

nehiyaw iskwew kiskinowâtasinahikewina – paminisowin namôya tipeyimisowin: Cree
Women Learning Self Determination Through Sacred Teachings of the Creator

by

wahpimaskwasis (Little White Bear)
Janice Alison Makokis
B.A., University of Alberta, 2005

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Human and Social Development

© wahpimaskwasis (Little White Bear) Janice Alison Makokis, 2008
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy
or other means, without the permission of the author.

nehiyaw iskwew kiskinowâtasinahikewina – paminisowin namôya tipeyimisowin:
Learning Self Determination Through the Sacred Embedded Teachings and
Responsibilities given to Cree Women by the Creator

By

wahpimaskwasis (Little White Bear)
Janice Alison Makokis
B.A., University of Alberta, 2005

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Cheryl Suzack, Supervisor
(Department of English)

Dr. Jeff Corntassel, Departmental Member
(Indigenous Governance Program)

Dr. Laura Parisi, Outside Member
(Department of Women's Studies)

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Cheryl Suzack, Supervisor
(Department of English)

Dr. Jeff Corntassel, Departmental Member
(Indigenous Governance Program)

Dr. Laura Parisi, Outside Member
(Department of Women's Studies)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores self determination through the lens of Cree First Nation members located in northeastern Alberta, Canada. The researcher utilizes the talking circle to explore how Cree leaders define self determination. Four prominent themes; 1) identity and western influences 2) personal transformation 3) searching for nehiyaw pimatsowin and 4) commitment and responsibility evolve from the stories shared. Cree spirituality and the need to involve 'self' in ceremony proves to be the foundation upon which Cree self determination is founded. This thesis moves towards, "Learning Self Determination Through the Sacred Embedded Teachings and Responsibilities given to Cree Women by the Creator".

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | PAGE |
|---|------|
| SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE | ii |
| ABSTRACT..... | iii |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS..... | iv |
| CREE WORDS AND CONCEPTS..... | vi |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | vii |
| DEDICATION..... | ix |
| CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION | |
| Nehiyaw Iskewew – (Cree Woman) as Researcher..... | 1 |
| First Words..... | 1 |
| Contextualizing the Spiritual Element of Self-Determination | 8 |
| Journeying to Understand Iyiniw Pahminsowin: A Transformative Process | 12 |
| CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW -WHAT INDIGENOUS SCHOLARS SAY | |
| Self-Determination..... | 19 |
| Indigenous Women | 27 |
| Indigenous Feminism..... | 29 |
| Distinguishing Indigenous Women from Feminism..... | 34 |
| Using Feminism to Rediscover Sacred Women’s Teachings? | 37 |
| Summary | 38 |
| CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY | |
| Articulating Nehiyaw Pimatisiwin as a Research Paradigm..... | 39 |

| | |
|--|---------|
| Understanding the Origins of the Talking Circle..... | 46 |
| Selection of Participants | 49 |
| Practicing Nehiyewak Protocol..... | 50 |
| Putting Methodology to Practice (Talking Circle Process) | 51 |
| Talking Circle(s) and Community Expectations..... | 54 |
| Experiencing the Stories and Transforming them into Teachings..... | 55 |
| CHAPTER FOUR – STORIES (ELDER TEACHINGS) | |
| Introduction..... | 57 |
| Identity and Western Influences | 61 |
| Spiritual Personal Transformation | 72 |
| CHAPTER FIVE – STORIES OF EMPOWERMENT | |
| Searching for, practicing and living Nehiyaw Pimatisiwin | 82 |
| Commitment and Responsibility..... | 101 |
| Recognizing the Sacred Role of Nehiyewak Women..... | 111 |
| CHAPTER SIX – CLOSING THOUGHTS (WHAT THE STORIES MEAN) | |
| Acimowin wapahmaskosis – Telling My Story as a Cree Woman | 116 |
| Our Language as Resistance | 119 |
| Uncovering our Traditional Knowledge | 121 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 125 |

CREE WORDS AND CONCEPTS

Ahcahkowiyasowewina – Cree Spiritual Laws

Ayiwahkemowin – Thinks oneself is greater than the next person – elevating oneself as righteous thus becoming challenging.

Kwayaskatisiwin – Spiritual Law – Honesty

Iyiniw Pahminsowin – How I regulate my activity; to work and direct oneself.

Mahtahitowin – Spiritual Law - Sharing

Miyo Pimatisiwin – Living the “Good Life”

Nehiyaw – Cree Person

Nehiyawak – Cree People

Nehiyaw Iskwew – Cree Woman

Nehiyaw Iskwewak – Cree Women

Nehiyaw Pimatisiwin – Cree Worldview/Cree Way of Life

Sakihtowin – Spiritual Law - Love

Sohkeyitamowin – Spiritual Law – Strength/Determination

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to say Ay Ay (Thank You) to the Creator for giving me strength, determination and guidance throughout this entire research project. Without believing in and practicing my own spiritual ceremonies this thesis would not have been possible. I would also like to extend a huge Ay Ay to my immediate family (Mom, Dad and James) for their continuous encouragement, support and belief in me throughout this entire process. Without your loving support I could not have completed this thesis project. A special thank you to my mother for taking the journey of seeking nehiyaw pimatisiwin (Cree Way of Life) so that I would later come to be on that same road and for always encouraging me to write when it seemed unbearable. I would like to also acknowledge my late nookum (grandmother) Alice and my kookum Mildred for epitomizing what it means to be a strong Cree woman. To my extended family (aunties and uncles) who took the initiative to learn more about our beautiful nehiyaw culture/ceremonies so that our family would be able to live nehiyaw pimatisiwin and pass it on to our children and the generations to come. I would also like to extend my sincerest gratitude to the staff at Blue Quills First Nations College for helping me in various capacities with this thesis research. Ay Ay to my nation and the staff at the Saddle Lake Education Authority for making this educational journey possible.

To my thesis committee chair, Dr. Cheryl Suzack, Ay Ay, for always being such an amazing support and guide along this thesis journey. Your kindness and belief in me made this project manageable when it sometimes seemed overwhelming. To the rest of my thesis committee, Professors Jeff Corntassel, Laura Parisi and Heather Tapley, Ay Ay for your insightful feedback to make this thesis what it is. To Jeff Corntassel and Taiiaike Alfred for their support and guidance on this thesis and throughout my entire time being an IGOV

student, Ay Ay. My way of thinking has forever been transformed as a result of sitting in class with you. You have given me the intellectual tools to think, write and research like a nehiyaw, so, Ay Ay. Thank You to all the IGOV staff that have come and gone for their continued help and enthusiasm in making the graduate student experience more enjoyable.

Finally, I would like to especially thank all the participants that were a part of this thesis research. They graciously shared their time, life stories and teachings with me so that I could attempt to bring life to the importance of our sacred women's roles once again. Ay Ay

DEDICATION

To all those women (sisters, mothers, aunts and grandmothers) who have gone before and blazed the trail for future young women to uncover, reclaim and take our rightful place within our nations the way our ancestors imagined. To all those unborn children coming into this earth life so they may learn, practice and teach our nations how to live self-determination and practice nehiyewak governance so we honor and continue our way of life.

Chapter 1

Introduction

A Nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground. Then it is done, no matter how brave its warriors or strong its weapons.

Source: Cheyenne Proverb

Nehiyaw Iskwew – (Cree Woman) as Researcher

Indigenous Nations, both women and men, should heed the wise words of our ancestors as noted in the above quotation. This chapter initiates the discussion of ‘self-determination’ by analyzing a Cree woman’s lens of what self-determination purports to be. Three themes are explored to take the reader on this journey; they include **first words, contextualizing the spiritual element of self-determination and journeying to understand iyiniw pahminsowin: a transformative process**. This chapter lays the mental and spiritual foundation for later stories as shared by Indigenous academic scholars and research participants.

First Words

Tanisi wahpimaskwasis nitisikason nehiyaw iskwew niya onicikiskwaponihk ohci niya. I begin this thesis by introducing myself in my Cree language because it sets the context of how my vision and interpretation of self-determination relates directly to this act. In English, this translates to “Hello, the Cree spiritual name that has been given to me is ‘Little White Bear’, and I am a Cree woman from the Saddle Lake Cree Nation. The significance of having a spiritual name and knowing what it means is linked to self-determination. This idea was conveyed to me by the female Elder present during the talking circle I held to collect my research data. She said:

We’re all born with a spirit. And you have a spirit name. If you don’t you must get one; and have it tattooed. (*Laughter*). So that you will never forget it. But

you also put it here (pointing to her heart) and you live with it. And that's like having it tattooed within your heart. Your being, your way of thinking, that's your guide. Your spirit teaches you. All you have to do is ask. But that commitment is there. You committed yourself. Or your parents or your grandparents committed you already. When you had a name when you were born, you grew up with it, so now that is your guide, here in this life. This is the spirit, the name that you were given.

Prior to this talking circle, I had not been taught the reason *why* we have spiritual names and the meaning behind *why* our parents, or in my case, my grandparents insisted on getting one for me and their other grandchildren. I remember sitting in a sweatlodge ceremony at a very young age with my grandmother not understanding the significance of what we were doing or why I had to be there. But, after hearing the words of Veronica explain the importance of having a spiritual Cree name, everything made sense to me. My grandmother was clearly exercising her role as a Cree woman and a grandmother by making sure her granddaughter knew who she was, knew where she came from, and knew what her responsibilities were and are to my people and community by giving me that spirit name which would act as my guide. Because my grandmother passed away when I was eight years old I never had the opportunity to learn more from her. What little I do remember is the legacy that has lived on and the path that she and other indigenous activists during the 1970's took to blaze the trail for future generations of our people. I hold their passion and conviction for change close to my heart as it is the collective legacy of ancestral memories of my relatives that provide direction for me and other indigenous peoples to continue on that path to seek social justice so that we can truly live in relation to our homelands in the way our forefathers imagined us to.

When I recall my childhood and adolescent memories they are steeped with happy but confused recollections of what it meant to be Cree as I grew up. Up to the age of

eight, I vividly remember spending a lot of time with nookom (my grandmother) Alice and nimosom (my grandfather) Vernon as their house was within walking distance from my parent's house. I had many joyful memories of knowing what it meant to be Cree at a young age while my paternal grandmother was alive. I remember watching her sew, speak Cree and make an effort to teach me about our culture, traditions and way of life. Despite not having the opportunity to get to know nookum Alice because she passed away when I was eight, her memory and legacy of rallying events of socio-political change has lived on through my generation of grandchildren as we seek out ways to bring forth the strong grounded indigenous voices that was evident in the 1970's group of political leaders. It is the memories passed on through stories, teachings and ways of life that my family and other closely related relatives (both immediate and extended families) lived that enable me to move beyond the colonized identity that shaped my early adolescent years to the one I am in now where I continue on a path of seeking out what it means to be a nehiyaw iskwew.

As grandchildren, we were introduced to Cree ceremonies and language at a very young age because my grandparents were adamant about their grandchildren having a strong sense of identity. This included taking us to Cree ceremonies, speaking to us in Cree, and consciously making every effort to teach us about what it meant to have a strong identity. They did this by introducing us to ceremony, the Cree language and other cultural traditions that make up what it means to be a nehiyaw. When I think of self-determination I think of my grandparents and what they went through to raise their children (my father and his siblings) and the efforts they made to teach their grandchildren about who they are as nehiyawak.

My story of Cree women and self-determination stems from the stories I have heard about my grandparents and what they did to make certain that our people were formally educated in the western sense but more importantly, their unwavering energy to incorporate a strong Cree identity in our education. One of the stories that resonates is when I hear my aunt speak about how our local tribal college, Blue Quills First Nations, was taken over locally and would later be operated by our own people. At the time of the takeover, in the 1970's, my grandparents were both involved at some level in this political endeavor. They had the foresight and vision of seeing our people formally educated in the western sense while infusing the educational experience of our people with nehiyaw ways of knowing. Their purpose was to ensure that future generations of students that walked through the doors of the college would know what it meant to be nehiyawak. The fundamental principles guiding the actions of our people initiating this takeover came from traditional Cree teachings of upholding the responsibility to consider the future of the next seven generations to come and to practice the teaching of iyiniw pahminsowin, whereby, appropriate actions were taken to regulate and organize their activity to consider the future of their families, communities and nation. One of the stories that I have heard from my aunt about my grandparent's involvement in this event is how one of the 'priests' working at the college (which was a residential school) asked my grandfather, "How do you expect to run this school when you can't even read or write?" My grandfather responded, "Maybe I won't be the one running this school but my children and grandchildren will". These words speak volumes as they embody the spirit of what lied within the hearts and minds of my grandparent's belief that our people would take their rightful place in our homelands by educating our people with our

language, teachings and cultural way of life to ensure our survival within our territory as our forefathers envisioned. These actions taken by my grandparents were then transferred over to how they socialized and interacted with their grandchildren.

My grandmother epitomized the strength and resilience that many indigenous women embody because of her sheer willpower and determination to survive despite what colonial policy created to break their spirit. In my grandmother's case she was a survivor of the residential school system and used those horrific experiences to try to make change within her grandchildren's generation by making sure we knew who we were, and instilled pride within us by teaching us about what it meant to be Cree. My grandmother made a conscious effort to teach her grandchildren our Cree culture and language because she knew the importance of having a strong foundation in our culture for the survival of our people and subsequent generations. When I think about the memories I had while being in the presence of my grandmother I now know that she was teaching us to be proud of who we were and where we come from. She was instilling within us the necessary teachings of what it meant to be proud nehiyawak. It is these memories that I hold close because they remind me of the power and strength that indigenous women have in raising our children, our future generations, our future leaders and our people to be strong and proud of who we are so that we know and remember what our responsibilities are to our people.

When my grandmother passed, everything changed for me and our family because she was no longer there to be the rock that kept our family together both spiritually and culturally. I have come to learn through my post-secondary training that the insidious nature of colonialism has even impacted the way indigenous people deal with the loss of

their loved ones. When I reflect back on how my family dealt with the loss of my grandmother I now know that colonialism reached into the hearts and minds of how my family and even our people live and deal with the most intimate emotional moments that should be free of colonial constraints. It is this insidiousness that penetrates the layers of our indigenous identities thus leaving us in a state of confusion to navigate between choosing to pursue a path of following the teachings our ancestors left for us to walk or choosing to walk down the road to assimilation and acculturation. Personal introspection of how this impacted my family's life after my grandmother passed informs my understanding of just how cunningly subtle colonialism seeps into the behavioral actions of its host. This event became the pivotal point in my life where I went from having strong foundations of knowing what it meant to be a nehiyaw to one of a confused state of being. It is during this phase in a child's life that is precious and important because it is when you really begin to learn about who you are. Socialization begins to take on its function and helps mould and shape the way one thinks and behaves.

