", "You remember you drank too?" - "Now you think you're so good" all these comments that they used to throw at me and I just - ignored them.

Thea: That time pretty much everyone was drinking?

Elizabeth: Everybody.

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012, edited for confidentiality)

The last part of this story sets the stage of how life in the community was at the time. Drinking was not experienced as an articulation of suffering or as filling the void for the devaluation of people's self-governance and skills through government and industry interventions. Drinking was normalized as a way of life for many in the community. Her break with this normality threatened other's sense of security in the routines of finding a bottle, drinking with others, sobering up, experiencing the negative emotions that come with a hangover, and soothing the pain with yet another round of binge drinking.

The continuity of well-practised perceptions of herself, of others, their behaviors, and their positions within the field of relations, however, lingers. This is well reflected in her choice of who to seek out for help. She deemed the minister, a Euro-Canadian man from southern Canada, as morally superior and expected him to judge her harshly. She feared the same from the Euro-Canadian social worker. The only person she could trust not to reject and judge her was one of the local Gwich'in social workers. It turns out later that both Euro-Canadian men in fact did not judge but did support her. However, the collective experience of relations to outside agents of colonialism had sedimented into her perception illustrating the pervasive effects of settler attitudes of superiority and disregard for Aboriginal lifeways.

The local social worker, the late Phillip Blake, welcomed her by validating not only the novel way she asserted herself, but also by recognizing and pointing out her status as a groundbreaker in the community who will experience resistance. She was the first to frame her use of alcohol as a "problem". On the other hand, he persuaded her to give her family one more chance. Knowing how a separation of the couple would be perceived negatively and sanctioned

in the community, he cautioned her and suggested returning home with the assurance of his continued support.

What appears as a radical move in this account is her resolve to give her children into foster care. I remember being so surprised when I first heard this story knowing her as such a loving mother and *jjuu* (Gwich'in word for grandmother). My own experience of unpredictable and adverse situations when having sole responsibility for someone or something served me as a crucial motivator to go on, stood in stark contrast to what she was saying. I expected in her case that her children would be a source of continuity of self and, therewith, a tangible symbol of a possible future that is created in the present despite all contrarities. Family and children were also often mentioned by people in Fort McPherson as a foundation for their sense of purpose and well-being in their lives. But Elizabeth felt she has no choice but to give her children away and focus all energy on laying the foundations for a new way of being. As she ventured away from the way of life that was normative in the community at the time, she risked the security of supportive kin relations and had no place to go with her children. Her home was unsafe as it threatened to draw her back into the immobility and passivity of her previous life, and other family members were complicit in prompting her to return to her expected role. Dominant moral values at the time caused many parents, who could otherwise have provided shelter in such situations, to instruct their run-away daughters to return to their marriage despite conflict and violence. Mrs. Colin was moving into unknown territory and whether or not the journey would be safe for her children was impossible to predict. In her narrative I hear a sense of danger, rebellion, and confrontation. The way she talks about her changing sense of self and her shifting position in relationships invoked in me an image of the new way of being, her new "me", forcefully breaking its way through her body and confronting her environment. In the first few weeks after this decisive day in April, Mrs. Colin was not in a position to see how things would unfold, what her life would transform into. She was in a state of constantly surprising herself.

I start *talking back* [...], I wasn't even scared to *talk* or anything [...] and I felt *good* saying that! [...] And I just go places where I never go, I start going out! No more – no more holding me back. And – ah – I just went where ever, where ever I needed to talk or just get together/ you know/ and – it was *hard*, a *lot* of people didn't understand.

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

What stands out about this account is how Elizabeth speaks of the tremendous changes in her life in terms of mobility, of freedom to move, to speak, and to relate as well as the sense of security and confidence to do so. This account invokes a sense of astonishment about the possibilities of agency and mobility, a potential that opened up from within herself, without any changes in the external circumstances. Elizabeth started moving, relating, talking, and acting without letting others' expectations constrain her. It was possible and it felt good. She seems surprised at the sense of courage, well-being, and drive that she experienced when she started to live life more on her own terms. In remembering this time and telling me about how her life changed and, most importantly, how she perceived herself changing, Elizabeth reflects on who she was and is as a person. She thinks the person who "couldn't do nothing", "couldn't talk", and "had to do everything" as a "prisoner", as herself in a state of existential immobility. Then, the person who was drinking, not speaking for herself, or neglecting her appearance was not herself at all. Only when she started to move and to speak did she identify with herself: "no more holding me back".

This impression of being taken over by the capable, confident, and strong "me" that was always there but imprisoned by the expectations and demands of others is what I heard in her stories on many occasions. Her facial expression often underlined her accounts of speaking up for the first time, of acting with confidence, of succeeding in projects that nobody expected her to carry out: eyes wide with surprise and the corners of her mouth turned downwards in disbelief followed by a chuckle of unexpected satisfaction. I have heard her tell the story of these events several times and over time, what seems at stake for her to convey, crystallized for me as exactly this surprise of being able to speak, act, and decide for herself. However, she portrays this new confidence as coming from a place inside herself that she did not know was hers, that she still, narratively at least, presents as unfamiliar.

At the same time that she is experimenting with encountering others in different ways, using her resolve to take control over what is happening more than being acted upon, she is also experiencing ways of relating to others that are new and unfamiliar to her. She explained how she learned what *confidentiality* means and what it means to *be on time*. Two qualities that she had to learn to trust not only in others but also in herself: to find assurance in that not all talk is to be shared and made public as well as confidence in people to follow up on their word. Although the concepts of privacy and rigorous time schedules were foreign to her at the time, she emphasizes these as part of a newly-found basis for security in how her environment

operates in relation to her. Time and punctuality played little role in the daily and annual subsistence lifestyle. Although *timing* was crucial to survival, it did not depend on clock time but on the migration and behavior of animals, the seasons, and the weather. Clock time is still not of highest priority in the community today, if not in all areas of community life, but in some with certainty. Being on “Gwich’in time” does not mean an inability to follow through on one’s plans in a negative sense, but rather signifies that things will come together when everyone and everything is ready, not when a clock shows a certain time. There is generally no value seen in rushing things. However, in some instances the need for being “in tune” with the speed and movement of the communal action and the insecurity about when and if things will happen causes tension and frustration for individuals. Clocks are everywhere in the community today and the negotiation of different expectations as to how important it is to incorporate their dictate into community life can, at times, cause minor discord. In Elizabeth’s experience of the uncertainty that her situation entailed, a person reliably and predictably acting according to their word offered a security so significant that she considers it worth of recounting and emphasizing almost 40 years later.

Confidentiality is part of a counselling discourse that entered the community by way of southern trained social workers and nurses. At the time, the word and its meaning was new to Ms. Colin. In the excerpt of her account above, this professional obligation of the social worker adds a tool that enables Elizabeth to leverage her position in the tug-of-war between expectations oriented towards her from family and community and her resolve to change.

Punctuality and confidentiality in this case are articulations of a reliable relationship, especially in Elizabeth’s encounter with the social worker Phillip Blake, a person in an authority position who supported and validated her in acting on her own account and, therewith, acting against common expectations for a wife and mother. Although he urged her to “try one more time”, to find the strength to try and be different than she was but remain within the social norm of marriage and family, he also offered her support if the alternative of living independently with her children becomes unavoidable.

Her act of first admitting a problem with drinking and her resolve to change her life marked a turning point in the community’s relationship to alcohol, it introduced a new discourse of emphasizing the self in people’s understanding of themselves within their environment and, of understanding drinking as a disease, as denial of emotions, and as caused by projecting problems onto others.



Figure 5: Elizabeth Colin speaking at the unveiling ceremony for the Gwich'in Traditional Caribou Skin Clothing Project (Thompson and Kritsch 2005) at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre in Yellowknife, March 28, 2003. Photo: ©Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute, Tessa Macintosh

Struggling and Persistence

When Elizabeth Colin told the social worker that she had a “problem” with alcohol and required help, she started a movement in the community. Not only her husband but also her sister and brother-in-law as well as many other community members followed her example. This idea of framing drinking as a problem eventually became common understanding in the community. In these first years, however, people who “quit” and went for a 28-day treatment to one of the southern cities were met with considerable resistance.

It was *hard*, a *lot* of people didn’t understand and – uh they just call you name, how many times people calling me names, you know “Who you think you are”, “You remember you drank too?”, “Now you think you’re so good” all these comments that they used to throw at me and I just - ignored them.

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

I was going to AA meetings too, I really – it was good for me, you know, like I say I had to help myself up, so I was criticized for it, every way, but I never gave up.

(M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

Both women, whose quotes I share here, as well as a third one who preferred to remain anonymous, explain in their life stories how they took the lead in pursuing treatment against the resistance of their partners, families, and friends. Considering how women described their role in the family as submissive to their husbands, the steps they took to change their lives were likely perceived as threatening by others who preferred to maintain the established gender relations. As seen in the quotes, people attempted to communicate to these women that they were perceived as overstepping the boundaries of locally sanctioned behaviors in terms of a superiority-modesty dichotomy. Staying within the restrictions of what was seen as appropriate for women was perceived as modest and correct judgment of their position, whereas stepping outside expected behaviors is framed as thinking too highly of oneself, an attitude that has much negative value attached to in Gwich’in discourse. Bragging, using “big words”, not being “level with the people” is all categorized as an expression of superiority thinking and is met with negative judgment. The women who quit drinking and went for treatment were seen in such light. Eventually, after several years, people accepted that these women continued to treat their fellow community members with respect, humility, and understanding, as well as observed how they were able to improve their lives and positions within the community.

He told me “Liz, sit down! Sit down! I got to tell you something” - half of the kids were there I think and – I sat down and he said “You know what? Those mens and boys are

talking about you!” Ah gee - I don’t want to-what he’s gonna say – and he said “You know - every party I go to they talk about you, they say only you never forgot where you come from. You meet them – and when you meet them they’re scared to meet you while that you meet them and you say something to them and you start laughing with them. [...] And how many times I thank him for telling me that, you know - honest little things you need to hear.

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

Eventually, they saw how people were that sobered up, were looking so good and that they were able to do things in the community and were part of the community, whatever went on, events, anything that went on in the community, they just became part of all that. And people started seeing that.

(M. Teya, 31/08/2012)

The 28-day program at Henwood Treatment Centre near Edmonton, which still runs today, played an important role in Elizabeth’s story. She and others emphasize how the ways of thinking and speaking they encountered during treatment were instrumental in how they were able to transform their, in many cases continuing, adverse experiences. Physically, the journey to the treatment centre in July 1973 was a reflection of the new and unfamiliar. In the liminality of the treatment situation Elizabeth unlocked imaginative horizons that included new kinds of relatedness, which enabled her to link the present unfamiliarity to a potential future and adopt an orientation of hope. Hope allowed her to face the intense sense of displacement she felt when she entered the program. Emotions of fear, nevertheless, were strong but after having experienced how potential emerged at the point of disorientation and unfamiliarity when she first quit drinking, fear does not occupy a central place in her story anymore. Rather, she enlists both the comical and the frightening in the experience to make a good story:

And when we got to Inuvik they put us at the hospital too, everything was different. From there we went out [to Edmonton] and this one counsellor there picked us up, I was so scared! First time in the big city too! And look, he had shorts on, he never even had socks or shoes on and no shirt on too! That’s the kind of guy who picked us up. [...] Blond hair too, just – gee – you know?

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

One of the most salient experiences of displacement and subsequent emplacement during treatment revolved around *talk* and the narrative construction as well as communication of experience that was expected and practiced throughout the addiction program. This was a common experience for all the women who told me about what they remembered of their treatment. Dorothy Alexie clearly remembers her struggle with this alien way of thinking of oneself and speaking about oneself:

So when we got to treatment centre, I thought what did I get myself into, I couldn't understand nothing, I couldn't even ask questions like, what am I supposed to do? [...] I can't talk like that, I never did talk to anybody like this before, never talk about me [...] We do one-on-one and then we go into groups, just listening to other peoples what they, how they drank and all the problems it causes. Still I wouldn't talk, hard for me. Anyway, after 28 days, I thanked my counsellor for helping me and when I was walking out that door, I was thinking, boy, when I get home, I'm gonna try to get training and try to help my peoples.

(D. Alexie, 05/09/2012)

Encouragement and validation of verbal expression of experience is one of the main ingredients of established forms of addiction treatment programs (Carr 2011, 3). That, however, is tied to a certain way of constructing one's narrative that is imposed as well as enforced by the counsellors. The only permissible way of framing experience in the context of addiction treatment, that is based in the philosophy and principles of the Alcoholics Anonymous movement, is to speak in a first person narrative: *I felt, I thought, I did, I want*. In recounting their treatment or counselling experience, the women who shared their stories with me were sure to emphasize that this was a revealing lesson and decisive as a new perspective on their own position within their field of relations and experiences. This alternative perspective focused the women's attention on the aspects of their experience that they, according to therapeutic ideology, have control over, which include their individual perceptions, emotions, thoughts, and actions. Emerging from this is another recurrent theme in the stories of life transformation I have heard: through this shift in attention people reasoned that *blaming* others would hinder them from understanding the root of their suffering and making necessary changes for the better: "We were blaming other people and saying it's their fault that we're drinking. Here it was just us doing it to ourselves." (B. Francis, 05/09/2012). The foundational assumption behind this perspective is that every person individually determines their own thoughts, emotions, and actions. This idea reflects non-Aboriginal, Euro-American ideologies of a referential self but has now become a normative way of speaking about experiences of crisis, which is salient in the locally very influential moral discourse of "choice".

Therapeutic language, which limits narrative of experience to a first person account of inner reference fell on fertile grounds as the women who first appropriated this discourse encountered it at a time when they had a sense of finally recognizing and being themselves, a person who had been inside all along but had been kept in "prison".

Another effect of highlighting the self and one's subjectivity in talk-based therapy is the institutionalized validation of one's personhood and perspective. Especially for the women who went through treatment first, this contrasted their previous experiences in relationships to their husbands and parents and contributed decisively to how they were able to re-negotiate their position within a field of human interaction and relationships: "I couldn't say nothing, I just had to take it [...] So – I don't know *why* we took it? You know, I guess there is a lesson in that for what we are today: Just up and go out, don't have to say 'I'm going here', you know?" (E. Colin, 13/03/2012).

In counselling, the rules of framing one's experience would prevent anyone from interfering with the women expressing their emotions and thoughts. Husbands and wives were separated in residence and therapy during the 28-day treatment program. If couples received counselling together, the counsellors ensured that both individuals were heard without interference or defense from the other.

From the women's current perception of past events, they experienced a kind of validation and support through the counselling process that was not experienced to the same extent by men. Elizabeth Colin's initiative and similar steps undertaken by many other women in the community created the imaginative space to re-order established gender roles:

[...] now you see most of the women in *everything!* They *are* taking over. They [the men] try and say something about it but, you know, they were told 'We waited for you and you weren't moving.' Ya, they were told that by the women.

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

It is interesting that women are finding validation through a therapeutic institution of yet another dominating force in their lives. Euro-Canadian economic, religious, administrative, even social institutions had firmly established themselves as authorities in the North in the 1970's. Adelson (2008) shows in her ethnography of women and stress in a Cree community that social structures and cultural norms leading to stress and suffering for women were seen as entirely non-indigenous and the result of gender divisions perpetuated by the Anglican Church (2008, 325). As women take the lead in appropriating western therapeutic ways of talking about and dealing with painful experiences and adapting it to their community's needs, they strategically use another Euro-Canadian discourse to shift the balance of power in gender relations again. This process finds its narrative expression, however, not only in terms of validation of

personhood but also in terms of movement. Women embarked on a path of change and by that maneuvered themselves from an inability to act and speak to a position of mobility, activity, and influence:

[...] you know when I went to Henwood, I felt like going through the door, leaving my old self behind and the new one – on the other side, and I never looked back.

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

Doing it Our Way

Two months after Elizabeth and Neil Colin returned to the community, the idea of starting meetings according to the program of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in the community emerged from conversations they had with two nurses at the Fort McPherson Health Centre. AA style meetings had been an integral part of the Henwood treatment program. Elizabeth had also been in Yellowknife for an AA “Round-up”, which is a larger gathering of AA groups in the region, in September 1973. It was the first of many she travelled to. Elizabeth and Neil Colin were open to the idea, but unsure as to how to start up and lead such meetings in Fort McPherson. Their motivation was born from the positive emotional state that their own experience of recovery and treatment had induced and the desire to inspire others to follow. With this momentum the couple decided to engage in a new level of activity and leadership despite being uncertain of their own abilities and whether or not there would be support in the community. Soon they were able to elicit the help of a group of Euro-Canadian professionals from Inuvik and started holding AA meetings first in different homes and later in the empty boys’ playroom at the old hostel: “And gee, we never miss it, every Sunday we had it, just packed!” (E. Colin, 05/09/2012). Although the established AA rules and language were used in the meetings, the population who attended was strikingly different from other AA groups in North America. The meetings were not only frequented by people identifying with alcoholism as a disease, but by everyone, whole families including children: “Those days, AA meeting, anybody just came, you know. They wanted to know what it was all about.” (E. Colin, 13/03/2012). AA meetings became regular community events (see Palmer 2005, 139 for a comparable inclusiveness in Alkali Lake, B.C.). Gatherings in Fort McPherson are always well prepared for by the women with food and tea. And so the AA meetings became gatherings where people shared their food and cooperated to make the best out of the little resources they had available. In the actual community practice, the previously foreign idea and format of AA morphed with the lives, needs, and goals of the

Teet'it Gwich'in engaging in it. Agility, creativity, improvisation, and cooperation were long-standing Teet'it Gwich'in attributes of being-within-their-environment that served them well in this new purpose:

*Those day AA meeting anybody just came, you know and they wanted to know what it was all about, so we had it up – there was an old, ah, nursing, ah, hostel there, it's just the boys playroom was always empty that's where we had our meetings and before we had meeting, you know where that building they took down that teacher's house? On the side it was big pipe running out: running water – you just turn something and water used to – I just borrow electric tea kettle who ever got some, and we – I was working around the hostel too that time and I always borrowed their tea kettle and I get tea, sugar, cups - I *don't even know* if there was *paper cups*, you know, but I used to bring all my cups down there and Marilyn [Elizabeth's daughter] and those used to bake cake and cup cakes and all that we used to take down and with – going down we take water [laughs]. And that's how we used to do it. I [chuckles] remember Abe Stewart Sr. donated big ten pound of sugar, I don't know how long it lasted, you know? So, they had really good meeting with us and it started and that was October, October - I think it was October 25, 1973 and for a whole year we had meetings, and people start coming, start coming and *by that time* people start going for treatment too.*

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

At the same time, John Osborn, the social worker who Elizabeth previously avoided seeing, suggested they apply for funding to run what became known as the "Alcohol Centre". Although she was unfamiliar with such bureaucratic processes and dealings with government agencies, Elizabeth went to an appointment with Don Bruce in Yellowknife, the person in charge of social programs funding at the government of the Northwest Territories, to defend their proposal for a community-based Alcohol Centre. The story of this meeting is one Ms. Colin likes to recount as it illustrates so well how much she continued to be surprised by herself with the courage and competence she was developing after leaving her "old self behind".

Elizabeth: [...] end of August and first part of September we were in Yellowknife for AA Round-up, that's *the first* AA Round-up I went to too! And we made appointment to see, ah, coordinator of the drug and alcohol program, he's the one that give money – Gail Cyr was gonna go, you know her ha, Gail? Gail Cyr?

Thea: No.

Elizabeth: She lives in Yellowknife and she's involved in a lot of different things too, she was supposed to go there with me. And she got *sick*, so George Erasmus went there with me and here I thought he was gonna talk for me [smiles] and he just sat there – never said *nothing*! And we send him proposal before that and he's looking at that, he want to know *why* we're gonna do this and do that and [claps

her hands] you know he tried to change the *whole* thing to - work out like – in oonjit way/

Thea: Ya. Ya.

Elizabeth: White man way

Thea: Ya.

Elizabeth: and I disagreed with it and that's the *first time* I met him too! Don Bruce was his name. First time I met him and here I - I was real *aggressive* those days too when I first [laughs] I *wouldn't* go for it. He ah - 25.000 that's what we started with, today is big money they work with and most of us we just volunteered you know. But anyway, I told him, he ask why. *Why?* Because we have to be kept busy, we just can't sit around do nothing we have to – *make* the program work and we have to be kept busy [...] I – I told him - I just look at him, and *that George too never say nothing* too! – He *never!* Once in a while I look at him and he never say nothing. I just turn around and told him "Don - if you're not gonna give us that money, take it back, you can do what you want with it, I'm not changing what we put in there. Just *take it back!*" Just like that I talked, and he told me "No, no, no, no I can't take it back. I'm gonna give it to you and you work your program the *way* you want to." So but we really have to go by the money – ah the money, ah?

Thea: So what did you put in to the proposal?

Elizabeth: I know – we put in sewing machine, to sew! And what else we put in? Gee, I wish I knew what we put in that proposal, but it was mostly doing things, doing things like. [...] It was something to start them off and I don't really remember what it was – boat - but a lot of recreation things I know we ordered and usually we just go to Inuvik and check around that's how we got most of the things and - but *gee*, you can't do a program for a *whole year* on 25 thousand *now!*

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

In this story, Elizabeth reveals much of how her perception of what is expected of her and others was shifting at the time. As a woman she assumed to be a passive supporter while men are negotiating. George Erasmus, a Dene politician and later president of the Dene Nation, however, did not comply with this assumption but acted as a silent supporter for his part. Elizabeth had no choice but to speak for her ideas and what she felt was needed in her community. The questioning of the government agent was a confrontation in her perception of the conversation. But Elizabeth was not willing to let any confrontation infringe her newfound sense of self and agency. Not only was it unusual for her to speak against a man, but also against an agent of the dominant government who was in a position of power over her, and additionally this happened at the very first time they met. In her perception, shaped by her upbringing and

her life in the community at the time, such behavior appeared so out of role to her that she labeled it as “aggressive”.

The proposal outlined a program that emphasized activity. As outlined in chapter four, keeping busy, working, and travelling is an expression of healthfulness and strength of a person within their environment in many Aboriginal societies. For Teet’it Gwich’in women sewing is an immensely important activity that is not only tied to fulfilling responsibilities to provide necessities to their families, but has also become fundamental to their identity as Gwich’in woman per se. Today, perhaps not without the influence of the Alcohol Centre and their promotion of sewing to keep recovering women busy, sewing has become symbolic for ‘good’ Gwich’in women living a positive and healthful life. Ideas of what it means to be a Gwich’in woman, what it means to live a good, healthy life, and how relationships between Gwich’in and settler government operate, all were merged and challenged in the negotiation of this proposal. As the government agent attempted to change the proposal into what was familiar to him and fits the parameters of his position, Elizabeth Colin resisted his intrusion into what she recognized as her sphere of control and agency to the extent of asserting her independence from government resources should he not accept the boundaries of influence she established between them. There is no way to reconstruct how the government agent perceived and interpreted this negotiation, however, he agreed to provide the funding to the community to run the program the way Elizabeth and the other pioneers of addiction counselling in Fort McPherson understood as meaningful for their community.

The above quote introduces yet another cluster of themes, one that is pronounced in all accounts of the Alcohol Centre, in life stories, and in public self-representation of the community of Fort McPherson: that of resources, volunteering, and ideas of strength and independence. The \$25,000.00 allocation for one year of programming was just enough to pay two part-time counsellors, later a secretary, rent the old nursing station in town for \$1 a year, and purchase some materials for activities. The majority of governance work, administration, program planning, and counselling was contributed voluntarily by community members: “Most of us we just volunteered”. The word “volunteering”, however, was not in use at the time. People spoke about such work as helping each other: “When I grew up, they didn’t say volunteering. They just said, they need help.” (Wellness Worker, 31/01/2012). Rather, what people did for the program originated in their commitment to transform their community but also, and perhaps above all, in the great value that is placed on sharing in Gwich’in society. The

emergence of volunteering as a salient characteristic of the community's self-image, as symbolic for healthy and positive community members, as well as of tensions around the monetary value of work and knowledge and increasing perception of inequality are intrinsically enmeshed with the history of the Peel River Alcohol Centre.

The Program

Within one year, in November 1974, the Peel River Alcohol Centre opened its doors. Later incorporated as a society, the program consisted of weekly AA meetings, daily counselling service, around-the-clock volunteer counselling, workshops and retreats on the land, as well as daily recreation activities. Elizabeth was joined in her efforts by her husband, Neil Colin, her sister Dorothy Alexie, and others such as Rebecca and Amos Francis, Bertha and Alfred Francis, Mary Effie and Charlie Snowshoe, Mary Francis, Mary Teya, Johnny and Jane Charlie, Alice Vittrekwa and many more. For the larger part of ten years she volunteered, always on call, always ready to be there for anyone in need of help. Funding was short, but with everyone's contributions of food, time, and effort the Alcohol Centre became a central transformational force in Fort McPherson offering a space for people to practice healthful sociability, find expression of their experience in a mutually intelligible narrative, and to engage in purposeful work.

Elizabeth: Look at this [pointing to the food on the table] we used to do this too

Bertha: Ya. When Thea phoned me and she told me we're gonna have cake and some goodies, "Just like old alcohol centre" I said "we're coming to that, how nice!" because that's what we used to have all the time. We used to eat together, we all tell each other what we're gonna do and we all take something down, just like a potluck. And we gather down there and it was our second home. The atmosphere in that building was really good to where just like it was saying "Come! Come!" We were more than welcomed in, whoever was working have tea or coffee on, we went in, we sat around, there's other members come around, we all talk and tell each other stories. Sometimes we talk about how – I remember talking about how I was when I drank because it wasn't very good and yet we could laugh about it. Elizabeth did a lot for us, she said, she didn't know what to do but that's the same thing with all of us, we didn't know where to go, who to go to, but when she started the program it was something that we wanted to. And we worked towards it, we got our own sponsor and the person never failed us, always was willing to talk with us. And they made us feel really good when we walk into there and telling us that whatever is gonna happen, we

have to do it ourselves and that was a hard thing to understand. (E. Colin and B. Francis, 04/09/2012)

After we had heard Elizabeth's story of the time she quit drinking, went for treatment, and started the Alcohol Centre on that Sunday afternoon when we sat together sharing memories of the Alcohol Centre for the video documentary, it was Bertha Francis' turn to share her memories. In her first few sentences she touched on many of the themes that were common to people's stories of life transformation in Fort McPherson: the transformational power of sharing experience through talk, the sense of agency and community through cooperation and sharing, the practice of non-judgmental, reliable, and non-hierarchical relationships, becoming knowledgeable through engaging in work, as well as the benefit of personal initiative, resolve, and practice towards healing. The latter is emphasized again and again in all life stories and stands out as an important message people direct towards their audience. Bertha illustrated her transforming idea of subjectivity, of herself as an individual with thoughts, emotions, and decisions, by telling a story of how Elizabeth Colin did an exercise at the Alcohol Centre. Elizabeth asked people to write down all the reasons why they drank. Bertha remembers feeling pleased with herself about coming up with so many different reasons. After everyone handed in the piece of paper with their reasons to drink, Elizabeth responded by questioning "You know what this is?" and then informing the puzzled participants that "this is all your excuses to drink!" (B. Francis, 04/09/2012). Through practicing this kind of insight and perspective the idea of "blame" entered the discourse of suffering and healing as the cause for an inability to change one's life to the better. Bertha sees one of the achievements of the program as helping people to shift their attention to what is internal to a person and their life experience. Dorothy Alexie, another member of the Alcohol Centre who led an Ala-teen program for many years, presses the point as well: "Like for me, I had to better myself like before I blame other people for it. [...] after all those years, I'm still working on me" (D. Alexie, 04/09/2012).

The shift in perception towards inner states of a bounded, distinct self, the "I", however, was balanced by the informal and formal establishment of reliable and trusting relationships through the program. People met informally at any time of the day at the Alcohol Centre, finding like-minded community members to share stories and food, or to sit together and sew. All counsellors were recruited from the group of people who returned from treatment for their own issues with drinking and, thus, they offered non-judgmental relationships based on their own experience with similar problems. Numerous training sessions, that counsellors and

volunteers were keen on participating in, supported behaviors established in mainstream counselling, such as a certain attention and discourse in listening as well as confidentiality, all contributing to a sense of being safe and understood in the counselling setting. Since the Alcohol Centre drew on the AA philosophy and vocabulary, what was called *sponsorship* became a common and cherished practice among Alcohol Centre staff and visitors. These relationships were often maintained for lifetime and consisted primarily of the willingness and promise to be available for the other to listen in times of hardship, worry, doubt, or temptation no matter what time of day or night.

Another aspect of shifting the focus on the self was the recognition by everyone involved that whatever it was they expected from the program, they were to realize it themselves. Elizabeth Colin, Dorothy Alexie, and the other founders of the Centre were the first to acquire a considerable set of new skills by taking on the responsibility of running such a program. The funding they received through the government of the Northwest Territories required them to adhere to organizational standards such as program and budget governance by a board of directors, through reporting and accounting. Elizabeth remembers learning about how to set up a board of directors, she said: "That was hard *too!* We had to learn everything, you know? We didn't know, but – *all volunteer too!*" (13/03/2012). The counsellors, paid or volunteer, honed their skills through daily practice but they also actively sought out training opportunities. Recreation activities had to be planned and facilitated. Every day and evening the Alcohol Centre opened its doors for community members providing food and entertainment:

Just an open invitation for everyone, there was always somebody there. They take turns being down, that's volunteer too. They be down there – and Rebecca [Francis] and I, we learned to run the projector! With the reels! We got movies from Yellowknife [...] Anyway, we learned how to work that projector too. So, if she's not there I'm there and put on movie for them and her too, so *lot* of things we were doing.

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012).

Aside from movies, TV, and a pool table, there was a sewing machine for women to practise their skills after many women had given up the craft once settled in town and dealing with alcohol in their lives. Doors were open for everyone in the community to use the space and spend their evenings. The Alcohol Centre became a space for families to gather, share food, stories, and activities. The community aspect of the program not only prevented people from being singled out and stigmatized for having a problem that requires counselling, but also facilitated the healing and support of families and friends during all stages of someone's

recovery. Much emphasis is placed in the stories of those days on appreciating people through listening, caring for their needs in an encompassing way, validating each person through gifts and celebrations, and keeping busy.