One of the main institutions that shaped my identity took place in primary and secondary school. Although I grew up on the reserve, my upbringing was predominantly set within a euro-western context because I attended elementary/high school in the nearby town that was twenty minutes from the reserve. My entire social upbringing was set within the environment of a French-Ukrainian community as a result of attending school there. The socialization that occurred during this time was steeped with deep acculturation and assimilation into how to function and fit with(in) a western societal context. It was during this time in my life that my memories of a happy childhood immersed in everything nehiyaw began to drift away and became replaced with

experiences of self-hatred, racism and shame of being nehiyaw. My identity transformed from being nehiyaw, to being confused through my 'different-ness' experienced by racist commentary or jokes. I never quite fit in with the monias (white) kids because I wasn't white enough and was never accepted as nehiyaw because I wasn't Indian enough. So, my adolescent identity was one of constant confusion laced with trying to find out where I fit and who I was. It was in this state of confusion that led me to learn more about who I was.

It is important that I introduced myself in Cree because it reminds me of who I am, where I come from, who I am accountable to, and the responsibilities I have in upholding certain teachings that have been passed on to me. I was born into a family of educators, ceremonialists and socio-political activists. As a result, I was brought up and taught from a young age that certain laws guide my life and that these laws are to be found in the journey that one undertakes to seek nehiyaw pimatisiwin (Cree journey/way of life) and its meanings. This thesis is a reflection of my journey in discovering what self-determination means to me as a nehiyaw iskwew and how this is directly related to who we are, where we come from, and the path one takes to seek out the ancestral teachings present within the knowledge held in our decolonized indigenous identities.

It was not until taking a course with Dr. Jeff Corntassel (Self-Determination and Indigenous Peoples in Canada) during my Master's degree program that I really began to think of self-determination in a different light. Dr. Corntassel asked us to find out what this term meant to us in our own language which forced us to seek this meaning from Elders or knowledge holders that come from the community or nation we belong to. Prior to this exercise I had most often associated self-determination with a legal,

economic, political or socio-cultural framework because much of the discourse on the subject is and has been written within this realm of understanding. This exercise encouraged me to seek an alternative understanding to articulate this principle and encouraged me to look within myself, my family and my nation to see how this concept is recognized and practiced within my community. The way that I have approached and carried out this entire thesis process has been to practice iyiniw pahminsowin (self-determination), which is found within our indigenous ways of knowing. By this, I am referring to the knowledge framework that exists outside the euro-western system of knowledge that we have been socialized to think is the normative standard upon which all knowledge is derived.

Contextualizing the Spiritual Element of Self-Determination

I have been fortunate to be surrounded by positive nehiyawak that live and model their life after the teachings of our nehiyawak ways which has resulted in teaching me how we practice these within our life as part of the larger nehiyawak community we belong to. My community is the Saddle Lake Cree Nation. It is located approximately 150 km northeast of Edmonton and is recognized as one of the largest Cree nation communities in Canada. The nehiyaw ideological concept that best articulates self-determination is ‘iyiniw pahminsowin’. This is the Cree term that explains “how order and organization are given to the people” (Makokis, 2001), and it is most foundational to the language and meanings associated with our teachings and the structure of nehiyawak ceremonies. This concept of ‘iyiniw pahminsowin’ is best articulated by a Cree female Elder interviewed for Makokis’s unpublished dissertation entitled Teachings From Cree Elders: A Grounded Theory Study of Indigenous Leadership. The Elder states:

...we are not individualistic and independent of each other, much less the Creator. We have been born into a social order that is based on sacred laws and teachings of responsibility to one another. Hence, we are interconnected and interdependent beings. At no time in our lives, are we ever alone. We each have to fulfill roles and responsibilities as a result of our birth into Cree society (2001, p. 119).

The words conveyed by this Elder clearly demonstrate that a Cree interpretation of what 'self-determination' is becomes intrinsically and intimately linked to one's ability to take appropriate action to fully embody a person's Nehiyawak identity. The impetus for this thesis research idea stems from my own spiritual transformative experience(s) and seeing the profound strength that Indigenous women embody as they relate their own understandings of iyiniw pahminsowin through their relationship, connection and involvement with ceremony. The purpose for uncovering the meaning of this term for Cree women is process-driven and based in personal learning and individual decolonization by living and practicing ceremonial teachings that explain our roles and responsibilities as women. By roles and responsibilities I am not referring to the euro-western gender discourse that conjures up notions of inequality, hierarchy, difference or power and 'how gender' explicates this socially structured phenomenon (Kimmel, 2000). I am more interested in the sacred positions that the Creator gave to us when we were created as humans and more specifically as women, and learning how the acts of uncovering these Creator given roles helps us to recover and reclaim a post-colonial identity found in seeking 'iyiniw pahminsowin' through the spiritual realm of ceremony.

The foundation of this thesis revolves around ceremony because it was in ceremony that I came to understand 'iyiniw pahminsowin' (self-determination – how we

regulate/organize ourselves) from an anti-colonial framework and how it is implemented within our daily actions. By anti-colonial I am referring to the spiritual space in which indigenous peoples utilize and practice our systems of knowledge and ways of being which are found in our language, our teachings, our stories, our songs, and our ceremonies. By practicing the most fundamental form of resistance to colonialism (practicing our ceremonies), we are calling on the collective memory of our ancestors to remind us of the path they have fought and created for us to follow and in these actions we are practicing self-determination at the most fundamental level. These are the conceptual elements that I am interested in examining within this thesis as they are the sacred frame (hoop) that holds together and guides a nation's existence (Gunn Allen, 1992). The philosophical principles that hold this frame together are the spiritual blueprints that provide people within a clan, a community and a nation direction in choosing their path and directing their life which inevitably contributes to the good of the collective.

For many nehiyawak within my community, ceremony acts as the repository of our knowledge systems, the place where our knowledge is stored, learned, understood and transferred to those who wish to seek out traditional ways of being [nehiyawak knowledge]. Ceremony is where we connect to our ancestors, their teachings and the way of life they left for us to practice. Ceremony demands understanding traditional knowledge as the tool we utilize to discover who we are and the place where we practice self-determination, governance and our natural laws. Ceremony is the place where we discover the spiritual aspect of our being and it is the space that is most anti-colonial where we understand by experiencing what a decolonized existence looks, feels and is

like. One of the participants that I interviewed for my research captures the importance of ceremony to our way of life. He is a pipe holder, a sweat lodge holder and a tribal college teacher who integrates indigenous knowledge systems within the curriculum he teaches. He says:

...in ceremony that's where we put the method into practice. And we are people of practice. We have to practice. If we don't practice then we don't have it anymore. So we practice. And the more people that can get into it...it's like having a workout. The stronger we become. If we don't work out then I don't know what we're becoming. So we talk about roles of people and we talk about self determination. Self-determination is a funny thing too because self-determination is all about self- responsibility. What is your responsibility? Yet when you go to ceremony you give up your responsibility to a higher power. So you're no longer responsible. You can plan to the best of your ability but once that ceremony starts the spirit takes over. And whatever happens, happens. Your responsibility is no longer there. But your responsibility IS there because you have a small part to play in that ceremony. If you don't play that small part then that ceremony doesn't happen. And it's all about the collective: these ceremonies. It's all about our nation when we come together in ceremonies. Sure there's a ohnikaniw (the headman there), oskapewsak (helpers), the fire keepers, the door keepers, the pipe holders. But it's everybody working together that makes that ceremony, what that ceremony is. Everybody. So if everyone has their own responsibility but yet they give up their responsibility so that everybody moves along...that's ceremony and that's self-determination.

Vincent notes that through integrating ceremony with self-determination we pass on our traditional cultural values inherent within our epistemological system. But it is within these sacred spaces that we learn and practice what self-determination and governance mean. Ceremonies are thus important for our contemporary existence because they remind us of who we are, where we have come from, and what our connectedness means to our ancestors who provide the spiritual guidance to us in everything we do.

Journeying to Understand Iyiniw Pahminsowin: A Transformative Process

Alfred's (2005) most recent book Wasase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom resonated deeply with me as I began to think of what my thesis topic would be about.. His forthright criticism of the current state of indigenous peoples and what needs to be done to reconnect and assert our rightful place within society made me reflect on my own personal journey and helped me conceptualize the concept of connecting self-determination to spirituality. Alfred states:

The root of the problem is that we are living through a spiritual crisis, a time of darkness that descended on our people when we became disconnected from our lands and from our traditional ways of life. We are divided amongst ourselves and confused in our own minds about who we are and what kind of life we should be living (p. 31).

These words and the ideas inherent within Alfred's work speak to the importance of 'building a social reality toward a restored spiritual foundation" and the connection this has to evoking a socio-cultural revolution that can aid Indigenous peoples and nations to move towards a contemporary anti-colonial social order (p.22). What resulted from connecting this idea about the need to spiritually revolutionize our people was looking at the important role that our women have in our families, societies, communities and nations. I became interested in how indigenous women's spiritual transformative journey's can aid in attaining a more indigenous centered vision of how we can live in our homelands according to our own ways of being. Alfred's work helped me theoretically conceptualize how self-determination can be explained within the spiritual realm as a way to seek out what is holistically natural to indigenous peoples in an arena outside the political rights based discourse framework which has overshadowed and diverted the path of what self-determination really is to many indigenous people. My

own experiences both personal and intellectual helped shape this research idea.

Spirituality is central to Cree women's lives and is important in helping us learn about and practice what self-determination is. Spirituality for women, as I will show, practiced through ceremony moves our communities toward a nehiyawak vision of governance.

My research focuses on Cree women because it was by finding out who I am as a nehiyaw iskwew that I understood self-determination and I wanted to unpack this concept from a nehiyaw iskwew perspective to better understand our governance structure and how self-determination is an essential aspect of this.

My own decolonized transformative process began as I sought out ceremony to help me understand who I am and what being a nehiyaw iskwew means. It is through ceremony that nehiyawak learn how to organize and live life by the traditional roles and responsibilities our ancestors formed and gave to us in hopes that we would protect, keep and live authentic nehiyaw ways of life. Prior to entering on this path, which is often referred to by Elders as 'the sweetgrass trail, or red road' I recognized that my idea of what it meant to be Cree prior to committing myself to ceremony and the teachings that come from them was shaped by the colonized existence I was socialized into. Living in a "colonized" state of mind makes it difficult to attain truth because you are continuously justifying behaviors that do not resemble an authentic nehiyaw way of life (Alfred, 1999; Memmi, 1991). This is why our Elders tell us to go to ceremony and learn the ways of the old people because it is in ceremony that we begin to strip away the layers of colonialism that keep us bound to a colonized existence. Elders teach us that we can only begin to understand what it really means to be nehiyawak if we live our life in ceremony. Through ceremony we learn what our role and responsibility is to our people and it is this

role that keeps us relationally accountable and on the path of living the ‘good life,’ miyo pimatisiwin.

I grew up in an environment where being nehiyaw was all around me through language and ceremony. I remember sitting outside sweatlodges from the age of four and I painfully remember at the age of five attending my first sweat when I received my nehiyaw name. By painful I am referring to the scorching heat that hot lava rocks exude when they are splashed with water and how frightening it is to be sitting in complete darkness at the age of five not knowing the meaning or significance behind ‘sweating’. Although *being around* ceremony was a part of my upbringing it was not until later in my life, as a young adult, that I began to wonder about the significance and meaning of the ceremonies I participated in. Up until the age of twenty three, I had only attended sweat lodge ceremonies on an irregular basis and even then I did not know their deeply rooted nature and purpose. It was during a difficult time in my life that I really began to ask the hard questions such as: Who am I? What does it mean to be a nehiyaw? What is my purpose? *and* What is my place within my family, tribe, community or nation? I began to ask my mother more about the ‘fast ceremony’ that she participated in on a yearly basis and this later led me to desire to participate in ‘the fast’ as well. This act of questioning and seeking deep ‘self-reflection’ is articulated by Makokis (2001) who states, “The Cree people have to completely understand the way of life given to them. In finding the spirituality of self, one also develops the bonds to nature. Human beings are of the natural world and are related to the animals, plants, and all of creation. It is a Cree belief that by observing the habits and characteristics of the animals, lessons are learned” (p. 87/88). Makokis elaborates further on this point that ‘observing habits and characteristics

of animals' and makes the connection to establishing and learning principles such as 'integrity'. We learn integrity from those 'beings' or animals that live their life according to their birthright because they live their entire lives as whatever animal they are, never straying from that path because they know how to survive as a bear, an ant or a bird. Like the animals remaining true to their birthright, it is the responsibility of nehiyawak to seek out and find what it means to live a life premised on a nehiyawak existence and to honor that birthright if we are to remain truthful to who we are.

This path to seeking out 'nehiyaw pimatisiwin – Cree journey/way of life' would help me understand what it means to be a nehiyaw and inevitably lead me to the 'fast ceremony'. It was through my experiences in this ceremony that I began to realize what living a nehiyaw way of life encompassed. The 'fast ceremony' is a ceremony where one seeks truth. By truth I mean our own personal truth which comes from asking questions about yourself, the world around you and how you relate to that world. When you are put out on the land without food or water for four days and four nights your senses become heightened to a level unimaginable. All the layers of what make you 'human' are stripped from you as you become immersed in the natural world, and it is here in this spiritual domain that balance and harmony become realized. The mental or intellectual aspect of what makes us question logic or reason ceases because you have entered a spiritual state whereby your communication is with yourself and with your relations (the land, the animals, the birds and everything else that makes up the natural and spiritual space you occupy). The revelations that come out of this experience to helps one understand that our life is guided by something much higher than any legal or political norm created to dictate the way we think or behave. It is here that your spirit takes over

and you realize just how simple yet profoundly complex nature's law is. It is in this space and place that your mind suspends all inhibitions and you embark on what Alfred (2005) refers to as a 'spiritual transformation'. We must take this spiritual journey to release ourselves from the colonial shackles that keep our minds, hearts and bodies bound to living lives that are completely disconnected from our indigenous value systems, teachings and principles. Nehiyawak and other indigenous peoples must take these sentiments seriously as the hearts of our nations are at stake. The survival of our nations' should be the impetus for us to restore our ways of being and living as nehiyawak.

When I made the commitment to embark on that journey of 'truth seeking' my entire life changed. I began to learn how one lives the good life, or 'miyo pimatisiwin,' in Cree. Truth is powerful when you abide by natural law and guide your life according to the path that our ancestors laid for us. When you are put out on the land that nourishes us, gives us life and teaches us to survive without food or water you begin to see the life you lead in a different light. You make the connection between the actions you exhibit and personal accountability to your birthright. It was during my first fast that I realized that the life I was living prior to fasting was a disguise of authenticity a mask that lead me to take the easy road and just 'get by'. Through 'fasting' you confront your inner most fears and see how important it is to be consistent in living your life to the teachings or words you speak about because the continued transference of our way of life is at risk. Some Elders refer to this as 'walking our talk': we are not only talking the talk, but we are in fact going down the road of 'walking or living our talk.' It is vital that indigenous people seek out ceremony – the place that traditional teachings are found – in an effort to preserve, maintain and transfer our way of life to be able to say we are living an authentic

indigenous life for the health and prosperity of our nations. By authentic, I am referring to a way of life that forces us to change our behavior through a cognitive transformation so we think and subsequently turn our thinking into actions and thus *live Indigenous*.

I have purposely begun to write this thesis by articulating its personal and spiritual meaning in order to contextualize how I have come to this topic, how I have approached and carried out this research, and how I am very much a part of every aspect of what this thesis is about.

The purpose of this research was to discover how Cree women living in their community conceptualize self-determination and the connection this has to their relationship with ceremony. The way in which this thesis research was carried out was related to how Cree people approach knowledge acquisition and knowledge translation to incorporate within their lives. The process of how knowledge was conveyed in this research process resembles the protocol Cree people embark upon when we seek out Elders to help us understand a question we have. In practicing this knowledge acquisition and translation process within my research I wanted to experience how the transfer of knowledge through talking circles can be used as a strategy in reviving Cree women's roles to take our rightful place within the Cree governance circle. In the process of this research it became evident in the research participant's contribution and participation in the talking circle that an indigenous centred approach to conducting research was the appropriate method to take. Had I not followed indigenous protocols when one asks for help and knowledge from Elders the positive reception I received from the research participants could have been hindered, thus jeopardizing my research. A

more in depth discussion of what worked and what did not during the research process will be discussed in Chapter 3.

This thesis will argue that Cree women view self-determination as an idea intrinsic to our core ways of being and asks **How does ceremonial life become an integral aspect of where nehiyaw women conceptualize self-determination and why is this important in moving an indigenous vision of governance forward?** The following chapters will outline the literature that helped frame this research question, the methodology used to collect the research data and the analytic findings that came out of the stories in the talking circle from my participants. This research examines the process that Cree women take to understand self-determination and their relationship to ceremony in helping them seek out their roles as women to reclaim their sacred positions within our Cree governance structure.

This is a discussion and expression of my own ceremonial journey to understand what self-determination is and how other nehiyawak in my community relate their own stories of what this means to them. The ideas in this thesis do not speak to all indigenous women's experiences, how indigenous women come to understand their sacred roles or what an indigenous gendered perspective of self-determination is but rather, this thesis should be read as a tool that indigenous women can use to seek out ways to empower themselves, their families, their communities and nations in aspirations of seeking *nehiyaw pimatisiwin*.

Chapter 2

Literature Review – Indigenous Women, Indigenous Self-Determination and Indigenous Feminism

This literature review focuses on Indigenous women's experiences that have made them the powerful leaders they are today. I have chosen to focus on those authors who provide a perspective to better comprehend how Indigenous women, more specifically, Nehiyaw women within my community (Saddle Lake Cree Nation), determine, shape and lead our community's vision of "iyiniw pahminsowin"¹. Also included in this analysis are some of the focal pieces of writing that have made important contributions to the body of literature that have influenced the discourse surrounding self-determination. Select pieces of Indigenous feminist literature were chosen in attempts to show how Indigenous women have turned to other forms of a non-traditional deconstructive analysis to address the impact colonialism has had on the indigenous gender relationships. This thesis research is about self-determination contextualized within the framework of how Cree woman figure into this.

Self-Determination

In recent years the word 'self-determination' has generated some controversial debate amongst academics, political theorists, grassroots indigenous peoples and those committed to indigenous political issues. A significant part of this debate concerns terminology and its importance to the Canadian-indigenous political agenda. Because it is problematic to define or understand what self-determination is in its scope and meaning when viewed solely through the lens of a euro-western paradigm, it is necessary to analyze self-determination through an Indigenous philosophical framework to provide

¹ The Cree term that describes how order and organization were given to the people. (Makokis, 2001).

a more appropriate and interpretive understanding that reflects our relationship to this concept. Because my thesis is about Cree women and self-determination I began to question what this term meant, how it might inform the socio-political movement of what happens at the grassroots level, and how this ideological concept might be reframed to be more inclusive of an indigenous epistemological framework found within our indigenous languages and teachings. From this critical position, I sought out literature that would help articulate my argument that self-determination should be contextualized in anti-colonial language to help assert an indigenous identity premised on principles found in our authentic ways of being. An important aspect of this positioning concerns recognizing that our ways of being may be learned through working with Elders and Indigenous knowledge holders in the communities and nations we come from.

As a means of understanding how the concept of self-determination was brought into circles of debate, discussion, and negotiation it is imperative to seek out the origin from which its meaning derived. The international political scene helped foreground the beginning of the self-determination debate. Scholar James Anaya, has written extensively on how the international political community, more specifically, international law has influenced Indigenous people's ability to articulate their demands, both in their home territories and internationally. Anaya (1996) elaborates on the principle of 'self-determination' as it is commonly used within the international scene. He writes:

Extending from core values of human freedom and equality, expressly associated with peoples instead of states, and affirmed in a number of international human rights instruments, the principle of self-determination arises within international law's human rights frame and hence benefits human beings

as human beings and not sovereign entities as such. Like all human rights norms, moreover, self-determination is presumptively universal in scope and thus must be assumed to benefit all segments of humanity (p. 76).

This interpretation of self-determination has been constructed within an individual ‘rights discourse’ framework which automatically places it within a euro-western perspective of rights as it relates to international law. The language inherent in this explanation takes away from other perspectives or interpretations of what self-determination could mean. For this reason, the questions I seek with my research were related to ceremonial life and how teachings found within ceremony inform a nehiyaw vision of self-determination not found in a formalized legal/political interpretive understanding. This euro-western perception of self-determination assumes a universal homogenous way of seeing and understanding its scope and content. As a result, this political legal discourse discussion determines what goes within the ideological box of what gives self-determination meaning. This articulation of self-determination assumes the “core values of human freedom and equality” to be enjoyed by everyone in the same way at the same level. How can this be possible when an elite and select group of people set and determine how we are to enjoy these “core values”? The values established through human rights law are premised on western notions of what individual ‘human rights’ are. Further, they aspire to define all people in the same way by “benefiting all segments of humanity”. From an Indigenous perspective, we must be critical of the body that creates these ‘rights’ which are derived from european law because the positioning of these ‘rights’ within a euro-western paradigm impacts and restricts our ability to navigate within this framework. This exercise of navigating becomes difficult

because euro-western paradigms refuse to see these ideological concepts from an indigenous philosophical foundation. It is this language war that we have engaged in and is the premise upon which this thesis was created. The contribution of the international perspective of self-determination helps set the context to understand how domestic issues are closely related to the international scene and vice versa.

One of the classic pieces of texts about the future of Canadian Indigenous self-determination is the edited book entitled Pathways to Self-Determination: Canadian Indians and the Canadian State (1984). The ideas enclosed and expressed within its pages still have relevance today and contain passionate declarations from Indigenous authors who seek answers from with(in) our own systems of thought. Iroquois scholar Oren Lyons (1984) expresses his belief in the distinctiveness of Indigenous peoples when he states:

My people, the Iroquois, were very powerful people. They had a coalition of forces that was governed by two fires: the spiritual fire and the political fire. The central fire, of course, was the spiritual fire. The primary law of Indian government is the spiritual law. Spirituality is the highest form of politics, and our spirituality is directly involved in government. As chiefs we are told that our first and most important duty is to see that the spiritual ceremonies are carried out. Without the ceremonies, one does not have a basis on which to conduct government for the welfare of the people. This is not only for our people but for the good of all living things in general (p. 5).

Lyons eloquently outlines the centrality of spirituality to a nation's political actions. He also states that governance is integrated in important ways with tribal life. Lyons' idea of

integration supports my own because integration of ceremony and governance through Indigenous ceremonies represent a different path to replace Eurocentric ideals of how we can achieve political autonomy within *our own* traditional territories.

Self-determination has also been rethought to mean a political discursive formation to secure nationhood (Deloria and Lytle, 1998; Alfred, 1999). In their book The Nations Within (1998) Deloria and Lytle capture the political culture of Native Americans and the importance and primacy of what the word ‘nationhood’ and its inherent indigenized meaning stands for. They state:

When we distinguish between nationhood and self-government, we speak of two entirely different positions in the world. *Nationhood* implies a process of decision making that is free and uninhibited within the community, a community in fact that is almost completely insulated from external factors as it considers its possible options. *Self-government*, on the other hand, implies a recognition by the superior political power that some measure of local decision making is necessary but that this process must be monitored very carefully so that its products are compatible with the goals and policies of the larger political power. *Self-government* implies that the people were previously incapable of making any decisions for themselves and are now ready to assume some, but not all, of the responsibilities of a municipality (p. 14).

In understanding *who we are and where we come from* we are much more grounded in articulating a counter anti-colonial narrative. We become more equipped intellectually against those colonial forces that are found in the power structures that continue to subject us to occupy spaces of silent passivity within the intellectual academic arena we

are a part of. The ceremonies are our spiritual centres and thus allows us to redefine self-determination in our own ways.

The existing literature informs us that Indigenous peoples must reassert our voices to claim our rightful place in the paradigm wars that we find ourselves in (Mander and Tauli-Corpuz, 2006). We are living through a period of time where it is critical for us to affirm our presence through the utilization of our own indigenous languages where a decolonized reality can be sought, in an effort to breathe life and meaning into concepts such as self-determination, sovereignty and self-government (Turner, 2006; Alfred, 1999), instead of allowing them to be defined in the euro-western framework they are often created in. This is where it is of paramount importance to assert our indigenous voices within the political and legal discourses that are produced which ultimately influence the agenda that affect our livelihood within the territories we call home. This inevitably influences the lives of indigenous women who bear the future of our nations.

The most recent piece of work that advocates a strong indigenous intellectual presence to create a ‘critical indigenous philosophy’ that ‘unpacks the colonial framework of these (the language of rights, sovereignty, and nationalism) discourses’ is Dale Turner’s (2006, p. 95) work in This is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy. In reading Turner’s book I agreed with much of his analysis for ‘word warriors’ except for his position of *where* spirituality fits within creating a ‘critical indigenous philosophical framework’. In Turner’s (2006) words:

This does not mean we must ignore the spiritual dimension of indigenous thought in our teaching, in our scholarship, or in Canadian courts of law for that matter – far from it. What it does highlight is that when we use a concept like ‘spirituality’

in European philosophical discourse, especially in political philosophy, we must appreciate that in order for it to do the philosophical work we believe it ought to do – say, in generating a richer understanding of political justice – we must be able to find a place for it within European philosophical discourse. Finding the right ‘place’ for terms like ‘spirituality’ is essential to a critical Indigenous philosophy (p. 115).

If our philosophical foundation is premised on or found in ceremonial rituals or teachings, then how can we make the claim that ‘we do not know how to incorporate or where to place spirituality’ within a philosophical exercise of creating a critical Indigenous philosophy? In much of my experience in coming to know and understand what an Indigenous epistemology is, it came through teachings that originated in ceremony. One can read all the books she wants about ‘what an Indigenous philosophy is’ but only when one truly immerses and embraces his/herself within indigenous ceremony do they find the true meaning of an indigenous way of thinking and experiencing the world through a true anti-colonial framework. It is through the experiential knowledge acquired by participating in various ceremonies that you truly appreciate the importance of a philosophy based on ceremonial teachings found within the spiritual realm of an indigenous existence.

First and foremost our actions should be guided by our own epistemological frameworks if we are also seeking true vindication from a philosophical colonial construct that has held us to be the social, political, cultural and economic prisoners within the very spaces we seek redress from through the years of colonized subjugation we have experienced. In doing so, we have to return to our teachings found in the

languages we speak, the songs we sing in ceremony, the teachings found in the ceremonial structures that have been passed on to us from our ancestors, and the philosophical bundles of knowledge found in the ways of our ancestors.

It is within these ceremonial and anti-colonial spaces that we take a stand against the colonizer's language and we begin to reclaim that aspect of our colonized identity that has devoured our will to learn about who we are. Native Hawaiian nationalist Haunani-Kay Trask (1999) emphasizes the importance of language in advancing a decolonized nationalist agenda stating:

To Natives, the burst of creative outpouring that accompanies cultural nationalism is self-explanatory: a choice has been made for things Native over things non-Native. Politically, the choice is one of decolonization. Language, in particular, can aid in decolonizing the mind. Thinking in one's own cultural referents leads to conceptualizing in one's own world view, which, in turn, leads to disagreement with and eventual opposition to the dominant ideology....This is why thinking and acting as a Native under colonial conditions is a highly politicized reality, one filled with intimate oppositions and powerful psychological tensions (p. 44).

For the purpose of my own research, I took to heart the message that Trask advocates to 'think and act Native' by seeking out the scope and meaning of the term 'self-determination' within my own community as a way to import a nehiyaw connotation.

How can we say we live and practice self-determination if we don't even know what this concept means in the language or philosophical teachings of our ancestors? How do we become self-determining by utilizing systems of thought that are foreign to our way of thinking? These questions situate my broader research objectives by calling attention to a

decolonized advancement of conceptualizing 'self-determination' outside the normative colonial framework we seek meaning with(in). There must be a mass summoning of indigenous people to embrace a critical indigenous thought process premised on our own indigenous ways of knowing. It is in this intellectual space that we can find solace and refuge to think, experience, live and practice ways of living that reflect those of our ancestors. By undertaking this research I am participating in an anti-colonial struggle in an effort to fight the colonial imperialist forces that pervade the colonized psyche through years of institutionalized principles found within the structured social, political and economic systems that have been created and inflicted on us. In unearthing the meaning of 'self-determination' through our sacred positions as Cree women (held within the teachings that inform us of our roles and responsibilities) we are better equipped to assert our rightful places within our nations which will inevitably lead us to support the prosperity of our nations survival. The next section of this literature review seeks to situate the place of spirituality via ceremony in the lives of indigenous women as a space for establishing and practicing a decolonized process of seeking and taking action within indigenous communities to articulate a vision of self-determination found within an indigenous epistemological framework.

Indigenous Women

To fully grasp and understand the traditional roles and responsibilities of women within our respective Indigenous Nations it is critical to recognize the belief systems, Natural Laws and governance structure(s) that traditionally guided the governance of our Nations. This understanding is conveyed and understood by many Indigenous women as they seek to understand their place within their own nations (Anderson, 2000; Anderson

and Lawrence, 2003; Makokis, 2001; Monture Angus, 1995). In an anti-colonial analysis of gender violence among Native American women Smith, (2005) articulates the “need to adopt antiviolence strategies” as an effort in combating patriarchy, stating, “Our strategies to combat violence within communities (sexual/domestic violence) must be informed by approaches that also combat violence directed against communities, including state violence – police brutality, prisons, militarism, racism, colonialism, and economic exploitation” (p. 151) She does not examine the role ceremony can have on creating community based strategies emanating from ceremonial teachings and structures (p.151). This absence in Smith’s analysis reaffirms the need to seek out ceremonial life and the teachings that stem from it in order to create a vision of an anti-colonial reality that reclaims a governance structure reflective of a gendered balance inherent in traditional Indigenous societies. Anderson (2000) explains the traditional political role of women, stating, “Native women had political authority because our nations recognized the value of having input from all members of society. The inclusion of women in decisions was critical for the security of a nation” (p. 65). In order to delve further into this “inclusion of women” that Anderson states, it becomes paramount for women to seek out what their traditional roles were in order to uncover their sacredness, respect and reverence within their Nation. It is thus important to shed light on what actions Indigenous women are taking to ‘seek out’ their traditional roles in order to find out what their responsibilities are. By responsibilities, I am referring to the sacred positions and gender balance inherent in a governance structure honoring women in relation to their family, community and nation.