I don't know it's surprising how we got through it, you know like Christmas, New Years we had parties small little place and everybody had room to sit and move *around* with everybody bringing something little. *Christmas* we - we tell them we have, we make – I mean we decorate a tree too and we tell them to bring a gift – just put your name inside it, no name on the outside. “So everyone bring a gift?” I said “you're allowed to get one gift” just a *small little thing*, like ash trays or things like that – ehh - it was, you know, you got *something* and that ah - I remember New Years too after they had AA meeting they had dance around there *too!*
(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

In line with AA rituals, the first sober day of someone's recovery was celebrated annually like a birthday with a cake. Elizabeth showed me some photographs taken sometimes in the 1970's, many of which portray a smiling person with a decorated cake that has their name on it in icing, big enough to share with many others. Mary Effie Snowshoe remembers:

You're sobered a year, they bring you a cake. It's not that I really wish to eat cake [laughs] but I think that was so *nice* of the people to do that cake, every year you get a cake, how many years – one year you got one candle on there, two years you got two candles. In 1975 I sobered up, well I get a cake then and everybody does, which I think that was so good and, you know, it was good because it makes a person feel good.
(M. E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

Another integral part of the Alcohol Centre's way of framing a person's experience of recovery was sending-away and welcoming-back celebrations for every person going for treatment in one of the larger cities.

The night, the day before we're gonna have party for them. We give little gifts like toothpaste or toothbrush and comb and things like soap - that's what we gave them. Then when they came back we did another party for them, they have to tell us all that they went through - and how they felt and all that. So it was really just bonding and being close together.
(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

Elders often told me that they had to learn how to cry during their recovery. They felt that free expression of emotion had previously been inappropriate and was suppressed. Elizabeth brought the knowledge of the cathartic effect of expressing emotions back from her first counselling experience: “And for a lot of us, for me anyway, it was hard to cry, we're not supposed to cry and when I start crying I couldn't stop crying for a while.” (E. Colin,

04/09/2012). At the Alcohol Centre, she and others created the space for formalized and legitimized expression of emotions and the practice of narrating experience. Talking one-on-one or in-group sessions became the cornerstone of the program at the Alcohol Centre in town. Many times, however, the team took the program out on the land for weekend or weeklong workshops. Here the weight shifted from talking about experience to practising healthful relationality and activity: “We had programs in the morning and in the afternoon we just let them go hunt for caribou [...] what we did with the little money we had!” (E. Colin, 04/09/2012). Because of the “little money” that the Alcohol Centre had available, people were needed to put their best effort into the program giving their time, work, creativity, and resources. The money went into the program, Elizabeth explained to me once, not into wages, food, or hired labour³¹. Cash economy had not reached the level of importance and necessity it has today. The Elders who were the first ones to run the Alcohol Centre were driven by motives other than securing an income, at times to the point of neglecting their own health and families. The liberating experience of their own recovery and compassion for their fellow community members gave them the urge and strength to work beyond what people today feel is reasonable or even possible.

One time I remember I had to go to Yellowknife for - I had to go to *Edmonton* to get operation here on my neck because I couldn't *swallow* and *yet!* - I kept right to the end. I was going down - volunteering - and I was dealing with a couple right to the end and - and from there I left. [...] sometime I just crawling into bed, sometimes I be down there and somebody come and talk - 12 - 1 [o'clock] I'm going home. I'm just crawling into bed while that somebody phone or come in and - I go with them.

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

The counsellors at the Alcohol Centre were available for people in need every time of the day and night. Helping others became their primary occupation, often to the expense of their families and their own health. After one of the volunteer counsellors suffered the effects of exhaustion, the team made the decision to follow a rotational system: six month on and six months off. Paid counsellors also began rotating on a two-week schedule.

Elizabeth: So whoever is trained on counselling just go, go and we change every six months cause we couldn't do it a year, it was 7/24

Bertha: 24/7

Elizabeth: ah, 24/7, ya [laughs] we just have to go there when they call [...] – sometimes I just going to bed and somebody come in, instead of saying wait til tomorrow I

³¹ In contemporary programs workers are hired as camp attendants or cooks.

go, I don't know what time I come home. [...]

Bertha: And it changed every six months, you know. You go down there and you see somebody and then there is a change, it makes you feel really good and you're just more than willing to talk with the person and you know, it's just an ongoing thing.

Elizabeth: You could just only work for six months because of the way we were going.

Bertha: You could really get burned out easy. That's why they made changes and it was good. Everybody was happy with it, nobody got mad cause it was their time over, they go and let another person in.

(E. Colin and B. Francis, 04/09/2012)

Others joined and helped with the same willingness to help, often ignoring their own physical and mental needs for rest. The urgency that people felt in the need to help others was intensified by the first suicide in the community in the mid-1970s. Young men especially took their lives within a few decades following this first incident, mainly under the influence of alcohol.

In the end I had some helpers too, her [Bertha Francis's] dad told me that if I needed help, sleeping or not, I was supposed to go to him. And sometimes I get some young boys, I just can't talk to them, and I couldn't have left it for tomorrow, how many times I went down to him, knock and he opened the door and I tell him "I need your help." So he take over for me talking to this person, so I had peoples like that helping me too.

(E. Colin 04/09/2012)

In addition to AA meetings for men and for women as well as the counselling services and recreation, Dorothy Alexie offered an ALA-TEEN program for youth with alcohol problems in their families: "and that was volunteer, after work, I can't remember how long I worked with ALA-TEEN" (D. Alexie, 05/09/2012).

However, as much as Elizabeth and her colleagues wished to assist everyone in the best possible way, continuing on with the intensity of engagement they started with was detrimental to their own health.

when we have clients we *really* try to - help them as *much* as we could. - The only thing I think we never went home with them and, you know, we were *so protective*. During that time too I found out that *some things could wait til tomorrow* – put it on the backburner and let it – for tomorrow. Cause we *need our rest* [...] Gee, we're just going, *going!*

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

Being always busy and continually giving to others are expressions of strength in Teet'it Gwich'in memory of the past as told in stories of strong Gwich'in individuals. Those are qualities

that Elders recount of their parents, of “strong” and “smart” people. Elizabeth, Dorothy, and the other active members of the Alcohol Centre embodied these qualities with their relentless dedication to helping their community. Many believe these qualities are hard to find today.

I see it *really different today* because they there’s not that many peoples volunteer today, you know? Some volunteer but - not everybody

(E. Colin, 13/03/2012)

So, even if we had to go to 8 Miles that time I remember – it was *volunteer!* You know? *Everybody!* We *all* volunteered like. I was with the program ten years and five years I volunteered. That’s – I don’t think anybody could do that today. And – a *lot of us* volunteered before we finally start getting paid for what we were doing and it *wasn’t even very much* but *still* it was something for us.

(E. Colin, 06/06/2012)



Figure 6: Preparing food during a workshop of the Peel River Alcohol Centre on the land during the 1970s. Photo: Elizabeth Colin.

Contested Knowledge

The first two paid counsellor positions were filled by Dorothy Alexie and Neil Colin. The positions were part-time and complemented by volunteer counsellors: “All of us, as they’re sobering up, they just volunteered.” (E. Colin, 13/03/2012). Only five years into the program, after the changes to the rotational system, did other volunteers take advantage of the wage available for these two positions. Aside from that, the Alcohol Centre employed a secretary. The “workers”, as people referred to themselves, were often recruited from the couples who had gone through a 28-day treatment program. Neil and Elizabeth Colin went to treatment first, followed by Dorothy and Robert Alexie, and later by Mary Effie and Charlie Snowshoe, Eileen and Thomas Koe, and many more (E. Colin, 13/03/2012). Some, such as Rebecca and Amos Francis, recovered without going south for treatment and worked as counsellors at the centre. Others involved in counselling, or as members of the board of directors, were Rosie Stewart, Ida Stewart, Abraham Stewart Sr., Mary Teya, Bertha and Alfred Francis, Mary Francis, John Charlie, Joanne Thompson, Louisa Kay, Alice Vittrekwa, Catherine Francis, and Norma Snowshoe.

The most important qualification for being a counsellor at the Alcohol Centre was people’s own experience with alcoholism, but formal training was equally valued and sought after by all.

- Elizabeth: We didn’t look at their grades or [laughs]
Bertha: I remember her saying, as long as you drank and you know how it is and you know what you did to get help, you can become a counsellor
Elizabeth: A drunkard becomes the best alcohol counsellor because they’ve been through it and they know it. But you had to get training, you had to get training

(E. Colin and B. Francis, 04/09/2012)

In line with Gwich’in preference of experiential knowledge, counselling expertise at the Peel River Alcohol Centre was rooted in personal experience with problem drinking, addiction, and recovery: “When we quit drinking, we right away became instant counsellors. We didn’t have training or anything like that but yet through our own experience with alcohol and what it did to us and what we did to help ourselves.” (M. Teya, 31/08/2012). Nevertheless, everyone who shared their memories of the time with me emphasized that they took every chance to acquire formal training in counselling. From the beginning, people went for workshops and courses.

We went to lots of different training session in Inuvik , Yellowknife, I remember going to Henwood too for a week [...] I was the only Indian there but, you know, we went places, we were always invited to go and all of us took advantage of that. Not the same persons were going, every time is different, so we had quite a bit of counsellors, you know men and women, that's where it was easy to change every six months, one woman, one man.
(E. Colin, 06/06/2012).

Dorothy Alexie was one of the two first counsellors and invested a tremendous amount of effort to serve her people the best she could. She completed a 60-day course that was offered through the Aurora College in Inuvik at the time.

While I was going to AA meeting and listening to other peoples talking, they put me on a job, I have no training. So I asked if I could go for counselling training, so I went in to Inuvik six times that year. Leaving my family was not easy because there was alcohol in my home, but I toughed it out for each training it took ten days. Boy, it was a tough workshop. What I went through and how I can help peoples. A lot of times I had to go in front of the group, there was about ten of us and some times it was real hard but I had to because I wanted to help the next person. And then I come back for two weeks and then I go again. Finally I completed my six, six workshops, so I got on the job, some days I work with five peoples.
(D. Alexie, 04/09/2012)

These stories reflect the intrinsic value of experiential knowledge as embodied skills for their daily practice of living a good live and helping others to do the same. Furthermore, they speak of the sincerity with which these former counsellors pursued training and other sources of knowledge and practices to best serve their fellow community members. Assured by the successes of the program and their efforts to fulfill government expectations in terms of administration and training, people did not anticipate the changes that were about to occur.

The Take-over

Struggles over legitimate expertise and methods in counselling between local people and Euro-Canadian professional standards, however, confronted the program and eventually led to its transformation into a standardized counselling service operated by the Health and Social Services Department of the Government of the Northwest Territories. The first incident of Euro-Canadian attempts of extending their influence over healing and recovery services happened within the first few years of the Centre's operation when another local wellness organization, that was directed by transient counselling professionals, made an attempt to incorporate the

Centre's services into their program. Considering the profound experiences that the founders of the Centre had gone through only recently at that time, including finding their voice and courage to speak for themselves, working hard for their own and other's healing, stepping up against authoritative government expectations and realizing a program according to what made sense to them, this attempted "take-over" threatened the people invested in the Alcohol Centre at an existential level. When at a meeting of the board of directors this potential incorporation was discussed, someone called Elizabeth to come immediately. Despite being ill with the flu at the time, she went to the meeting where these things were discussed and, together with her sister Dorothy Alexie and Joanne Thompson, the women defended the purpose of having their own program. The majority of people on the board of directors of the Alcohol Centre at the time were, at the same time, staff of the other wellness organization. While such a situation is common in a small community with a lack of sufficient numbers of people willing or able to occupy positions, in this case it resulted in a conflict of interest for the board members and hindered them to speak their mind. Elizabeth and Dorothy were counsellors at the time and technically not legitimate decision-makers.

Oh my, I don't know what gave me the courage, I just got up and I start talking. There is no way they were gonna do that. [...] we're the workers, they're [the Board of Directors] above us and we shouldn't be talking like that but we weren't gonna let that place go. [...] it didn't happen, you know, oh we were so kind of proud of ourselves because we stuck up for that alcohol program.

(E. Colin, 06/06/2012)

A couple of decades later, however, no appeal from community members and the Centre's staff or directors could prevent what people call the government "taking over". At that time, Elizabeth Colin was not involved with the Centre anymore as a worker but as a board member. After more than ten years of volunteering, five of them additionally working as a paid counsellor, she left her responsibilities at the Centre and focused on her family. A new generation was becoming involved at the Alcohol Centre and differences in doing things and relating to each other led to some tensions. When she fell in her house and hurt her ankle one day, she decided it was time for her to leave and turn her attention to her family.

Before it was taken over, before it was taken over - and we were, where the building is *now*, we were in there. The last workers was me and Dorothy I think, but I had to leave too, because I sprained my ankle and I couldn't walk back and forth, so, and then I was just *also tired* of it, I just walked away from it to come home to my children.

(E. Colin, 06/06/2012)

She was still a board member and witnessed the integration of the program with the Health and Social Services of the territorial government (GNWT). The chair of the board, John A. Snowshoe, tried to appeal the decision and so did Charlie Snowshoe, but to no avail.

I'm sure it was in the 90's cause I was on the board then, John A. Snowshoe was Chair. And all of a sudden we're getting letters to turn it over to Health and ah- Health and Social Department. And you know, we just didn't let it go. John *really* fought for it. But – the board too, but in the end it just went.

(E. Colin, 06/06/2012)

People today are not certain about the processes that led to this decision. Elizabeth does remember that the program was visited for evaluation. In her perspective, it was running well and successfully, “and yet,” she said, the evaluation concluded “something wasn't going right” (E. Colin 06/06/2012). What that something was, is not clear to her or other Elders of this generation in Fort McPherson. The reorganization of the local counselling services into the Integrated Service Delivery Model (ISDM) was developed by the GNWT in 2003 and implemented in 2004 with the purpose to ensure coordinated primary community care (GNWT Health and Social Services 2004). Mental Health and Addiction Services are one of the six core services of the ISDM. Previous to this process, an evaluation of community counselling programs was commissioned by the Government of the Northwest Territories and resulted in a report titled: *A State of Emergency – A Report on the Delivery of Addictions Services in the NWT*, 2002 (Chalmers et al. 2002). This timeline does not quite fit the memory of the Elders who dated the changes to the late 1990's but the document evaluates the Peel River Alcohol Centre as one of 15 programs in the NWT and rates its program-effectiveness at minimum (2.2 on a scale of 7). Only the office space rating was very good and elsewhere in the report it was explained that this is due to the program having been already integrated with government services. This evaluation might reflect the state of the program in transition and shortly after government integration. The authors emphasize the need for better education and qualification of counsellors “There is an overall lack of expertise, knowledge and skill of personnel involved in the delivery of addiction services” (2002, 19). Programs are largely deemed inadequate and poor in scope.

The evaluation as well as its integration into government wellness services, which not only affected the Alcohol Centre but several other community programs across the Northwest Territories, was perceived as the government simply exerting its power over people in the

community. Counselling is still offered, however, under the supervision of Health and Social Services, in a 9-5 Monday to Friday office setting, with two permanent counselors, and without regular recreation possibilities.

And it's under Social Services and Health Department now where we have no say or we can't do *anything* to it or else, you know? It's just out of our hands right now, but it's still *running*. Not like it *used* to – because we had a lot of programs going and a lot of us were sobered all [laughs] jobs to do, you know, not *just one person* can't do the whole job so.
(E. Colin, 06/06/2012)

As mentioned before, the Elders who expressed their frustration about this process to me were not aware nor did they remember knowing of the evaluation criteria and results. It is important to note that in the mid or late 1990's the founder generation left the program as active workers due to a combination of exhaustion, other responsibilities and disillusionment: "So, like I said, it was working good and we start fading away, and the newcomers start coming in, they knew it all, they thought they can run the alcohol centre, so us old timers, we just kind of walked away from it." (C. Snowshoe, 02/09/2012).

My research did not attempt to discern the state and quality of the program throughout its history but to relate the experience of people transforming their lives and embodying this process in their work. The narratives of the Elders reflect awareness of the tension between different modes of knowledge production and legitimization. They all emphasize the superiority of experiential knowledge, but also their active pursuit of formal training. These were the components of "running it our way": personal experience with addiction, training, cooperation and sharing, engaging in purposeful work and activity, as well as dedication to each other and the program that went far beyond financial or professional rewards. Success was seen in how much people took a stake in the program and recovered from alcohol abuse.

That place was open 24 hours a day and it worked because people go there, they take care of the place, they look after the place and any sort of little entertainment we put up they're right there, kids and all, they're enjoying themselves, wide open. And once the government took over, I think everything died in that place and that's the sad part of it.
(C. Snowshoe, 02/09/2012)

The integration into government Health and Social Services, despite the improved and secure funding it would provide, was tantamount to disenfranchising people who had successfully run this program and, thus, was perceived as incomprehensible and unjust. Today, Elders still see

evidence that counter the unfavorable evaluation that the program received. People express their gratitude for the dedication and humility with which these Elders approached their work.

This one person there “Thanks, Liz!” That’s all he need to say and I know,
“A’ha” I just say. [laughs] We’re so grateful for our sobriety, really, really, we are really grateful.
(E. Colin, 04/09/2012)

I still thank them for it, I still thank them for what they did for me and I still have my sobriety, ya.
(B. Francis, 04/09/2012)

Lots of times I talk about it and said, if it wasn’t for Neil and Lizbeth, we wouldn’t be like that, we wouldn’t be where we are. They’re the ones that made the first step.
(J. Charlie, 04/09/2012)

So they were there to help the people that were having all these problems and it was really a good thing that was happening in the community. [...] Thank goodness for the AA program and also the Peel River Alcohol Program, so we were strong enough to do that, and I’m glad that we were able to help one another to be strong enough to stand up and say to one another that you have my support and we have each other’s support.
(M. Teya, 31/08/2012)

And you know like I said, Lizbeth Colin is a very smart woman. When she start working with Philip Blake and John Osborn and they were helping her to start up the program, now after doing all that, the government, you know she wanted funding from the government, the government of the Northwest Territories turned around and told her “If we give you the funding, we’ll run it our way!” Lizbeth said “No. You give me the funding and we’ll run it our way.” And it happened.
(C. Snowshoe, 02/09/2012)

Today many former workers of the Alcohol Centre still have a deep sense of disillusionment about the change. They feel that government agents took something away from the people that was an inspiration for many without any consideration of local views and the effort people had invested. Elizabeth Colin repeated to me again and again that back in the 1970’s they had incorporated the Peel River Alcohol Centre as a society. A process that, so she was told, would render them invulnerable to the whims and changes of government policy. In local perception, the fact that local control was taken from the centre despite their legal status as a society, is only one occasion in line with many when people’s knowledge, agency, and governance is disregarded by transient professionals and policy-makers.

6.2. Narrating Transformations

Elizabeth's narratives of life transformation reveal how she navigated her way through a multitude of shifting constraints and openings. The multiple and at times disjunctive dimensions of how she remembers her experience preclude a simple, linear story of freeing oneself from one kind of oppressive situation and living a good life from then on. She faced a set of expectations from her own family and community that ran counter to the way of being she began to embody. She experienced herself as recognizing and accessing a new potentiality as well as a freedom to move and act that provided the foundation for her sense of existential security from which she began to relate to her environment in a fundamentally different way. Although her sense of self and mode of communication with regards to her experience shifted while learning to speak and think as a sober and healthy person according to North American cultural values distilled in AA rules and language, she also transformed addiction counselling from an individualist, talk-based practice into a community-based exercise in creating a place that allows for healthful relationships and the practice of skills. While her sense of ontological security increased along with her experiences of mobility, enskillment, and agency she simultaneously faced resistance from other sources that contested the legitimacy of her actions.

As resistance within the community transformed into support and participation, and more people joined the program, a new kind of resistance emerged from the younger generation who was expanding their own potential for agency and mobility. Within this continuously shifting balance between being-for-oneself or acting on one's own terms and being acted upon, Elizabeth navigated her life path - ever adjusting, initiating, creating, and negotiating under the existential imperative to prevent demands and limitations from nullifying the sense of existential mobility that is needed to feel well. Many times, this balance was threatened. These situations often caused her physical pain and illness. Even during the time I was in the community, her circumstances were so overwhelming³² at times that she needed to physically move in order to maintain her sense of humanity, agency, and mobility. For Elizabeth, this shift was achieved by going to 8 Miles for a while, being by herself in her cabin where she would make fire, cook, sew, cut fish and meat for herself and her family. Pain and illness would stay in town. Having the freedom to go and do things allowed Elizabeth and others involved at the

³² While I realize that this formulation is vague, a more explicit description of these conditions is not warranted in order to protect confidentiality.

Alcohol Centre to create a place of healthful relationality and enskillment that facilitated existential mobility and security for others as well.

How did others experience the transformation from suffering to leading a good life? How did others tell their story and what mattered in sharing their experience. Every time I sat down with someone to record their life story we went through my consent form and discussed what this recording is for, how it is going to be used, and who is going to have access to it. Most times, the person and I have had many conversations before, I knew parts of their story and also had been told by others that he or she would be “good to talk to”. This procedure at the beginning of each life story often brought out the same intention from the storytellers: “Ok, I’ll tell you. [...] use my name if it’s gonna help somebody, if it’s a help to someone that might need it. At one point in your career, in your travels, you know, there is people that are struggling out there right now because of drugs and alcohol and to be able to hear a story of someone that went through that problem for years and years is a way to give back.” (A. Stewart Jr., 03/06/2012). This intention to telling one’s story obligated me as a researcher to keep telling it. Consequently, I will share four more stories of life transformation that illustrate the ambiguity and fluidity of negotiating ontologically secure grounds in a historically, politically, and socially precarious environment. At the same time, I want to meet my obligation to share the stories that have been told to me as someone who is expected to bring them to others experiencing similar hardships. With these stories I aim to widen the scope of how people in Fort McPherson experience life transformations and the shift to becoming what is thought of as a healthy, good person. These four individuals represent three generations, two woman who are Elders and who were part of the Alcohol Centre, one middle-aged man who was in his teens when the Alcohol Centre opened, and one young woman who grew up when counselling was already transferred to the government.

The Force of Talk

I will start with what Mary Effie Snowshoe told me about her life and what she has come to know about suffering and renewal. Mary Effie is one of the many Teet’it Gwich’in Elders who I deeply admire for their assertiveness, skill, physical strength, wisdom, and humour. I met her through her granddaughter, Sheena, who, at the time, worked for the Tl’oondih Healing Society,

which is the Teet'it Gwich'in's incorporated non-governmental healing society³³. The wellness worker there, Mary Ross, had been a great support for me and allowed me to work at the spare desk during the day if I needed office space. I always enjoyed the conversations with the women at the office and learned much about life in the North from them. Sheena spoke highly of her jijuu and how she still does a lot of work on the land despite her age. It was November, we had some -35 weather, the rivers were frozen, the ice road in place, and a lot of snow was on the ground. Sheena talked about how her jijuu set nets under the ice to fish and how she takes school kids out to the Peel River by 8 Miles to show them how it is done. I was keen to learn as much as I could and, especially, to be out on the land with people, so I asked her if I could join them one day. After a while, I received the message that I would be picked up at 2 o'clock in the afternoon to join a school class who took the afternoon off to learn about fishing under the ice. At 1 o'clock, a car pulled into the driveway of Gladys' house: it was Mary Effie and one of her daughters to pick me up. I was not ready. Mary Effie said this was already the third time that she tried to pick me up and I was never there, now I was not ready. Trying to be involved in the multitude of community events apparently made me miss out on much. But I had already learned how to be ready in a very short time and had my uuchuu (Gwich'in for bag, spelling according to pers. communication with G. Alexie) ready with knife, extra mittens and socks, tea, matches, safety blanket, candles, some cardboard as fire starter, and snare wire. I just put my snow pants and parka on and jumped in the car. When we got to the river, we walked out to where she had set nets before. First, we needed to re-open the two holes for the net with an axe. It was very hard work as the ice was thick. Once the hole was made, Mary Effie brought out a heavy chisel to work on the sides and make the hole bigger. After both holes were wide enough, she tied a rope to the net and started pulling it out on the other end. Lots of fish in there! Then we all changed into rubber gloves and embarked on the difficult task to untangle

³³ The T'ooondih Healing Society is a community-based not-for-profit organization that provides addiction and mental health programming for individuals and families. It is funded through various government and non-government grants and administered through the Teet'it Gwich'in Council. The organization was incorporated as a society in 1995 under the name Gwich'in Healing Society and this name was changed in 1996 to T'ooondih Healing Society. According to Elders, the Healing Society operated in some capacity since the 1970's. In which form, however, is information I was not able to obtain. Contrary to the Peel River Alcohol Centre, the T'ooondih, previously Gwich'in Healing Society, is directed by a southern Canadian professional psychologist and consultant who visits the community several times a year to be present for the annual general meeting of the society or other urgent matters. In the 1970's there was an attempt to incorporate the Peel River Alcohol Centre as an integrated program of the Healing Society. This attempt, however, was vehemently opposed by board members and workers of the Alcohol Centre and failed (personal communication with Elizabeth Colin; also see chapter 6.1.).

the immediately frozen fish from the net. We counted 62 fish, Whitefish and Coney. She explained that there were little icy dots on some of the fish, which means the fish is fat: "that's good eating!" (field notes 16/11/2011). After all fish were taken and the net untangled, Mary Effie pulled the rope on the other side to move the net back under the ice. We packed the fish onto sleds and hauled them up the banks to the vehicles. I asked her what she uses the fish for and she explained that she is getting dogs for a dog team and will feed them fish. It was late for Whitefish, normally the first week of November is the end of Whitefish running, but that year there was still lots. She told me that it is good for me to live with Gwich'in and to get to know the people.

A few days later I was out checking nets with her again. This time, grade nine students joined to watch and help. I started on one hole with an axe while Mary Effie and her daughter worked on the second. I was amazed how thick the ice in these holes was after only two days and did not manage to break through. Mary Effie came over and with three axe cuts she hit water. She said: "You know why? I put a curse on it!" (field notes, 18/11/2011). We all burst out laughing. She followed up to explain that she put snow in the hole the last time we were here, that way it does not freeze so hard. This time, there were not so many fish in the net, so we finished quickly. On our way back in the car, Mary Effie and her daughter who is the principal at Chief Julius School spoke about doing more for the kids out on the land. Mary Effie would like to take kids out to "Three Cabin" upriver to pick berries, hunt moose – for at least a week. Elders always emphasize that it is no good to be out on the land for only one day, one has to be there for a while to experience the land and do the work.

Mary Effie was raised on the land. Her parents made a living in the bush and both were known as strong and smart people. She said she feels so lucky that she grew up listening to her dad telling stories every night. She heard of wars, starvation, hunting, how people survive off the land and respect the land. She married in 1960 at 22 years old and towards the end of the 60's, as so many in the community, became acquainted with alcohol. For ten years her life was "getting pretty rough" (M.E. Snowshoe 10/04/2012) until 1974. Many times, her father was angry with her and told her to stop drinking: "when he gets mad with me and it seems to me I get worse, I just think to myself: No, if you people are mad I'm gonna continue drinking!" Things changed for her, when one day her father changed the way he approached her:

Until one day – this is where I say I still remember my dad telling real nicely, telling me: Please, leave that drink alone and start looking after your kids. I almost cried when my

dad told me that. Just a soft voice, not yell at me and telling me this, so I start thinking about it. (M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

Shortly after this conversation, she picked up a magazine at the church titled “Moccasins” and read an article about an Aboriginal family with alcohol problems who changed their lives. She recalls how reading this article made her reflect:

No, these people are the same as me. They are Natives and they drank and they give themselves hard times. Everything that they were saying, it was me. And I really believe that my Higher Power made sure that I got a hold of that paper to take. Next day, we went to the social worker; he’s a counsellor too. He was a social worker and he dealt with a lot of people and we went down to him. I had so much fear in me. I had so much fear that I was thinking to myself, what am I getting myself into? But when I brought that paper back, I looked at all my kids in my house, I just look at them and I thought to myself [...] OK, you make the choice, there’s the bottle here and there’s your kids here, which one would you chose? And I chose my kids.”

(M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

Then, with a firm voice, she said something that I heard many times from her, either in her stories about her family and her own life or in her teachings with children or others in the community: “I found out that we have two things, not only me, everybody does, two things in your life – is to make the choice and make the difference. The choice I made was my kids, my children who I love dearly, I made that choice. The difference I was making was to leave the alcohol and to live a sober life and that’s what I did.” (M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012). She continued by explaining how this choice was not as easy as this poignant statement may make it sound. Making this *choice* and *difference* was not easy nor was sober life easy. But I sensed that what mattered to her was to get me to understand the importance of this sense of personal agency that includes two inseparable aspects: setting an intention and embodying it through practice.

Mary Effie went to Edmonton for the 28-day treatment with her husband, as did several other couples of her generation who changed their lives in the 1970’s. Similar to others, she speaks about these weeks as transforming her perception of herself as a person within her family and community. Therapeutic language changed her way of narrating her experience and, therewith, transformed her experience profoundly:

I found out that I wasn’t there for them [her kids], I was there for myself. [...] It took me a while before I realized that I was there for Mary. [...] I kind of just opened up and start

talking about Mary [...] I start talking like that, where I – everything was I, not somebody else doing this to me. And things got more easy for me.

(M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

During her life story, she emphasizes this shift again and again. She explained how she used to feel that she needed alcohol in order to bear the grief when someone close to her passed away. After this change in perspective, however, she never did use alcohol again, no matter how much hardship she experienced:

And I'm strong for my Higher Power. We need him, we need him in our life, he's there for us, he's waiting for us to call him, you know when I used to drink and somebody die, a relative, or somebody die in the family, I used to drink and let's say – I feel so bad, I'm hurting, I need to drink, *that* wasn't true, that wasn't true, it's an excuse because I went through a lot of different deaths – like my mom got into accident on the highway, my auntie got into accident – and they're gone! My dad is gone, everybody is gone, my aunties, my uncles, everybody is gone but out of that – my youngest boy when he was 19, alcohol took his life outside, 19 year old boy and he was very, very young this boy too, youngest one in the family. That's the time I was hurt and I thought to myself that was the end of the world for me [...]. Many years I stayed sober and then my son passed away, I never think of going out there to drink, and I took everything, oh yes I cried, many *years* I cried for my son, I think after eleven years I finally let him go.