Taiiaki Alfred states that Indigenous peoples generally have to understand their role within the Nation they were born into to fully understand what being autonomous from a “colonial mentality” means (Alfred, 1999). This moment of experiencing internalized autonomy came to me as a result of experiencing ceremony because through ceremony I realized what my role and responsibility is to the Nation that I have been born into. While many of the authors reviewed for this piece of writing articulated the respect given to women within their traditional (pre-contact) societies a significant piece missing from the literature was finding out the role of ceremony in provoking those women to uncover what their ‘traditional roles and responsibilities’ were. By focusing the thesis question and the research methodological process on ceremony it was hoped that the importance of ceremonial life and the teachings derived from this research would unveil how ceremony has helped women want to “uncover and reclaim” what their role as women are. It was hoped that in doing this research I would get at the crux of why ceremonial life is integral to a Nations’ survival as many pursue their own vision of autonomy. The reverence given to ceremony is apparent in the literature but the connection it has to shaping autonomous individuals which translates into what it means to live an autonomous life uninhibited by colonial thinking is not expressed thoroughly. I hoped to capture this in my research by the women who ‘move, shake and instill’ decolonized agendas of seeking a vision of iyinew pahminsowin.

Indigenous Feminism

The social interactions that we engage in both privately and publicly become the basis for the institutionalization of normative standards thus producing and (re)producing a set of societal norms, through the process of embodiment. The societal norms that are

of interest to me in this discussion are those that relegate Indigenous women to marginal positions to the point where our voices become suppressed and oppressed in this “cycle of colonized-colonizer” as articulated in Makokis’s (2001) unpublished dissertation. In her discussion of the historical legislation via government policies including - the Royal Proclamation of 1763, the British North American Act of 1867, the Indian Act to name a few – she shares how these policies continue to impact our current realities. Martin- Hill (2003) voices her concern with the oppressive state many Indigenous women find themselves in. She states, “The fragmentation of our cultures, beliefs and values as a result of colonialism has made our notions of tradition vulnerable to horizontal oppression – that is, those oppressed people who need to assume a sense of power and control do so by thwarting traditional beliefs” (p. 108). While many Indigenous women encounter this oppressive form of “traditionalism”, it should also be noted that there are examples of communities that maintain traditional teachings, values and beliefs that do not coincide with oppressive measures as Martin-Hill speaks about. The message in this is for women to be able to recognize these ‘thwarted’ traditional moments by holding autonomy and an integrated sense of self-worth to interpret those traditional practices and ceremonies that do not honor their existence as women within their Nation. Bruno (2003) reinforces this statement by emphasizing the need for “Aboriginal women to question how tradition is framed and in what context it is being used, in order to construct a positive lifestyle” (p. 9).

Many Indigenous women continue to face circumstances of powerlessness and disempowerment which is the sad and unfortunate legacy of colonialism and the road it has paved for Indigenous peoples. Today, many Indigenous women encounter the “She

No Speaks” phenomena articulated by Dawn Martin-Hill in Strong Women Stories (2003) which is also supported by both Green (1997) and Napoleon (2005) in their articulation of “patriarchal constructed policies” that continue to govern Indigenous women’s lives. This “She No Speaks” anomaly is a problematic one that exists in many Indigenous communities as a result of colonial induced policy and law, as stated by Martin-Hill:

Internalization of patriarchal notions of the silent subordinate woman gave rise to the She No Speaks “traditional” woman, which has been embraced by our twenty-first century communities...Nowadays, the woman who attempts to exercise leadership in public and private capacities is often characterized as meddling and immoral...This reaction to the modern role of a traditional woman tells us that she is not to speak, lead or have vision (p. 111).

The articulation of the “She No Speaks” phenomena contextualizes the colonial framework many Indigenous communities continue to subject their women to without realizing the detriment of perpetuating such a concept. In understanding the complex socio-historical issues, this idea can be of importance in my study but it is also important to note that many Indigenous communities are at different stages in their decolonizing process. I want to move beyond the colonial framework that the “She No Speaks” phenomena articulates and delve deeper into uncovering the spiritual essence that guides and regulates Indigenous women’s ability to harness teachings that release them from colonial constraints. I want to unearth what Indigenous women are doing and how they are maintaining the actions they practice in achieving what they understand to be liberation from western beliefs and practices.

Uncovering the “the collective memory loss” of the oppression that women encounter is paramount to reclaiming and uncovering the esteemed position of indigenous women (Monture-Angus, 1995, p. 238). Oklahoma Choctaw scholar, Abbott-Mihesuah (2003) reinforces the need for understanding the importance of ceremony and spirituality in this process of reclaiming, when she states, “Many modern Native women leaders point to their tribal religions and traditions as inspiration and justification for their positions as leaders” (p. 143). When our women and our men come to understand their place and role in the nation or community that they are responsible to, then our nations become fully revived (Monture-Angus, 1995). Ceremonial life as expressed through Indigenous spirituality and culture must be looked at more closely to see how it guides Indigenous women in the work they do within their community to lead their individual communities to a place of an existence premised on Indigenous ways of knowing. This point brings me to the following question, how does ceremony become a focal and integral aspect of nehiyaw women guiding and moving their vision of autonomy forward within the Saddle Lake Cree Nation? Delving deeper into this question becomes important for mapping out potential strategies and actions of an autonomous nehiyaw existence guided by our Elder’s teachings of iyiniw pahminsowin. In raising this question in the research I focused on the practices of my community and the teachings I gathered from my research participants.

Resistance to colonial regimes and empires becomes an integral piece of the puzzle in pursuing self-determination (Green, 1997; Napoleon, 2005, Lyons, 1984; Smallface-Marule, 1984). Metis scholar, Joyce Green (1997) articulates a more recent

understanding of the ideological implication of invoking self-determination agendas by Indigenous peoples. She states:

When indigenous peoples invoke the right to self-determination, they invoke the legacy of colonial history, an assertion which at its core suggests the colonial state illegitimately interfered with the right. Solutions, given the real politic, must be relational; the state must change its assumptions and practices to accommodate indigenous self-determination (p. 13).

So how does this play into or implicate the discussion I have outlined above about Indigenous women and ceremony? The way in which my research seeks to approach understanding self-determination originates from a ceremonial framework of governance which stems from a spiritual fire that Indigenous nations have utilized since time immemorial in seeking direction to govern our lives. While this political discourse helps frame the ideological understanding of what self-determination is in the political and legal realm, it does not help communities understand at a pragmatic level how this translates into principles that are reflective, responsive or respectful of their ways of knowing in a way that honors what it means to practice autonomy at the most fundamental level, the individual and subsequently within their tribal collective(s). As a nehiyaw person 'self-determination' discourse in an abstract European legal framework makes no sense to me unless it is translated into an understanding about my role and responsibilities, first, as a nehiyaw iskwew, and second, as a relational person/woman who fits into the larger picture of envisioning nehiyaw pahminsowin. A clearer picture of this is voiced by Skywoman in Makokis's findings of the importance of Cree ways of knowing to leadership. She states:

In defining self-government we cannot use the word '*tipeymisowin*' because we can never *tipeymisonaw wikac* (be totally independent of everything). *Tipeyta* is the root word, which means "to own," *sonaw* means "ourselves" and *wikac* means "never". Literally translated it means "we can never own ourselves." Because, who was born here by himself/herself? Nobody. We are all born to families, to parents. Those parents were loaned *kiyanaw* [us], the Creator loaned the two people the child. We were all loaned children, we do not own them.

Pahminsowin, now that is different, this is where I can regulate my activity. The root word *pahmiyta* translates to "be in control or to take care of". I work for myself.

Distinguishing Indigenous Women's Experiences from Feminism

My understanding of feminism came from a young charismatic radical feminist professor who taught me during my undergraduate degree. I was curious about what "Women's Studies" was about and found myself enrolled in my first course during my last year of undergraduate studies. I distinctly remember my first women's studies class to this day. I looked around and the class was full of female students and the handful of male students who were brave enough to sign up for an area of study that was often assumed and misunderstood to be a 'man hating discourse'.

My thoughts of what to expect and what I would learn were put to a halt when my professor walked through the door. She carried with her a confident, empowered and feisty demeanor and would soon introduce us to ways of thinking that would open me up to start feeling a level of pride and empowerment not experienced in any other university course I had taken. My initial perception and understanding of what feminism was would

change dramatically as class went on. No more than ten minutes had passed during this first class when my professor stood in front of us and asked “What is woman? What does it mean to be a woman?” These questions got me thinking and ideas began to run through my head for the remainder of the class. The remainder of the course focused on these very questions.

We were introduced to a different history that would unveil the oppression that women had endured which she taught us resulted from ‘patriarchy’. I learned about various theories that would help me think critically and taught me to deconstruct various layers of oppression found within the background of our everyday experience created and (re)produced by our own social, political, economic and legal existence. As my women’s studies course came to an end I was grateful that my professor had taught me how to think like a woman and more importantly to see and experience my world around me a lot differently after being exposed to feminist authors and theories. Feminism taught me to ask “why” and search beyond the surface of what we often accept to just “be”. It was this yearning for more of what “woman” was that began the spark and ignite a fire within me that turned me to my own cultural teachings and practices in search of finding something closer to home and meaningful to me.

Although feminist discourse provides a springboard in beginning to understand a woman’s meta-historical narrative, Indigenous women’s experiences must be distinguished from the general feminist movement. A separate discussion is needed in order to appreciate the deep layers of oppression that emanate from our colonial experience and the subsequent impact colonization has left Indigenous people to disentangle ourselves from. While I appreciate the feminist movement for bringing life

to the women's struggle, their efforts in seeking equality from oppression is quite different than that of an Indigenous woman. An indigenous woman must first deal with the historical impacts that colonialism has imposed on her people/community, racism, then closely followed by sexism and then she must deal with every other layer of oppression that a group of oppressed colonized people endures.

In an effort to bring life to Indigenous women's voices and oppressive experiences a surge of Indigenous academic literature has developed within the area of feminist theory to shed light on Indigenous women's experiences. This new area of writing has been termed "Indigenous feminism" and contains within it a wide array of academic opinion attempting to breathe life to this new area of academic writing. So, what then *IS* Indigenous feminism? There are a variety of perspectives given by Indigenous women academics. Joyce Green (2007) articulates Aboriginal feminists to be those whose "work looks both at the genesis of colonialism and its consequences and at the internalization and perpetuation of colonial practices within Aboriginal communities, especially male dominance over women and children" (p. 23). Later in the same article, Green says that Aboriginal feminism is "an Aboriginal liberation that includes women, and not just the conforming woman, but also the marginal and excluded, and especially the woman who has been excluded from her community by virtue of colonial legislation and socio-historical forces (p. 25). In the same edited book Making Space for Indigenous Feminism (2007) Andrea Smith discusses the relationship that feminism has or may have to Indigenous sovereignty and social change. She states, "Central to developing a Native feminist politic around sovereignty is a more critical analysis of Native activist responses to feminism and sexism in Native communities" (p. 95). Both of these authors

epitomize the diversity of arguments and perspectives available regarding the place feminist thought has in contributing to the social movement that refocuses the important place women have within our Indigenous nations.

Using Feminism to Rediscover Sacred Cree Women's Teachings?

In conceptualizing the ideas for this thesis research the impetus came through my own relationship to my cultural teachings. It originated when I took the initiative to learn more about our sacred Cree ceremonies. My reasons for incorporating an Indigenous feminist thread of literature within this project was to show how its development contributed to a separate but similar social justice path in seeking vindication from colonialism faced by Indigenous women within their community. I am not disagreeing with the arguments advanced by Indigenous feminists. However, I am seeking to put forth a different path of getting Indigenous women to avenge our decolonization process in reviving our sacred roles. It is for this reason that I do not see my project grounded in Indigenous feminism and why it did not become a focal piece found within the analysis of the findings that came out of the talking circle. Rather, my focus became on how Indigenous ways of knowing can be used as a theoretic framework of how we begin to deconstruct our colonial identities and practice Indigenous self-determination and thus Indigenous governance.

While feminism could provide the theoretic deconstruction of how the colonial experience disrupted the gender balance within our pre-contact governance structures it could not provide the necessary tools of regenerating our sacred roles - which is what this thesis is about. More appropriate tools for social change in a reserve community are those found in the hearts and minds of people who carry with them ancestral teachings

preserved in our cultural ceremonies. If feminist ideas originate in a western framework and the purpose of this thesis is to revive sacred women's teachings that can be used to get women to practice nehiyaw pimatisiwin (Cree Way of Life) then feminism conflicts with the thesis of this research. Furthermore, the methodology of this thesis originates in ceremony which becomes paradoxically opposite to some of the arguments advanced by feminist theorists.

Summary

It is the ideological deduction of self-determination from the discourse level to the personal level where ceremonial life begins to make sense in pursuing agendas of autonomy. The question then becomes, how does the pivotal awakening moment within the lives of nehiyaw women make them turn to uncovering an understanding of what it means to be living a life reflective of iyiniw pahminsowin by turning to a spiritual path found in ceremony, and how can these acts be captured for others to start their own personal transformation to live a life reflective of their nation's way of existence? My literature review covered two areas - self-determination and Indigenous women - with the purpose of showing how the research filled areas of conceptualization that are necessary to Cree women's self-government initiatives. In the next chapter, I will outline the methodological framework I used to collect, compile and analyze the data I received from my research participants.

Chapter 3

Methodology

As a Cree woman living and working in the community, I was raised and trained with a deep sense of responsibility to the community, to honour voice, to give something back (reciprocity), and to offer a meaningful experience to participants. I was also taught that we cannot separate ourselves from the experience or the knowledge, but that in fact, we have a relationship with knowledge, and with every experience.

Source: Chisan, 2001, p. 47

This chapter outlines the research method that was used to collect, compile and analyze the stories shared by the participants selected for this research project. A discussion of the nehiyaw concept of ‘Nehiyaw Pimatisiwin’ (Cree Journey/Way of Life) contextualizes the methodology I thought was most appropriate for this research given the subject and participants involved. Following the concept of nehiyaw pimatisiwin is a brief overview of Cree Natural Laws to contextualize how these principles guide the overall framework of *nehiyaw pimatisiwin*. Finally, I will outline how the methodology I chose guided this research by summarizing how the participants were selected, the process utilized to conduct the talking circle and how the writing of this thesis has become an aspect of practicing a nehiyaw methodological process of coming to know what being nehiyaw is.

Articulating Nehiyaw Pimatisiwin as a Research Paradigm

As I began to think about what my research design would look like and what research method would be most appropriate for my research I began this task by asking myself ‘*what is an indigenous research method?*’ and ‘*how is the research I’m embarking on going to be of benefit to me, my community and the larger indigenous socio-political cause?*’ Schnarch (2004) eloquently captures the importance of seeing research as a transformative tool stating, “Research is a tool for promoting changes that

can transform people's lives" (p. 94). The idea within this statement provides theoretical insight into my own research process because I see this research as a process and framework that can be utilized to decolonize, transform and empower those involved to understand the sacred positions they occupy. This sentiment is voiced in some of the personal reflections of my participants as stated in the talking circle.