(M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

As many Gwich'in whose stories of transformational experiences I heard, Mary Effie points out the detriment of blame to the healing process. The language of inner reference turns her attention inwards to “me”, or “I”. While this emphasis on the self was foreign to the women who went for treatment in the 1970's and might be seen as an external demand on people's sense of who they are and how they relate to others, in the context of social and political transitions including gender relations, living arrangements, physical work, and household economy, the creation of a pronounced “I” in separation to others was a way for these women to regain a sense of agency and personal power. As in the other examples, Mary Effie negotiates her position in every encounter. For example, on the one hand she embraces the disease concept of alcoholism including its symptoms of denial as well as blame from the therapeutic language of treatment centres and AA meetings, and consequently practices the language of inner reference using talk as a cathartic practice. On the other hand, however, she does not follow AA philosophy of relating to a *Higher Power* against her own experiential knowledge:

And they start talking about AA Big Book, 12 steps, that you have to follow. Right off the start I start thinking about it and I was thinking to myself – AA the Big Book, the 12 step is

not my power, my power is up there, my Higher Power is God - that's who I pray to and that's who brought me this far, I'm gonna continue to pray to him and ask him for strength, show me what to do. Accept things that I cannot change - and he will. I don't need that 12 steps to follow - I thought that. So, I took it, I took who is my Higher Power, I took *that* - and I done pretty good. (M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

Another example is how she resists being defined by others, an existential aspect of agency that she also teaches to her children: "I don't care what people tell me, [...] it's just, I'll hear it and finish. I'm not gonna listen to *anybody* again." (M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012).

Talk is a strong force, which can transport strength or sickness, it can threaten one's existential integrity or strengthen it. Throughout her story, Mary Effie illustrates the power of talk. Her father's stories taught her about life, how to survive, and how to be strong. At AA round-ups other people would share their experiences and she would feel strengthened: "A lot of good stories from other people and that makes you very, very strong" (M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012). Other people's talk can also be destructive and has to be resisted to not uproot one's existential security. Talk can strengthen people or make them sick:

I went through 28 days and I got a *sponsor*. I got a sponsor and that was Mary Teya. I'm her sponsor and she's my sponsor - and when things bother me - I really feel I can't talk to anybody and I got to have a sponsor who I could talk to and that was her. Thank God - til today - we're still supporting one another - and there's time when life goes little too much for me - I talk to her - same with her she talk to me but - uhm - she works in the church and then she's got a lot of work and then there's times I feel "Gee, I don't want her to get sick, I don't want her to pack this garbage" and you know, I feel like that about her and I told her that and *yet* - she's there for me, if I phone her, she's gonna sit there until I finish talking - and it started off like that with me and Mary Teya and today is still the same and that's where I'm strong.

(M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

Salient in Mary Effie's account though is her believe that talking to God is the most powerful kind of talk that she uses. What it takes to change life for the better is talking to God and asking for good things to happen to people. While all Elders whose stories I heard emphasized the importance of compassion towards everyone, no matter what they struggle with, for some being under the influence of alcohol constitutes a different person, a different being altogether under the control of the force of the drug (see Goulet 1998, 119-122). All Elders have a strong sense of compassion because they have experienced this force and done things they regret but, nevertheless, intend to be and are good people. Mary Effie has a different perspective. She does not separate the experience of being under this force as separate or as belonging to a different

subjectivity. She speaks about suffering and all difficulty as a part of herself. Not only the hardships and conflicts in the community but all suffering and struggling in the world. She knows herself not only as interconnected but as one with the world: “I feel sorry for that person because that person could get out of it – I’ve done it, by the help of God, and I don’t think those people are bad people, because I did it, and – looking at the world, looking at the people – everything is me, *everything* that I see I done it, but today I try to live a sober life.” (M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012). This sense of kinship with every being and every struggle is reflected in how she engages with others. While she asserts her own need for creating her subjectivity, she also grants this to others knowing that a sense of personal initiative and existential freedom to act on one’s own terms is foundational for people’s ability to act in the face of suffering:

I’m always open, I’m always waiting, doesn’t matter who – stops me, I work at the school, even I’m going to work, doesn’t matter if I’m late – I’m gonna stop and listen to this person talking to me and that *how* important it is to me when somebody wants to talk - my job is down there, I’m walking to work, and I stop to listen. I walk maybe five minutes before I’m gonna start working, sometime I’m late but I tell them *why*, why I’m late. So that’s how important it is for me, I got help, why should I keep it, how I got help I just told you, I don’t have to keep that, I want to pass it, pass this over to people that are still suffering out there – because if I could do it, they could do it [...]

(M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

No way, I would *never* go to a person and say “Look I want to talk to you because you’re doing these things.” [laughs] no, because what I wanted was, I chose my kids, I want to make the difference so I had to walk for it and work for it, you know, to get it, not somebody coming up to me and saying “Ok, here is your tools, this is what you have to do” No – I have to do it – so I think that’s the way people have to work is that they have to walk and ask for help, you know, like I meet somebody on the road and say “Mary, could I talk to you?”

(M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

As for many others, the experience of life transformation was characterized for Mary Effie Snowshoe by a shift to a greater sense of agency and to living life more on her own terms while simultaneously engaging in purposeful activities that build community and healthful sociability. It did not, however, reduce the difficulties and hardships she encounters:

I’m sober *now* and I think I’m ok, I’m *not* ok ... this summer I went to fish camp and I sat in there all by myself in the morning and *all of a sudden* I could see my mom working with moose skin over there, tanning skin, my dad is packing net down by the bank, there is a boat coming up and I see myself sitting in that boat and my youngest boy is driving the kicker, I just broke down, I cried that was this summer, I just cried by myself, oh I cried all day long - there I proved to myself I’m not ok, I still got problems too – *deal* with them, but every day to live sobered, I know what I did last night, I know who I

talked to yesterday, I know where I was – that’s important to me – and I think that’s a good life. (M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

Similar to many others of her generation, well-being, feeling safe in the world and balancing being-for-oneself with being-for-others is most effortlessly achieved out on the land. Continuous work, a sense of self-sufficiency, little infringement of others, and a sense of profoundly existential enskillment emerge more easily while working on the land:

Mary Effie: Even when we *were* drinking, we were out on the land
Thea: You drink out on the land too or only in town?
Mary Effie: No, in town - boy, you drink out on the land – you never be sitting here [laughs]
Thea: [laughs] you wouldn’t survive
Mary Effie: How they call – that’s good thing about that too, nobody drinks out on there, they drink in town here [...] it’s good to be out there where you don’t sit around, where you eat good, where you sleep good and, how they call it, don’t have to worry about nothing (M.E. Snowshoe, 10/04/2012)

Throughout our conversations as well as speeches she gave at the community level, Mary Effie emphasized the “choice” everyone has and the “difference” everyone can make. In her own life such choice was articulated by a linguistic and resulting perceptual shift away from the event, situation, or other people to her self and what was important to her. This shift in the perception of her own agency allowed to move from passivity and being acted upon to engaging with her environment more on her own terms: to “make the difference”.

Knowing Who You Are

The next woman I would like to introduce is Mary Teya. Throughout this work, I have mentioned her name and insights in different contexts and she also contributed to Chapter 7. She is an important personality in the community and throughout the North, a respected Elder, active volunteer, Gwich’in translator, and deacon holding service together with others every Sunday at St. Matthew’s Church. Mary Teya has played, and still plays, a significant role in many people’s lives, in the community’s work to improve well-being, as well as in regional politics. In her story

she touches on some of the same themes I have discussed before but she also brings out other nuances of how people overcome experiences of suffering and hardship.

She started with describing how in 1958 the first liquor store opened in Aklavik and liquor was first sold to First Nation people. The amount that each person could purchase was limited, as it is today, but then and now people find ways to circumvent these restrictions. It was during the time in the 1960's that a lot of men from the community found work in exploration or construction at the coast by Tuktoyaktuk or Sachs Harbor or at the DEW-line (M. Teya, 30/04/2012). At first, Mary Teya remembers, people had a good time with parties and drinking but soon, it became an outlet for aggression and anger.

To tell you the truth it was just like *common* - for a woman to go walking around with a black eye – it was *common!* [...] And I don't know it went on for *years* and then there was times when people *drowned* because of *that*, because of drinking and going out on the river in a boat – and some people had burned to death and there was *killings* and *suicide* all this kind of thing was happening. - So it affected people in all kinds of ways it was *sad*, because you know a lot of the children they saw all that - but – the *funny* thing was that couples stayed together no matter *what!* [chuckles] and I don't know them days the young people were still listening to their parents and they were still listening to the Elders you know and so some of them were told "That's your *home!* You go home!"
(M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

She remembers how she and other women felt like they had no choice over what was happening in their houses with alcohol. So many people were drinking at that time that a pervasive sense of fear and insecurity ruled community life: "It's not a *good* situation to be in, you know you're scared, you're always looking out for yourself, and *everybody* was like that, everybody in the community." (M. Teya, 30/04/2012) After one attempt at staying sober that lasted eleven months, she made a second resolve to quit drinking, one that lasts to this day: "In 1975 I quit, I remember that really well, 1975 October – I thought to myself my kids are more important than me drinking. Having this kind of a party home, where people come in and out and that kind of thing and I didn't want that anymore." (M. Teya, 30/04/2012). In the years that followed she struggled to create a place of safety, non-violence, and health for herself and her children. She made sure that no drinking was taking place at her house when she and her children were at home and communicated clearly what she needed to live in a way that she knew as healthy and good:

I realized for myself that *I can't try to change* a person no matter what I do or say it's not gonna change a person. I could become *sick*, I could become *depressed* if I try to.

And so I realize for myself that – I can't do anything for anybody else and I'm in a situation where I *need* help and *only me* - I can help myself – I have to take care of *me!* I got to start taking care of myself, and that's what I did.

(M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

What struck me in her story was the sense of agency and security that she seemed to have and that allowed her to act for herself in the face of difficulty and insecurity. Her narrative reflected that she had a foundation of skills and a sense of personal strength that she could continuously draw on. Contrary to other stories of life transformation, Mary Teya never went to treatment and did not experience a pronounced shift towards focusing on her 'self' or away from letting situations and people limit her existential mobility and agency:

I *didn't* go for treatment but I *did* talk to a lot of people and I think I had – through my parents - I had good advice and encouragement and they taught me that I was somebody, somebody that *they* cared for. And I *know* that, that's why I always say that no matter *where* I am, no matter *where* I go, no matter *what* I'm doing my mom, my dad are always in the back of my mind, they're with me that's what I say and I think *that's* what keeps me strong [...] And not only to take care of myself, physically and emotionally and that, but also spiritually. The spiritual part of my life was given to me too and I think that's one of the *best things* that ever happened to me.

(M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

The AA meetings and events at the Alcohol Centre had already been running at the time already for a few years when Mary Teya became involved and started to help others through her own experience. She went to the meetings, read the Big Book and studied the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. As many others told me, the principles of AA resonated with many Elders who were changing their lives at the time. Mary Teya explained why the Twelve Steps made so much sense to her:

Mary: I just did everything to understand what it was all about and I *really like* it, I really feel it's something that, it's something that people should go to, the AA meetings because it really helps. [...]

Thea: So what you liked about – you said you like those AA principles or those steps

Mary: traditions

Thea: do you think they are similar or they relate to the teachings from your parents and grandparents?

Mary: *Yes!* Yes, yes, it's almost from, like it's a teaching from *the Bible*, and it's done by people that had the experience with alcohol. (M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

She often emphasized how the teachings of her parents and grandparents, who were deeply religious people, made her the person she is now, gave her strength and wisdom. Throughout her story I could sense that this was the message that mattered to her and that she wanted others to hear: the ability to stand up for oneself, to act in the face of hardship, and to help others with compassion and wisdom comes from her knowledge of belonging to a continuity of teachings from generations of ancestors:

And I *also* know that because of my experience of being able to stand up and do something and say something about it that I was able to *help* other women in the community, through my job as a community health rep I did *a lot* of that, I help people, I counsel people, I did a lot of advising and – *all that* I guess is because of the way I was brought up too out on the land and that – I *knew* cause my mom talked to me, my dad talked to me all the time and they taught me well, I think I'm one of the fortunate people that got all the teachings of our way of life out on the land. [...] I was taught that, we got to know who we are, got to know who – where we come from, who's our ancestors, our parents and our grandparents, I think I was taught all that by my parents and my grandparents.

(M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

She remembers that the teachings she received especially strengthened her position as a woman. This is what she tried to offer others as well in her position as a community health representative and as a volunteer counsellor:

And I always tell women that they are special people – they're *life-givers* and – you give life into the world and really should respect yourself and take care of yourself – like our Elders when we're young they talk to us, when we're becoming women they talk to us, they tell us how to take care of ourselves, respect ourselves, and even - get rid of things that we use like our pads, and that too, get rid of it respectfully, don't just dispose of it *anywhere*, because it's something special, and *all those things* they teach us and when we *know* that, I feel that we have something, like a *foundation* has been laid for us, that's the way I feel and those are things that I use.

(M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

Communicating with others from this place of security, belonging, and purpose she has been and still is one of the most important persons in the community that others will seek out for help and advise:

I'm able to deal with things like that because of the way I was brought up, I was taught not to *criticize* people, not to *talk back* to people, *respect* people - I treat people the way I expect people to treat me, this is the thing that *stays* with me all the time. And I feel *really good!* When I go out and I talk with people in my *own* language, especially, when I talk in my language, it has more *meaning* to it, than when I speak in English – and so - all that kind of teachings I got and *this is how come* I am able to stand up to things – and

- and then there's other people in the community like leaders, you know, I was told to respect them too - to stand behind – and that's why, I guess, even in the leadership I'm like that and besides too when I first started working in the community back in 1968 *right away* I started getting involved with other organizations, *right away* people were nominating me and, and being in elections, getting into positions – and - so I learned *lots* as I was going along.

(M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

She was the first woman to be elected into the Band Council and stayed in this position for over 20 years. Not only that, but she was also the first and only woman to be acting Chief for a while. Again, she explains her success in dealing so well with issues and conflict in the community as being based on what her parents and grandparents taught her and the life she experienced growing up on the land. Her continued engagement and experience equipped her with a sense of enskillment and security, but also with a deep understanding that everyone struggles to have a say in their life, to live on their own terms. This knowledge allowed her to approach everyone she worked with without constraining their sense of humanity, without limiting their agency and sense of control over their lives:

Sometimes it's difficult [...] confront people and to ask them to *listen* to what I have to say and try not to, try not to interrupt me: "After I bring to you whatever, you can tell me whatever". So a lot of times it turns out good because of the way I, with respect and, and a lot of explaining, it turns out for the good, so I'm *happy* about that. And I think to myself that - you know, I've done well, done alright, I think I deal with people in a *way*, in a respectful way, so that the situation turns out for the best – for the *good* - and I'm happy about that - ya.

(M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

Mary Teya's story is unique in that she did not narrate a linguistic and experiential shift to a referential self but emphasized the importance in conceptualizing self within a line of ancestors. Although this might appear contrary to the experience of the women who went for treatment, the result for their encounters with others is similar: both ways of imagining self allowed the women to carve out the space for themselves to live life on their own terms as much as necessary for their well-being.

Defining Who You Are

The next story provides some insight into the generation after the Peel River Alcohol Centre was established and the first generation of people had sobered up. Abraham Stewart Jr. is the man who started his story by framing it as 'giving back' to others in return for the help he received in the quote in the beginning of this section. Whenever I met Abe Stewart Jr., or Nitchio as he is known in the community, at the Band Office or somewhere along the main road he always had a smile and a joke. During the year I was in the community, he was elected to sit on several boards and committee, was known as being someone who continues the life on the land, and was about to be recruited for one of the main roles in a feature-length film that would be set in Gwich'in country and tell a story about a young Gwich'in girl.³⁴ When I asked one of the local professionals working on social and health issues about a story of change and healing that she witnessed, she immediately pointed me to Abe Stewart Jr. since he "used to drink lots, now he's on all these committees, lives at 8 Miles." (B.K. Martin, 26/10/2011).

Abe Stewart Jr. is a middle-aged man who grew up during a time when drinking was still an integral part of life in the community: "In my life, I've been an alcoholic since I was about 13 years old. I started drinking when I was going to school. We used to sneak out and make homebrew, me and my friends. All this we learned them days – the old people now were young them days, and that's what we used to do." (03/06/2012). He went to school until grade 8 and then left to help his mother out on the land. His parents were separated because of the father's alcohol addiction, so Abe learned how to hunt, trap, fish, and travel with dog team from other men:

I would travel with guys, we would go out hunt caribou, fishing, trapping, we did everything on the land and then we used dog team. [...] That's where I learned all these life skills, you know? Like going with different people and I learn different things. You know when you travel with different people you learn different things and you apply it to your own life. [...] I was pretty wise in my own way, I knew how to get around, I knew how to survive and you have to survive in this world to get around. And I could do it in a city, I could go to a city right now and I'd survive.

(A. Stewart Jr. 03/06/2012)

Contrary to other life stories I have heard, Abe Stewart Jr. departs from an account of confidence and well-being. Skilled and knowledgeable he speaks of a sense of self-reliance in the face of any, even unfamiliar, situations. Equipped with this foundation, he moved away from the

³⁴ "Under the Midnight Sun" – project by film maker Kirsten Carthew.

community to take advantage of the income and work opportunities with the growing resource industry. For twelve years he worked on a boat for Canmar Canadian Marine Drilling. All these years he earned a good wage; most of it went to buying alcohol when he was at home. Several times he tried to quit drinking and went for treatment but kept “falling off the wagon” (A. Stewart Jr., 03/06/2012). Eventually after a long time of binge drinking he was left with nothing in his house and did not even know what happened to the things he owned. This was the moment when he decided that he had gone “too far”. He quit drinking, went to treatment, and later took a one-year course at a college in Hay River and trained as an addiction counsellor. He took on a position in Inuvik and started a family. Six years into his sobriety, however, he started drinking again. After years of drinking to the extent that entire months of his life and whole winters, eluded his memory, he found himself having nothing: no hunting gear, no skidoo, no furniture, no food:

I sold everything and then I was in such a bad shape, I was hungover, no fuel, nothing, I was lucky power didn't get cut off. I was just really ashamed of myself, just complete shame. I have to go up town, to get something, and oh man, I was just so, so ashamed of myself. I couldn't look at nobody. I couldn't focus. All I was, I was just really no good. That's the way – I put myself right to the ground, right down. If I had to go up town I wouldn't even go see my mom, my sisters, or anybody. That's how bad I felt. Finally I said, I got to do something, I got to do something! I said to myself and I went, it took a lot of courage but I went to Beatrice and I told her “I really need help, I really need help.” So I went through all the procedures, had to stay sober for at least four weeks, doing counselling with her. Ya, it was hard and I went and I did it. I just focused, my focus was on the time that I was sober before, that I was sober for six years and things were so beautiful when I was just out there. I focused on stuff like that. I just think to myself: I was sober once, oh man, it was just so beautiful! And I want it again.

(A. Stewart, 03/06/2012)

He went for treatment and, as many others, appropriated the language of inner reference and the importance of verbal expression of inner emotional states as crucial for his recovery:

you know when you talk about *your* problem, about *you* – everything should be *I*, not *we*, or *you*, or *they*, focus on *you*, you can't focus on other people otherwise it's not gonna work! You know because you're still blaming other people - and that's part of it, we blame other people for the way we are, we never, we never stop and say “I'm the one” nobody else and when you realize that – that you *are* responsible for *you*, then you start to - having a different point of view, of yourself and, and the thing is you have to talk to somebody about it to get it out, get it out, they always say “Get it out!” don't, don't leave it in here, otherwise it builds up, ah/ it builds up that's what it does.

(A. Stewart, 03/06/2012)

However, his experience is different from the women Elders who started the Alcohol Centre in that he went through several periods of treatment, sobriety, and relapse.

When you get out of treatment you're just full of joy, full of glory, full of hope, full of happiness and – everything, and you're just on top of the world, you're sitting on cloud nine when you come out of treatment because *all* the things counsellors give you, people give you, because of the friendliness in there, in that one building, the other clients, the other patients in there, they begin to bond a family, you become close, you don't wanna leave each other after 30 days. And then you come back and - all you left behind and you're alone again, in an environment, hostile, when you just left, your other friends expect you to be who you were when you left and they *want* you to be! So, they want you to be who you were before and they'll do anything to make you go there because they don't wanna see the new you! You know they don't - and if you can't handle that then you're gonna fail again.

(A. Stewart, 03/06/2012)

Although the struggle between being-for-oneself and being-for-others, between acting and being acted upon also seems at stake in his story when he recalls why he went on and off alcohol for so many times and why he finally feels safe in his sobriety today, what is different, however, is the playing field of this contestation. In his story, he reflected on what it means to be a good person and what makes someone have a sense of being a whole, healthy, and good person. For him, times of suffering were intrinsically bound to having his subjectivity defined by others. Whether others perceived and reflected back to him a positive or negative image of his person mattered little as long as he relied on this reflection to think of himself. For instance, he reflects upon friendship and whether or not having friends in a certain situation says anything about himself and his worth as a person.

And all these people that come around, I never ever saw them for two years now. So you know who's your friends and you know who's not your friends. But I still don't, even though it's that way, I don't look down on people for that reason. You know because they are going through what I went through, they are having the same problem. You know they think they are friends, but as soon as they quit drinking all our buddies are gone.

(A. Stewart Jr., 03/06/2012)

Another aspect of what matters to him in order to balance being on his own terms against living on other's terms concerns what he calls "pride":

Abe: [...] When I do something and I'm proud of myself I expect somebody to praise me for it "Oh man you did a good job, you did a good job" I learned that that has to stop, I learned I cannot take praise from other people cause it's not

gonna last, it's gonna stop somewhere and then you're gonna wonder "what? What's going on, they don't like me anymore, they don't like me no more?" You know? [...] Because if you expect to be praised everyday - for your sobriety, for the things you do, you know, it'll stay for maybe a week or so, you know, and then they get tired of it, the people, so they don't say it no more and if you don't accept it then you - you, you lose your confidence and *yourself* - you lose, you lose hope and you start wondering "How come they're not saying that to me anymore, how come they're just, they're ignoring me?" you know?

Thea: ya

Abe: So I learned that, I don't take praise for my sobriety. I live each day for me, not for them people out there, I don't want, I don't care what they *think* of me, I don't care, a lot, a lot of my friends they come, [...] that guy came here *every* single night and drink, passed out, you know he just made himself at home and after I sobered up he told me "Hey you just think you're good because you quit drinking" [laughs] I told him "No, I don't", I don't think that way.

(A. Stewart Jr., 03/06/2012)

This passage exemplifies positive comments about his recovery as well as negative comments about the way he is anticipated to relate to others. The next quote illustrates the struggle of re-negotiating personhood after his experience of life transformation:

Sometimes - uhm, in this life you know there's people that are gonna put you down, you know, no matter *what* you do or *where* you go - I've been living this kind of life for a *long* time and I still get put down [...] - because - they can't see *change* - for one thing - and, and if you - within the family, this community is a whole family, you know - the way you are - is the way they expect you to be for the rest of your life, you know, and if they see you change - they don't like it.

(A. Stewart Jr., 03/06/2012)

His account reflects in a vivid way how subjectivity emerges and is contested within a field of relations, how personhood is an intersubjective process. His experience is that being defined by others threatens his sense of existential integrity, his sense of well-being and agency. Being thought of as a healthy and good person by others does not have lasting consequences for his sense of who he is, unless his own movement towards enskillment as a useful member of his community creates a sense of agency and existential security. Abe Stewart Jr. experiences both positive and negative construal of his person, as others dictating the terms of his way of being and he emphasizes the importance of balancing these demands with his own intentions. This story gives insight in the continuing balancing act of being for oneself and being for others. While Elizabeth's story focuses on mobility and agency, Abe Stewart's imperative in his narrative is how he came to balance control over defining his personhood. Others around him are equally invested in this struggle and his personal change threatens their experience of who people in

the community are and how they relate to each other. Every shift requires others to shift and every movement meets resistance.

Since I know Abe as someone who spends as much time as possible in his camp or out on the land, I asked him how he felt about hunting, trapping, and travelling on the land during times of drinking and sobriety.

When I quit drinking I start making my own camp, you know, I know what it's like out there, from past experiences, I know how *beautiful and peaceful* it is out there and I know the *land* and I know what's living out there and I just *love to eat country food!* I just love it and that's why I go for it. And when I, say when I set net and I catch fish – that's brings such big *joy* to me, when I go cut cord of wood when I come home with big load of wood, I feel so proud of myself, so powerful, I build cabins, I feel proud, I feel happy, I achieved these things. And I could live out there now – and I could live with joy in my heart because that's my life and I did it by myself. (A. Stewart Jr., 03/06/2012)

When he was drinking, he still would go out on the land but he said that he did not enjoy it. I wondered why, since others, such as Bertha Francis or Elizabeth Colin, had said that even in times of suffering, the land would provide for a safe place where someone can experience peace. Abe Stewart explains:

But because of alcohol – I did it, just so – because I wanted to make the money so I could buy my alcohol and there's a difference, ah, you know I don't wanna go out there but I *have* to, I need to drink! You see? And that's what's making me do it [...]

(A. Stewart Jr., 03/06/2012)

Although he practiced his skills on the land, this engagement did not provide the same sense of agency and well-being that it did when he was sober. There was no purpose and use for himself or others beyond providing the money to buy alcohol. His sense of ability and belonging as a useful community member diminished more and more in the process. Being asked to do something for the community was what he remembers today as a transformational experience:

I had such low self-esteem, nothing mattered to me you know, I just wanted to go look for another shot of alcohol and then – that was quite a few years ago, long time ago - men's feast! It was New Years that time, I remember, and I'm sitting there Robert Alexie [Sr.] come in "hey, you cook this meat for us for men's feasts" "Ya, ok" and that was part that changed my life, I said, to myself, I said "Wow, nobody ever asked me to do something like that in my life" I never forget that, I never – I always use that – when I go to meeting – or when we talk about young people that need help - brought that up – what we need to do is treat our young people like they're worth something, otherwise they'll be feeling like shit forever [...] that's one way that helped me to realize that I you know what I could be of help in our community by to get into council right now –

somebody asked me to go, ah/ .. and I said “ok, I’ll try it” and I was scared first time because I didn’t know anything but I tried it. (A. Stewart Jr., 03/06/2012)

After quitting alcohol and becoming an involved community member, he remembers being surprised at how much he was able to do, using similar words as Elizabeth Colin in her life story:

I just love to be sober because when – now – today I could go out, to the Band Office – and I could work there, I could do things I never realized I could do [...] Today I could go anywhere I want without having-I got no fear, no fear at all.

(A. Stewart Jr., 03/06/2012)

This quote illustrates his sense of existential security from which he feels like he can take on any challenge and achieve good things for the community. Despite his growing sense of enskillment and well-being contributing to community life, travelling, working, and living on the land is where he feels at home:

Happiness don’t just come from the things you do, no you got to feel it, you know, and I just *love* the bush, you know, I just could, I told Dave [pseudonym] “I just could *stay out there forever* if I had a chance!” “I know what you mean” he probably does. But this determination – I *always, always* loved it out on the land, I never, there was never a time that I didn’t like it except for the last few years – I mean when I quit school – I went out on the land lots and then I started drinking, I’ll go – but – I didn’t like it, I just went to do something I didn’t *enjoy* – today, I could just enjoy every bit of it. Doesn’t matter if it’s raining or snowing I’m gonna be out there, like the other day, *Saturday* I woke up, I look out “raining oh man I gotta go to my camp!” and I said “Don’t matter I’m gonna go! I’m gonna go!” I got out there, oh man, I got a, I got a tent frame out there, built that this winter, this beautiful lake there and my friend Abe [Wilson] came with me - we got out there, we looked at net and we got some ducks, we had about six ducks, black ducks, we cleaned the whole thing, we cooked them too, had radio going, CBQM on it [laughs] we sat there *all* day! We never had rain – maybe wind but no rain! Just warm and I told him “You know Abe, if I had a truck of my own I’d leave it on the highway, I’d stay here and I go home, any time I want but because I don’t have a truck I got to go home with you.

(A. Stewart Jr., 03/06/2012)

This quote brings up the theme of mobility again. It is important to have the ability to “just up and go”, as people in Fort McPherson would say. Trucks are important to provide this mobility, however, they are a liability as well since their maintenance requires cash income. Nevertheless, the immense sense of motivation, joy, and purpose that is linked to going out to one’s own camp and work for shelter, warmth, and food resonates in this passage of Abe Stewart Jr.’s life story.

As these life stories show, transforming experiences of suffering into positive lives and the existential negotiations surrounding living on one's own terms and, at the same time, being a useful engaged member of a group play out across varying fields of interlaced aspects of being. What mattered in telling her story for Ms. Colin at the point in her life that I met her might be different than what mattered to her in the past. Mary Effie Snowshoe, Mary Teya, and Abraham Stewart Jr. each chose again different focal points of their story and narratively worked through different areas that were of existential import to them. While Elizabeth Colin framed her experience in terms of mobility, personal agency, and enskillment, Mary Effie Snowshoe and Abe Stewart Jr. both emphasized the shift to a greater sense of agency over defining who they are in the face of being defined by others. All three grew up on the land, becoming skilled and secure through working, walking, and sharing within their families. They were young adults or teenagers in the 1960' and 70's when their immediate social environment grew from extended family to community, physical work became more and more obsolete, and the transitioning to cash economy as well as state bureaucracy limited existential mobility, agency, movement, self-sufficiency, and sharing. The AA program and the Peel River Alcohol Centre opened the space for re-negotiating agency, mobility, and for new ways of becoming enskilled.

At Home in the World

The last story of this chapter will introduce a young women in her late twenties who grew up in Fort McPherson, went through a time of hardship and drug use, and is now one of the most active young volunteers and a role model for many. In the 1990's, when she was a teenager, alcohol was commonly used among youth as well as their families. As children were enrolled in school and most parents had not been raised on the land themselves anymore, life took place in the community for the most part. On-the-land school programs, as offered today, were also less available before the Comprehensive Land Claim was signed in 1992. In addition to the focus on classroom, non-experiential learning in school, home life had also changed considerably for the younger generations. Many parents had experienced strict discipline and daily routines full of chores in residential schools and many lived through physical and emotional abuse. All tried to give their children a better life without the harsh discipline they had experienced. As a result,

growing up in the 1980s and 90s meant less daily chores and physical work for youth than previously. Under these very different circumstances, the experience of subjectivity and agency necessarily differs from that of previous generations in the stories above.

Lara's³⁵ story brings out more of these ambiguities in the role of ontological security in shaping experiences and narrating experience. While mobility, both physically and socially, is of existential importance in Elders' stories for having a sense of wholeness, agency, and integrity in their lives, mobility in Lara's life was a strategy of maintaining the appearance of ontological security while experiencing profound uncertainty in her engagement with her surroundings. At the time I met Lara, she was working with youth in the Leadership and Resilience program and was elected into various committees and boards. She started a yoga class for everyone and was loved and respected by community members for her exemplary lifestyle and always-cheerful manner. Times had been much more difficult for her before though and listening to her life story I was amazed by how she was able to give her path of addiction and depression a radically different direction and become the energetic young woman that everyone knew her as. Seeing her around the community always laughing, always friendly, and popular with everyone I was surprised to hear that her experiences of adversity and suffering lay in the very near past. After we sat down in her kitchen with some tea, she started "right at the beginning" and set the stage for her story of life changes by identifying herself as an adoptee into the community who, as a child and teenager, felt out of place. At fifteen she moved to a city for the first time. In her story she traced her journey through various cities in three different provinces, but having been on the move so much she forgot a city, or a move, here and there and had to correct herself. Wherever she moved, a sense of isolation followed her:

I guess I felt like, I just, I just always felt like, maybe alone, sort of alone, like I, you know I had, I lived in Kelowna for a couple years too after – no before Edmonton, ya, I guess I skipped that part, I lived in, I lived in Kelowna too for a couple of years and then I was *really big* into partying, but I had like *such* a wide variety of friends, I felt like I was always kind of like, you know when say you're in a room full of people but you're still alone [...] like I had such a big group of friends that if I went out and got stupid, wasted that it was just people "ah – that happens, people get drunk like that" but I just went out with so many different people, nobody really knew that it was happening like *every time*, right, so I guess that's a big part of my history was just like keeping it hidden too like I would always work really hard on keeping up appearances [...] Prince George like I knew I had a problem with drugs and I wasn't in a good place, but Kelowna I really knew there's things needed to change, so *that's why* I came home for that year and I quit

³⁵ Pseudonym

drinking and sort of, that sort of stuff and then ya and then there was Edmonton and ya, basically I, I thought maybe by moving that would kind of stop things but everywhere I went it was just the same, wherever you go, there you are [laughs]. (27/05/2012)

Despite feeling “out of place” in Fort McPherson, her “safe place” nevertheless was at home, with her parents in the community. I was wondering what it was then about Fort McPherson that made her feel safe and she explained: “I guess just like being with my family, like living with my family and that keeping appearance thing was like super strong like I couldn’t not let them know, like how bad it was” (27/05/2012). In Lara’s memory, the infringement on her agency and mobility through her social surroundings, a situation that was a condition of suffering in the stories of Elders, offered a sense of security and assistance in keeping the amount of control that alcohol had in her life in check. Restoring a balance between living for herself and living for others was not what was at stake for her, rather being-for-others and living on other’s terms seemed safer and more purposeful than exercising her freedom to act and live on her own terms:

Once I started drinking again and like all – everything goes out the window, right and so, like me and her dad hooked up and like I got pregnant and that’s just like *blew my mind* [laughs] I mean I was just so surprised, even to know like, like it was a possibility but I was just like, *oh my god!* But at that point too, like I was living by myself and I was like *on my knees every single day*, like just praying for something to change, like praying for help of some sort, like I was just so desperate at that point to stop living the way I was but I couldn’t stop on my own so I just like honestly just prayed *every single day* like all day, especially at night, I would just pray [...] I prayed to like – God, whatever that was, prayed to something ya, ya so I prayed like, I prayed so much and then like I said I met up with her dad and then I got pregnant and now that I look back on it, it’s kind of like the answer to my prayers cause I couldn’t do it for myself but if you put something else, someone else in the mix, like I was always able to do things for other people and like for a little innocent life. (27/05/2012)

During her pregnancy she went for a six-week treatment that consisted of *Twelve Step* meetings according to AA principles, group talk, one-on-one counselling, and chores such as cooking and cleaning. Treatment takes people out of their usual surroundings and employs a distinct daily routine and language that is designed to create subjects that conform to the larger society’s norms of a healthy and good person. As such, it is a liminal period in which counsellors and clients re-negotiate ideas of self and one’s place in relation to others. For Lara, this time was also an inquiry into who she was and a period of reformulating her idea of the self:

Thea: What out of the whole, the whole program you had there you think helped lots like
 Lara: Uhm – just talking about ...
 Thea: The one-on-one, the group?
 Lara: the group
 Thea: The group talk was
 Lara: Ya, the group talk has *always, always* been really attractive to me, just like the Twelve Step group, just like the – anything where I can be around people which is crazy because I was like I, you know I spent so much time like
 Thea: Isolating
 Lara: Isolating, *but really* I'm a people person [laughs] like really *I am* but it's like more my addiction and the way I'm feeling that keeps me like isolated uhm so, but I've already really been attracted to like people helping people, so that was probably what helped the most

(27/05/2012)

Not only did she explore a new way to situate herself within the world that gave her a sense of being at home, she also slowly revised her sense of embodiment and started to experience herself as whole and integrated, where body and mind can no longer be separated:

Thea: Did they have anything physical, apart from the chores?
 Lara: Uhm – ya! We did yoga, so we did yoga, *oh* that's like a *really big part* of my recovery too, actually I should have – mentioned that, that happened in Edmonton first, before I started to go to AA and stuff was actually yoga that really sparked that like, there's more to life [...] so I took like a 12-week beginners yoga course uhm and *that really*, like really made me feel like there is like, there's hope, like there is more to life, like I remember I always, always remember this and I think I even told you this before, but like it was on a Monday night, where I remember like one class uhm – I went to class and I'd done coke all, all weekend right and I went to class and like laying there and my nose started to bleed and I just remember being like, this is just not , this is just not right [laughs] you know like – uhm so I don't know, just something woke up inside of me and *that's* like, that's like when I really started to like, like I really wanted to quit drinking and that sort of stuff [...] like yoga really like *kick started* everything for me [...] it just really brought me into my body, like really calmed my mind but there was this bringing me into my body cause I did, everything I did took me *out* - of my body, like you know it was – alcohol and drugs or food

(27/05/2012)

Starting to feel at home in her body and to feel security in relationships and groups, Lara began to see her urge to move from one place to another not as something that kept her safe in her reality but something that hindered her from creating ontological security that could enable her to live in healthful relationships and engage purposefully with others:

Edmonton has such a - it's like a really special place in my heart, it's not like the most beautiful city uhm but it's like definitely like has like a big place in my heart because it's really where like I actually stayed and faced [laughs] faced the real issue which is not the location it's actually - myself - and then I met some like amazing people, just have some like amazing supportive people in my life. [...]

And I've also been drawn to that sense of community and like - *before* I didn't really feel like a part of my community and that's like all, that's my stuff right - but now that I'm here for like a second time around - like I, I *love* this sense of community - like that's, that's what draws me to McPherson, that's what I like about McPherson uhm, but within this community there are, you know of course there is - people that I'm not gonna get along with and like - uhm people that I don't feel that I can trust like that's gonna happen anywhere that happens in my 12-step program too, right - that's gonna happen anywhere uhm but I still - like to work within a community

(27/05/2012)

Her involvement in the community is, aside from the supportive relationships she has been able to nurture, an important foundation for her sense of security and belonging:

Thea: We were at if there is anything that came in addition to relationships here that makes you feel safe, secure

Lara: Ahm - having a job that I love [laughs] ya that's - that's I really enjoy that, that's like in line with what I really wanted to do was like to help - *youth*, so that's been really helpful having a job that I really, really love [...]

I guess knowing that I have the ability to do it and enjoying what I do and - and the financial part of it too cause that was in Edmonton you know like - making it from day to day, like pay cheque to pay cheque that wasn't really enjoyable, and well not just my job, not just my job but what I'm doing, I guess - is really - for security in it, but at the same time, you know, I have other dreams about what I want do too and I, but that's, what is really important to me - is like having a job that I love [laughs] which I think is important to everyone but giving back is important to me *as well* - so that's - I can do that through my job which I really enjoy. And being up here too is like - it's - much slower, there's a much slower pace which sometimes it's a bit, you know, like makes my skin crawl but for the most parts that's you know I have the time to - to do my yoga, I have the time to meditate, I have the time to do my step work - it is really nice not running from here to there, from here to there, from here to there like - I really have a lot of time to work on my, myself which is really nice, ya - so that's, that's helped me [...]

People have helped me and it's like if I can help someone than it's kind of gratitude for what has been given to me - and not only that but like I said it's I know for myself that it's been helpful to have - support along the way and then doing things like the Justice Committee and that sort of stuff, it's like - I *have* the time and that stuff is important and I just feel I can make a difference like I feel I'm in a place right now where I can give back so, so why not, I guess [laughs] ya, but - I do really enjoy it being - something that is of interest to me or where I feel like my skills will best be - used which would be somewhere like

the Justice Committee and ya, through AA [...] being useful with giving what I – using my strength

(27/05/2012)

At this point in her story, I heard a familiar theme: after renegotiating her sense of personhood and experiencing what she was capable of and could accomplish for others, it was finding a balance between applying herself for others and for her own needs that started to matter:

I'm *finding* – the balance and that's where again, just choosing the things that use my strength where I feel like I can make the most difference giving myself to just a few things where I can really make a big change is much better than spreading myself thin and giving myself, like giving just a little bit of myself, so – I don't feel like I - I don't feel like taking on too much and I, I'm really learning to – balance everything out [...] *but* I'm really, really learning to take care of *myself* which allows me to take care better of my other commitments, so ya – no right now I'm not, I'm not stressed out which is, which is really nice because I have been stressed out and I can get stressed out but I really feel like *today* – like *stress is a choice* – which is amazing [laughs] to know that [laughs]

(27/05/2012)

We stopped the interview at this point. Her little daughter had a friend over and after playing inside for a while, they had put their rubber boots and parkas on and wanted to play outside. It did not take too long and they came back continuously asking curious questions, making bright suggestions, and wanting to share their newest ideas with Lara. She laughed and joked with them and after she had been asking them for patience as long as we were finishing our interview, she now rewarded them by giving them her attention. Lara's story is different, her struggle to gain a sense of existential security took a different point of departure and played out in different dimensions of being than that of the Elders I got to know. There are, however, themes in her narrative, such as emplacement, relationality, enskillment, and balancing life on one's own terms and life for others, that are familiar from the experiences of Elders.

6.3. *The Power of Talk, "Discovering" Selves, and the Struggle for Being on One's own Terms*

My point of departure for this chapter was to understand how people remember the liminality of "rock bottom" and what is at stake when people struggle to transform the experience of crisis into a life lived well. I am interested in the potentialities that become accessible for people whose ontological footing is existentially threatened and shattered. The stories I have shared

here are memories framed in narratives that people thought to be intelligible to a young foreigner such as me, and also to others in the urban and professional world of southern Canada who will read what I write. This text, however, is also produced for the community, so the audience that people imagined includes their fellow community members. They address leaders who make decisions about who gets to do what in the community, peers who might have forgotten about what struggles people went through years ago, and especially the youth who might currently go through similar personal suffering today and who might have never heard about their Elders' past struggle.

People told stories to be included in this thesis with these audiences in mind as well as against the backdrop of socio-political developments that matter to them. In this case, the stories of the Peel River Alcohol Centre are also a commentary to the announcement of the new Mental Health and Addictions Plan 2012-2015 "A Shared Path Towards Wellness" by the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT Health and Social Services 2012). In the community we first heard about it when several newly elected ministers of the GNWT visited the community in early 2012 to introduce themselves and their agendas. The Minister of Health and Social Services at the time, Tom Beaulieu, spoke passionately about respecting community initiatives and input as well as the need to support on-the-land wellness programs. This meeting fueled the conversations I had with Elizabeth Colin and others about the Peel River Alcohol Centre. After I had left the community, a "Minister's Forum on Addiction" (GNWT Health and Social Services 2012, 15; pers. communication with E. Colin) travelled to Fort McPherson to hear about community concerns and needs as a way to develop mental health policies that are responsive to local situations. Elizabeth Colin repeatedly mentioned this meeting, and what she contributed to the discussion, to me on the phone. On the one hand, she was glad that local voices were heard, on the other she was puzzled over why the government was working on ideas such as community-run addiction programs and on-the-land workshops (GNWT Health and Social Services 2012, 13-15) while at the Alcohol Centre "we had all that" (pers. communication with E. Colin).

The stories of life transformation in this dissertation are snapshots of moments in continuously transforming dialogues between residues of past experience, competing or complementary discourses, current matters of importance, local and wider political agendas that threaten to limit people's sense of governance over their own lives, and myself – my level of understanding, the closeness of my relationship with some of the women, and my own

affinities that led me to hear in a certain way and led others to relate to me in a certain way. At one time, when I was worried about a friend and mentioned that to Elizabeth Colin, she said that I reminded her of herself when she was young and cared so much about everyone in the community who was struggling with alcohol. This is not to say that I compare in any way to her dedication and achievements, I do not, but that we felt kin to experiences of existential suffering and helplessness as to the solution that can be provided by anyone else. “You can’t say anything, just listen”, is what she said many times. Liminality and ontological crisis, in what I understood from her, turns attention to the “self”, the person, and his or her agency as a force of change. This shift in how personhood is imagined from embedded in intersubjective processes towards a more separate self is what she and others experienced when they engaged in addiction treatment in southern Canadian cities and the Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Conventional North American therapy, then and today, capitalizes the link between narrative and the self and, through language, aims to produce subjectivities that conform to the larger cultural imaginaries of a healthy person. Regardless of the hegemonic implications that the import of this discourse and self-oriented notion of personhood might have, the women who struggled with addiction and violence in their homes experienced this shift in perspective as giving them leverage vis-à-vis an overwhelming experience of being acted upon.

While Elizabeth consistently uses images of movement in her narrative, she also remembers this constitution of a “new me” as decisive in how her life changed for the better. She speaks about the early stages of her transformation in terms of her “self” breaking free from what she experienced as the prison of her life and about surprising herself with the skill and agency she has always had, hidden somewhere beneath. However, talking about her time at the 28-day-treatment, she speaks of a radical break from her “old self” that served in the old world followed by a movement into a new world with a “new self”. The other women, whose stories appear here, whether they went to treatment in a southern city or sobered up through the Peel River Alcohol Centre, shared a similar experience. The transformation of personhood that these women experienced in treatment or AA meetings is closely linked to the adoption of specific linguistic forms of framing oneself and one’s experience within one’s environment.

Therapeutic methods in North American addiction treatment aim at re-making personhood endowed with qualities valued by the larger North-American society through, what Carr (2011) calls the “semiotic” work (2011, 3) of therapeutic communication. In her insightful ethnography, Carr observes that treatment centres are “central sites where cultural ideologies

of language are distilled – that is, reproduced in pure and potent form” (2011, 4). Therapeutic principles common in the North-American context are based on the assumption that addiction is accompanied by an inability to read one’s inner emotional state and express it verbally. Talk as therapeutically beneficial has a long-standing history in North America and is privileged in clinical practice based on the idea that language allows people to express and release disturbing emotional states (Kirmayer, Fletcher, Watt 2009; Lepore, Ragan, Jones 2000). Therapeutic settings, such as the mainstream 28-day treatment or group meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, offer guidelines of “healthy” talk and monitor clients in their speech practice. Blame or protest, which directs attention to others in a field of relations, are seen as performative and eschewed, while “sober” narratives of confession that reference individual inner states are encouraged and labeled as healthy (Carr 2011, 4). This corresponds to how Elders in Fort McPherson describe their experience with talk in treatment. The idea of an internal origin of suffering and individual power to effect and change one’s negative emotions was often emphasized as a new and unfamiliar concept learned during treatment that, in retrospect however, was believed to be crucial in order to achieve well-being. Much more ingrained in people’s ontology and consequently in their interpretation of events was an intersubjective causation meaning that one’s own emotions and actions are inherently intertwined with other people’s actions, events, or circumstances. The Elders recalled going through a period of not knowing how to talk in such ways and how to think in terms of “me” as separate from their relations and the situations of concern.

Citing evidence from clinical literature and other addiction treatment practice such as Alcoholics Anonymous, Carr observes that addiction specialists across theoretical approaches agree not only on the disease model of alcoholism but also on denial as “its chief symptom” (Carr 2011, 86). Denial in addiction treatment is conceptualized as the inability to recognize reality and to identify one’s own behavior as the cause of one’s problems and suffering. This “disease of insight” (2011, 90) is, according to established addiction treatment practice, best remedied by guiding clients towards “discovering” themselves and identifying their patterns of denial (91). Language is the primary method in this aim of discovering subjectivity: “successful clients learned to use language as a means of inner reference: matching spoken signs to innermost signifieds, which were thought to be already there and awaiting expression.” (2011, 94). The focus on feelings is part and parcel of this practice and an inability to identify and verbally express emotions is perceived as an aspect of addicted subjectivity and deemed

dysfunctional. Carr points out that she encountered the widely spread idea in therapeutic settings that feelings that are not verbalized have not been identified yet (2011, 108). Such clients are thought to need help in identifying and expressing feelings, which is achieved through specific forms of speech during one-on-one or group therapy. In many of the workshops I have witnessed during my stay in the community such exercises of verbalizing emotions are applied. Often labeled as “checking in”, this method involves having everyone in a circle of participants verbalize how they feel, either at the beginning or the end of the day, what emotions they brought into the day or what feelings they are leaving with.

Feelings, however, are also suspected to be affected by the addict’s denial and the objective of therapy is to mine for the underlying, the “real” feelings. Anger, for example, is conceptualized as an “umbrella feeling” that, in fact, is a symptom of denial of feelings of fear, grief, or shame (Carr 2011, 109-110). While clients are engaged in therapeutic practice that is said to uncover their inner truths, therapists set the terms of and guide the client’s search in very specific ways. Although psychology began researching the psychological and physiological benefits of narrative only since the 1990’s (Pennebaker 1997; Lepore and Smyth 2002), the experience that women from Fort McPherson had during their treatment in the 1970’s clearly attests that talk was at the centre of the recovery process even then. Their difficulties to learn how to speak about “me” and to conform to the language of inner reference, their reasoning that blame is a form of denial, and their resolve to first look at themselves and discover pre-existing emotional states that are responsible for present issues suggests that much of what Carr observed in her work in contemporary North-American treatment settings was present in the therapeutic practice in Canada in the 1970’s. Considering the important role that AA style meetings played in the 28-day treatment in Henwood and in the work of the Peel River Alcohol Centre, this can be related to the influence that Alcoholics Anonymous had all over North-America since the publication of the *Big Book* in 1939 and continues to have in addiction treatment. The Twelve Step program is based on the disease model of alcoholism and guides the alcoholic through steps of accepting the identity of an alcoholic, focusing attention inwards and searching for problematic emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, as well as verbal confession of what is found (Alcoholics Anonymous 1955, 58-71). While the ideas and language of AA clearly are resurfacing throughout addiction treatment and contemporary discourse on alcoholism and recovery in Fort McPherson, Alcoholics Anonymous cannot be seen as its origin. Rather, the movement reflects itself the larger linguistic, civic, and religious conventions in North America.

Carr (2011) traces connections of these ideas to the tendency in English to presume that “the structures of language should transparently fit the structures of the *real self*” (2011, 124, original emphasis). She further cites clinical ethnographies, such as Robert Desjarlais’ *Shelter Blues* (1997) and Allan Young’s work on Vietnam veterans (1995), that illustrate how the verbal representation of inner truths, which when denied are thought to cause and maintain illness, is the dominant clinical ideology in the treatment of mental illness, post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as addictions. Carr also points to the Christian practice of confession as a “history of inner reference” as well as the popularity of personally revealing TV talk shows where people are “encouraged and expected to use the language of inner reference” (2011, 125) and make public confessions. In her study on life stories and AA narratives in Alkali Lake, B.C., Palmer (2005) suggests that the form and pattern of the AA narrative “may be part of a larger genre of conversion stories” that are characteristic for certain Christian denominations in the area (2005, 138). It follows that the semiotic labour that takes place in treatment and AA programs is not only an established clinical practice but strives to produce subjectivity and verbal expression that conform to North American cultural ideals. Training people in using a specific form of speech and of linguistically positioning their selves as bounded, distinct entities with inner truths that can be expressed independently from the relations in their environment is also a profoundly political practice. In removing the context of the emotional response, the language of inner reference also removes the person’s capacity for structural critique (2011, 126).

This is reflected in how people think about the role politics plays in their own lives and the community. Although there is a large spectrum of resistance to political decisions that affect the community, especially the land, rivers, and animals that are highly valued as the basis of Gwich’in survival, people generally refrain from explaining the state of personal well-being as dependent on political interventions such as residential school experiences or the land claim. One young woman summed it up in the following words: “policies and the self-government negotiations are not so influential. The main issue is what we are doing in our community, we do have a lot of control, we don’t need all the political BS, the changes come from within.” (24/10/2011). This is not to say that Teet’it Gwich’in are not outspoken against political decisions that threaten their land or their level of local governance, but it points to the idea that personal well-being is thought of as related to the agency of an autonomous “self” that, although embedded in the community, is the source of suffering or well-being. This idea frees individuals from the constraints of their surroundings and establishes a powerful self but

simultaneously renders them unable to critique the impact of structural power on their well-being.

Another aspect, that Carr calls “flipping the script” (2011, 226) is when experienced clients in treatment settings learn the language of inner reference so well that they are able to use it strategically to access the resources that are depended on treatment success without being invested in what they are saying. This phenomenon “simultaneously reproduces and undermines therapeutic practices, as well as the semiotic ideologies that underlie them” (Carr 2011, 126). Carr uses this to argue against simple theories of power structures with the therapist as powerful and controlling ideas of self and verbal articulation of experience and to show that clients do resist these ideologies and are able to redirect the encounter to reach their goals. Although the structural situation at the Peel River Alcohol Centre blurred power lines that would typically exist between counsellors, clients, and other community members and access to resources through compliance with the therapeutic script was not at stake, the memories of the women show that they too used the language of inner reference to leverage power imbalances. In many conversations it became impressively clear that through therapeutic language that shifted attention to an autonomous self with emotions, thoughts, needs and responsibilities, women were able to tackle the often overbearing situations in their personal lives. They started to appreciate therapy and treatment for their own sake, not for their husbands or children, but for themselves. As mentioned in the stories above, some women started to set priorities according to their own needs, they allowed themselves to move, act, and speak freely, or to put things “on the backburner” because they too needed rest (E. Colin, 13/03/2012). There is ambivalence surrounding this relationship between discourse and power: the women experienced the potential for existential mobility and agency through latching onto institutional treatment ideologies, at the same time this process perpetuated hegemonic discourse and subjectivities which were then brought back to the community. But again, women exercise agency and renegotiate these constraints to extend their ability to live on their own terms. Despite adherence to therapeutic language, the founders of the Alcohol Centre brought in whole families instead of treating addicts only, they focused on meaningful work in addition to talk-based counselling, and they preferred one-on-one conversations instead of group therapy. Nevertheless, directing their perception and granting agency to a separate, inner “self” allowed each of them to restore a balance of being for oneself and being for others.

A corollary of this shift to imagining the self as a powerful agent is the idea of personal “choice”. As mentioned in the stories above, through treatment, counselling, and mental health workshops many people in Fort McPherson agree that blame is detrimental to healing and life is based on one’s own choices. Although this prevalent discourse can be traced to the narrative framing of experience in therapeutic language and appears to have been introduced at the time when the first people went and came back from treatment, I have no evidence of how personal choice was conceptualized historically among Teet’it Gwich’in and whether or not this represents a shift in perspective. However, by categorizing people under the influence of alcohol as embodying a different person, people have a way to lessen the weight of their responsibility and accommodate for the impossibility of making conscious and rational choices in every life circumstance: “You know when you drink, it’s not you, you’re a different person again.” (Dorothy Alexie, 05/09/2012). Goulet (1998) made similar observations in his conversations with Dene Tha in Northern Alberta and describes how drunk people are seen as having temporarily lost their mind and do not know what they are doing (1998, 122). He also argues that Dene Tha are aware that such a state might be strategic as it provides a “socially legitimate context within which to pursue objectives they cannot seek when sober” (Goulet 1998, 118). Today, after more than three decades of establishing this discourse in the community, drinking and presenting oneself as having an alcohol problem might be an option to escape the discursive ideal of always making the right choices to prevent any kind of misfortune or suffering in one’s life.

This analysis suggests that the imperative in navigating experiences of life transformation as narrated by people in Fort McPherson is in juggling competing constraints and potentials that at times threaten to tip the balance between acting and being acted upon in one direction but at the same time might be used to produce a shift into another direction. The semiotic labour of talk, discussed above, is one of these forces that is at work at the interface of people’s sense of who they are within their environment, hegemonic discourses of personhood, and relational projects within and beyond a community.

The stories in the previous sections however, illustrate yet another aspect, one that is not part of therapeutic language but one that shines through in people’s narratives of experiences of strength and ontological security, in the bodily practices that people recount as characteristic for recovery and renewal, and, especially, in the memories of the founders and volunteers at the Peel River Alcohol Centre. That is the imperative of existential mobility, the

freedom to move on one's own account, to work for one's own needs, to contribute to collective well-being, and to have a say over one's subjectivity. Liminality, when people "hit rock bottom", is not only the experience of disintegration of the reality one knew, but it always also bears the potential for new associations and ways of imagining oneself in the world. This includes the potential to radically renegotiate existential mobility. Elizabeth Colin's story gives a vivid example of how she experienced this shift from immobility to movement. The new "me" she experienced following liminality was not only shaped by therapeutic language, but it dominated her experience even before treatment. As movement is the foundational condition for experience and the formation of subjectivity, for the shift from "I move" to "I can" (Sheets-Johnson 2011), the initiation of movement results in experiences of "I can" and the repetition of movement sediments as enskillment and the sense of ontological security. The Peel River Alcohol Centre originated from and was an expression of people's existential mobility and growing enskillment. The first generation of workers at the Alcohol Centre created this place as a reflection of their sense of renewal at the time and it grew from their need to move, to relate to others, to work, and to contribute to the well-being of others. This experience shaped the program at the Alcohol Centre. As many daily chores that women grew up with had become obsolete in the settlement after government housing was introduced, sewing and cooking remained as some of the most crucial skills that women practiced to care for their families. Elizabeth Colin bought sewing machines for the centre to keep the women busy. Every gathering included food, tea, and coffee that women brought from their homes. Men came in to play the fiddle for people to dance. Since many people remembered experiencing a sense of well-being, enskillment, and ontological security out on the land, the Alcohol Centre organized "workshops" up the river, or anywhere out on the land. On the land, one has to be sober to ensure survival. Food, warmth, and shelter are dependent on one's work and knowledge. Despite being more physically taxing than town life, most people attest to the fact that life on the land is good and healthy. Considering the stories people told about strong Gwich'in they remember, I argue that it is precisely because life on the land demands a strong body, physical effort, and the application of knowledge that this way of being equips people with a sense of existential security and well-being. Elizabeth Colin, her husband Neil, and the other workers in the early days of the Alcohol Centre shaped the program in continuity with the way of being on the land. Aside from the minimal core funding they received through the government, comfort, entertainment, and nourishment at the centre depended on everyone's concerted effort and

contribution. Although this was more demanding for everyone, it also allowed people to practise skills, to experience themselves as useful and productive members of a collective, and to foster a sense of agency. Everyone's contribution to the programs and the existence of the Alcohol Centre strengthened the process of enskillment and emplacement which is foundational for a sense of being "at home in the world" (Jackson 1995). The Peel River Alcohol Centre became a home for the people who contributed evoking Jackson's sentiment that: "in the end, home is not a place that is given, but an experience born of what one makes of what is given, and the work is always before us of becoming "bosses for ourselves"." (Jackson 1995, 155). This is why the little institutional and financial support that the Alcohol Centre had did not matter for the people who were invested in it. They had created this place of existential mobility, healthful relationality, and a sense of existential control with their own ability to create and to know.

This existential control was attacked by the government's decision to integrate local addiction programs into Health and Social Services. By de-valuing the knowledge and skills the workers and volunteers had built and contributed over the years, this policy transformed what was perceived a "second home" into an institutionalized counselling service. Although the two well-trained counsellors who worked there after the integration were local and experienced people, the sense of emplacement and communally owned way of helping each other had been lost. With the expanding government bureaucracy and also the financial support that became available with the signing of the Comprehensive Land Claim, the premise of helping each other, sharing, and the strength in working and contributing was faced with a competing notion of work and knowledge measured in monetary terms. With that, volunteering started to become meaningful as exceptional – as work that is not rewarded financially but maintains ties to values of helping each other as from the past. Although, Fort McPherson is known as exemplary in its volunteerism, this process also put people at risk to experience "burn-out" as their efforts stand in contrast to other's work in light of these new measures of appreciation. The next chapter elaborates on present day volunteerism, its significance for recovery and renewal, as well as the continued negotiations for life on one's own terms that play out in its name.

Part III. “Doing good for oneself” – Change and Continuity in Present Articulations of Well-being and Ontological Security

Chapter 7

Volunteering, Working, and Being Busy

The band office is always busy: people are working at their desks, talking to community members about concerns or news, preparing events, cooking, baking, chatting and laughing. Everyone who steps into the building is welcome to help themselves to coffee, tea, and perhaps a meal. This building opens at 9 o'clock in the morning and often does not close until 9 in the evening. After regular office hours end at 5pm, various council and committee meetings or other events take place in the boardroom. The Teet'it Gwich'in Council meets every four weeks and so does the Elders Council. The Youth Committee meets regularly to discuss matters that affect young people, fundraise, support youth events, send members to conferences or meetings outside the region, and much more. Aside from these councils, the Renewable Resource Council, the Justice Committee, the Rat River Development Corporation Board, and the Peel River Watershed Committee are volunteer committees that meet regularly under the lead of an employed coordinator. Other committees outside the Teet'it Gwich'in Council government include the Hamlet Council, the Board of the Tl'oondih Healing Society, the Housing Board, Women's Wellness Committee, the Fort McPherson Radio Society, the Junior Canadian Rangers, and the Care Committee organizing events under the NOT US campaign. Many people are on several committees, as the small population has to support all local governance bodies.

Most council or committee meetings were accompanied by a meal as people would often come directly from work and be busy at the meetings into the late evening. Therefore, if a meeting was scheduled in the evening, a few women would take the time away from their work and cook for all committee members and visitors. I made a stop at the Band Office several times a week and always found a vibrant combination of busy deskwork, communication, cooking, and laughing. Almost every time, I was invited to have a meal or at least some coffee. Someone would walk by me and just say: “Eat!” and then “Eat some more!” Many times on Fridays, the women at the Band Office cooked a meal and invited Elders to come in, eat, and visit.