Mary was a student in the Bachelor of Social Work program at Blue Quills First Nations College where she is currently employed. She was exposed to ceremonial practices and teachings while being a student and continues to learn, practice and implement the teachings she has learned into her everyday life.

Mary's words:

I guess I feel very humbled and honored to be here. I am still trying to figure out what I'm doing here and what I have to offer. I was really shocked when you came to my house. And then when you offered the tobacco I wanted to cry because I had read your proposal before in one of my classes. I was using it as a guide to develop my own research proposal because I didn't know how to write in that way. And I mainly came today because like you I want to learn too. I'm still in a place where I'm learning and I feel like I really don't know anything. And I don't want to pretend that I know everything because really, I know nothing.

Veronica is a female Elder who is well respected in the community for her knowledge of Cree women's teachings. She is a ceremonial holder of various Cree women's ceremonies that she continues to practice and pass on.

Veronica's words:

I would like to thank you for inviting us. It's a very humbling event for me to come. And, it's also very touching, because all the time I've been carrying the bundles and keeping them, I've been trying to promote others to follow the sweet grass road; that way of life that we call the sweet grass road that was given to us to follow. To be able to talk to young women, prepare young women for life and to help them understand the basic principles of the law that we have to live within. There's not many of us left. And I'm worried. Because, we have all this stuff now and who is going to take it into the future? So, this (referring to the talking circle) is where it helps. Together we're sitting around in a circle as women.

The words voiced by these two participants in my study echo the way in which this research process was designed to initiate a holistic transparent knowledge transfer for all those involved in the research. Their words validate for me my responsibility as an indigenous person who is doing research with her own people to first and foremost be accountable to those that taught me the teachings I continue to learn, second, to be respectful to those involved in the research and thirdly, be ethically accountable to my community. This study provides a small glimpse into the contemporary socio-cultural reality found within reserve ceremonial-spiritual life.

Every aspect of this research project was approached with the frame of mind that I was integrally the learner first and then researcher. The way in which this thesis has been carried out, starting from the committee selection stage, the data collection, the writing and to the defense stage will have all been followed from a nehiyaw way of knowing and doing things. This act is very much a part of how we learn and how we practice what we

have learned through our experiences. To understand this nehiyaw philosophy better, I call on the work of Makokis (2001) who states:

According to the Cree world view, it is in each individual to seek out and understand the truth of his/her existence. The answers to the questions posed by Skywoman (participant in study) are found embedded deep within ourselves, and the journey starts from the mind to the heart. Once the answers are revealed through a journey of introspection, then each individual can become responsible and serve his/her fellow human beings and the land. Thus, the Cree world view claims as its base and its future direction, the spirituality of the Creator, inclusive of all beings both in the seen and unseen world (p. 88).

It was within the place of questioning my own relationship to the research that meaning was sought, clarified and eventually led me to develop my own methodology. This task of reflection directed me to seek out the meaning of 'methodology' and to ask how doing research in an indigenous community from an indigenist perspective meant unraveling the years of colonial research methods that have influenced the research agenda for indigenous researchers. Wilson (2001) provides clarity to elements of what might be contained within an indigenous research methodology. He states "...a research paradigm is a set of beliefs about the world and about gaining knowledge that go together to guide your actions as to how you're going to go about doing your research" (p. 175)

I wanted to employ a methodology dissociated from western discourse because this act is part of what de-colonizing research methods is about. This means uncovering and revitalizing ancestral methods of knowledge acquisition and transference and putting it into contemporary practice. By doing this, every aspect of what this research stands for

is steeped with an authentic indigenous method. This method aligns with seeking out and uncovering what 'self-determination' is from a nehiyaw perspective of living and being.

This is best understood in the words of Maori scholar, Linda Smith (1999), as she states:

Self-determination in a research agenda becomes something more than a political goal. It becomes a goal of social justice which is expressed through and across a wide range of psychological, social, cultural and economic terrains. It necessarily involves the processes of transformation, of decolonization, of healing and of mobilization as peoples. The processes, approaches and methodologies – while dynamic and open to different influences and possibilities – are critical elements of a strategic research agenda (p. 116).

In reflecting on the above words it became apparent to me that the only methodology appropriate in this research is the one that I am familiar with, the one that I live, breath, and practice everyday. The truest and purest form of a methodological process premised on nehiyaw ways of knowing are those of the Cree Natural Laws (graphic 1).

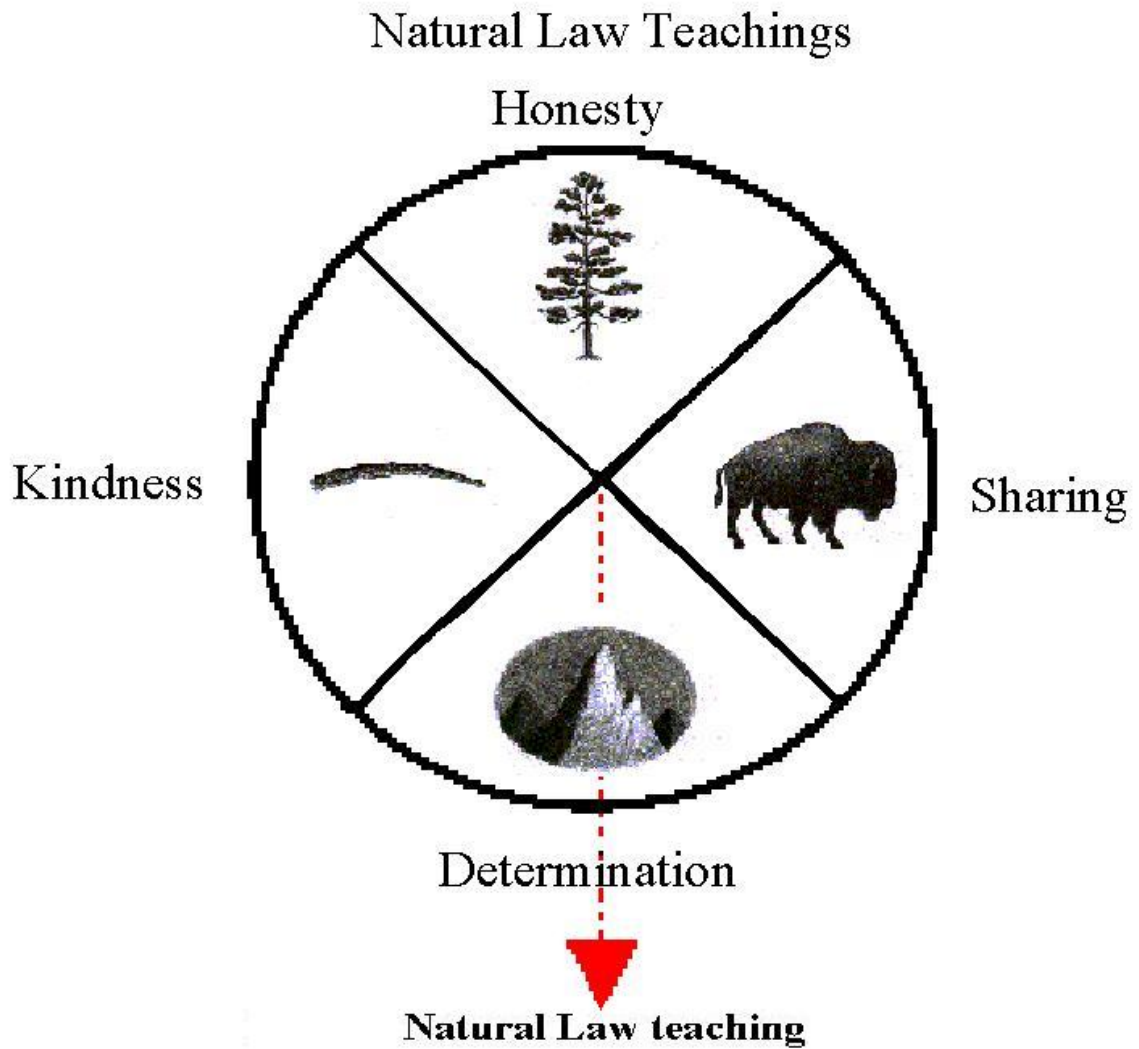


Figure 1
 Natural Law Teachings
 Elder's from Blue Quills First Nations College

The Creator's Natural Laws (or more commonly referred to as the Natural Laws) are those Laws that govern Cree people. These Natural Law teachings are respectfully outlined above in their visual form. One cannot really comprehend the spiritual depth of these teachings without participating in ceremony. They are 'heartfelt, or spiritual' teachings passed on to us from our Elders and then become incorporated into our lives through the teachings we derive in our experiences.. What follows below is a brief

outline of what these laws are and how they become incorporated into the lives of Cree people shared by Cree Elders.

The Natural Laws are significant because they form the spiritual foundation that guide my life and thus guided this research. It is the core of how we govern ourselves; therefore, it was the core of how this research was undertaken and carried out to reflect *iyiniw pimatisiwin*². These four main spiritual laws, known in Cree as *ahcahkowiyasowewina*, outline a way of life that Cree people are governed by and expected to uphold everyday. These Natural Laws are *mahtahitowin* (sharing), *sohkeyitamowin* (strength/determination), *sakihtowin* (love) and *kwayaskatisiwin* (honesty). These principles are intrinsic to our tribal customary laws and relay the spiritual path that we are to live as a means of maintaining who we are. Our teachers of these laws are the plants, animals and elements found on our Mother Earth. I am reminded of the teaching of *kindness* from the wild grasses that grow despite what we as human beings do to them. We stomp on them, we cut them, we burn them, and despite all this, they continue to demonstrate kindness by growing for us so we can utilize them in our ceremonies. I am reminded about the teaching of *sharing* from my brother the animal (buffalo), for he gave his life so me, and my ancestors are able to be here today. Animals continue to give their lives so we are here on this land; I am reminded of their sharing every time my father hunts to sustain our family. In that dual respect my father offers tobacco to the spirit of that wild animal for giving its life so we continue to have life. The Elders remind me that the teacher of *honesty* are the trees, for with the proper water (nutrition) they stand straight and tall as I am to, in living these Natural Laws. And finally every time I see the mountains (or rocks) I am reminded of their *strength and*

² The English translation for this Cree word/term is 'Cree Journey/Way of Life' (Makokis, 2001)

determination, and thus the strength and determination I must aspire to daily as I face challenges.

When put together in ceremony these laws are the foundation for the way of the pipe (Figure 1 Above - red line with arrow is the visual representation). The bowl of the pipe is the rock (strength/determination), the stem comes from the tree (honesty), the sweetgrass (kindness) is used to light the pipe and the land/animals (sharing) are found within the pipe teaching itself. All of these natural laws are found in the way of our nehiyaw pipe teachings which are derived from mother earth who is the teacher of our epistemological system. When understood in this context it becomes vital for nehiyawak to participate in ceremony in order to comprehend the deeply rooted spiritual knowledge system we have. These simple principles but intricate knowledge system is learned orally and begins to make sense when we make the journey to practice nehiyaw pimatisiwin and connect this ongoing journey to the relationship we have to our nehiyaw ceremonies. Each law/principle is found within a different direction and has specific teachings/prayers that go with its direction when the way of the pipe is put into practice in our ceremonies. If one wants to know more about these principles they would take appropriate steps to approach Elders and follow protocol in seeking the knowledge they seek or answers to questions they have. I have outlined our Natural Laws in a way that articulates their general principles but keeps their sacred nature intact.

Understanding the Origins of the Talking Circle

In many indigenous communities the process of acquiring or sharing information is transparent when there is a sacred spiritual element guiding the core of its purpose. This is achieved when ceremony is present and then becomes guided by ceremonial

protocol. The purpose for information to flow transparently is for all in attendance to learn and benefit from the open knowledge transfer. This transparent information flow is often found in a talking or sharing circle. This sacred circle symbolism is noted by Anthony Hart (2002) in Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal Approach to Helping who states, “Historically, Aboriginal ceremonies, council meetings and social gatherings included the circle format”. Although Anthony Hart, discusses and utilizes the talking circle in his research from the perspective of ‘helping’ in the field of social work, the importance of when, how or for what talking circles can be used should not be seen as being limited to certain social functions but rather a process that can be used in many situations to initiate discussion on various topics within a community.

The importance of utilizing processes inherent in indigenous community practices is articulated in Chisan’s (2001) discussion of being an indigenous person conducting research within her home community and the responsibility one has to conduct sacred research. She notes: “As a Cree woman living and working in the community, I was raised and trained with a deep sense of responsibility to the community, to honour voice, to give something back (reciprocity), and to offer a meaningful experience to participants. I was also taught that we cannot separate ourselves from the experience or the knowledge, but that in fact, we have a relationship with knowledge, and with every experience” (p.47). The impetus for me to create a unique methodology originating in Nehiyaw ways of knowing is echoed by the sentiment found in the words of Chisan who emphasizes the importance of making research meaningful to the participants and the community the research is being conducted in. In the community of the Saddle Lake Cree Nation talking circles are often used in ceremony, for research, therapeutic healing

practices and other situations related to community and family social functioning. By choosing to use the talking circle as the means to gather the information via participant stories, I utilized a process that my participants were familiar with. It created a trusting atmosphere for them to come with open hearts and minds to share their knowledge. These were the reasons that guided my decision to utilize the talking circle process.

I approached every aspect of this research with the intent that I was held deeply accountable and responsible to the Laws and to the people involved in this project. I am entering into a sacred contract with my research, the process and the participants involved. Inevitably, this made me honest and truthful in everything I did throughout the research process at all times. Embodying and practicing these spiritual laws kept me connected to Creation and the people I interacted with, thus honoring the mind, body and spirit relationship. This held me “relationally accountable” to my research in the application of this research methodology (Wilson, 2001). Wilson articulates this notion further, by stating,

As a researcher you are answering to all your relations when doing research. You are not answering questions of validity or reliability or making judgments of better or worse...the axiology or morals need to be an integral part of the methodology so that when I am gaining knowledge, I am gaining knowledge in order to fulfill my end of the research relationship” (p. 177).

The understanding of what it means to be “relationally accountable” is what guides the path for this research to be carried out.

When considering existing research methods utilized by current Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics the one that closest resembles a research design with an

Indigenous vision of research that could reflect Indigenous epistemology and metaphysics is the qualitative research design (Makokis 2000; Struthers, 2001; Ermine, et.al. 2004). Some qualitative methodologies that align with Indigenous research agendas in attempts to give voice to the people involved in the research are participatory action research, storytelling and phenomenology. These qualitative research methods align with Indigenous research agendas and have be used to incorporate an Indigenous research agenda. However, they still originate in western research discourse. It is for this reason that I chose to use a methodology reflective of the nehiyaw teachings that I am familiar with to honor where I come from. By doing this, I created my own research methodology that echoes age old teachings that have been passed on to the generations of people living in my community today. This exercise of integrating ancestral methods of teaching and decolonizing is what practicing self-determination in research by utilizing the processes of “ownership, control, access and possession” (Schnarch, 2004).