Others care for yet other areas of community life that would not be possible without the unpaid work of community members. Gladys and her sister, for example, volunteer much of

their time for the Anglican Church. They go in during the week to decorate the church, to polish the brass cups and plates for Holy Communion, have clothing and bake sales to fundraise for new stairs for the church or other necessities.

Fort McPherson is known as a leader in volunteerism in the Northwest Territories and community members consider this an important aspect of how they like to see their community represented to outsiders. In 2005 the Northwest Territories Literacy Council, the Native Women's Association of the NWT, and the YWCA of Yellowknife conducted research into volunteerism among Aboriginal communities in the north. The project chose Fort McPherson as a case study to "provide lessons about improving Aboriginal volunteer participation" (Auchterlonie 2005, 1). The study summarizes the work of twelve community groups, lists approximate volunteer numbers and hours per year for some of the groups. Among the volunteer activities mentioned are parent involvement at Aboriginal Head Start, the Fireworks Committee that raises funds for and organizes the New Years Celebrations every year with fireworks and bonfire, The Radio Society, the Volunteer Fire Department, Junior Canadian Rangers, volunteers for the Midway Lake Music Festival, The Tetlit Gwich'in Tourism Society, The Suicide Prevention team, the Women's Wellness Group, the Women's Auxilliary, the Youth Committee, and various sports groups. Key features of volunteerism in Fort McPherson according to this report include the strong role of women, which are said to constitute 75% of all volunteer leaders, a pronounced need to respond to local needs independently from government policy or funding, pride in the community's status as a leader in volunteerism, efficient communication of activities through radio programs, and a strong foundation in Gwich'in values of helping, sharing, and caring (Auchterlonie 2005, 7-10). Tensions were found to revolve around differences between paid and unpaid volunteer work (2005, 7-8). Many of these groups have become familiar to me through their radio shows on CBQM, the bake sales, bingos, and loony auctions, their workshops and events. Some, such as the Women's Auxilliary, had ceased to exist for the time being, and new ones, such as the Care Committee, were formed. Women continue to be at the forefront of the community volunteerism, although not exclusively. Men are active as sports coaches, as musicians for the many dances throughout the year, as committee members, and as providers of meat and fish for community festivities.

During my stay in the community I was amazed by the number of events that were happening in town. There were sport tournaments, volleyball and basketball training, snowshoe racing, canoe races, walking groups, yoga classes, baseball games, curling, even biathlons and

triathlons. Community members acted as coaches training kids in various sports, opening their houses for them to gather, or opening the doors to the gym or the recreation complex. People love to play games and laugh. Games nights for youth or adults were organized where people of all ages enjoyed competing in musical chairs, three-legged-race, egg and spoon race, balloon pop and many other funny games. There were sewing afternoons at the Youth and Elders Centre, film nights, and ladies' nights. Aside from these regular and common activities, there were large events to plan, such as the annual Midway Lake Music Festival or the Biennial International Gwich'in Gathering that Fort McPherson hosted in 2012.

At the end of the year until late January, around Christmas time, when the sun does not rise over the horizon and the community is in darkness for most of the day, many people find it harder to stay well. In my notebook, I wrote about how surprised I was to feel the effects of darkness myself. I felt tired, gloomy, and missed friends and family more than usual. Earlier in the fall, I had joined Liz Wright and her snowshoe racing team who trained for the Arctic Winter Games five times a week and, during these dark days, I felt that the daily snowshoe run during the couple of hours of dawn and dusk in the early afternoon contributed immensely to my sense of well-being. Community leaders are aware of how hard this time is for many and, therefore, ensure that an extra number of events is happening every day to keep people busy and involved. One highlight for example, is the annual Talent Show for which people from Old Crow and Aklavik come to town to compete with Teet'it Gwich'in in singing, playing the guitar, or fiddling. Another is the Christmas Concert at school for which kids rehearse and grandmothers sew new mukluks. The Band organizes an Elders Feast before Christmas, a women's feast on Christmas Day, a window-decorating contest, snow sculpture contest, house decorating contest, gingerbread house contest, a Santa parade, Crib tournament for Elders, and a "Turkey shoot" at the curling rink. There was even a biathlon between Christmas and New Year, with teams competed in running and snowshoeing. My plan on that day was to watch and videotape this competition, but one team was short a runner. So I was told to run and get my mukluks to participate in the snowshoeing part. Thanks to my exceptionally athletic teammate we won third price and proudly took CAD 100 home. Everyone who was involved left the event laughing and with a sense of well-being.

There is a substantive amount of literature on the positive impact of volunteering on individual well-being, a discussion of which would go far beyond the scope of this thesis. Most of

the research in this area has been done in the fields of psychology or sociology and interprets results in terms of established theoretical constructs of the respective discipline. Thoits and Hewitt (2001) show that individuals with a stronger sense of well-being are more likely to be involved in volunteering. In turn, their volunteer work further enhanced aspects of well-being such as life satisfaction, happiness, self-esteem, sense of control, physical health, and depression. A study with older adults who suffered diminished well-being as a consequence of an absence of identity-forming social roles showed that volunteering served as a protective factor for individuals with decreasing role identities against experiencing a decrease of sense of purpose in life (Greenfield and Marks, 2004). Using a large sample of Australian participants Meller et al. (2009) found support for the proposal that volunteering is beneficial for people's sense of well-being and that this positive relationship remains even if other factors associated with improved well-being are accounted for. Weinstein and Ryan (2010) demonstrate that autonomous motivation for helping behavior is crucial to a positive effect on well-being.

In Fort McPherson, volunteering is generally associated with people living a healthy lifestyle. Not only do 'healthy' people volunteer and volunteering is seen as a 'healthy' activity, but becoming involved with volunteering is also seen as a marker for a person's recovery and healing. An Elder, Eileen Koe, explained it this way: "All that helping each other and doing things for free like at the Treaty Day, that's all well-being." (08/09/2011).

The reasons people give for why they volunteer are varied. For some a personal tragedy, such as being bereaved through suicide or suffering from addiction, has motivated them to invest their time and effort into helping others in similar situations. Others explain their volunteering by statements such as "it makes you feel good" (N. Francis, 27/05/2012), "I like to be busy" (G. Neyando, 06/06/2012), or "I'm happy if I feel like I could do it" (G. Vaneltsi, 14/04/2012). Volunteering in Fort McPherson is seen as a sure sign of someone "doing good for themselves", of becoming a healthy person living a positive life as a community member. Health in this local context comprises much more than physical health, indeed, someone with a serious medical condition could still be referred to as living a healthy life. As extensively described in the literature on indigenous ideas of health, well-being is constituted of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health that comprises a person within his or her community as well as the land, animals, and water (Adelson 2000; Waldram, Herring and Kue Young 2007). The same is true for Teet'it Gwich'in who often emphasized the need to attend equally to physical, mental, and

spiritual health. Doing good for oneself then simultaneously means doing good for others as well since the relational aspect of health is crucial for a personal sense of well-being.

How do people explain the role that volunteering plays in their experience of renewal and recovery from crisis or suffering? What are the various ways that volunteering contributes to such a comprehensive sense of well-being? Why do Elders lament the decrease of volunteering while the community appears so busy with volunteered activities and events?

In the following I will describe some of the volunteer activities I came to know in the community in more detail, particularly the groups concerned with individual or community well-being. I will introduce some of the volunteer leaders and explore how they relate volunteering with well-being and “doing good for oneself”. The examples I chose are varied and illustrate the nuances of volunteering that range from unpaid assistance in community events or involvement in community governance to the creation of informal groups, to assisting people in need, to the pooling together of resources in times of suffering. Using these episodes I suggest that volunteering is a decisive, yet ambiguous, narrative in Fort McPherson that at once signifies an individual’s status as a healthy, good person to the community, the community’s capacity to respond to local needs independently from public funding, as well as a normative discourse of helping one another in a community that consists of close kin. Above all, however, I argue that volunteering offers individuals a conceptual framework to move and become actively engaged with their environment to shape their own and their family’s lives. For community leaders, the emphasis on volunteering provides them with a narrative that places communal practices of helping in a larger political discourse of healthy community life and exemplary citizenship, which fosters a sense of continued relevance of the “Gwich’in way of life”. While, historically, helping each other has been an integral part of Teet’it Gwich’in lives (Stephenson 2001), and volunteerism as a local discourse developed in the 1970’s through individuals who were driven by personal transformational experiences to help others, today it has become meaningful as a means of keeping busy, becoming enskilled, as well as experiencing a sense of agency and purpose within the community.

Fundraising

Volunteering and fundraising go hand in hand and the people of Fort McPherson fundraise like world champions. Bingo is very popular as an evening activity, and it is also one of the main sources of funding for events. Bingo finances the fireworks on New Year's Eve, it raises funds for the activities of National Addiction Awareness Week, for the Midway Lake Music Festival, for sports teams to travel to competitions out of town, for special youth events, and more. Without Bingo many events would not be possible. People raise money for families in crisis through loony auctions, bake sales, cakewalks, dinner sales, or by selling tickets for a draw. The yearly Peel River Jamboree is financed exclusively by competing teams selling tickets for draws almost every day, except for Sunday, for a couple of months. If there is a death in the community volunteers will put on a radio show to collect money for the funeral and call for volunteers to help cook for the feast. People call in and put their name down to prepare food, they drive to the radio station to drop off their donations, and in their homes women start cooking food for the family and all the visitors until the day of the funeral.

On my fourth day in the community, Mary Ross who is a councillor at the Tl'ooondih Healing Society invited me to volunteer. Understanding life in the community is intrinsically tied to being part of things, to being involved, to volunteer. As I knew from previous research in the North and from reviewing the literature on Dene ways of knowing, learning is inherently experiential. This premise is so important for researchers coming to Fort McPherson that Peter Loovers made it the title of his dissertation "You have to live it" (2010). On my fourth day in town, not knowing anything about either "Bingo" or "Nevadas", I was helping out with it – and I learned. That same day, I bought my first tickets, one dollar each, from a young woman who was going around volunteering to fundraise. The first prize was a box full of meat. This was the first of hundreds of these fundraisers that I witnessed and participated in during the one year of my stay. Kids would stop people on the road and sell tickets; people would go from house to house, from office to office. They would advertise their draw over the radio and even deliver the tickets to people's houses. The causes of these fundraisers would always be worthy of support, especially knowing that without everyone's contribution the basketball team, for example, would not be able to go to Yellowknife to compete, young athletes would not be able to go to the Arctic Winter Games, or a family would not be able to afford to stay with their ill relatives in a southern city as long as they are in the hospital. Most popular were prizes such as meat, especially bags of everyone's favorite snack dry meat, gallons of gas, hand made crafts such as

fur mittens or beaded cardholders. As time went by and I learned to appreciate the warmth and comfort of traditional clothing and started to enjoy sewing and beading, I found myself excitedly competing with other women at a loony auction for material for a parka. One day during the fundraiser marathon leading up to the Peel River Jamboree I was the lucky winner of a beautifully beaded cardholder. Winning prizes, however, never appears to be the sole motivating principle in joining these gambling activities. Rather, it was a reason to gather and socialize, an occasion to enjoy playful competition, and a sense of shared responsibility to make the things happen that groups were planning for the benefit of many. What I wrote in my journal on a Friday evening in January is representative of many other evenings in the community:

I was dropped of at CBQM where the Nevada and Bingo sale was in full swing. Three people were volunteering to sell sheets and tickets and I stepped in to help with the Nevadas. Another young women was there as well selling tickets for her draw later that night. She and a friend of hers are one of the competing couples for King and Queen of the Peel River Jamboree. Also some girls from the basketball team with their coach Les Blake were there selling tickets to fundraise for their tournament in Yellowknife. They were talking about having a bake sale on Tuesday, so I offered to bake something for that. Nevadas were sold out soon enough. Bingo was over and tickets were drawn for the prizes. So many prizes go out like that every day. Money and things are constantly moving. What otherwise is called gambling, with a connotation of negativity and addiction, in Fort McPherson is always towards making a community activity possible and people don't think twice about contributing their money.

(field notes, 13/01/2012)

Gambling and fundraising exist in a symbiosis that, on one hand, might create difficulties where considerable parts of a family's income and parents' time goes to playing bingo, on the other hand, however, it allows community members to realize many of their ideas without dependence on public funding and within a timeframe that fits local circumstances. Gambling was mentioned as problematic during a few workshops where community well-being was discussed, nevertheless, Bingos, casino nights, and draws are enjoyed by many recreationally and are crucial as a means to finance events and activities that benefit many.

CBQM

When Mary Ross advised me to volunteer and be involved in the community on my fourth day in Fort McPherson, she also invited me to help during her weekly radio program on Thursday morning. Since 1981 the people of Fort McPherson run the volunteer radio station CBQM. In the

mornings from ten to twelve community organizations, such as the Teet'it Gwich'in Council, Chief Julius School, the Social Workers, the RCMP, the Health Centre, or Mary Ross for the T'oodih Healing Society, put on programs that include information about services, upcoming events, or community concerns, good old time country tunes, gospel music on Sundays, or the very popular Elvis Presley. In the afternoons, volunteers operate the radio for music, greetings, and information. The evenings, except for Wednesday and Sunday, are reserved for Bingo over the radio. Sometimes, on special occasions such as the CBQM anniversary or the Peel River Jamboree, the program is extended until the early morning hours and broadcast over the Internet.

Community members of all ages are listening in their houses, at work, in their cars on the roads in the vicinity of the community, or in their cabins on the land and at 8 Miles. There are birthday greetings, well wishes for ill people, updates on programs or travel, good morning greetings, jokes and more. Ideally, two people work the station during each program. One selects the music, works the controls, and announces messages and another person answers the flood of phone calls for greetings and information. Mary Ross, as a councillor for the T'oodih Healing Society, took great care to speak to the community about mental health and how to better take care of one's own well-being. She did programs on depression, suicide prevention, and on bullying among others.

When CBQM goes online for an anniversary, the Jamboree, or other special occasions relatives and friends from all over the country can listen in and send their messages. After I left the community, listening to CBQM online and perhaps phoning long-distance to greet some of the friends and Elders keeps me connected to the community and the way of being I was familiar with during my stay. These days are very exciting. Many people use the chance to show their continued belonging to the community and phone in from as far as Florida or Alaska. On such days CBQM broadcasts all day long until the late night hours. A few young men started to take care of these night shifts and played some classic rock to the taste of the younger people in town. Soon they started bringing in their guitars and singing songs themselves. The "Frankie and Herby Show" was a huge success. The young man who led through these late night programs, Frank Stewart, played an important role in motivating other young men to start volunteering for the radio. By springtime 2012, these late night live-music shows were a regular entertainment, often until the early morning hours.

Christmas 2011 was another occasion when CBQM was online and broadcast longer hours than usual. Elders phoned in to tell stories of the Old Days, greetings poured in from near and far, and the announcers joked and laughed to invoke a sense of community and a festive mood for their listeners. On Christmas Day, after a fun-filled evening of playing Indian Bingo with Mary Ross and her family, she and her friend Betty went to CBQM to take over the program until midnight. They asked me to join them and I gladly accepted. The phone rang continuously as people were keen to wish their friends and family a Merry Christmas. The women cracked one joke after another and we laughed and laughed.

CBQM occupies a central role in community life. Essentially, it is an effective means to communicate between community organizations and community members and between individuals. When I expressed my interest to learn about the community and become involved, I was told to listen to CBQM. I did and within a few days I had opportunities to call in and sign up to volunteer for something. CBQM has become an important symbol of what community leaders and members regard as their strengths: it is operated by volunteers, the participation of a variety of community organizations and government services reflect leaders' vision of integrated, problem-oriented services, it offers the means to quickly collect resources from all community members to respond to crisis situations, much of the fundraising efforts happen with the help of CBQM, the announcers play the music that Teet'it Gwich'in identify with and reflect local values by playing Gospel music when families in town are mourning. Moreover, CBQM offers a space for young people to engage in useful work that is fun for themselves and appreciated by others.

Death and Funerals

When someone in the community passes away the news spread quickly. Gladys would immediately pick up the phone and inform her family members and friends of sad news. In winter 2012, the respected Elder and one of the last snowshoe-makers, Robert Francis, passed away. That Sunday I went to Elizabeth Colin and she was already making bread, buns, and bannock. She said she saw the Elder, who usually "takes things over" when someone passes, drive up to the family's house. Elizabeth recalled how this man arranged everything when her son died, and by the time she arrived at her house he was already cooking, people were eating, and food was coming in from everywhere. Now she made buns for Bernice, Robert Francis' wife.

It is the women's job to provide food for a family in mourning. From the time the news arrives in the community until the funeral ceremony, their house will be open for everyone to visit and eat. In the meantime, the men in the community will take turns and dig the grave. In the winter, when the ground is frozen, this is extremely difficult work and can take days to complete. On my way home, I went by the store to pick up ingredients so I could bake something to take to Bernice's house. On the stairs to the Co-op I met Vicky who walked out with things to make lemon and poppy seed loaves for Bernice. Inside the store, the manager was already filling a box of food to support the mourning family. When I arrived at Gladys's house, I phoned Dorothy who informed me that when something like this happens "you don't go anywhere or do stuff, you stay put" (19/02/2012). So I did, I stayed at the house, made carrot loaves and crumble cake for the family and listened to CBQM. The next day, Monday morning, I went to the Band Office. Here the women were busy cooking and baking for the mourning family as well. I sat down to have coffee and listened to the stories of two Elders who spend their morning there drinking tea and socializing. In the evening, I picked up Elizabeth Colin and we walked down to Bernice Francis's house. The house was filled with people paying their respects to the late Robert Francis, eating and talking, an Elder was cooking. At times, some people had tears in their eyes, but overall the conversations were light and cheerful. People told each other good memories and stories. The women from the Band office had made baked spaghetti and sandwiches. There was goose soup and bannock, a platter of Vicky's cake, and a lot more to eat. Bernice was telling stories about how she thought Robert was the most handsome man and everyone smiled. Diane Koe had written a beautiful poem on how Robert Francis left tracks in the snow through all the snowshoes he had made. Elizabeth explained to me that there would be no feast after this funeral because, in his lifetime, Robert Francis had shied away from big crowds and enjoyed a quiet life. People remarked on how nice that was: just like they did long ago, just quiet, lots to eat at the house but otherwise quiet. There was an album with family photographs that people flipped through. After an hour or two, Elizabeth and I made our way back and I followed her into her house to see the progress she had made on her quilt. At home, I turned on CBQM. Two women were leading a donation program collecting money for the funeral. Lots of people phoned in and donated for the family. Two days later, the donations as well as the visiting at the family's house were still going strong. I went up town to donate myself and then joined the women from the Band office to go have lunch at Bernice's house. Again, many people were gathered there, eating, and looking at the family photographs. People were telling stories,

chatting with each other, and laughing. The little grandson was the centre of attention. Later that day the funeral service was conducted at the Recreation Complex. The hall was packed with more people than seats. Many had arrived from neighboring communities to attend the service. Relatives and friends went to the front to read poems or tell stories. Most of them were funny memories, “he liked to tease and he made people laugh”. On our way home, Elizabeth Colin reflected on this funeral and said that it was good that people laughed nowadays. It did not used to be that way. Funerals used to be so serious and sad, nobody could laugh. Kids had to be quiet and stay inside, nobody would be on the road. They also never had a feast after the service, as is usually the case today, until about twenty years ago. Everyone used to wear black, now it does not matter what people wear.

Later that evening, I went to a friend’s house and we also talked about the funeral. She agreed with what Elizabeth had said and explained that the feast, the laughter, the stories were a new development. She prefers how funerals are done today, “it is a celebration of their going home”. Her husband remembered a story he had heard about a family in the old days. They lived about 40 miles down the river and their mother died. They came up the Peel to Fort McPherson with their dogs, buried her, and the next day they went back: “Life goes on, you couldn’t stop, you had to keep working.” (field notes, 22/02/2012).

While the work associated with death and funerals is sometimes referred to as volunteering in the community, the process is very different from helping at community events or programs. When someone passes away, people “just know what to do”: women will start cooking, someone will take charge of the food that comes into the house and needs preparing, men will go hunting for the feast, other men will start digging the grave, someone will go on CBQM and collect donations for the funeral, the family will open their house for visitors and start preparing for the feast, staff and leaders at the band office will postpone any events or meetings until after the funeral, announcers at CBQM will play gospel music, and people will visit the family’s house to show their respect. As a concerted community effort funerals are made bearable and the relatives of the deceased are embedded in caring community relations. This is not merely a common feature of small town life, but particular to Teet’it Gwich’in. Many people told me how lucky they considered themselves to live in a community such as Fort McPherson where all these things are done unasked for and how surprised they were that other communities had to hire and pay someone to have a grave made for example. In my experience, as much as this practice can be seen as the continuation of the historically documented

tendency of Teet'it Gwich'in to draw together in times of crisis (Slobodin 1962, 70), it first reaffirms the bereaved family's embeddedness in communal relationships and, second, pre-structures a way of keeping busy and engaged in meaningful work for everyone affected by the death.

Wellness Volunteering

In September 2011, I turned on CBQM as usual in the morning to listen to what was going on in town. Hazel Nerysoo, the community's mayor at the time and known for her dedication to suicide prevention and first aid, was speaking about a Mental Health First Aid Program that was being developed by the Government of the Northwest Territories. Hazel has been working for years to improve mental health programming and to make it more relevant for northern communities. That day, two consultants were in the community inviting people to share their ideas and concerns during one afternoon and one evening meeting. On the radio, Hazel expressed her concern that mental health problems are still a taboo topic in the community while they are a reality for many individuals in town (field notes 22/09/2011). To lead by example, she shared her own experience and spoke about how her commitment to improving mental health started when 38 years ago her brother committed suicide.

In the afternoon I went to the Hamlet Chambers where the meeting was happening. Aside from the two consultants there were several women who either worked in a health related position, or had a lifetime of volunteer experiences, or both. There was Elizabeth Colin, Mary Teya who is one of the deacons, former community health representative, and member of the Concerned Citizen Committee, Jane Charlie and Ida Stewart, both Elders who are available for people to talk to in times of difficulties, Hannah Alexie who is a deacon at church, one community nurse, one wellness worker from the Tl'oondih Healing Society, and the community coordinator from the Band Office. The consultants explained the program, which provides training for in-town mental health first aid instructors who then prepare community members to recognize mental health issues and give first response assistance. After introducing the program, the consultants asked the group to identify the issues that were most relevant with regards to mental health in the community. One of the first things that the women mentioned was the enormous amount of grieving and mourning in the community as so many people passed away with cancer. Others mentioned that very few people do all the work in the

community and, consequently, suffer from “burn-out”. Other, more obvious, problems included alcohol and drug abuse and especially the issue of bootlegging where some individuals charge extremely high prices for alcohol and take advantage of others’ addictions. Aside from these, there were also structural issues mentioned, such as the insecurity of year-to-year program funding. For example, 2011 was the last year of a multi-year agreement to fund the Tl’oondih mental health worker position. After that no one could say with any certainty if this position could be maintained.

After the women shared their main concerns, the discussion went on to examples of good practices as well as needs to improve the situation. The ideas that were brought up were as varied as the women who took part in this workshop and as diverse as the situations people deal with. The suggestions revolved around themes such as healthy relationships, working on the land, grieving, and policy. Elizabeth Colin, for example, drew on her experience at the Alcohol Centre. She emphasized that this program used to be available “24/7”, there was always somebody there to listen without judgment. However, this intense work put the counsellors at the centre at risk to suffer “burn-out”. She suggests that while this kind of care in the community is needed, especially for people after a suicide attempt or after they come back from addiction treatment, the caregivers and leaders also need support. Someone else added that as long as the “resource people” (nurses, teachers, RCMP) are not involved in this discussion, there is not much that can be done. Another woman responded by saying that the community depends too much on these people, because the ability to decide for themselves and their responsibility was taken away from them through colonial policies such as residential schools. Mary Teya remembered how she and other women in the 1970’s were strong enough to stop drinking, how they took on responsibility, and became “instant counsellors”. Today, she said, the community is still dealing with these problems. Elders are always there to talk and to listen, but they have nowhere to go to get help themselves, that is why so many Elders get sick. She said, just because these Elders made positive changes in their lives, everyone else saw them as stronger. As a result, it is always the same group of people who talk, get involved, and try to do something. At this point, one of the women asked: “Where are the men?” (22/09/2011).

Hannah Alexie turned the conversation to remembering how it was when she grew up. She remembered what made her a strong person. She said they used to have lots of fun with their dog teams in the winter, travelling by boat in the summer, and helping their parents. It was still OK in the 1960’s, she remembered, however as soon as the 1970’s things started to get

worse. Now, she said, people do not communicate with each other. They used to be close; when someone had a fire outside everyone could come and join. Now people get charged if they have a fire outside. There is the Midway Music Festival where people live close to each other, visit, and share food but it is only once a year. Only a few people still go for berries and many children are not part of it. The women in the group agreed. Mary Teya remembered how her parents lived: they were travelling all day, then set the camp, and then held a service. Elders who lived this life would often reach their high 90's or live to more than 100 and still be active: "just busy from getting up until they go to sleep, forever moving around." Hannah Alexie added: "They ate fresh meat and fish everyday, so their bones were thick. They never fell down and broke their bones. Now, the food you eat – you fall and you break a bone right away. Berry picking too, no matter how old, they would go down the river and pick berries." (22/09/2011).

When the consultants asked how the Mental Health First Aid Course could be made relevant and effective, the first answer was: "Get them involved and do things!" (E. Colin 22/09/2011). A younger woman added that people with mental health problems have to be more out on the land, there is better "focus", less distraction, and life is "more positive" (22/09/2011). Elizabeth concluded: "Our *own* people should be doing it, because they will be here and stay, not an outside counsellor. Out on the land makes people feel good, they look after each other, they laugh, and do things for themselves." (22/09/2011, original emphasis).

Then the women spoke about death and how everyone in the community has their role: some would act as counsellors, others would start to prepare the meals, and men would start to dig graves. In the case of suicide, however, a small group of women does all the work. They take care of everything. Sometimes they are called upon to go to other communities to help with these difficult situations. One woman, who had been involved in suicide prevention and response for many years, added: "No one in Yellowknife should make rules for what we have to do". Then the conversation turned to youth and the women admired young people in the community for how good they are with sports and at dancing. Also, they were happy that young people still like to fish and that they continue the practice of sharing their catch with Elders. In fall, at night, they go and make a hole in the creek and jig for loche³⁶, a fish that is mainly caught for its big liver. They come home with a big load of fish and give it all out to other people. Sometimes at midnight somebody would come and ask if they want loche. There was much pride and joy in the women's faces that the skill of fishing and the importance of sharing

³⁶ Burbot

were still alive among young people. Then they told the story of the time when the community powerhouse caught fire. I had heard this story before and it seemed like one of the favorite stories in town. Years ago, the powerhouse burned down leaving the community without electricity for several days. The women recalled: "Everybody was running around helping the Elders. Soon enough there would be pipes sticking out the window because people would bring in wood stoves to heat up the houses. People had only candles and they would take care of each other." (22/09/2011). One woman said laughingly that she did not want the power to come on ever again because it was so nice.

Many more stories were told that evening, all of them in a kind and funny way. There was no doubt in me that Gwich'in women like to laugh. Everyone agreed that this meeting had gone very well and that they would like to sit together like this more often, share stories, and laugh. Regardless of what the two consultants took away from this workshop, the women seemed to be reassured that Gwich'in people in Fort McPherson have been living well and healthy based on their own strength in the past and that they will be able to do so again. Indeed, their own control over how and what to do, as a community, as families, and as individuals, is key for the effectiveness of the help that can be provided to people who suffer. Doing things, working on the land, practicing skills, sharing it with others, eating together and visiting is what kept people strong and what these women felt is needed to improve mental health in the community today.

One of the examples that the women mentioned during this workshop was the support that local women such as Mary Teya, Mary Ross, and Hazel Nerysoo offer to families dealing with suicide or individuals at risk for suicide. I learned more about this volunteer group during a suicide prevention workshop as well as an interview with Hazel Nerysoo. The three women offered this workshop in January 2012 in hopes of motivating the younger generation to take a more active role in suicide prevention. On a Thursday morning, I met Mary Teya at the radio station. She was speaking about the health dangers of smoking during the morning program. Before her program, we had a chat and, with a smile on her face, she told me how tired she was. She had been called upon to do so many things. Her role in the community was such that people relied on her expertise for workshops, meetings, decisions, to solve a crisis, and much more. She said she was glad that I was documenting all the things that are done in the community so that young people have something to go by. She invited me to come to the suicide prevention

workshop to learn how the community responds in such cases. At six o'clock in the evening I went to the Tetlich Building where the workshop was held. Mary Ross and Hazel Nerysoo were the facilitators. Both had attended counselling training in Hay River and had years of experience working with suicidal individuals. They wanted to reach out to youth, not only so that they could one day take over the difficult work these women were doing, but also to give them the tools to recognize when their peers slipped into suicidal thinking. Mary Teya was there to share her experiences having been bereaved by suicide and tending to people at risk for suicide. There were six participants, all of them young women. The workshop started out with "ground rules", reminding everyone to speak respectfully, followed by a clarification of "right and wrong beliefs" about suicide. Then Hazel spoke about the history of suicide in the community. I wrote in my notebook:

She said that from 1973 – 2011 there had been about twenty suicides, mostly men, and most, except for two, under the influence of alcohol. The very first one was Hazel's and Mary's brother. It was a huge shock, nobody had ever heard of suicide in the community before. Hazel doubted that the word "suicide" was known. The priest didn't allow the funeral to be in the church because he said suicide was a sin. It was only for Mary Teya, who spoke to the priest about it explaining that it is up to God alone to judge, that funerals for suicides were held at the church. But for this first one, the shame about suicide being a sin added tremendously to the pain of the family about their loss. Mary Ross shared how she had felt angry over her brother's suicide and later, when other suicides followed over the years, she had the feeling that he had started it all. Hazel talked about her nephew's suicide attempt. They had taken him to the nurse who worked in the community's health station at the time. She had looked at him for five minutes and decided that he was OK. That made the women so angry since a proper assessment should have included questioning the family and much more, but his nurse just didn't bother. This was the time when Hazel and Mary decided to do something about it.