Selection of Participants

The participants for this study were selected based on prior relationships or were suggested to me by people in the community. All of them, are exposed to ceremonies, integrate ceremonial teachings into their life and put into practice the Cree worldview in their everyday life. My research included hearing personal reflections, stories and teachings about the experiences that five Cree women and three Cree men have to ceremony within the Saddle Lake Cree nation and how they relate this to their nehiyaw conceptual understanding of self-determination. The reason for including men within this research was to incorporate a male perspective on the importance and role of Cree women within the community. It is important that I maintain this gender balance in this

research because in our governance structure both men and women work together collaboratively for the betterment of our nation. Therefore, to understand women's roles, one also needs to hear the male perspective of what they interpret gender roles to be and how they honor and practice these roles pragmatically to ensure a balanced way of governing.

Most of the participants involved with this project have an extensive amount of knowledge in the area of nehiyaw cultural heritage, protocol and traditions. An important concern of my research method was to develop methodological processes and designs guided by an Indigenous research paradigm in order for my participants to be familiar with it. Because this research is focused on a nehiyaw understanding of ceremony and self-determination, participants were selected and limited to nehiyaw people and the membership they have to my home community of Saddle Lake Cree Nation, as well as the relationship they have to nehiyaw ceremonies. That is, I am integrating academic and community frameworks in developing my methodology

Practicing Nehiyaw Protocol

The framework upon which my methodology originates is a nehiyaw ceremonial protocol and thus ceremony guides how every aspect of this research process was performed. In order to honor this ceremonial methodology the interview process reflected how knowledge continues to be shared in a traditional nehiyaw context. Every participant in this research was approached personally by the researcher with tobacco at their home or place of work. I introduced myself (to those that didn't already know me), explained how I came to develop the research topic/study which inevitably led me to explain my relationship to ceremony, and I outlined what the research study entailed. At

this point I asked the person I was visiting if they were interested in being a part of my research study, and if he/she accepted I went into detail about how the research project would be carried out (talking circle, analysis of data, writing, anonymity etc.).

Putting the Methodology to Practice (Talking Circle Process)

I utilized a ‘talking circle’ format to conduct a group interview to honor the voices of the participants who were a part of the circle. The method chosen to conduct the group interview was familiar to each participant when I asked them to become a part of my research. When first approaching each participant they each stated that they have either participated or utilized this ‘talking circle’ method in their own lives for professional or personal reasons to address certain topics and/or issues. By utilizing this method I provided a space in which the participants were able to conceptualize their understandings, perspectives and ideas about the subject area in an atmosphere that is familiar to how Nehiyaw discuss important issues.

There are many ways in which talking circles are conducted depending upon the community, topic being discussed and participants involved in the circle. Generally, the process is initiated with an opening prayer given by an Elder present or the facilitator conducting the circle. Each talking circle is unique and is conducted in a way that is most appropriate to those present within the circle and the subject being discussed. Since my topic was about Cree women and how ceremony informs their understanding of what self-determination is, I chose to arrange a talking circle that would create the most appropriate environment to have this discussion. In doing so, I approached a Cree female Elder who would be one of my research participant’s who would also conduct the Cree

woman's pipe ceremony prior to the circle as a means of setting the tone and context of discussion to unfold thereafter.

Before the pipe ceremony and talking circle could take place I had to follow proper Cree protocol to ensure my actions would be accepted by the Elders present within the circle to assure them I was serious about my intent in learning from them. Part of this Cree protocol process included me presenting tobacco to the Cree female Elder and asking her to conduct the Cree woman's pipe ceremony. After she agreed to conduct this ceremony I then informed the other research participant's that the circle would start with a Cree woman's pipe ceremony which would require the female participants to wear long skirts or dresses as is customary protocol in all Cree ceremonies.

On the day of the talking circle, Veronica (Cree female Elder) and the other research participants showed up to the venue where the talking circle was scheduled to take place. We all situated ourselves on the floor in a circle to honor the protocol of participating in pipe ceremonies and then Veronica conducted the woman's pipe ceremony. Immediately after this ceremony took place, we arranged a circle of chairs where the talking circle was held. Before the circle began, both Elder's asked me to explain to them again what my research was about and how their help would benefit my research. After I explained what my research was about, I wrote my guiding questions on the board. These questions were developed prior to the talking circle out of the major themes originating in this thesis (Cree Women, Self-determination and Ceremony). While I was writing these questions on the board it was brought to my attention by both Elders that the questions I was asking take a lifetime of learning and one talking circle would not cover the information I was searching for. It was then agreed through

consensus from all research participants and myself that the circle would be guided by the general themes this thesis stood for (How does ceremonial life become an integral aspect of where nehiyaw women conceptualize self-determination and why is this important in moving an indigenous vision of governance forward?).

During the actual talking circle a rock or eagle feather are usually used as a means to help ground a person spiritually when it is their turn to speak. When a rock is used it helps to provide a physical grounding experience for the holder with strength and determination as they speak. When an eagle feather is used it symbolizes honesty and truth and when held the person holding it must speak as honest and truthful as they can while in the circle to contribute to the circle. Since all participants are familiar with this talking circle process, it was not explained in detail why we use a rock or eagle feather in talking circles; I simply said that we would be using the rock to guide the process and that when one person was holding it that person had the floor to speak on the subject area. After the talking circle was complete I thanked all of my participants with gifts as a way of acknowledging Cree protocol when asking someone for help. In following this entire process, I was putting theory into practice. All participants present within this circle would be learning about Cree women's teachings and thus practicing iyiniw pimatisiwin (Cree Way of Life) and iyiniw pahminsowin (How we order and organize our actions – how we regulate our activity according to Cree ways/teachings) which is the foundation of transformative research based on a nehiyaw methodology created out of ancestral teachings.

Talking Circle(s) and Community Expectations

The aspect of this method that became unfamiliar to the participants was the audio recording of the dialogue given its sacred nature (ceremony) and the initial posting of questions on a whiteboard. It was not necessarily the posting of questions on the whiteboard that was unfamiliar because when talking circles are conducted there are usually one or two questions that guide the process to help the individuals in the circle conceptualize their thoughts. It usually takes two to three rounds of circle discussion to arrive at a place where everyone in the circle is satisfied with the content of the dialogue. The specific part that my participants vocalized their opinion about was the ‘content’ of the questions I posed. Since the content of the discussion revolved around ceremony and its relationship to Cree women and self-determination the Elders (George and Veronica) in the circle commented on this by saying “It takes a whole lifetime to come to answers regarding the questions you are seeking and one sitting won’t capture everything”. Because Elders are highly respected knowledge holders in Indigenous communities their reflection on the ‘content’ of the research set the tone for the talking circle. In response to the Elder’s commentary, I altered the question process and asked them to answer to the best of their ability how ceremony is important for Cree women in understanding their purpose and how this is linked to self-determination.

Since I am familiar with ceremonial processes and protocol it was sometimes difficult for me to be in the position of what western research terms ‘researcher’ because of the negative connotation ‘research and researcher’ have come to be known for in many indigenous communities. As a means of bridging this western research experience, I tried to the best of my ability to make this research project not seem like it was ‘research’

but me initiating the beginning of a process that our community could use to generate ideas to transform ideas into action.

Experiencing the stories and transforming them into teachings

I chose to utilize storytelling and personal self-reflection as a Cree researcher immersed in the research to accommodate this methodological framework in the analysis of the data as a means of respecting, honoring and giving voice to the participants' willingness to share their knowledge of the subject area. Storytelling fits well with the methodology because in the traditional Cree way of transferring knowledge from 'knowledge holder' to 'knowledge seeker' stories are used for teaching and much of our historical records come through and from this oral tradition. I chose personal self-reflection as the 'data analysis method' because it is what we learn from our life experiences and stories told to us that constitute knowledge or a learning formation, thus leading us to fulfill an experiential knowledge framework of how we learn (Chisan, 2001). I am reminded of words by Eber Hampton when he delivered a presentation at a 1995 Indigenous Scholars Conference regarding Indigenous research. He explains,

Memory comes before knowledge. Every person's life contains experiences and memories of these experiences. The way it works for me is that I forget those things until I unwrap them, until I actually roll out the sacred medicine bundle of my life and look for those memories. I pick them up and touch them and feel them. And each memory gives me knowledge" (p. xx).

These words are appropriate as I articulated my methodology because this entire research project was about how I came to learn about my own purpose as a Cree woman and the link this has to uncovering what self-determination is to me and for other nehiyawak.

This thesis was an opportunity for me to take my experiential learning one step further and put it into practice by doing ‘iyiniw pahminsowin’ and maintaining a personal and spiritual relationship to every aspect of what took place during this research. I was learning about how to transform and articulate what Hampton (1995) calls ‘memories to knowledge’.

Chapter 4

Stories (Elder Teachings)

I have always been told that we learn by stories, and that this is the way of the Cree. What is meant by this is that it is through the telling of stories that we learn, and begin to understand the Cree way of knowing, being and seeing. Embedded in these stories are teachings about such things as history, animals, personal relationships, relationships between human beings and non-human beings and survival.

Source: Ladner, 1996, p. 103

Introduction

What follows in this chapter are the findings that came out of the talking circle and the single individual interview I conducted to gather and compile research to better understand how Cree women fit within the circle of the community and how they articulate their interpretation of self-determination. My understanding of iyiniw pahminsowin (self-determination) has expanded as a result of this research. It gave me the opportunity to listen to each of the voices of all the participants involved in this study, thus furthering the meaning of what I interpret self-determination to embody. I am grateful to each participant for what they have taught me and for trusting me with their stories to expand on the role of Cree women and their understanding of self-determination. It was their courage, strength and passion to share with me their experiences of their life's journey that inspire myself and others to walk with them as they clear a path for positive socio-political change to occur within our communities. The stories of the participants teach us and tell us about the state of contemporary reserve life and the continued impacts and manifestations of colonialism in the lives of indigenous people. The participants in this study convey the strength, beauty and resilience of our nehiyaw culture and how it has transformed their lives to live as nehiyawak and how their teachings can transform the lives of others to be able to live on our homelands in the way

our forefathers envisioned. Because my methodology was created outside the euro-western framework and employed a methodology founded on nehiyaw thought, the interpretation of the data will be seen and interpreted through the lens of nehiyaw teachings understood as nehiyaw pimatisiwin (Cree worldview-Cree Way of Life). This is better explained by Veronica, the female Elder that was a part of this research, who states,

This is Indian school (referring to the talking circle process and the content of the discussion we had). Now, there are basically two sets of principles you have to follow (later discussed as the medicine wheel teachings and the natural law teachings). Whatever captures your heart is the one you keep for the rest of your life and *those* are your guiding principles.

The analysis of the findings will be viewed through the lens of ‘personal reflection’ which coincides with the teachings that Cree Elders pass on to us. This Cree pedagogy is found within the words of an Elder interviewed for Makokis’ unpublished dissertation entitled Teachings From Cree Elders: A Grounded Theory Study of Indigenous Leadership (2001) who states:

According to the Cree world view, it is in each individual to seek out and understand the truth of his/her existence. The answers to the questions of Who are we? What is the purpose of why we are here? are found embedded deep within ourselves, and the journey starts from the mind to the heart. Once the answers are revealed through a journey of introspection, then each individual can become responsible and serve his/her fellow human beings and the land. Thus,

the Cree world view claims as its base and its future direction, the spirituality of the Creator, inclusive of all beings both in the seen and unseen world (p. 88).

The analysis of self-determination among Cree woman will be analyzed through the lived experiences, stories and teachings of each individual that was a part of this study and will also be filtered through a nehiyaw epistemological framework expressed by each person in their own way of how they understand being nehiyaw and how it is practiced within their own lives. My personal reflections of iyiniw pimatisiwin will also be woven throughout this analysis as part of my journey in coming to understand what this means. My participants showed me that being Cree means searching within oneself to unearth aspects of our own lives to view our experiences as opportunities to learn, and unraveling these experiences to see them as teachings to grow and transform our thinking. This Cree process is both self-reflective and integrative of past and present experiences to instill future understanding that becomes a lived transformative practice. I have purposely kept the voices of my participants intact as it is their stories that spoke volumes while in the sacred circle allowing me to come to my own self-reflective analysis of how the principle of self-determination is understood. Since we learn through oral tradition it often appears like the Elders/Participants in this study are saying the same thing over and over. However, the arrangement of this Findings section exhibits *how* the nehiyaw knowledge acquisition/transfer process is practiced. It is this type of analysis that is congruent with a nehiyaw pedagogy, reflective of ancestral teaching methods passed on from one generation to the other.

There were seven people present at the talking circle that I organized to collect my data for this thesis research. One person could not make the talking circle so I

conducted a separate individual interview to accommodate the person's schedule. After listening to each of the participants there were consistent themes that were a part of each person's story and I have arranged these themes as follows: Indigenous Identity and Western Influences, Personal Transformation, Searching for Nehiyaw Pimatisiwin (Cree Way of Life) and Commitment/ Responsibility.

Identity and Western Influences

The arrival of the settler society on Turtle Island (Commonly referred to North America in English) brought a new way of thinking and ideological framework that would forever impact the lives of how Indigenous people live on our homelands. This importation of settler society onto Indigenous territories has changed how we live on our land, how we view ourselves and even how we identify who we are. Our indigenous identities have become a site of political, legal, and economic struggle where we continue to fight and assert our indigenous nationhood. We have become exiled strangers in our own land - land that once nourished our spirit and fed our minds to be the strong nations we were before settlers arrived in our territories. The socio-political changes that have impacted our identities from settler society are felt in the hearts, minds and actions of indigenous people. Today, we struggle to decolonize ourselves in efforts to recover ancestral ways of thinking and living which has been forcibly taken, beaten and stripped from us through colonial legislative policy. Despite these genocidal attempts indigenous peoples continue to exhibit a fighting resilience that is derived in strength of our cultural teachings, traditions and ceremonies. It is the strength that lies in our collective hearts and minds of our people and nations where answers of how we restore our ancestral ways lie.

What proceeds in this section are the stories and voices of the participants that were a part of the talking circle I conducted, for this thesis research. I have chosen to keep intact as much as possible the voices of each participant. They graciously shared stories of how they understand Cree women in relation to self-determination. Each

participant discussed the impact that western ideology has on their own life and how this contributes to shaping our indigenous identities.

Veronica:

Finding Yourself Through Teachings

When you talk about governance, we need people like that to have the strength. That whole self-determination is what we work on, for ourselves, like you are and what you're doing and what you're here asking for. The questions you're asking. And then it makes you feel stronger. It makes you feel more at peace with yourself, but at the same time you want to know more. You basically have an interest. So you can use it two ways. You can use it for over here (to learn about you), because on the outside you got to prove who you are, and what you are and what you want to be. Well, the same thing here (referring to being in the talking circle), on this side; within the circle. And that's even more sacred because there's sacredness - there's spirit in it, in your study when you're sitting in the circle. And that's why the elders tell you, 'well, you can only talk about so much of this'. It doesn't belong over here (in western institutions).

Reclaiming Women's Teachings

I see different people give interpretation. It's just like with these teachings. That really bugs me and I really had it out with these mountain men. They said, "you can't come here, you women are dirty." And I said, "What do you mean, don't call me dirty, I'm not dirty." They said "yes you are, all women are dirty". I said, "Well okay, what is it to you? Why do you tell us that?" And he said, "Well you have your moon time, you can't come here you're going to spoil the whole ceremony you're going to do this and that." He was really calling women down and I said "Yes we can be here". I said,

“Maybe a really young woman that’s 14 or 15 years old on her moon time can’t come here but, if one had a baby now that curiousness, that greatness, that preparation in your life is a little down. When you have a little one your moon time is less. You’re not right at the top of the mountain (referring to strength/power) you’re down a little bit.

With reproduction, we are supposed to know and be trained that when we’re in our moon time we don’t go to the ceremony, we don’t even look there. We don’t even look in that direction. That’s how serious those teachings were; we didn’t even think about it or we didn’t even look in that direction. We were supposed to go and stay by yourself away from it, away from even your own home. You had to go away when you are a very young woman because you’re very powerful. Now, that went on for many years where the women were kind of pushed out of the tipi and the tipi is theirs, they’re suppose to be in there. But they got pushed out because of moon time. Because they (the men) said you’re going to wreck everything. But my argument was, I told that men “well where did you come from? Did you fall out of the sky or what?” And he said, “no, my mom”. And I said, “Yeah, your grandmother and your great grandmother”. I see children from your wife and, your daughters, your granddaughters, your great granddaughters. And I said, “I can give you a set of excuses where you’re sitting right now why you should invite women to your circle”. But, he didn’t really want us in the circle. He didn’t want us to participate in any of the ceremony. That doesn’t mean a woman can’t be there. I could go. You know, I’m way past my moon time but I can still participate with them and represent the women. But when you actually just don’t want the women to be there, that’s a different story. That means you’re not respecting your own birth; your own birthright, where you came from. You came through a woman.

That's why I say "a woman has greater responsibilities than the rest, than the men. The men were there, he was given that job to look after the woman, to support the woman, to bring everything she needs within that that tipi. So she wouldn't have to leave her children there and run around and you know try to hunt and bring food or whatever. You (women) had to stay there, just to take care of them and the man is the one that goes around and gets everything she needs to use. So it's very hard to explain that, that law from yesterday, long time ago, and try and apply it today. We have to try, what we say, accommodate?"

George:

All of these ceremonies, all of these special prayers they're called, they're very mysterious. I intentionally spoke Cree for this session because today we're at a place where the white person has directed our mind and has directed the way we live which is quite different from the way we're used to. I am so happy, and I give thanks to this young lady who wants to know more and I hope that in the future this will guide her. But, all of these laws are in ceremony, they're in different ceremonies, they direct how we live our lives and what we should be respecting.

Mary:

I'm very proud of who I am even though I still don't know what that means. I'm still learning what that means. And the more that I learn the taller I walk. I remember I used to ask my granny how come Indians always walk with their heads down. And she told me, "never mind that's none of your business she said uh it's how you walk that's important". And when you walk she said "I want to see you walking with your head up." And still, I didn't know what that meant. I didn't know what I had to be proud of until I

came to Blue Quills and then I got to meet beautiful women that walk with their heads held high. And I remember thinking I want to be like that too, you know. I want to be proud. I was sitting in a sweat one time and I offered my flags to the lady that was running the sweat and I told her I want what you have. I want to be strong and I want to be beautiful and not in a physical way. I want to be beautiful on the inside, so when I look in the mirror I don't dislike what I see. And she told me uh "Mary you already have that". She told me, "You wouldn't be able to recognize it in me if you yourself didn't possess that already." And so that's when I started to really begin to see the beauty in who I am. And when I leave here (Blue Quills First Nations College) and I'm done my two-year diploma program it was the teachings that I received from the elders that I remember. I don't remember anything that came from the book. It was only by attending the give away ceremony and things like that that I really learned and I think that's how I was able to complete without wanting to quit. And hopefully when I take that back to the community and not only Saddle Lake but when I go home I hope people will see that.

mihko kihew iskwew:

I love ceremony - I don't think anything would have touched my spirit. And I think my spirit needed to heal and in that healing I've become who I'm supposed to be and truly appreciating the lessons I had to learn so that I could be, so I could remain humble. So that I can always remember that I am one of many and that each one of us moves to the same drum and the same direction that we can do something collectively. What I learned here (being at residential school) is to shut down and be voiceless, when you're voiceless you cannot carry out your responsibility. Not to say that my voice is

greater than anybody else we've got groups of people, their voices, you know are very harmonious.

Vince:

The work that you're doing is very valuable. It's valuable work because it's bringing forth and privileging our knowledge within a dead knowledge system. wistawaw (them too) our relations from Europe. Their knowledge is based on abstraction. It's a derivative of. And I'm not too sure what the derivative is of. (*Laughter*) Here's the feather (mihkwan oma). Now over here there's a feather (referring to and pointing to air as if there's another feather present there). This is an abstraction of the real thing, the real feather. Do you understand this? How can this be real? And you (referring to western knowledge) pass this forward to all the generations. Or I can just give you this feather which is the real thing...a transfer of knowledge. Their knowledge is everything that they have in their hand that they can hang on to. But what they're hanging on to is nothing. (*Laughter*) It's all based on abstract. They talk about methods and methodology (wistawaw – them too). (nistanan) we had our method thousands and thousands of years ago and our method is our language. Our language is so important. With the method comes the methodology and the methodology is the ceremony. Because in ceremony that's where we put the method into practice. And we're people of practice. We have to practice. If we don't practice then we don't have it anymore. So we practice. And the more people that can get into it...it's like having a workout. The stronger we become. If we don't work out then I don't know what we're becoming.

Book learning is good. But again, you have to realize that it's just an abstraction. But learning about, instead of researching. Because, they use that term 'research' within the institution, the western academy to find their answers. Research. It's like going over what was already there. RE-search (with emphasis). Where as in our our prayer guide, in our world (nehiyaw-pimatisiwin) we have seven stages of life. And one of those stages is a stage of search time; where we search. And one of those good places to search is in ceremony because you get to be connected with what's not in your hand. You get connected with everything out there and the possibilities are endless. So it's not, it can't be a criticism where only you see, you smell, you taste, you hear, you touch; those are limited forms of knowledge. Watch all around us and you can't see and that's the spirit world. And that's all knowing. That's more when I say, 'when you have to go to a higher ground well that's a higher ground' a higher form of knowledge of knowing. And the more you get connected, the more they show you. The more you come in contact with it the more you learn. It's so simple but you have to open your eyes. And in order to open your eyes you have to close them. Does that make sense to you? Your eyes can be fooled but when you close your eyes you can't be fooled.

Sherri

I believe and I feel very strongly that it's the ceremonies that are going to carry us as a people. Even though I've done a lot of book learning and I've gone down that road and walked through those halls that it isn't that (doing book learning) that is really going to make the kind of difference, that other kind of learning is going to make. I hope that it's going to help, that it's going to support that, but I know that it would be easier to do without the book learning than it would be to do without the ceremonial learning. We

can survive into the next generations without the book learning as long as we have the ceremonial learning. But we can't survive into the next generation if all we have is the book learning. That's sort of where I got myself to but trying to reconcile that and trying to balance that; and trying to stand in that place in the face of a lot of pressure from the rest of the world to go down that book world. And so I think that if I can try to balance that, I can understand that book world now but still be able to speak from that place of the heart, that place of ceremony, from that place of spirit.

Stewart

When our ceremonies were banned it was like burning the library at Alexandria, all this knowledge was suppressed; it wasn't and isn't destroyed. It can't be destroyed. When we're born it's like we're given a little costume, we're given a skin bag and a little identity and we start to get attached to our identity. We start to think that's who we are but in order to save mother earth and ourselves (it's selfish too) we have to learn how to transcend that, the skin bag that we were given at birth; our little costume. It doesn't mean that we have to abandon them. We all get out little special gift, from the Creator that we can use

Reflections

As I listened to each participant tell me their story and relate their life's journey to the questions I posed for this research, one of the recurring themes that kept surfacing as people articulated their understanding of self-determination was the impact of western thought and ways on their life and the lives of our people. What becomes particularly evident in listening to their stories is the impact that western influences had on the lives of women. This is clear in Veronica's discussion of how women were 'pushed out of the

tipi and ceremonies' as a result of ceremonial interpretation and she conveys the impact these experiences has on the lives and identities of women. This is very clear in the following conversation she had with a man while challenging him on women's place and role within ceremonies. She states:

I see different people give interpretation....That really bugs me and I really had it out with these mountain men. They said, "you can't come here, you women are dirty." And I said, "What do you mean, don't call me dirty, I'm not dirty." They said, "Yes you are, all women are dirty.".....Now, that went on for many years where the women were kind of pushed out of the teepee and the tipi is theirs, they're supposed to be in there. But they got pushed out because of moon time. Because they said (the men) you're going to wreck everything.

Veronica was born into and socialized in a traditional Cree upbringing so she could question and challenge those who may 'push women out of the teepee or ceremony' for reasons not related to 'not respecting their birthright' because she knew the teachings of Cree women and learned them at a very young age. What becomes challenging for those women who never grew up or were raised to know women's teachings is that they may find themselves in similar situations and may not understand the deeper layers of the sacred teachings that go with a women's moon time thus allowing for misinterpretation of a woman's role and place (Anderson, 2001). It is misinterpretation that becomes problematic for shaping the identity and place of women within their community and nation. In remembering my own experiences as a young Cree woman, I recall memories steeped with images contained in words such as 'squaw, dirty, easy, useless and different'. It is the power of naming that lie in these words which contributes to shaping

one's identity and how one sees oneself in relation to the community and nation they come from. This is why it becomes imperative to seek out who we are in places where resistance to colonialism is practiced. George, the male Elder who was a part of this research, reiterates the importance of this stating, "...all of these laws are in ceremony, they're in different ceremonies, they direct how we live our lives and what we should be respecting". One of the participants stated that to transcend the mental slavery of colonialism is to go to ceremony because it is in the spiritual practices of ceremony that we utilize all of the gifts we were given through Creation that teaches us about the philosophy of how our ancestors governed themselves, thus helping us find out who we are and how we govern our lives. In hearing the stories and experiences of my participants I recognized the insidiousness that colonialism has in controlling the minds of how we see ourselves, how we relate to and identify ourselves as indigenous people and, ultimately, how our identities are sites and targets of an imperialist agenda of socio-political power. This agenda is configured to keep us lost and confused about who we are so we continue to remain complacent about state sanctioned agendas that affect our livelihood in our homelands. We have to utilize our ceremonies, traditions and language as acts of resistance in order to transcend our colonial 'identity skin bag' that we have become socialized in as a means of reclaiming who we are. This is particularly important for indigenous women because we give life, and in this sacred act of bearing life, we determine, shape and mould those children that become the future of our people and our nations. If we are strong in who we are, we can pass on that strong indigenous identity to our children and that subsequently gets passed on to successive generations of our people.

If self-determination is understood and expressed by the participants in this research as ‘a journey we take to discover who we are, where we fit within our nation and how we articulate this positioning within a larger societal context’ it becomes essential for our people to seek out these answers in spaces far removed from colonialism to truly practice an indigenized system of governance. It is in the journeys that we take as self-determining decolonized individuals that we begin to heal ourselves from the pain that colonialism has inflicted on the minds, hearts and bodies of our people. When we have transcended the colonized identity we have become prisoner to we can then begin to take back and assert our rightful place in our territories based on laws, principles and teachings our ancestors left for us to find and utilize.

Spiritual Personal Transformation

When I began to think about spiritual transformation and what this idea meant, I immediately recalled my first spiritual fasting experience and the feelings that that particular ceremony evoked for me. Prior to fasting, I had understood that ceremony in general was an important aspect to maintaining our way of life, but the depth and breadth of what that ‘importance’ meant was not entirely understood until I came out of finishing my first fast ceremony. My decision to participate in this ceremony came from encountering a difficult time in my life and just wanting to do some personal reflection into what all of the events leading me up to this point in my life meant for me. I was in a period in my life where I was confused and lost about who I was and part of this questioning led me to ask questions such as: Who am I? What does it mean to be Cree? And, what does it mean to be a Cree Woman? Since I had never fasted before, I really did not know what to expect. I was open to whatever was supposed to happen and be taught to me during this time in my life. Not knowing what I know now, I just assumed that this questioning was because I was lost, there was something wrong with me and needed some type of guidance. This is partly true, but what I didn’t realize at the time was that this ‘questioning’ is a natural part of what our Cree seven stages of life entail. In our seven stages of life, we call this period in our life ‘the searching stage’ because that’s what we are doing, we are searching for answers, we are searching for who we are, and it is in this ‘searching’ that we figure who we are as a nehiyaw and what this journey of searching means to our position or relationship to our community and nation.

Although most of my life was lived ‘outside of ceremony’ I am fortunate to come from an extended familial network where my aunts and uncles their own spiritual journey

to find out about nehiyaw pimatisiwin so they could teach and pass on. It was the women in my family that took initiative to learn our Cree way of life so they could pass those traditional teachings of how our ancestors lived and governed themselves onto their own immediate and extended family.

This act of searching out who I am led me back to my own family where I began to ask questions that included: Why were we not taught the language? How did family members get involved in ceremony? Why did my grandparents not teach ceremony or the language to my parents? This line of questioning brought me back to how one's identity and how we perceive ourselves as indigenous people is paramount to our survival as nations. When I started to ask these questions to different family members the story of colonial impacts on my own immediate family began to unravel and it is within this space of questioning that this thesis of women and self-determination started to become clearer. These questions began to evoke memories of my childhood spent with my nookom Alice, and it is in these memories that I began to realize how identity, spiritual transformation and self-determination are all linked and inter-connected with one another. My own decolonized journey led me to seek out ceremony and ask questions related to unearthing aspects related to what is included within "Who am I" and this is where I began my spiritual transformative process leading me to search for and uncover a different perspective of a Cree woman's interpretation of what self-determination is.

kisapwew

I was raised by my grandmother and growing up I've been to many ceremonies. I feel real fortunate that I was raised by her because if she didn't raise me I think I wouldn't know a lot or I wouldn't be who I am today. And I think for me ceremony, it's

really important in our culture, for our people. It teaches so much about who we are and that's where being a Nehiyaw Iskwew is; my grandmother has taught me how to be, who I am as a Nehiyaw Iskwew. She's taught me how to love, she's taught me how to be kind and how to share and how to be honest. And that's what I'm trying to teach my kids.

Mary

...what the culture and the ceremony has given me, is my life back. It's given me back my pride, it's given me a direction now to follow, even when I do become lost I still know which way that I need to go. And had I not found it then where would I be. I really don't know and I actually didn't even see the connection between ceremony and where I am now until some lady pointed it out to me and she said, "geez Mary ever since you started dancing the Sundance you've really found direction in your life." And I was thinking, it's true, I have found where I belong in this world. And now I want to give that back to the kids that I work with.