(field notes 12/01/2012)

In 1983 a consultant from a reserve in Ontario came to the community and held a workshop on suicide prevention. She talked about how she set up a program in her community and got everyone involved. She invited Mary Teya and others to her community to see how it worked. Upon their return to Fort McPherson, Mary Teya, Hazel Nerysoo, Mary Ross, and others started the "Concerned Persons Committee". Women and men met once a month to talk and organize events for the community. They brought food, played games, and created a network of volunteers. They collected everyone's telephone numbers on a public list so that people could call them at any time if they needed someone to talk to. This list is periodically updated and is posted in every public building in the community.

Mary Teya emphasized how they “just did it” independently from government funding, “you don’t need dollars for it”, she said. Then she recalled how life used to be and the changes she went through in her lifetime. She was brought up on the land and lived there until 1963. Then they moved to the community and she had to go to residential school. The family still went for wood with their dog team and hauled ice for drinking water. They lived in their own log house consisting of two rooms: one room to cook and eat, and one room to sleep. Everyone slept together, everyone ate together. There was so much family interaction. But things changed, she said, when government housing came and everyone had their own space to go to. Stores opened up where people could simply buy the things they need. Everything became easy. She said, that at first it looked like things were getting better but then it actually got worse. Then there was a time when the town was “really ruled by alcohol”. She remembered how she saw it in her children’s eyes that they slowly lost their love and respect for their mother when she was drinking. That is when she stopped and, as she expressed it, took her power and her responsibility back as a woman, a mother, and a wife. And this she would like to see the younger people do: to take back their power and responsibility and not depend on help from outside the community: “Get to know who your ancestors were, what they were able to do, then you will be OK, you’ll be OK.” (M. Teya, 12/01/2012).

Hazel has been at the forefront of volunteer suicide prevention and response in the community and at the territorial level. She received the Gwich’in Nation Community Service Award in 2000, the 2001 Award of the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, the Wise Woman Award of the Status of Women Council of the Northwest Territories, and the Northwest Territories’ Volunteer Award for Suicide Prevention for the community in 2004. Almost ten years after she lost her brother to suicide and after returning home from her training as a counsellor in Hay River, she joined the Concerned Persons Committee that was founded by Mary Teya, Eileen Koe, Hazel’s grandmother, and others (H. Nerysoo, 05/06/2012). At this time, the group came together once a month and chose two or three of them to be on stand-by for the month. Anyone who was concerned about a person could phone them and they would go and talk to the person or their family. Later she continued her education and took a one-year course at the Dene Cultural Institute in Hay River. During this course she became involved with the development of a suicide prevention curriculum. In the 1980’s the Legislative Assembly had become very concerned about the high rates of suicide and organized regional forums to listen to local people. A large forum was held in Rankin Inlet (when Nunavut was still part of the

Northwest Territories) and they were working on a northern curriculum. Eventually, the Dene Cultural Institute was chosen to finalize a three-week suicide prevention curriculum taking the ideas and views from the forum into account. Hazel was asked to pilot this course in Fort McPherson. In 1996 she delivered the three-week course at the T'oonidih Healing Camp, 20 miles up the Peel River, to a large group of people from all over the north. The course first focused on everyone's own experiences with suicide, unresolved emotions, and grief. Even though this was 23 years after she had lost her brother, Hazel realized that it was still hard on her. During an interview with me about her volunteering she said:

You know, I lost a brother in 1973 and that was the first suicide I ever knew of, here in the community, and I had a lot of issues around it – because of the *shame* and, you know, I remember when that happened I used to wonder, you know, what's wrong with our family? At the time, the minister wouldn't allow us to bring the body into the church; we had to have the funeral outside. There is a whole bunch of issues around it, you know, that sort of prolonged grieving. Anyway, I remember that I dealt with it, dealt with his death but when I finished [sharing about her own grieving at the workshop], there is such a big group, they moved along to others and - I felt that I wasn't, I wasn't finished with it yet, I still had issues and I was, you know, I was so fortunate that I had this connection with the instructor that I was able to say "You know I'm not finished yet, I need to do more." And I was able to do that before we left there.

(H. Nerysoo, 05/06/2012)

In her perspective, this personal element in the curriculum and the focus on healing one's own grief before moving on to helping others is what made this northern curriculum so effective. During the three weeks of the training program participants addressed their own painful experiences and then practised how to deal with other people's suffering through role playing and sharing circles:

[...] and you know people say it's long but when you're gonna help someone you need to get really comfortable with it – and that's what three weeks do. You have to be comfortable before you move on to the next stage and you go in and you deal with your own issues. You work around intervention and then you look at prevention and strategic planning for your community: how are you going to do it, who is going to be involved, what are you going to build on.

(H. Nerysoo, 05/06/2012)

Six women from Fort McPherson took this first training: Hazel, Mary Teya, Louisa Kay, Edna Alexie, Ida Stewart, and Sharon Snowshoe – to this day, most of them are actively involved in promoting community well-being one way or the other. Hazel emphasized that one of the most important things that this group worked out as their community strategy was to establish cooperation with the RCMP and the nurses at the Health Centre. Again, this insight was based

on the women's own experience. Hazel explained what she had witnessed happening to one young man:

[He] was suicidal and he was next door at my parent's place, he had taken a gun and he went into the bush and it was pitch dark. One of my nephews came and went back and after a while brought him. I had called the RCMP and that was the hardest thing seeing him being taken away by that RCMP. And I told them at that time, I said "You know, I want him to be assessed before you release him." Well, the next day they brought him in the Health Centre and someone from there maybe spent five, ten minutes with him, and said that he's OK. I was so *hurt* thinking how come they didn't talk to me, how come they didn't ask me, like what's going on or if there is any issues at home or anything like that, you know, someone from out of the community that doesn't even know him, doesn't even know his background, doesn't even know if he did that before, like they can just come in and say that he's OK? [...] After we got that training that was one of the first jobs was to work with the RCMP, work with the Health Centre and say "Look, we *have* this training, we could come in, we could assess people that are suicidal", you know, we do a better job than someone transient in the community who doesn't know the family or the background. So we were able to do that, we were able to set something up, we educated through the radio, we held events at the complex, educating the people, at the school, wherever we could get into we did. We worked hard and lots of times we were called, lots of times we were at the Health Centre and the RCMP. We were there when people had taken pills and were there during the process they had to go through and seeing them off at the airport, being at the airport with them when they're getting medivaced. (H. Nerysoo, 05/06/2012)

Sitting in her office during our interview, I asked Mrs. Nerysoo what it was that kept her going in difficult times. Her answer speaks of the importance of having a sense of agency, a place of one's own creation – out on the land, and of maintaining a balance between working for oneself and for others:

You know with my work here – I deal with people and I *always* want to see changes, a good outcome of things. You know, I think, some people in the last ten years that I've worked with have made those changes. I no longer see them, or if I do see them come here, it's just for a little chitchat or whatever. [...] you know at one time, Thea, I used to think you know all those problems we had here, you know when is the government going to come in and help us. And one day, I thought: No! Whatever is happening here is our problem, it's nobody else's, it's *us* who have to work to get things better in this community. And I always believe that if we want change we have to make changes ourselves. The government doesn't know what we need, the answers are here in our own community. You know, it's springtime now, the ferry is in [the river] and I just look forward to going up to my camp, spending time there. And every weekend, if I could, I'd be out there, just enjoying that. You know as a child I never had the opportunity to go on the land, or if I went with somebody else, it wasn't for very long periods of time, like my friends, they'd go out for the whole summer and now that I have a little place of my own – I love it out there. (H. Nerysoo, 05/06/2012)

A few days later we all came together again for the second part of the workshop. One younger woman mentioned that, since the last time we met, she had heard five people talk about suicide. Hazel said that there indeed was an attempt. The main focus of this gathering was to think about the positive things that are already available in the community or that can be done to help. A lot of things were brought up: the wellness and recreation workers, the volunteer committee, and all the volunteers who coach kids in sports. People wanted to see more youth involvement in these workshops and one young man, who came to this gathering for the first time, mentioned on-the-land programs. Then people shared much of their own experiences with friends who had been suicidal or had actually taken their lives. In the evening, Elizabeth Colin phoned me, she had been trying to reach me all day. We talked for quite a while and I told her about the workshop. So she told me about how it was when she started out with the Alcohol Centre and how hard it was back then when she had nobody to talk to. (Field notes 22/01/2012). The Thursday after this workshop, Mary Teya went on CBQM again to report back to the community on what they had done during the workshop.

These episodes illustrate yet another type of volunteering in the community. In the case of the Peel River Alcohol Centre, the experience of which Elizabeth Colin refers to in her comments, and the Concerned Persons Committee are peer counselling initiatives that originated in the founding members' personal experiences of suffering with an affliction or tragedy. The women see their work in line with the life of their parents whose long working hours and constant busyness is thought of as explaining their health and longevity. Keeping busy with purposeful work that fosters enskillment and emplacement within the community is what Elizabeth Colin knew was decisive for people struggling to recover from alcoholism. The success of the Alcohol Centre where people who had sobered up became involved in peer counselling and everyone contributed to its programs suggests how crucial such meaningful engagement in communal work is for restoring a sense of well-being and existential security. This is why "get them involved and do things" is her advice for what is needed to improve mental health programming. What matters is the experience of mobility and the shift from being acted upon to acting and governing one's own life. The liberty to imagine such a program and realizing it in practical, creative work is the foundation for experiencing oneself as whole and alive for both, volunteers and clients of healing programs. Government interventions and regulations interfere with exactly this existential need to "do things for oneself". Volunteering, thus, takes on

additional meanings of resistance against the extension of government control over the structure and method of healing programs and, in opposition to bureaucratic and policy demands, reaffirms a sense of agency and collective autonomy.

At this point, it becomes clearer why the narrative of volunteerism has become the centre of the community's self-representation towards others. Before the extension of Health and Social Services into local healing initiatives and family life, helping each other was a normative practice that was part of being Gwich'in. However, these ways of helping and responding to needs were experienced as being de-valued by the establishment of government services and conventional wellness counselling. When people started speaking of their helping work in terms of volunteering, the legitimacy of their contribution to their own and others' well-being was at stake. The discourse of volunteering offered a strategy to frame Gwich'in ways of helping in a language that is acknowledged and legitimized in the larger society's discourse of a functional community. While the personal initiation of volunteering, peer counselling, or helping out is a kinesthetic strategy to achieve a sense of agency and governance in one's own life, adopting the discourse of volunteering appears to be a strategic narrative transformation of the threat of nullification of local life ways through government interventions.

However, this shift to framing helping as volunteering also had other, less beneficial side effects. This linguistic shift, along with the establishment of paid wellness positions, moved the helping act from being a normal aspect of relationality in the community to a position in between "just helping" and employment. Comparison between the work of a volunteer and the work of a paid counsellor or health care provider engendered a sense of deficit, then a sense of injustice, and perhaps even resentment towards those who received an income through their work. One worker of a healing program that is financed partially through government funding but is administrated through the Teet'it Gwich'in Council, expressed a common sentiment: "The Peel River Alcohol Society was run by a board. Now that [it] is changed to government positions, It just spoiled it. Me up here is not a government position, part of it is government funding, but I can be called on 24/7 [...]. I try to carry on the tradition but not everybody takes part in that." (09/11/2012).

Another problematic effect of the emergence of volunteerism as an important aspect of collective identity is that a large amount of volunteer work is done by a relatively small group of people. Further, not all events are attended by a lot of community members. Sometimes, people's efforts are disappointed when only a handful people come out to participate. One

woman who was involved in preparing several events for National Addiction Awareness Week said, “attendance is a problem”. When I went to different workshops concerning well-being or healing, I saw largely the same group of women who attended, who spoke up, and who set the tone and topic of the event. Some of these women expressed how tired they were trying to accommodate so many obligations in their lives. Many of the most active volunteers also had jobs in the community, all of them had family and children. Some used the label “burn-out” to give their experience a name. Trying to be involved in the community, I started to feel what a commitment it is for many of the women in town to maintain this high level of activity, events, and fundraising. My desire was to be out on the land, this was where well-being is, where, according to many, people feel safe and well and healthy. But it was in town where people are suffering, so most of the women who volunteered their time to help had to be in town, to be there and do something for the people who needed it. People often remarked that they are too busy to go out on the land with their families. Participating in just a fraction of what is happening in town, I felt I shared that experience in some way.

Moving from an experience of immobility and passivity to being engaged with others in purposeful work is a catalyst and articulation of renewal and well-being. However, this engagement can also become so demanding as to restrict one’s sense of existential mobility and governance over one’s life in a way that threatens the balance of acting and being acted upon. Elizabeth Colin had a similar experience at the Alcohol Centre that finally led to her leaving the program after so many years of investing much of her life to it. Especially after volunteer activities, which had been carried out for years, became institutionalized to a certain degree and distanced from the original personal motivation, people involved with the work became exhausted. At the same time, with increasing institutionalization, people who are targeted by the program may feel less able to participate. As elaborated in many of the examples in chapters six and seven, the principal driver for becoming active in volunteer work or to participate in wellness-oriented activities is a personal experience of potentiality and existential mobility associated with having a sense of balance of being-for-oneself and being-for-others, acting and being acted upon. Well-established volunteer groups, especially when using particular methods, such as group talk, or a specific language, such as therapeutic language adapted from conventional counselling and self-referential talk, can become perceived as exclusive, hierarchical, and disconnected. While the established volunteers genuinely want others to

contribute and become involved, these aspects constitute a barrier that is hard to overcome by others.

New initiatives that emerge from a personal desire to help and that are not yet tangled up in community divisions, professional discourses, or community resources do not experience such exhaustion or difficulties with attendance. Two examples of those showing such initiatives are the work of Joanne Tetlich and Elizabeth Wright. Before dedicating the next sub-section to Elizabeth Wright's snowshoe coaching, I present Ms. Tetlich's work with children as an example of wellness volunteering.

As soon as her new cabin was ready to shelter people from the elements, Joanne started taking children to her camp to teach them how to bake bannock and donuts, how to cut meat, make bone grease, how to sew or do whatever else she is working on at a given time. There was a growing group of children who enjoyed going out to her camp for a few days during the time I was in the community. In particular, she attracted children who had a history of being difficult in school or other community contexts. At the time that I visited her in her camp, she was thinking of applying for money to expand her practice. Whether or not that happened is irrelevant here since she already practiced what her vision was on her own. In spring 2012, I visited her a couple of times. She and her partner had just built the cabin over the past few months and were still working to put things together. The cabin is located a short distance from the banks of the Peel below the community. When I arrived the first time, three girls were playing outside in the snow; one was inside making donuts with Joanne. Joanne's daughter was outside tending to the fire and cooking ribs and potatoes. Her son and his friends practiced their target shooting and I took out my sewing to join Joanne who was beading some uppers for wedding shoes for someone in her family. Everyone was busy with something, enjoying their work and the company. After we ate, I went out to get brush with one of the girls while the other girls made slushies with snow. Later, everyone gathered in the cabin and all the girls wanted to learn how to sew something. Some made necklaces, some wristbands. Joanne was happy with how things went with the girls. They all helped cooking, all ate the good food, and all kept busy. She made a remark about the girls now eating chocolate and not doing the dishes, but she did not want to say anything. They had done enough. We spent the evening sewing and joking (field notes 11/04/2012). Another time, I had the chance to catch a ride with Joanne's daughter on her skidoo to go to the camp. When we arrived, some of the kids were just getting ready to go back to town. Five of them had spent the night. They had cut up caribou legs and

boiled the bones to make bone grease. The hooves were still drying on the floor when we entered the cabin. Joanne had made dry meat, but most of it had already been eaten. She also had made itsuu with them, which is a ball made of pounded dry meat, held together with marrow, grease, and sugar. The tendons of the legs they had worked with hung off the poles in the cabin to dry. Joanne said people used to hang caribou legs and feet in trees. Animals would not touch them, not even the crows. When people were starving and they came across such a tree, they were able to make a soup from these legs and survive. The young girls obviously enjoyed their time at the camp, Joanne's stories, and the work they did (29/04/2012).

Volunteering in this case can be seen as a continuation of a way of relating to and taking care of each other that remains outside the market economy, therapeutic language, and state bureaucracy. Similar to the beginnings of the Peel River Alcohol Centre or the Concerned Person's Committee, this initiative is an articulation of a newly gained mobility and potential to set intentions in motion. Having a place away from the community, the mobility to come and go, the experience of creating her own place on the land, and the sense of enskillment supported through the need to work for shelter, warmth, and food prompted Joanne to open this space for others to share in this experience.

Snowshoeing

On a Sunday in November, after church and a quick snack for lunch, I put on my long johns, wind pants, thick wool socks, duffels, and the canvas shoes that Vicky had given to me. Warm and ready to go for a run in the cold, I went over to Liz Wright's house for my first attempt at snowshoeing. Liz is a middle-aged woman, the youngest daughter of the beloved late Chief Johnny Charlie and Jane Charlie, and at the time Fort McPherson's Sub-Chief. Since 1997, she has been coaching children for snowshoe racing for the Arctic Winter Games. The International Arctic Winter Games take place every two years in March in one of the circumpolar countries. In January, every country holds trials for various disciplines in different regions to compete for regional or national teams. In 2012 the territorial trials for snowshoeing were hosted by Fort McPherson and the Arctic Winter Games were held in Whitehorse, Yukon.

On this Sunday, one after the other, about twelve kids came into Liz' living room, piling up on the couch and on the floor. First, Liz showed us how to tie the snowshoes to our feet with laces. While we were practicing that, she held up a bag of chips: "That's garbage! No chips, no

pop until March!” (field notes 06/11/2011). Several women, mothers of the children, friends of Liz, as well as Chief Julius School teachers, came along for a walk and to cheer on the runners. Liz and her husband Dennis had prepared a trail with their skidoo through the willows down by Happy’s Landing³⁷. The trail in the flats by the river was for running laps and the banks leading up to Happy Robert’s house was for training up hill. Many kids were keen to try and run although only three of them had registered for the competition at that point. I put the wooden snowshoes on, laced them up, and started walking awkwardly trying to keep pace with the other ladies. Once at the trail, we started jogging and, to my surprise, the faster pace was easier than simply walking with snowshoes. We ran one lap, which is little more than one kilometer, and then came back. This was an easy start and in the weeks to come, Liz would train the kids much harder. Her house was open for training about five times a week depending on the weather. A few times we tried to run in -35°C, but generally training would be cancelled if the temperatures dropped that low. Sometimes we ran in an open field in the middle of the community, sometimes we ran on the highway, and sometimes we left the snowshoes at the house and went for a run in mukluks. Liz always had food for everyone afterwards. Once in a while she asked the kids to bring snacks and some of the parents also helped with cooking food. Liz was very concerned that all the participants had a good balanced meal with protein after training. She always had bottled water for everyone. From November until March most of her free time was spent preparing for the Arctic Winter Games, coaching the kids, organizing the territorial trials, and fundraising for the athletes’ registration fee as well as for new snowshoes for every participant.

On the first day of the territorial trials, the day when the kids from Fort McPherson would compete with athletes from another community for “Team Northwest Territories”, the temperatures dropped to -35°C plus wind chill. It was bitter cold. A lot of people gathered below the banks at Happy’s: the athletes from Fort McPherson, Deline, Tsiigehtchic, Fort Simpson, and Fort Good Hope, their coaches, parents, volunteers, and other people from the community who came to cheer. There were several categories: junior boys and girls as well as juvenile boys and girls. All groups had to complete a short and a long run that day. It was so cold that my video camera froze up several times and my feet were painfully cold despite the big skidoo boots I was wearing. Nevertheless, everyone held out in the freezing dark to cheer for every single athlete,

³⁷ Happy’s Landing: An elderly man with the nickname Happy Robert lives right on top of the banks where a path leads down to the river. This is where steamboats and other boats used to land. Hence, the hill and the flats below are called Happy’s Landing.

regardless from which community they came. The next day was even colder. The coaches decided that it was not safe for the kids to run in -40°C weather. Without further ado, Liz Wright, the teachers of Chief Julius School, and other helpers started filling up bags and sleds with snow to build a snowshoe track inside the recreation complex on the hockey rink. Within a few hours, they had completed a track and volunteers were recruited to count laps and take time. Adults and children, some of them equipped with cow bells, gathered around the seats of the hockey arena and cheered for every child running past. The third day was colder yet. With temperatures in the low -40's the athletes could not even walk down to the complex without potentially hurting their lungs, so all of us were picked up by one of the coaches in a vehicle. The children and their coaches gathered at the complex to get their gear on. Some runners from other communities had been having difficulties losing their snowshoes in mid-race because their laces became undone. Curious, they were watching how the runners from Fort McPherson laced their snowshoes since they had no such problems. It did not take long for them to decide that the Gwich'in lacing was better, so they looked over and tried to copy. Without hesitation Liz and the children wanted to show the other athletes their way of lacing. However, because the coaches were not allowed to touch anything of the participants, Liz asked me to help and show the other kids how it is done. The idea of competing with others easily co-existed with compassion, sharing, and learning.

Then we all took our seats around the hockey rink and got ready to scream and cheer to our lungs' capacity. I was sitting with two middle-aged ladies whose daughters were running. We laughed and screamed so much, for every athlete from every community. After all rounds were completed, spectators, athletes, coaches, teachers, and visitors, grabbed shovels and sleds to transport all the snow out of the hockey arena. Within one hour the ice was clean. Hungry and cold everyone gathered at the complex for a feast: soup, caribou meat, macaroni, and potato salad. The guests from other communities were served first. After we ate, Liz Wright announced who made the team and would go to the Arctic Winter Games in Whitehorse. Only eight of all the athletes that had trained over the winter could participate at the Games. Liz expressed her emotions with tears and pride in her speech. She asked all team members to come to the front and present themselves to the cheering audience. Six of the eight team members were athletes from Fort McPherson, a very proud moment for everyone in the community. After the feast, everyone helped to clean up and, because of the cold, we were all treated to a ride home.

In the aftermath, I expressed my astonishment about how everyone responded to the problem that the weather posed so immediately and creatively. With pride people would nod and say that this is what makes Fort McPherson. In conversations with me, people applied the term volunteering to instances such as this retrospectively. In the unfolding relations and workings of the process, however, this term is not used to ask for help or to initiate one's involvement. Kin or friend relationships are often cues that draw people to be present and engaged in whatever is at hand. Others become involved simply because they are present and see that help is needed. Another aspect involves a concern over the community's representation to others that is shared by many, though not all, community members and motivates people to help out. This is especially the case for larger events such as these territorial trials, the Midway Lake Music festival, or the Biennial Gwich'in Gathering. Further, these situations offer the space to engage with others in a common objective, to experience the results of one's labour as well as a sense of purpose and belonging. "Helping out" emerges from these situational cues or needs that people respond to in ways that are normative in the community.

In spring, after I had seen Liz Wright dedicate so much of her time to snowshoeing with these children, I asked her what in her life had contributed to her becoming such an active volunteer and what kept her investing so much of her time and resources to it:

My family for one. I mean being from such a large family, large extended family, lots of leadership and seeing that, I guess, growing up, my dad being Chief – my mom – she had lots of volunteering in her days, she had a little dance group going and all of that gave us kids, as dancers, the opportunity to travel, you know, to different communities and then when I went off to school – I came back home – and it was just there, it was just natural for everybody in the community to help out where they can – you had to be asked sometimes but – more times than others you're just there helping and volunteering. And then I like to be around people and I'm not going to be at home, stuck at home and letting the whole world pass [laughs] you know? I want to be out there and helping and seeing success and I think a lot of people want that too.

[...]

Every year we always say, this is too much, you know we need to do something else, it's taking up too much time, like the trail cutting and Dennis using the gas, the skidoo and the gas and keeping the trail debris free and stuff and – and then coming into my home and – like no time to clean and you know you're at home at 5 o'clock, you just want to relax [laughs] but that – I guess, I don't know, just like every two years you're done, now we're done at the Arctic Winter Games in Whitehorse, we're done, that's over and – already the parents are calling and saying "You know my daughter is going to be twelve in 2014 like she'd be perfect for Fairbanks" [laughs]

(E. Wright, 07/06/2012)

Liz had started coaching children in snowshoe racing after she had overcome struggles with alcohol, had moved back from Inuvik to the community, and adopted another child. However, her engagement in helping out and volunteering had been part of her growing up and part of her parents' life. In her explanation of why she volunteers she positions herself in a line of ancestors who were respected for their efforts in the community. Continuing this family tradition places her efforts into a larger context of kinship and identity. Like many others, she uses metaphors of movement to illustrate how she experiences the lack of purposeful work, of engaging with others, of intentionality and projective creativity. Being "stuck at home and letting the whole world pass" is an expression of existential immobility that, for her, is associated with un-well-being. The shift to moving within the world, past the limitations of her private life, is what sustains well-being for her. Her choice of activities revolved around movement and travel. She is concerned about the lack of physical activity in her own and the children's lives. Getting out with the snowshoers almost every day was important to her in the sense of having exercise as well. She considers travelling a crucial experience for children's sense of possibilities and learning. She also organizes a skidoo trip across the mountains to Old Crow every year in memory of her late father. According to her, travelling on the land and the necessity to test one's physical strength and endurance, one's independence from conveniences of community life, and interdependence with others as well as the ever changing landscape is a profoundly life changing experience.³⁸

As is the case for all other examples of volunteering in the community, Liz Wright's work also opens up spaces for others to engage in movement and purposeful work. Through her enthusiasm she attracted others to join the snowshoers for a daily walk. The territorial trial and the need to build a track inside the hockey rink is another telling example of how quickly many community members who had free time on that day took the opportunity to work for a communal goal, to be engaged with others in purposeful work, and escape passivity for a while. Goulet (1998) also alludes to the detrimental effect of a lack of work and meaningful productive roles for Dene Tha: "The tragedy is that for contemporary adults on the reserve there is a lack of constructive challenges to meet and succeed in" (1998, 127). A similar situation is found in Fort McPherson where a high level of unemployment and the conveniences of community life eradicate much of the hard work and busyness that people value so highly and associate with health, well-being, and longevity. Volunteering and helping volunteers offers a purposeful

³⁸ More about the skidoo trip see Chapter 8.

context to exert oneself in work that not only results in communal acknowledgment but also in the physiological and psychological benefits of physical activity.



Figure 7: Fort McPherson athletes at the Arctic Winter Games 2012 in Whitehorse, Yukon. All athletes are wearing canvas shoes made by Teet'it Gwich'in women for this event. Photo: T. Luig

Sports

The final example I chose to describe here is the volunteer work of Les Blake. Since much of the volunteering in the wellness field is dominated by women and Elders, the impression could arise that men are not involved with helping. To counter this, I would like to include this one example to illustrate how one middle-aged man came to “do good for himself” and the role volunteering played in his experience.

An important dimension of the community volunteer work revolves around sports. People are athletic and love to play sports. Teet'it Gwich'in are passionate hockey fans and compete in two teams: Gwich'in Flames and McPhoo Lightening. During winter and spring the roads throughout town are occupied by youth playing street hockey. Curling is another favorite recreation for young and old. Proudly people point out their relationship to successful curlers who compete at international levels. There is a women's volleyball team that trains weekly and

travels to tournaments in Aklavik or Old Crow. In the summer when the sun is above the horizon day and night, the baseball diamond is busy into the late night hours. There are girls' and boys' soccer teams as well as a basketball team.

The latter is coached by Lesley Blake, a young man who works as an education assistant at Chief Julius School. Lesley is the son of the late Phillip Blake, the social worker who played such an important role in Elizabeth Colin's life and in creating the Peel River Alcohol Centre. In the evenings, Les opens the gym for youth who want to play basketball or use exercise machines. This he does as a volunteer based on his own passion for basketball and his dedication to assist youth in living a healthy life, exercise, having fun together, and eating healthy. I first met Les when I presented my research proposal to the Hamlet Council in winter 2010. He pointed out that if I was to do research and write something about the community then I should provide a copy to the Council. Unfortunately, this had not happened consistently in the past. Later, during my year in town, I noticed that he participated in numerous committees and councils as well as coaching the basketball team. He was said to have a very good relationship to youth and so I approached him for an interview. In spring 2012 we found a quiet corner in the school library and I asked him how he came to be such an active volunteer: "All started when we had a new principal coming in and he started basketball and, but I had no idea what basketball was – and he came in and start working with some kids and then my uncle Kenny mentioned it to me one, one evening – we were in grade 8 and he said 'We played basketball today and it's pretty good, you should check it out', so from there on, I went to the next practice" (L. Blake 15/03/2012). Les, however, had to overcome some difficulties when he began playing sports. He was "a very heavy child, big, heavy child" and the coach took him aside demonstrating to him, in a kind and respectful way, that he needed to work on his fitness if he wanted to continue playing:

So from there on hard work and going to every practice, having fun, that kind of stuff – that's how I got from fatness to fitness, today not, not totally fit but trying to stay fit – and - there, there's always one image in my head to encourage me to keep moving and trying to eat the right foods is ah, uhm I don't want to be overweight anymore, it's just not comfortable, it's not healthy, and it – it'll shorten your life – and you know I love life so much that [...] Bill Warren is still my role-model and he's been so all, all, all the time I've known him cause he still plays basketball and he's 68 years now, so ... that's motivation for me.
(L. Blake, 15/03/2012)

His positive experience with how a physical practice impacted his well-being, however, is not his only motivation to help youth today to stay active.

[...] the smile on kids faces ah – when you opened up the gym, they're there all the time, it's two or three hours an evening of where you can - if I had hair, I'd let my hair down, you know where you just go into the gym and if you had a bad day, that's *gone*, you don't even think about that, you're just playing the game, soccer, basketball or whatever it is. Your stress level goes down, you forget about all your problems for two to three hours, you see the smile on the kids' faces, you see *them* – getting better and that's one of the biggest things too – encouraging youth to get involved in sports or in activity that keeps them moving and then I guess the reward is just seeing the smile on their faces.
(L. Blake, 15/03/2012)

To keep moving has not only helped him to feel better physically and emotionally but his involvement in sports has allowed him to travel, an activity he values highly. The ability to travel is seen by many in the community as extremely beneficial for everyone, especially the youth. Les explains:

Basketball brought me to a lot of places that I never ever would have had the chance to go to, like travelling: B.C., Alberta, Halifax, pretty much all over Canada for competition. So that's where you get your friends, meet new people, you experience cultures, just different things in life that, that opens your eyes and you know that there's something else out there than Fort McPherson and you try to convey that to the kids to get involved with stuff, even if it's not physical activity, do other things that make you happy - uhm - sports has made *me* happy.
(L. Blake, 15/03/2012)

Soon people started to ask him to become more involved in community leadership. At the time of my fieldwork he was a part of the Hamlet Council, the Tl'ooondih Board of Directors, and the Renewable Resource Council. Having gathered experiences and skill in working with children he accepted the challenge to contribute to the well-being of the community at a broader level:

For me I wanted to do my part in the community to, to say my piece and try to make things better because in the gym you say and do certain things that'll benefit the kids, to try help them to be a better person, to be a healthy person and contribute to the community. So I thought, why not, why can't I do that in the community, so there was elections for Band Council that fall – September 7th to be exact, I remember that date and a couple people asked to nominate me. So I said, it's as good a time as any, so I tried and I got chosen to be on Council, which I'm very grateful for. For the first bit I just learned through watching and asking questions and I started – *liking*, I started liking going to meetings and hearing different views and concerns and how the organization worked and how we could help the community. How we could work together as *a team* because, I remember when we first started, team [work] on boards and stuff wasn't always there, sometimes you get fights, one group didn't want to do this and another

group wanted to do something else – and - it took us, it took a long time, there's a few of us that thought that we needed to work as a team to become a better community and it took a long time, it's still a struggle today but – but I know that there's very few meetings that I missed and I've missed them because I've been out of town or I'm involved with something else and I know when meetings go on [laughs] I always say, I gotta go to the gym at 8, so you have me until 8, so – and then I, and then I gotta go.

(L. Blake, 15/03/2012)

Volunteering contributes much to his sense of well-being and belonging in the community. In a situation of crisis, however, his attention turns to the sense of well-being that he can access when on the land, either by himself or with family. Chapter eight will discuss the role of the land for people's well-being in more detail, nevertheless, it is important here to point to the multiplicity of experiences and the ambiguities that are involved when people navigate through suffering. While being busy and involved with communal concerns contributes to his sense of agency, balancing these demands on his time with “alone time” is important, especially in times of existential upheaval. For him, this balance is readjusted when away from the community - the canoe being his means of mobility to go on the land and lessen the impact others have on his being. Again, a movement from immobility to mobility is characteristic for his experience of dealing with crisis.

Volunteering and Doing Good for Oneself

When I asked one young woman what volunteering means to her, she answered:

Volunteering? It makes you feel good because people see you trying to do better for yourself, trying to be involved. It makes me feel good because people can count on me and I'll *be* there [...]. And it just makes me feel really good.

(N. Francis, 27/05/2012)

As we have seen in this chapter, volunteering in Fort McPherson takes on various forms and includes a multiplicity of practices and meanings for individuals within the community. Common to all examples is that volunteering is perceived as a sign of recovery from an affliction and a marker of a healthy, positive life. Volunteering and being involved in the community is symbolic of being a healthy person in local discourse as well as in individual people's experience. The importance of becoming un-“stuck” and beginning to move and engage with others in purposeful work is intrinsic to people's motivation to volunteer or help. The desire and the

capacity to help after coming through hardship re-negotiates one's place within the intersubjectivity of community life and perceptions of self within relationships. In the absence of sufficient meaningful work in the community, either employment or subsistence, volunteering becomes one of the means with which Teet'it Gwich'in "create and recreate the intersubjective experience that defines their primary sense of who they are" (Jackson 1998, 16). As such it generates a sense of being alive, competent, and useful as a member of a collective, a sense of being at home in the world and a foundation from which people can face challenges creatively.

This dynamic not only put Fort McPherson in the spotlight as a role model in volunteerism in the Northwest Territories, it also made the public acknowledgment and assessment of volunteerism a topic of reflection for community members. Announcing volunteers over CBQM is, for some, a way to position themselves as healthy and useful community members who participate in one of the most important aspects of collective self-representation. Some community leaders emphasize the need to publicly acknowledge volunteers to express the community's appreciation of their work. For others, such public announcement stands in contrast with the normative practices of helping, sharing, and keeping busy that they grew up with. One day when I sat with Dorothy Alexie, some women on CBQM were taking names of volunteers who would help cooking for a feast for a funeral. Dorothy shook her head, she always brings something down to the feast, but never calls in to have her name recorded or to have ingredients brought to her. She just does it on her own, with her own resources (field notes, 31/08/2011).

Volunteering is a recent term that has been adopted in community discourse since the 1980's. While the practice is a continuation of helping, sharing, and keeping busy in the past (Stephenson 2001), the contemporary discourse of volunteering also has to be understood in its current political context. Volunteering as a discourse and key aspect of the community's self-representation safeguards local practices against state intervention and bureaucracy and positions them favorably in the larger society's discourse on good citizenship. As a discourse that emerged in opposition to the professionalization of helping, volunteering embodies independence and self-sufficiency for many Teet'it Gwich'in. As such, volunteering can be understood as a strategy of re-asserting validity to one's claims to a locality and a way of life by evoking a "tradition" of volunteering. I draw on Sørensen (1996) and her observation that the un-reflected past becomes an object of reflection when encountering the unfamiliar, either in the form of new surroundings or of an intrusion of newcomers who contest and change socio-

spatial modalities of life, in order to establish a legitimate and secure basis for future development (1996, 213). Volunteering as an individual and collective experience draws partially on available frameworks of both helping as a discourse of normalcy and volunteering as a discourse of good citizenship, but always includes the potential for innovation. Conflict and fission within the community are set aside when larger events are planned or the community needs to respond to a crisis, such as a funeral, so that emphasis can be given to the community's strength and autonomy vis-à-vis outsiders (1996, 213). Sørensen's conclusion applies to volunteerism in Fort McPherson when she points out that it is maintaining "a sense of identity and dignity in times of disarray" that is not only fundamental for well-being but also the basis for one's ability to act in and shape intersubjective space according to one's life projects (1996, 214-215).

Several volunteering initiatives in Fort McPherson emerged from a desire to travel and the importance that is placed on giving youth the opportunity to experience other regions or countries. Travel and mobility continue to play an important role in Gwich'in life. Many people take the chance to go to Edmonton or Whitehorse whenever possible. Travel, however, is costly and many families cannot afford to pay for tickets or gas. Engaging youth in athletic activities is one way for community members to enable them to travel and a legitimate cause to ask others to contribute money through fundraising.

Volunteering is a central strategy in the continuous balancing between acting and being acted upon in the intersubjective spaces of family and community life, political processes and state encroachment on local governance, as well as local and larger societal discourse of being a good and healthy person. Considering these examples of embodied practices of personal renewal and their positive repercussions for others it becomes clear that the centrality of talk in conventional approaches to recovery and healing might be insufficient to fostering the restoration of existential security and the ability to make sense of and act in the world.

Chapter 8

The Land, Working, and Food

In our conversations about well-being, Teet'it Gwich'in inevitably referred to the land. One cannot talk about health and well-being without talking about the land. As this relationship is fundamental for an understanding of every aspects of Gwich'in life, the Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute chose it as one of their guiding principles for research: "The preservation and respect for the land are essential to the well-being of our people and our culture." (Gwich'in Social and Cultural Institute. Mandate and Principles). Similar to volunteering, spending time on the land and pursuing subsistence activities are perceived as markers of a healthy life as well as of recovery and healing. When Elders speak about the past and what they remember as the good life, living, working, and travelling on the land plays a decisive role in their reasoning why life was good then. The land was their home, travelling up and down the river and through the mountains in search of caribou was their way of being and what sustained them. For many middle-aged community members to whom I spoke, being out on the land is a break from the tensions and busyness of community life. Picking berries, driving up the highway, having a cook-out, or spending the weekend at 8 Miles or at Midway in a cabin is what they associate with relaxation and well-being. Importantly, these activities are thought of as inherently Gwich'in. Taking part in them or even just expressing the desire to take part in them is an act of identification with the Gwich'in Nation and an expression of pride.

During National Addiction Awareness Week in November 2011 I was asked to serve as judge for a drawing competition at Chief Julius School. The students had painted pictures illustrating "Living the Good Life". All children but a few painted scenes of life on the land: teepees, the river, caribou, campfires, and the mountains. The importance of being on the land for individual and family well-being has appeared in many ways throughout the previous chapters. This chapter elaborates on the role that being on the land plays for transforming experiences of suffering into positive lives. My focus is, as it has been throughout this thesis, to pay attention to the kinesthetic experience of working and travelling and the resulting sense of emplacement and enskillment as crucial for the positive impact that being on the land has for many people's physical health and ontological security.

Although research on the role of the environment in well-being is still scarce, the significance of the natural environment for Aboriginal people's health is increasingly recognized

by the academic community and tentatively by health policy makers (Reading and Wien 2009, GNWT Health and Social Services 2012). One of the most productive fields of such research is the assessment and prediction of impacts on Aboriginal health in relation to climate and environmental change caused by industrial development (Furgal and Seguin 2006; Richmond et al. 2005; Nuttall et al 2005). While this literature mainly deals with effects of environmental change on wildlife and resulting issues of food security and changes in diet, climatic unpredictability and the rise of injuries, pollutants in subsistence food, and the increase of infectious diseases in a warming climate, it has become commonplace to acknowledge that there is another aspect to the environment-health link that relates to “culture” or “identity” (Wilson 2003; Turner and Clifton 2009). Nevertheless, this literature remains focused on physiological aspects of human health from a natural science perspective. Other researchers, using political ecology approaches, point to the importance of political inequality that often plays out in contests over land use and industrial development in areas that have been used for subsistence activities by Indigenous peoples and is reflected in people’s sense of well-being (Richmond et al 2005; Nadasdy 2003; Spak 2005). The interrelationship of built and natural space with health and well-being has recently received more scholarly attention (Wakefield and McMullan 2005) and represents an interesting and important avenue for more research. There is evidence from a number of quantitative studies that time spent outside urban environments contributes to psychological restoration and stress relief (Berg, Hartig, and Staats 2007). An experimental study showed that merely the view onto trees alleviated post-surgery pain in hospital patients (Ulrich 1984 quoted in Berg, Hartig, Staats 2007). Others showed that a walk in the forest greatly lowered perceived stress, reduced headaches, and increased participants’ sense of balance. Since results increased in significance with increasing intensity of exercise in natural environments, the authors conclude that particularly the combination of strenuous activity and green spaces promotes well-being and stress relief (Hansmann, Hug, Seeland 2007).

Psychologists and researchers of other disciplines have increasingly incorporated the role of land or bush activities in their research on Aboriginal well-being, mental illness, or suicide (Kirmayer et al. 2000; Kirmayer, Brass, and Tait 2000; Parlee et al. 2006). These studies, which aim to produce quantitative data and statistical analysis, suggest that there is a significant link between spending time in the bush and less distress, experience of social support, increased cultural identity, and improved physical health for various Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Kirmayer et al. 2000, 50).

Particularly strong are the voices of Indigenous scholars in emphasizing the importance of the land for health and healing (Alexie 2009, 504; Gone 2008a; McCormick 2005; Greenwood and Leeuw 2007). The summary of the Dene Elders Restoring Balance Project of 2006 concludes: “Healing is most effective when the affected person is in the right frame of mind, spirit, and body. Being on the land provides the right frame of mind and spirit – the sounds, sights, and smells of the land are very powerful and relaxing.” (Yamozha Kue Society 2006, 77).

Anthropologists have explored the relationship between the land, place, and well-being beyond “Western” ideas of normality with regards to physiological health, fitness, and physical functionality (Adelson 2000; McMullin 2010; Gone 2008b; Fletcher and Denham 2008; Johnson 1997). In *Being Alive Well* (2000), Adelson illustrates the multiple intertwined dimensions of individual and collective well-being within the environment using a quote of a Cree Elder as a guiding theme throughout her analysis: “If the land is not healthy then how can we be?” (2000, 3). Medical geographer Wilson (2003) expands the concept of “therapeutic landscapes” to everyday places in different cultural contexts and similarly notes that the “land simultaneously contributes to physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health in a variety of ways” (2003, 88). Examples of this relationship include: food from the land is not only nutritious but is also seen as medicine that strengthens mind and body; medicinal plants and spiritual ceremonies on the land are healing tools for all dimensions of the self; and multiple possibilities of social relationships with human and non-human beings while being on the land offer emotional support and stability in everyday life (2003, 89-91; see also Johnson 1997). Such a concept of health transcends individual physiology. Awareness of interconnectedness that shapes human health not only comprises family and community, but also land, animals, plants, as well as spiritual beings. Drawing on research with Inuit, Kirmayer, Brass and Tait (2000) speak of an “ecocentric concept of the person” (612), which gives centrality to relations among persons and to place instead of a bounded, individual self. This notion exemplifies Ingold’s (2011) argument that human and other beings are in constant exchange with materials of the environment. In the context of Aboriginal subsistence activities on the land, this is articulated in humans making place and dwelling within the land, adjusting their seasonal lives to the migration patterns and habits of wildlife, eating the substance of animals and plants to nurture their bodies, or making clothing and shelter from the skins and furs of animals. It follows that both the attachment to places or the disturbance of landscapes, which are satiated with existential and social meanings, “are fundamental to feelings of belonging, identity, and social situatedness that in turn

contribute to or detract from individual and collective health and well-being.” (Fletcher 2006, 100).

It is important to note that such an intersubjective perspective of the person that takes one’s surroundings, historical, present, and future relationships and associations into account does not begin and end at the settlement boundaries. Community life with the demands and opportunities of the collective, the convenience and constraint of modern housing, technology, and increased competition for insufficiently available meaningful roles and occupations might even pronounce the centrality of relations for one’s sense of personhood and intensify the continuous negotiation of being-for-oneself and being-for-others. This is why in the face of overwhelming relational demands the discursive shift to imagining personhood as rooted in a separate self was experienced as liberating by women (as described in Chapter 6). On the land, however, women scan the hills for berries and pick in solitude or laughing with their companions, they cut meat or fish, sew, and cook in their camps. Their skills and effort become existentially relevant, meaningful for their own and other’s sustenance, and relational pressures are diminished. The tension between being acted upon and acting is lessened and balance achieved more easily. The contrast between community and land then becomes a marker of the change that colonial policies brought about (Kirmayer, Fletcher, Watt 2009, 292), but the co-existence of settlement life with subsistence hunting and fishing, with foods from the land, and recreational camp life simultaneously signifies continuity of aspects of collective identity that are relevant in negotiating one’s place in the present and future (Wishart 2004).

Both of these aspects, change and continuity, are apparent in how Teet’it Gwich’in speak about the role of the land in transforming experiences of hardship, for well-being, and strength. Being on the land is experienced as decisively different than being in the community. For many people who are active in community life, either as employers or as volunteers, finding time to go on the land is difficult. However, the desire to go and the pleasure of being on the land, even just for one day, speaks of the continuing importance that the land has for a sense of balance, well-being, and belonging. In fall the staff of the Band office took one day off from their busy office work to have a cook-out in the mountains:

We went up the highway to the border to pick berries. It was beautiful. Always joking the women went and searched the muskeg for nakal (Arctic Cloudberry). One man with a rifle kept us safe watching out for bears. It was a good berry patch and we all got quite a bit. My pail was about full and that was worth a picture. After everyone slowly regrouped at the trucks we continued on to Rock River. Today a government

campground, Rock River had been a traditional camp for Teet'it Gwich'in. Many remember staying there with their parents, sliding down the hills in the wintertime. The trees that line the valley of this small creek are much taller now than they used to be. While we unloaded the food and put everything out on the table, Elvis Presley was blasting from the truck speakers. Some women started dancing, lots of laughter and joking all around. The day before, the women at the band office had prepared much good food using some of the produce they had harvested from their community garden. There was potato salad and cabbage rolls made from vegetables from the garden, there was smoked fish and caribou meat, bannock and rice salad. A few tourists stopped by and were promptly invited to have food. Lots of pictures were taken, everyone having fun. All people emphasized how good it is to be out on the land and how little they had the chance to go into the hills this year. They were really grateful to the Band Council to give them a day off and some joked that they should have a day like this every week. People really felt that going out on the land is crucial to mental health in contrast to working at the office every day and being busy in town. (field notes, 26/08/2011)

Food from the land is an important aspect of how the land is seen as providing health and strength. Not only is hunting, berry picking, or fishing a form of physical exercise that is beneficial for mental and physical health, but the food procured through it is considered strengthening, healing, and appropriate for Gwich'in consumption. As long as the land is clean, the plants and animals, which feed on lichens and leaves, are thought of as healing. Gwich'in identify and use a number of plants and animals as food and medicines (Andre and Fehr 2000; Gwich'in Renewable Resource Board 1997, 2001). Staying with Elders there is always "traditional" food around. The morning usually starts with tea, coffee, and oats, lunch and supper would often consist of fish or soup and bannock. The soup is made from caribou or moose bones and meat with rice and macaroni or, my personal favorite, with oats. If people were lucky and had lots of caribou meat, the women would make dry meat and have that around as a snack. Not for very long, as dry meat is everyone's favorite. Lidii masgit (Labrador tea added to regular black tea) is served at feasts and made out in the camps. When someone falls ill, they would be advised to drink bone broth, eat cranberries, use spruce gum concoctions, or tea made from willow or tamarack.

While writing this chapter, I was visiting Elizabeth Colin daily at the hospital in Edmonton. Every evening I asked her if she had supper and how she has been eating. Every time she lowers her eyes and shakes her head: "I can't eat this food, we don't eat like that." Knowing how much she enjoys rice cooked with dried apricots, I made her some and brought it to the hospital. Other Teet'it Gwich'in, however, who have been visiting her know what she needs: they bring her broth from the bones of caribou, caribou soup, lidii masgit, and berries – food from the land.

When we recorded her life story in 2012, Elizabeth explained the difference in physical strength and health between people in the past and present by their different diets:

There is a lot of strong peoples back then! You know the old people, we don't know how they did it! Hannah's [Alexie] mom, she said "I don't know how those old people kept up with us!" they had two or three dogs when they move, all their belonging go on their sled, they sit on there and go after people where they're going. And they're still – you know? Look today, you can't do that too! Look I'm just 75 and I'm falling all over the place! Where did all the strength go? You know. But them they were right to really old age and they were still doing things for themselves. And it's not like today, it could be the food that we eat – that plays a big part, because we didn't have all the things that you have today. I remember when we were out on the land, Monday to Saturday, we didn't have nothing. I mean we ate, we had tea and we ate meat and fish and all that, rice and soup with rice and all that. But Sunday that's when we had big feast. I remember at Three Cabin – ah we just looked forward to Sunday. Bannock pan come out, make bannock and put raisin in it. You know how they say – when I talk about it I can just smell that bannock, you know? [laughs] so hurry to it and then she would cook rice and apricots. [...] That's why I guess, I go for apricots yet today! You know? It used to just taste so good!

(E. Colin, 05/09/2012)

The women Elders whom I spoke to have spent their childhood on the land and returned for extended periods as young adults with their husbands. Today, most of them own a cabin at 8 Miles or further up or down the Peel River and spend a few days or a few weeks there, especially during spring break-up. The range of bush activities for middle-aged people is much wider depending on their life experiences and circumstances. Some single men spend extensive periods in their camps along the river and continue to fish, hunt, and trap. Others go hunting, fishing, and cutting wood regularly, however, they often go for one day only and return at night regardless whether or not they had shot caribou³⁹. Younger and middle aged women are often busy in the community with either jobs or family obligations. Some younger women have started to establish themselves at 8 Miles, built a cabin, learned how to tan skins, how to hunt and fish, how to work with meat and fish, and continue to practise bush skills. Many younger women, however, go on the land for cookouts, for a ride up the highway into the Richardson Mountains to look for caribou or just enjoy the views, and for berry picking. While being on the land takes different forms for Teet'it Gwich'in, the ability to "just up and go", to be on the land that the ancestors travelled and survived on, and do things for themselves is a common denominator in all these experiences. Liz Wright pointed out that despite the

³⁹ For detailed accounts of men's life on the land see Loovers (2010).

difficulties of community life, Fort McPherson still offers the kind of mobility, relatedness, and liberty to acquire at least some of the necessities of life independently of the market economy:

Look where we are! [laughs] [pointing to the River] You can't go and sit anywhere in Inuvik without people walking by, you know bothering, or else you can't - there's nowhere to sit like this, you have to get in the vehicle and go somewhere - even though we did drive down here, but anywhere in McPherson you can walk, you can go into anybody's home and sit and have tea - and you can't do that in Inuvik, you have to make arrangements, [...] I like living here, I like, I like my backyard that I could just make a fire anytime I want and you can't do that in Inuvik, [...] and it's quiet, I like it quiet [...] anybody can get on a skidoo and go, you know and - then you can get into your truck and drive up the mountains! You could just, you see something different *every* time you go up there, I just *love* that drive, you can go to 8 Miles and get fish, I mean even if you have no food in Inuvik who are you gonna phone? You know I can go to my brothers and get caribou meat, you know, I could probably visit any of these houses and ask for - [laughs] bannock and somebody will have bannock. (E. Wright, 07/06/2012)

Mobility that allows people choice in how to nourish their bodies, how to relate to others, and what environment to surround themselves with is foundational for a sense of existential integrity. However, as outlined in chapter 5, mobility has been limited by socio-political and economic changes and again recently by the attempt of the Yukon Government to open large areas of the Peel River Watershed to development⁴⁰. "Protect the Peel" has become synonymous with Gwich'in protest of this decision on both the Yukon and the Northwest Territories' side of the Peel Watershed. This current political struggle and the infringement of industry on Gwich'in land are experienced as an infringement on the very existence of Gwich'in life. Thus, environmental protection is also existential protection.

Although a majority of Teet'it Gwich'in identify as members of either the Anglican Church or the Tetlit Zheh Christian Fellowship, the land is a foundational aspect of Gwich'in spiritual life (Parlee 2006; Loovers 2010). Spirits of ancestors, animals, and other non-human beings are encountered on the land as well as the agency of elements of the environment, such as the river or the animals. One young woman expressed how this sense of embeddedness in an ontology that is not limited to the ups and downs of community life allows her to experience a sense of ontological security in the face of difficulties:

When you go on the land - it feels like - there's an entity there, like a spiritual entity, like you look up in the mountains and you just feel like there's something staring at you and you can't see it, there's something larger than you - all your problems, you think it's

⁴⁰ See: www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/judge-reserves-decision-in-yukon-peel-watershed-battle-1.2814490

so big but when you go out there, it's just nothing, it just all get washed away – I don't know, you just know there's something else out there besides yourself and - it's not, like your day-to-day life that's all there is but there's more. (A. Neyando, 04/06/2012)

This sense of ontological security that she experiences on the land as well as in continuing the teachings of her grandmother, such as cutting dry fish, making fire with one match, and facing the world in a fearless and non-judgmental manner, gave this remarkable young woman the strength to go on with her life and be of great help to many in times of suffering.

Loovers (2010) touched on this theme in his dissertation describing his own experience of being reassured in the continuity of life by sharing a few days in a Gwich'in fish camp, learning from an Elder about setting fish nets, eating fresh fish, and drinking tea (2010, 222-223). Witnessing several tragedies in the community during his stay, he shared how one of the bereaved spoke about living and working on the land as crucial for coping with suffering and grieving. He concludes: "It is the land that heals through the continuity of life, the fortification of relations with human and non-human others, and the sense of being alive" (Loovers 2010, 221). While these aspects of human-environment relationship that revolve around a sense of belonging and connectedness to ancestors, around human-animal relationships, around food and spirituality, have been documented repeatedly for Aboriginal peoples across Canada, my experience with going on the land with Teet'it Gwich'in centered my focus on the element of movement and work as crucial for a sense of existential security.

When I sat with Mary Teya she shared her experience with death and liminality in an attempt to answer my question of how she had been able to come through tragedy in her life. Her spirituality is one important source of strength for her during those times; another is being out on the land:

In 1982 - my, my – my son – committed suicide in November '82, I couldn't, I was going through a really difficult time with that and he was supposed to graduate that spring – '83 June he was supposed to graduate and students that were going to graduate with him were phoning or some of them were writing letters inviting us to go down there. I had to refuse it, I said I *can't*, I can't, it's too hard and instead of that my husband said, "We'll go down Eagle River by boat", I said "Are you kidding?" he said "No, it can be done". And I was scared because I *never* been around there, *he* never been around there and I, I thought I don't know what kind of river that is, you know? What if we come upon a fall and we go over [laughs] – things like that I was thinking! [speaks laughingly] and so when my dad - I mentioned it to him, my dad was still around that time, and I mentioned to him and he said "Well, why don't you?" and I said "Well, I'm too scared" I said "I've never been around that before and I don't know what kind of-" He said "It'll be alright" he told me "Do it" he said "it'll be a good trip". So with that

away we went – June 21st they pulled a boat right over the mountain, right to Eagle River and put it in there – 20 horse Johnson at the back, and we started down – Abe Stewart was with us, Senior, right down to Old Crow and back – *beautiful* [...] so we *did all that*, you know? – so all that is a *good memory to me*. (M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

Her face lit up when she spoke about this boat trip and how it helped her to deal with the pain of losing her son. There was excitement in her voice that clearly spoke of how well she feels being on the land. Her late husband travelled up the Peel River every year, “something that he had to do every year” (M. Teya, 30/04/2012). For Mary Teya, going out on the land and working in her camp is something that she needs to stay well:

Thea: for you it's spring at 8 Miles, the yearly thing you have to do?

Mary: *Yes! Yes!* You know when I go up there, it's the house that he built, we stayed there so many times and now when I go up there I feel *good*, I feel close to him and I do things that I like to do, reading and sewing and doing whatever, work with meat, stuff like that – so I feel good, doing and I *have* – I *have!* to go, you know. Long ago when I first started working, *every year* my, my holiday time, I had two weeks holiday and I always took two extra weeks – without pay – and I would go, one month I would go up to Road River with my parents, my parents are there, I spent *one month* with them before I come back. [...] and little above there, there is the fish camp, that's where we used to go, that's where we were raised. There's also a camp across from the winter camp where my parents, my grandparents used to pass spring – so it's just in one area, that's where they go all the time. Every summer the family, some of the family members go up there *just to camp out* and pick berries and stuff like that, picnics. So it's a place where we all grew up and we – *did* what we liked to do. (M. Teya, 30/04/2012)

When I spoke with Les Blake, I wondered how and if he experienced an existential crisis and what helped him to come through times of suffering. He started to speak of the time after his mother passed away and he was grieving:

When my mom passed away was – I'd take drives out in the car on the highway and take pictures, look around, ah – a few times, it was a little much so you just let it – scream or you cry or you do something that'll, you know, take that stress off or that pressure – and I think that's how I handled it [...] Somewhere out, I remember canoeing: or just at midnight ah - my grandfather was at Husky River and I just borrowed my uncle's canoe, got a ride to first dock, put it in there, before I packed a few things and then just floated out, floated down, paddled a bit, all you could hear was the water, you could hear the birds, the wind blowing – nothing man-made – and it was – one of the most beautiful experiences I think - and then I paddled down to him and surprised him at 9 in the morning, which was pretty nice – so being alone, you need your alone time, ah, you need your time with people and you need your own time to reflect.

(L. Blake, 15/03/2012)

The tremendous sense of well-being that many experience out on the land is not limited to mental or emotional health, but has tangible physical benefits. Elizabeth Colin always wished to go to 8 Miles when life in the community became overbearing or when her arthritis pain became too much. If she did go out to her camp, she always said that as soon as she was there she had no more pain. In town she might have felt too ill to do a lot of things, but at her cabin at 8 miles she would always feel up to making fire, cutting meat or fish, hanging it up to dry, cut out material for a quilt, sew, and clean. She could walk around a lot and not feel tired.

Bertha Francis describes how being on the land shifts the weight towards a sense of living life on her own terms as opposed to a community life with its various demands and constraints:

Living out on the land gives you a lot of time to *think*, you're in *peace*, no fear of any kind and you just, you just relax out there and *enjoy* whatever you have out on the land. You can go berry picking, you can sit there, and look at the land, and *enjoy* the beauty of this land that we have. Its peace – quiet - *nobody* comes around, *nobody* rings the phone, *nobody bothers* you and you're just out there doing what you want to do. Sometimes I go out to my camp at the mouth of Rat River, there is an elderly lady that lives there, we go out picking berries, we have picnics, we cook fish to the fire, we make nice tea, we have good time together, sit and tell each other stories and we talk about the good times we have when we're out on the land and this is where - I found - my *safe place* to live.
(B. Francis, 04/05/2012)

When I framed my questions using formulations such as “what makes you feel safe when things go wrong or when you have had hard times?” people often answered with naming their “safe place”. Bertha Francis uses this expression in the quote above and so did many others. She explicitly expresses the sense of existential security she experiences on the land by emphasizing that there is “no fear of any kind”. Mary Ross reflected on what she does to feel better when facing hardship and said: “My grandmother kept me going. And my safe place was when we used to go berry picking, walked long walks through bushes with big red currants, I could just smell it even now. Whenever it got rough, I just go there in my mind.” (M. Ross, 09/11/2011). She does not travel to this spot anymore but when there is meditation in the workshops she participates in, she said, she would go to that place in her mind. The land is medicine, she said, “just putting your body on the ground takes the weight off, takes the pain and the stress. There is no noise, all one can hear is the birds and the water” (field notes, 13/07/2011). The land is saturated with embodied memories of movement and relations as well as of experiences of using one’s kinesthetic knowledge to sustain oneself and others. Even the act of remembering

the such embodied experience is a way to re-invoke well-being and a sense of safety in the world. Based on this knowledge, Mary, like many others in the community, believes in the therapeutic power of working and moving on the land.

Thea: What methods do you think are best for helping people?

Mary: One-on-one counselling. Also homework with books. By using yourself as an example. Sharing your own mistakes. Also on-the-land activities, it feels so good, sitting on the ground, mother earth just drains away your pains and issues. (M. Ross, 09/11/2011)

Working and travelling on the land, food, kin relationships of the past, present and future are all entangled in Teet'it Gwich'in relationship to the land. Walking the trails that have been used for generations and being at the campsites of ancestors connects past with the present and positions one's life within a community of belonging. Johnny Kay, former Chief and current project manager at the Teet'it Gwich'in Council, talked much about the importance of walking and of travelling in the footsteps of the ancestors. In conversation with him, he was imagining how beneficial and healing a long walk on snowshoes along the old trails for a few days, camping here and there, would be for young people. Liz Wright also reflected on the transformational force of travelling on the land. Every year she organizes the annual memorial skidoo trip to Old Crow in memory of her late father Chief Johnny Charlie. She is the main contact person for anyone interested in joining the group; she is concerned with finding funds for gas or supplies and takes the lead in organizing the schedule as well as accommodation with Old Crow. Her narrative illustrates the sense of insecurity she felt in a situation that was at first unfamiliar to her, but is also evidence for the growing sense of enskillment that comes with regularly organizing these trips.

It's pretty tough like going out, trying to spend one week with people you see in the community every day but don't know them personally [laughs] you're tested and tried every way I tell you [laughs] ya, ya – but *after*, you know after the trip and after you go home and after you're warm and rested up you think about the trip, talk about the trip and you laugh about certain parts, and then you think, oh this was so good and everybody was sharing a meal and you talk about that – but when you're on the trip, you just want to get home, ya, it's just, like halfway there, right, and now you want to come back home because you're tired of travelling all day and then trying to set up camp and – put brush down and trying to sleep with eight people in a four-men tent, you know, and it's not comfortable and, ya it's pretty tough. I would never survive if I was by myself, I can't even start a skidoo! [laughs] (E. Wright, 07/06/2012)

What seems crucial here is both, the sense of achievement and confidence that results from enduring the physically challenging trip and also the realization that, besides one's own effort and skill, cooperation and interdependence are pivotal for survival. When she spoke about her many trips to Old Crow and how they made her feel, I was reminded of the stories about strength of the Elders that I shared in chapter 4. I was wondering whether this trip had ever accompanied a substantial change in someone's life. Liz explained:

Liz: I think *everybody that's done the trip* has made a change in their life whether it was because of the person they were travelling with or whether the need to go out and test your strength, you know your endurance, because you need to be physically fit, you know and I know for myself when I go out there, you have to be, like, you have to be strong minded to get through the day because half the time you're just sitting on the skidoo right but you're bouncing all the way, if you're not, you're not in shape then – goodness that's – like hard on your body and then to try and tell everybody, you know, you have to be careful, because we're in the middle of nowhere and – if you get hurt, you know, that's – what are we going to do? We haven't had anything major happen to us, we had a few accidents but – we always pulled through it, you know, right to Old Crow or else right back to McPherson

Thea: and you got into quite a few blizzards and storms

Liz: Oh I know – and that's where you're really tested cause everybody starts getting angry and – wanting to take charge and wanting to be, “well, let's go this way” – *you can't!* You can't go anywhere if there's a blizzard, you just got to stay put
(E. Wright, 07/06/2012)

Travelling, movement, and engagement within the environment and with others allow for enskillment as well as the opportunity to work for one's own needs and to be needed for the well-being of the group. The bodily experience of travelling in unfamiliar, possibly dangerous, terrain and the experience of mastery of the task at hand through one's own effort and through collaboration with others fosters a sense of being home in the world, being safe with the skills one has and with the relations one belongs to.

After learning bits and pieces of bush life over the course of the months of my stay, I had a glimpse of this experience on several occasions. Learning some of the basic routines of camp life, or detangling a rabbit from the snare wire, skinning, gutting, and cooking it, or learning how to recognize good berry patches from a distance, or moving and working on the land I felt a beginning sense of security in my ability to navigate the world. Another of these occasions was going for wood with Mary Ross' daughters Stephanie and Jolene. I had heard many Elders speak about their chores as either the “outside girl” or the “inside girl” during their youth and was astonished by the physical strength that these stories reflected, especially with

regards to providing enough wood to heat tents or cabins with just a saw and an axe. Today, cutting and hauling wood appeared a mostly male occupation and that with the help of chainsaws and skidoos. I had accompanied two men to get wood at Stony Creek earlier in the year and made acquaintance with the physical demands of cutting frozen logs with a chainsaw and hauling heavy pieces of wood through deep snow to the trail. I was intrigued to hear that two young women were going for wood for their families' houses and that I could come along. Both women are working with children and youth in the community and are recognized as role models. One of them had returned to the community from living in a southern city not too long ago and was keen to catch up on the bush skills of her sister.

On a Sunday morning in February I packed my axe, thermos, and snacks – looked at my skidoo boots but then decided to wear my canvas shoes instead. The soft, flexible combination of moose hide and canvas with the warmth of wool socks and duffel is doubtlessly superior to boots in cold temperatures and deep snow. Gladys lent me some big rabbit fur mittens with duffel inside to keep me warm on the skidoo. Around eleven thirty in the morning Stephanie picked me up on her skidoo and we went to the Ross residence to get skidoos and sleds ready. After the sleds were freed of snow and attached to the skidoos we took off into the beautiful, sunny and crisp morning. If it had not been for a stiff south wind, it would have been a warm day of about -16 Celsius. We went across the Peel River, up a hill, into the woods crossing many small lakes. Upon arrival at our destination, we crawled up the banks of a lake and started to make fire. It took us a while, the wind was strong and the twigs wet. Jolene made wood chips from a cut tree and after a few minutes, she had the fire going. We moved a big log close to the fire as a bench to sit on and warm up, make tea, and cook food to sustain us during our work. The fire slowly burned a huge hole in the snow. We sat, had tea, some wieners, and were laughing about this and that. Two teenage boys were expected to join us and help. Soon they arrived but took off immediately to look for dry wood and did not come back for quite a long time. We waited for a bit but then the two sisters decided to start on their own. They chose one fallen tree, cleared off the snow and cut the branches with axes. Next was a tree that was dead but still standing up. We attacked it with our axes. Stephanie had superb technique and a lot of strength. With her sharp Fiskar axe she definitely had the most effect on the tree. Jolene and I chopped away at it as well but both of us lacked the practice that Stephanie had. Eventually, the tree fell and we cleared off the branches. We heard a skidoo and it was the two boys coming back. They had cut down a big tree, cut it in pieces and had already brought it back to town.

Now one of the two got to work with the chainsaw. He had checked with his axe if the wood was green or if it was dry, only the latter makes good firewood. He cut the tree, cleared the branches, and cut the log into pieces as long as the sled. Being about 1.5 meters long, these logs were very heavy. Stephanie showed us the technique to move the logs from where the tree was cut to the sled down the banks: lift the log on one end and flip it over, lift up and flip over. All three of us struggled with all our strength to lift the logs and flip them over. We laughed a lot and joked about how we were almost crushed under the weight of the logs. However, we managed to move all the logs to the sled. After everything was done, Stephanie talked about how good it is that we did this on our own and how she wanted to go out again on the next weekend to get a big dry tree she had spotted all by herself. Before we left, we cut some brush off the spruce trees. Mary Ross had asked for some to boil branches in her house. She had told me to get some for her and for myself as well, since it cleanses the air and clears the sinuses. She boils it in a coffee can on her wood stove. It smells wonderful and gives the room the fresh scent of spruce. After all logs were secured on the sleds, we started back, happy and satisfied with our work.

Elders draw on embodied memories of working and being in the bush to tap into a sense of ontological security and well-being when spending time in their camp at 8 Miles or elsewhere. Younger generations, however, had fewer opportunities to become familiar with living off the land and doing the work necessary for one's survival. As the examples of Liz Wright and Les Blake show, middle-aged Teet'it Gwich'in are drawn to integrate skills and knowledge of being on the land into their lives. Despite their initial insecurities and limitations, either with regards to skills or to time available, they both speak of a shift in experience when moving away from the community, out on the land, using their physical strength and knowledge to sustain their existence on the land. Young people in Fort McPherson also have a sense of the transformative force of working for one's own and other's sustenance on the land. Stephanie and Jolene are only two of many examples of young Teet'it Gwich'in who speak with certainty about working on the land as an activity that engenders a sense of health and strength.

Grounded in Heidegger's image of being as dwelling and building in a familiar place, Jackson (2005; see also Ingold and Kurttila 2000) defines emplacement as the bond that emerges between personhood and environment through inhabitation: "This objective world not only becomes endowed with, and animated by, our subjectivity; it becomes the primary source of the images and tropes whereby we identify and think about ourselves. At the same time, we

come to feel that we incorporate and depend on the existence of the people and places with which we habitually interact.” (Jackson 2005, 17). A rupture of this intersubjectivity in and involving place would then, as a logical consequence, threaten existential integrity. Displacement has been used conceptually to describe such experiences. Displacement, however, has to be critically considered to avoid “sedentarist analytic bias” (Liisa Malkki 1995 quoted in Chu 2006, 396) and to reflect on the language of rootedness as *normal*, and of movement as *pathological* (Siu 2007, 331). Not only a forced dislocation results in a sense of loss, but also involuntary immobility. The literature on northern Aboriginal people in Canada, for example, demonstrates the decisive role that mobility and travel played in people’s everyday lives in the past (Slobodin 1981, 515-517). Legends were made of the deeds and virtue of great leaders and travelers. In such a local context where subsistence depends on migratory game animals, mobility was a vital necessity. A sense of involuntary immobility resulting from experiences such as settlement in communities or residential schooling is reflected in the metaphors for suffering of Inuit participants in a healing program (Fletcher and Denham 2008). Suffering was described as carrying a heavy load and as a sense of feeling “stuck, unable to move forward” (2008, 128). Healing was to lift this burden and to move, work, engage with others in activities, and travel on the land. As discussed in chapter 5, Teet’it Gwich’in experienced a similar sense of existential immobility when they transitioned to settlement life and government housing. I believe this kinesthetic aspect to be crucial to the understanding of suffering and renewal, as it relates to a sense of passivity, inability to act and being acted upon, or on the other hand, enskillment and a sense of agency.

Volunteering is one strategy with which people create a sense of emplacement within the community. Working and travelling on the land is another way of engaged inhabitation that fosters a sense of ontological security through growing enskillment and emplacement. Being on the land, in particular, links past ways of being and imagining future potentialities with present articulations of being in place. Imagining the future is an integral part of peoples’ reflections on hardship, strength, and their being within the environment. While many young adults show increasing interest in learning skills to work on the land, they are at the same time concerned about young children who grow up less physically active and do not engage in learning bush skills. While people in Fort McPherson are very interested in using the newest technologies and think of technical competencies as important and beneficial, many voice their concerns that using technology is also associated with being sedentary and immobile. Many school initiatives

to take students out on the land are either for a few hours or perhaps one day. Other programs that aim to teach children bush skills are similarly short-term. The temporary quality of what could be called 'visits' to the land do not engender the kind of involvement that results in deep engagement with the environment. Les Blake explains:

I know when we went out [on the land as a child] it was something – it just happened and you took it in and that's, that's pretty much how you learn. Now, I think nowadays the kids, they don't want go out for a long period of time. They want to come back to their technology. Back then you didn't have all that stuff, it was just you and the land and your parents – the animals and – that kind of stuff. So it's a big change, we talk about it often around here, how we work with basketball to get better and better but here – but now – they come just to play and they go back to their video games and all that kind of stuff.
(L. Blake, 15/03/2012)

Alexandra Neyando, a young mother, expressed her concerns in a video she made for a community project. I asked her what her video was about:

It's about technology and - children. Oh, it's mostly about the fire – remember I was telling you – like if you have ten kids standing up, they'll all have iPods, laptops, mp3's, Xbox, PS3's, all this kind of technology stuff that they're just sitting there, playing games and - they're not going out there doing stuff. When I was – not like I'm really old or anything but - when I was small I used to go outside and play and have fun, like ride my bike or play around outside. But now – it's sitting there playing with their iPods – and I was just wondering, if you have ten kids standing there, how many kids would know how to make a fire, if they go out on the land or something, if they get stranded somewhere. That's what I wanted to do my video about.

(A. Neyando, 04/06/2012)

In speaking about what is important to her in raising her own children she articulates how important movement and enskillment is for children's health in her perspective:

Alex: I really want to try to set them up and make them think about what they're gonna do [...] I just noticed technology really takes over like all the physical parts of your life, like if you just sit there on internet or – I just really want to break that. That's a new like tradition that's getting brought into our Gwich'in people and – I don't know I just want to keep doing physical stuff with them. I just don't want them get all stuck in that – technology – even though that's what is coming - but it's not good for their health, I think - and I, what I try to do now is limit them, like when they play game or play whatever, they gotta be there just for a certain time, not all day [...]

But I really want to do that now, like go out there and do stuff like – duck hunting and whatever and try cut up by myself or get somebody to do that and show these kids – I just don't want them to get *stuck* - that's the main thing, I don't want them to get stuck

Thea: stuck in what way?

Alex: stuck in technology – you know they have to get traditional knowledge too - that’s – cause me I feel that I lost that - I mean I could still go out and learn all that stuff but I just have to - try and do it. I know the basics, I just have to go out there and – live it out! [laughs] (A. Neyando, 04/06/2012)

The metaphor she uses for the experience of living in the community dominated by a sedentary lifestyle is “being stuck”. Being stuck describes an inherently involuntary confinement and, applied to a way of being as in this quote, expresses a sense of existential immobility. Her fear for her children is that they will be confined by their preoccupation with technology in a way that keeps them from engaging with their surroundings to build skills and accumulate experiential knowledge that is relevant for Gwich’in to position themselves as distinct within Canadian society and to assert their rightful use of the land. Her concerns resonate with many Elders’ prediction that hard times are coming and people will need to rely once again on living off the land.

Aii ts’at aii tthak gashandaii guk’iighe’ at’at łahch’iihah yeenoo nikhwah gwich’in kat, nikhwitsii kat, nikhwiyuughwan kat gwiinzii guuvah iidandaih d’at’ at’at nikhwint’eh at’at yinjii nizrii chan iid’i’in ts’at t’at gwiinzii chan adik’anaatih. *When we know of how our people, our grandfathers and our parents lived long ago we have a sound mind and we know how to look after ourselves good.*

Gwiinzii chan gwiieendoo goodhain tr’iheelyah kwaa eenjit gahgwiheedandaii tthak gadiitr’oonahant ts’at aii gwinjik at’at gwiieendoo goodhain tr’iinlih kwaa chan goonlih. *When we are taught to be prepared for hard times we are able to get through hard times easily.*

Jii tthak at’at gahgwidandaii gwiint’oh gwitahgwahdaadhal. Yeendoo, yeenoo chan akoo digwidiinu’, nikhwiyuughwan akoo diginuu yeendoo nikhwigii kat juu gwinuu gwik’it nikhwint’eh chan akoo dijidinuu yeendoo nikhwigii kat jii gugwijiitth’ak ji’ ihłat gugoontrii guuvah nigwijaanaii ji’ at’at jii tthak ganagaandaii gwinjik at’at adits’at tr’angiheedandal. *All this knowledge will be depended on. It was said by our parents and we also have to pass this on to our children. Then our children will be prepared when hard times come and they will know what to do to help themselves.*

(M. Teya, Stories of Strength 09/2012, transl. by E. Mitchell-Firth)

Mary Teya ended her story of strength with this call to become enskilled in a way that allows one to live a good life and to navigate hardship and unfamiliarity. She reminds her people that this is how Gwich’in ancestors lived good and healthy lives and that the awareness of belonging to such people will help present and future generations cope with adversity. Her vision of the future, despite her anticipation of difficulty, is one of strength and ontological security. Being enskilled and being able to “take care” of oneself is the existential foundation to being able to

“help” oneself in crisis. She proposes that the skills needed to live on the land will also enable future generations to be at home in the world and balance their needs with the demands of others in a way that maintains a sense of well-being.

In summary, working and travelling on the land situates people as belonging to and continuing past relations, it asserts the legitimacy of their claims on the land and as part of the greater Gwich'in community with distinct rights in the present and future. Being on the land is also a marker of being Gwich'in, an identity that is important in Fort McPherson in the context of self-governance negotiations, infringement of government and industry on the land and wildlife, as well as a history of marginalization and disenfranchisement. Working on the land, eating food from the land, and working with skins and fur signify a healthy and smart person and allows someone to position themselves within the community as living a healthful life. In times of suffering and overwhelming relational demands, the balance between acting and being acted upon is easier to attain on the land. Being away from the community and out on the land, one's own work and skill becomes a priority and a source of well-being, while in the community such purposeful work might not be available. For others, the demands of their various roles might be overtaxing within the community and diminish on the land resulting in a sense of existential integrity and control. Most importantly, being on the land fosters movement, travel, walking, and working. Therefore, it shifts experience towards one's own enskillment and abilities to sustain oneself, which in turn is the basis for a sense of ontological security.



Figure 8: Spring breakup of the Peel River at *Nataiinlaji* (8 Miles). Photo: T.Luig

Conclusions

You're just in that tunnel where it's dark and when you sober up - I remember I walked down - by the bank, by Happy's [Happy's Landing] and over to the Mission house along that fence. I was walking in the springtime. All at once, I noticed the *nice green* leaves on those willows down the hill and I look way across I could see the mountains - I never - really saw that before and it just all came out to me clear. Because I was sobering up and that's when everything came out clear to me, just like I came out of that dark tunnel and everything just brightened up with me, and that's how I felt when I first - I used to drank for so long and I sobered up - and - that's when I thought going out on the land that's where I'm gonna find my safe place - and that's what I did, I used to even walk out on the sand bar - and just felt *so good* when I was out there - ya - so I just wanted to share that.

(Bertha Francis, 04/05/2012)

Social suffering is a reality that shapes everyday lives in Fort McPherson as in many other northern Aboriginal communities. However, there are an exceptional number of people in the community who have been able to shift their experience of suffering and engage with their surroundings in a way that restored their sense of existential mobility and ontological security. Emerging from the space of passivity and immobility, everyone who shared their story here engaged in new ways of relating to the world and to others. Many of the narratives of transformation were framed in the language of movement and mobility, of a shift in perception of oneself within one's environment, and of finding a sense of security in balancing acting and being acted upon.

In my reflections on how people overcome suffering and are able to act in the face of hardship and unpredictability I draw on a wealth of research that illustrates the role that identity, relationality, place, and narrative plays in transforming experience from suffering to renewal. My personal experience in Fort McPherson, however, the work and the conversations I shared with people directed my attention to the role of movement and a sense of existential mobility as the foundation of ontological security. While recent research on healing has made substantial contributions, the role of movement, working, travelling, and the physical aspects of transformation of experience has not been sufficiently considered, a gap that I tried to address with this work. As kinesthetic experiences are foundational for the formation of a sense of a continuous self embedded in relations as well as for enskillment and becoming knowledgeable, I argue that bodily practices, such as walking, working, volunteering, and travelling are pivotal to induce a shift in experience from ontological threat to ontological security.

Understanding my research as a result of the inter-existence that every encounter involves and that Gwich'in pedagogy of "being right in with the people" presupposes, I have discussed the intentions, relationships, and shared bodily experiences that the people I engaged with as well as myself brought to the dialogue that this thesis reflects. The conversations and activities that built the foundation of my argument are a dialectic between my life experiences and educational background and people's past, present, as well as future intentions. In a dialogic encounter, according to Bakhtin (1981), differing conceptual horizons and discourses come to interact in order to allow the speaker to get a reading on her own narrative, to enter into a dialogue between her ontological background and the one of the listener. The listener in the case of my conversations with people in Fort McPherson is not only myself, but policy makers, southern Canadian people, people back home in Germany, and most of all fellow community members, leaders, and people who are still struggling with addictions. This thesis is part of this ongoing dialogue and is written as a response to both my academic question as well as my learning from Teet'it Gwich'in.

To acknowledge the temporality of any experience that spans residual, sedimented past encounters, present relational projects, and anticipated future projects I have answered my question in a basic chronological manner. I began by looking at how the heroes of Gwich'in oral history are described in stories from long ago. Stories of Gwich'in origin speak of legendary travelers and leaders who embody the skills necessary to survive hardship and unpredictability, even isolation, which is a threat equal to death in the subarctic environment. They were able to do so by continuing to move, work, and apply their skills through creative engagement with their surroundings. All of them had to prove their ability to sustain themselves through their own skills, strength, and knowledge, however, they simultaneously reaffirmed relations to others by showing compassion and sharing the wealth they had achieved.

Next, I explored the meanings of strength that characterized Gwich'in Elder's youth and their memories of hardship and well-being in the old days. In these stories, walking and working is associated with health, longevity, and living a good life. It is from these memories that normative ideas of keeping busy as signifying a healthy life and a good person emerged. These stories further speak of the transformative quality of movement that enables people to shift from existential immobility to a sense of agency and well-being. Mobility, travel, and physical activity continue to embody physical and mental health as well as a sense of existential security for many Elders who shared stories with me. The meaning of strength that emerged from these

narratives revolves around growing knowledgeable in sustaining oneself and others (“being smart”) as well as emphasizes intersubjectivity and collaboration (“thinking with one mind”).

Although this thesis intentionally focuses on aspects of renewal and transitions to well-being, I discussed the assault on existential integrity and Gwich’in ontological premises that resulted from the colonial encounter with government interventions such as residential school enrollment, public housing, infringement on land use and local economy, as well as bureaucratic control over local helping initiatives. While Gwich’in strategically asserted their sovereignty and agency in many instances vis-à-vis traders, missionaries, as well as government agencies, government intervention in the 1960’s and 70’s constrained mobility and undermined agency to an extent that many people were left without a sense of agency and with a sense of existential immobility.

Elizabeth Colin’s story then served to illustrate how one woman was able to salvage ontological security in the face of unspeakable suffering and the rupture of relations and routines of her life. She narrates her transition from a place of immobility through a liminal space of destruction, but also potentiality, towards new ways of relating to herself and others in metaphors of movement. Her and others’ stories in chapter 6 demonstrate the various dimensions of being where people struggled to restore a balance between acting and being acted upon. Aside from movement, people used other strategies to negotiate ontological security in a way that “no one person or group ever arrogates agency so completely and permanently to itself that another is reduced to the status of a mere thing, a cipher, an object, an anonymous creature of blind fate” (Jackson 2002, 13). For example, narrative transformation from being a part of relational processes to *discovering* a self that is autonomous and powerful in its own right was one of these strategies that, while being a method of constructing healthy subjectivities that conform with North-American societal ideas of a healthy person, gave women leverage in face of overwhelming relational demands.

Finally, I described how I experienced contemporary practices of renewal and well-being in Fort McPherson during my year of being in the community. People who were in the process of transforming their lives for the better or who had been living a good, healthy life for a while were recognized by others by their dedication to volunteering or by their work on the land. Volunteering is not only an embodied practice of healing but also an ambiguous as well as powerful discourse of community identity and political resistance. First and foremost, however, volunteering offers people the space to engage in purposeful work, become enskilled and

restore a sense of emplacement in their community. While volunteering is a central site of healing and renewal within the community, people in Fort McPherson emphasize the crucial role that travelling and working on the land has in maintaining or restoring a sense of ontological security. While the examples in chapter 8 show that personal engagement with the land is different for different generations and individuals, there are two common themes that I recognized in all as well as my own experience on the land. The physical distance from the community lessens the intensity of being acted upon and, simultaneously, gives more weight to one's own acting as survival and bodily comfort depends on one's own work and skills.

In imagining the future both Elders and young people in Fort McPherson emphasize the need for enskillment that enables people to sustain themselves and share with others as a foundation for ontological security which would facilitate their ability to face future hardships.

This thesis is a part of an ongoing dialogue and many questions are left unanswered. I have not been able to learn any significant amount of the Gwich'in language which renders my understanding of t'aih and its various meanings rudimentary. The immense importance that sewing and beading plays in women's lives, especially after recovery from addictions or other afflictions, is a further interesting area of enquiry that needs consideration. Finally, the phenomenon of reduced physical pain or other illness symptoms when people travel or work on the land is an extremely important question that requires further research. In the face of continuing health disparities and insufficient health care provision in northern communities such research could contribute to health policy that gives more appropriate weight to local practices of healing and renewal.

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Appendix

"Lost in the Storm" by Mary Effie Snowshoe, Fort McPherson

Recorded on March 16, 2012

I'm a Gwich'in girl and I was at the age 18 years old when I got lost in the storm through the mountains. I'm just gonna tell you the story.

A lot of people were staying around Snare River. Snare River is past Arctic Circle. The month of February it was very cold and still short days, and, how they call, my dad told me that we're out of a lot of stuff, so I had to come to Fort McPherson and that was quite a ways from Fort McPherson to Snare River. And, how they call, it was very cold and two other teams beside me, we left Snare River and we came all the way through...through the mountains and we hit Rock River and we went down Rock River and we came all the way over. But in case I'm running into storm like this, my dad told me a lot of things about how to survive if I ever get caught in the wind. So he ... number one ... he told me that make sure that I have matches in my pocket, every pocket that I have on me to make sure I have matches in there which I always did. Then he had good sharp axe for me and he made sure that I had two good down blankets. And, of course, we had this caribou skin mattress. So I had everything that was warm and I know that if I ever get caught I would use these things.

And I started over and it was an open camp, it was open camp all the way to Fort McPherson and we camped three times and we got to Fort McPherson and got all the groceries and we stayed couple days and then we left again. When I hit Rock River I ran into wind, this was very bad wind. The mountains just got gone in front of me, but I kept going. And this friend behind me, it was a woman that was older than me and, how they call, she had a brother coming with her too. I was worried about them, so I keep stopping and keep stopping and make sure they are coming.

But when I got back to, got back to Caribou Mountain, got back to Caribou Mountain and some people were staying there. I had tea and I left and it was just white-out from there. I couldn't see anything and I couldn't wait for my partner coming behind me. But she was lucky that she ran into a family that was living on the side of the trail there. I went long ways past Arctic Circle and my dogs got lost, I knew my dogs were lost, they didn't know which way to go

and, how they call, I walk out to them, went to my leader, took my snowshoes and, how they call, I went to my leader and I put my snowshoes on and at the age of 18 years old I thought I can't do this by myself and I prayed. I remember I had faith in God that I will be safe. And I knew it was a lot, a lot of wolves around but again, I prayed, and I start walking. I tied a rope to my leader and I start walking. I just walk, walk, I don't even know where I was going. What I was really scared of – what if I was on top of a mountain and it was bad snow there. I was worried about snow slide.

And how they call, soon I got amongst little black things, I checked one out, it was little tree and, how they call, while that I can't see anything but the sound of the wind that's all I heard. The sound of the wind and I was walking. And I don't know where I am but I knew it was between Arctic Circle and Snare River. So I thought to myself I'm gonna take my right, so I just stood there and took my right and start walking. And got into a bunch of trees but still, I kept walking and I got into more, more big trees. And I couldn't, I couldn't make fire. I stopped there and my dad told me if you ever get caught in the wind and you can't start your fire, the wind is gonna blow your matches out. Dig the snow down deep and put something in there to get your fire going. So I thought of that and I did that, I dug the snow and I had matches on me, I took that out and I had a box there, I tore that up and I put it way down there and I start my fire. And whatever I see right beside me, I just break it down and put it down there. Soon I made big fire. With that light I could see around and I had real good axe and I start cutting wood into there and, how they call, when I put lots of wood in there I had more, more light from my fire. So I built a big, big fire out there. And that burned down and I did it again.

And I thought to myself, I have to do something to overnight here, I can't go any further. I couldn't even tie my dogs, it's blowing so hard that I couldn't even tie my dogs. But I had good axe, I dug a snow and made a teepee with little trees and I put one of my blankets around it and put snow on it and inside I put brush from trees and big fire right by my teepee there and I made my bed inside but I sat to the fire most of that night. And then I built a big fire again and I crawled into my teepee, I took my rifle in there. And I crawled into my blanket, I had my caribou mattress there and, how they call, I went in my teepee and I tried to sleep but the sound of the wind, that's all you heard. From the trees, you could hear the trees going back and forth in the wind, you could hear the sound. And I lie there and next thing I hear wolves howling from the mountain, here and there, you could hear, sometimes is more, you could hear it's a bunch because it's more than one wolf howling. A lot of wolves was howling on the mountains and

that's not very far. And, I finally fell asleep. I just lie there with my rifle beside me and, how they call, I fell asleep and I woke up and I still hear the sound of the wind and I can't see nothing. And my fire was going right down, I could see that. And, how they call, I turn over, I turn over in my teepee and I try to go back to sleep. And I did fall asleep again but I still heard the howling of the wolves.

All at once I woke up and I could see a little bit, just like it was daylight, little bit I could see. I sure got out of my teepee fast, I went outside and I got my fire going again. When I got my fire going, I put my tea kettle on and I had a lot, a lot of lunch like, say dry meat and bone grease and all these things I had. Just feeling kind of scared of the wind, I don't know where I am and I couldn't eat. So I made myself tea and I was having cup of tea and frozen bannock. And I had a dog named Dick. He's my wheel dog. Him, I managed to get out of harness and I had him tied close to my teepee. And he got up and he looked at me and he started barking. He was barking and, how they call, he's not barking at anything but he's barking at me. I guess he's just happy that I'm up and and I could see. So I had cup of tea, I remember, I had cup of tea and frozen bannock and my dog named Dick barking at me, you know, even that gives me a good feeling. At least, I knew my dogs was there with me. And then, again, I prayed that I'm gonna make it through. I don't know where I am. So I turned around and took my sled out of snow. My dogs, I fed them, dry meat. And then which way my sled is, I knew which way it came just by my sled. So I put my snowshoes back on and I went ... like ... my sled headed this way and I past my sled and I start walking again. My dogs were coming behind me and I walk, walk, and walk. Must have been, maybe, 6 o'clock in the morning, it's getting little bit light and I just hit the trail hours after I've been walking long ways. And then I hit the main trail, this is the trail I used to travel. So, once I hit that trail, I took my snowshoes off because my dogs knew it was trail right there. And they're just willing to go and I just managed to throw myself into my sled and off I went.

And I still remember, I still remember it was about 11:30 am, in the morning, that I got back home at Snare River. Even before I went in the tent, my dad knew something was wrong because I was home too early. I walk in and he told me "What happened?", so I told him, "I got lost in the wind, I've been camping way up some place. Dogs were scared of the wind really coming, they're scared of the wind." He told me that if I never made it home that day, my partner and her brother, they made it back to this camp and said that Mary was ahead of us, it would have been a big search. And this is what I didn't want, our Gwich'in people will never sit, no matter what kind of weather, if somebody was stuck out there. They'll make sure that news

were past down to the next camp, from there it'll go right down and it'll be a big search. I didn't want people to go out and search for me because I was ok, I was ok, and I was just happy before my partner and her brother made it back to there.

And, how they call, it was a big story, it was a big story because I was 18 years old that time. And now you go in the mountain, there's bad wind up there, people could get stuck up there, especially when it gets white-out. Any 18-year-old girl ever gets lots up there, I don't think they'll survive, you know? And, I think, I knew all this, how to survive out there, if I get into danger, if I know I am stuck, is because I had a teacher and that was my dad. But I made it back to Snare River with all the things that he wanted. You know. And I stayed there a few days and I started back the same trail again to move my parents back. So, that was the story about the time when I got lost in the storm. What I would never, never forget in this is the howling of the wolves, the sound of the wind, the trees are whistling and cold, cold, and here I am lying in my teepee. And in the morning sitting to make my fire, drinking cup of tea with frozen bannock, and my dog Dick howling at me and barking at me. So that was the story!