A lot of times, especially in school, they deal with their mental and their physical but nobody ever addresses their emotional or their spiritual. They say that's not the place for it; you'll hear people say 'that all that stuff is to be taught at home'. But how can we learn if we haven't dealt with those things. And George gave me that teaching. When I very first started school here and I didn't know which way to go and he just very simply, through a circle, put the four directions and said okay, what do you need to make your circle in balance; to keep it in balance.

mihko kihew iskwew

I have gone through a lot of psychologists and psychiatrists and counselors and the healing came in ceremony for me. Not just myself but my children. That's where we

did our healing. Because that was the place that we could be truly who we are; our emotions, our spirit. For me, ceremonies have transformed me from somebody who didn't take, who didn't love herself for one thing, didn't feel that I had anything to offer. But when listening to elders in ceremony and in their prayers and thank god I got the language because I could hear what they were saying, I could hear them thanking the grandmothers, the creator, our mother earth and the grandmothers and grandfathers for the gift that they're born with.

Stewart

My dearly beloved child, age 4 at the time was killed in a car accident. I was living at the Vernon reserve at that time and was a serious atheist. I was atheist because of a long experience with Christian thought and philosophy, a long period of indoctrination into Christianity and as a reaction against it I had adopted the atheist position. I didn't know any other position. There was Christianity and there was atheism. When I had done the math, atheism was the only thing that made sense; Christianity certainly didn't then and really doesn't now. I was living there on the reserve and I quit drinking. I found that the only sober people were people going to sweats. So, even though I didn't believe in sweats or the pipe. I didn't know anything about it. I was completely ignorant of it.

So, when my four year old son was killed in a car accident it was a very traumatic experience. It was like when you take a hard nut and you smack it with a hammer really hard and it smashes and I was in that smashed state. I didn't go and see Lee, he came to see me and he said "well we did a sweat and your dead son came and visited me, just his body is dead, his spirit isn't dead. He's finished his work he just finished early and so

he's gone, he's moved on. But he wanted to leave a message for you. The message was that he was going to visit you. He's going to demonstrate to you in a real physical way that the spirit world exists, whatever it is that we don't understand."

So Rosie, the man that I was training to take over my business (from the Vernon reserve) and I went to this yuwipi ceremony. They put the lights off and they started and then all these white really bright light flickering lights start coming and they were coming down from the top of the gymnasium. I was thinking to myself how the hell did those guys do that, that's quite a trick and they kept coming down and then they finally settled right on the rattles. Then these rattles went up. They started making light and they started going around the room. I started thinking, how the hell do you get around the room on foot that fast in the dark and there's people all over the place. It just didn't make sense to me.

So, after this experience I could no longer claim to be an atheist; I was stripped of my atheism. I started going to sweats with Lee and enjoying that and then going to sweats with other people. Gradually it led me back to Saddle Lake, to the circle with my relatives and extended family. I found something very powerful, very satisfying and wonderfully not Christian and not fitting into that philosophy at all. It's as if I discovered a crack in the structure of western civilization and where there was a little bit of light seeping through. On the other side there is a whole entire world that's not western civilization and it's not the way it operates or sees the world.

Reflections (Ceremony, Belief, Empowerment)

One of the stories that really resonated with me was Stewart's story because he went from being a self-proclaimed atheist to someone who could no longer ignore the power of spirituality in transforming a person's beliefs and way of life. His transformative experience through ceremony allowed him to reconnect to his Cree heritage and community. It was this transformative process that led him to learn and practice Cree ways of knowing and to incorporate what we learn into our lives. The other person's story that echoed a similar type of experience was Mary. She expresses her connection through to transforming her life. She says,

I actually didn't even see the connection between ceremony and where I am now until some lady pointed it out to me and said, 'geez Mary, ever since you started Sundancing you've really found direction in your life'. And I was thinking, it's true, I have found where I belong in this world. And now I want to give that back to the kids that I work with.

Both of these participant's stories are very powerful and they teach us about the role and influence that ceremony can have in transforming our way of thinking so that our lives change as a result of the actions we take to follow the ceremonial spiritual path. For Stewart, his spiritual transformative experience brought him back to the community of Saddle Lake where he re-connected with his Cree cultural background through his family relations. His reflection on ceremony as a method and means to open and 'discover a crack in the structure of western civilization' to realize that 'on the other side there is a whole world that's not western' speaks to the importance of finding these anti-colonial spaces where we can learn about who we are as nehiyawak in order to transcend the

blanket of colonialism that smothers our minds, controls our bodies, and wounds the spirit of our people. If we learn about who our authentic selves are through our customs, traditions and language we then begin to uncover the meaning of ‘iyiniw pahminsowin’ by breaking through the colonial barrier that keeps us bound by its institutionalized disciplinary norms inherent in the colonized spaces we are a part of.

Even more important for both the men and women that make up our governance circles is our ability to recognize the impact that colonialism has had on our lives. As women, the significance of transforming our colonial selves into our authentic nehiyaw iskwewak identities is paramount to the survival of our nations. Because we give birth to and raise the children we bring into this ‘earth life’ existence its vital that we know who we are as nehiyawak so we can transfer and pass on those teachings to raise our children grounded with laws, principles and teachings found in our ways of knowing so that they too discover and practice a nehiyawak vision of self-determination. What is interesting to this analysis is the connection the female participant’s a part of this study made to transferring what they know about being nehiyaw to their children so they can practice aspects of our governance principles found in our teachings. This is evident in the following words by the female participants in this study:

kisapwew

....for me, ceremony is really important in our culture, for our people. It teaches so much about who we are and that’s where being a nehiyaw iskwew is; my grandmother has taught me how to be, who I am as a nehiyaw iskwew. She’s taught me how to love, she’s taught me how to be kind and how to share and how to be honest. And, that’s what I’m trying to teach my kids.

Mary

...what the culture and the ceremony has given me, is my life back...and now I want to give that back to the kids that I work with.

mihko kihew iskwew

My first thought...is about my daughter because she just came back home. And last weekend she was in a ceremony and she was in a community that only spoke Cree. She came home and she said to me “Mom I went to a ceremony today and it felt good to be in the sweat and all these people only spoke Cree, but I also felt like I was deaf because I couldn’t understand what they were saying. I really am starting to believe that you can’t have ceremony without language because of the depth of understanding and nor can you have language without ceremony.” So that’s been a teaching for me and I think when we talk about roles and responsibilities as a parent I failed. I did not provide her with the language, nor did I provide it to my son. Now it’s almost at the point where I can’t make her learn but I will be there when she wants to learn. I will be there to support her in her learning and we started as soon as she arrived home. I can hear her, in terms of how desperate she is to understand what people are saying. As a parent I failed to do that (teach them the language) and I really would like to make up for that in some way. I guess that’s why I’m really involved in the language now.

Veronica

For a woman it's twice as hard but within the spiritual circle the grandmothers help us. The grandmothers prepare our child before it's born. They prepared us before we were born. As women we have great responsibility. Three quarters of the work that needs to be done is supposed to be done by women. Because the man is physically stronger the grandmothers said they would keep the man going. We were supposed to be like this in the circle - in our home fires- taking care of our children we can't be running off doing other things because the child that the creator and our mother loaned us is not ours. We have to give that child direction and guidance.

As women, we hold a very prominent place within our communities and nations because we give life and socialize our children into who they are. For this reason, it's imperative that we reclaim our position within our governance circle and claim our rightful place in our nations to take on those important roles and responsibilities of 'giving direction and guidance' to the children that become the future of our nation.

A personal reflection of the strength and power of women is found within my own family. In the 1970's my grandmother held a key position in initiating the local takeover of Blue Quills Residential School by First Nations people so it could be run by our own people according to our ways of knowing and being. My mother started her post-secondary education journey at Blue Quills and it was this educational pathway that would eventually lead her to pursue graduate studies. In the midst of her studies she too recognized the importance of ceremony in our family life and began her own journey of discovering more about what ceremony meant. It was seeing my mother and hearing the

stories of nokom Alice that would eventually lead me down this path of seeking out ceremony to help assist me in finding out more of what nehiyaw pimatisiwin meant.

CHAPTER 5

STORIES OF EMPOWERMENT (What the Stories Mean)

Searching for, Practicing and Living Nehiyaw Pimatisiwin (Cree Way of Life)

A significant part of knowing one's identity and being able to express who you are confidently and comfortably originates in the journey one takes in uncovering stories and undergoing experiences that assist you in answering questions such as; Who am I? What does it mean to belong to the nation I have been born into? These questions may sound simple but when I took the journey to seek out answers to these questions it led me to a path that would forever change how I would organize, act and think within my daily life. These questions led me to understanding what it meant for one to seek out 'iyiniw pahminsowin' (Cree Way of Life). In taking this journey I found that my answers would be found when I asked myself what it meant to be a nehiyaw iskwew which subsequently led me to ceremony and more specifically, the women's pipe teachings. I began to unearth what Leroy Little Bear refers to as the "collective agreement" by fulfilling my responsibility as a nehiyaw iskwew and taking appropriate action to find out what the values, customs and philosophy of nehiyaw peoples are (Class Lecture, February 2006). An integral aspect of the Cree collective agreement or nehiyaw tapohkeytamowina (Cree Beliefs) lie in our Natural Law teachings, Medicine Wheel teachings, ceremonial teachings, language and the relationship we have to the land in teaching us the importance of its inter-relatedness and inter-connectedness in seeking Cree epistemology.

I choose to speak abstractly on the significance of the women's pipe teachings because it allows the spirit of the teachings to speak without breaching cultural protocol. They guide my every day action(s) and help me understand how my activity is and

should continue to be regulated around these teachings. In the women's pipe ceremony we hear what each of the grandmother's role is and what they stand for. By learning the teachings of the women's pipe I had a more clear understanding of my role as a woman. This inevitably led me to realize that by being born into Cree society we cannot do things by ourselves but our individual actions should be made for the betterment of the collective group. As women, it is our role and responsibility to nurture and prepare our children to understand the gift they have been born with so they can fulfill their purpose in their own life because we are not here for ourselves but we are here as spiritual beings going on a human journey. The actions that I took to come to understand what it meant to live a life as a Cree woman subsequently transcends the guidance of how my daily action(s) are organized and regulated (practicing iyiniw pahminsowin). Translating my transformative spiritual experience into action is upholding my responsibility as a nehiyaw iskwew and ultimately practicing self-determination.

The participants within this study articulate how they came to search, learn and practice what nehiyaw pimatisiwin (Cree Way of Life) meant to them which has become the guiding force in how they choose to live their life. It is in the voices of the participants that answers can be sought about how we can interpret and give meaning to self-determination from a nehiyawak perspective that reflects our own customs, traditions and language.

Stewart

Janice – My next question is 'How does ceremony shape who we are as nehiyawak?' How do ceremonial understandings and teachings shape who we are?

Stewart – I agree with the kick that Vincent (Stewart's cousin) is on right now where he's talking about ceremony as our epistemology, our epistemological system, our way of knowing, our way of gaining knowledge; the method that we use to gain knowledge. Inside of the ceremonial environment we create the opportunity and we participate. We put our energy into it and we add on, along with all the other energy and all this added energy comes together to create a space where knowledge can be generated and knowledge can be transferred. This stems back to another thing that Lee Brown said to me one time. He said, "We don't have to worry about losing our ceremonies, our languages, our everything because it exists permanently in the spirit world. It can come back after ten generations separation". You can have a child that was raised in the city, completely isolated from the original indigenous community of their birth or their ancestors for a long time and that information can come back to that child in ceremony; especially through fasting ceremonies. So, I feel like when we talk about the indigenous epistemology and the epistemological system being ceremony there is knowledge, and it's a specific type of knowledge that's held in safe-keeping within the ceremonial context. That knowledge can be released at any moment as long as you do like what we did before we started this interview. We did a really simple ceremony here. We burned a little smudge and we sang two starts of a little song and in that instant we released or we set in motion the energy that happens. Another thing that Lee Brown used to say was that 'singing spiritual songs sets the spirit world in motion'. So for us, we're so distanced from the spirit world by our mind, by our conscious mind. It's a gift but it's a really challenging gift because it tends to separate us from the spirit world. So, while we're busy in our everyday conscious life, it's as if the spirit world is frozen and it is for us

anyway. It's like a photograph it's not like a film or video. When we start singing, especially when we close our eyes and cut off our visual contact which connects to our mental capacity and switch to oral listening which then links more to our emotion and our spirit. Then, that act sets it (our spirit). It goes again and the spirit starts to move again. When that spirit is moving then we have, for those that know, we get a re-verification of knowledge. For those that don't know we get an opportunity for the transmission of knowledge. So, when you think of ceremony that way it becomes critical for the life of the knowledge, that's the gift of the Creator to the people, to whatever group of people that is. On the downside, when there's interference with ceremonial life, so it stops then you don't get that verification and transmission. But, on the good side, if you think you can go ten generations that looks like an enormous hole, an impossible hole.

I did go and start that women's group and it led to a lot of things like eventually being asked to sit as an oskapewis (helper) at a woman's pipe and hearing the whole women's pipe. At the time I didn't even know there was a woman's pipe, it was incredible compared to the men's pipe. The men's pipe is like, we start it and then it's over. The women's pipe is huge, it covers everything, and it's really nice. This one time Veronica was talking about the mother bear and there was the discussion around women, menstruation and the pipe. Veronica said, 'She does a mother bear pipe. My pipe is like a mother bear. The mother bear does not reject any of her children, so it doesn't matter what state they're in or what they're up to, it doesn't matter. There's no such thing as rejection, it's a blanket acceptance. Everybody is welcome, all the time. And then there was more talk and someone asked, 'Well how come Cree men used to have six wives'. She laughed and said, 'Well there was a shortage of men during that war, there was this

horse war between the Blackfoot and the Cree but she said, but really it's a matter of perspective. If you can step back far enough you'll get into a place of different relationships where women are in the centre of society and they are in a complex relationship with each other. Men are in the periphery of society.

Well we talked earlier about ceremony as the epistemological method or system. Well the language that's being used is highly symbolic and highly metaphorical. It's not a simplistic, not a single level of meaning; its multiple layers of meaning all the time and multiple ways of reading it. They're very densely metaphorical. When I look at the wesakechak stories this is clearly evident. The very first wesakechak story I heard I thought it was stupid and didn't make any sense at all. These people are all laughing at this story but it's not funny. I thought, 'why would they all be laughing at that story'. Well now all someone has to do is start saying the beginning of a wesakechak story and I start laughing and I've heard it about 100 times. It's immensely funny because now I understand that it's a metaphorical language. It's got multiple meanings, simultaneous, those multiple meanings play off of each other so you get rainbow images that you can't control and it's all situational. It's just really complex and this is a governance system. It's suited to the way humans really are. To have one rule written down on a piece of paper and that one rule has to apply to every single human being at all times doesn't make any sense because human beings aren't like that. And then, to have to create a police force and a judicial system and a penitentiary system so that one sentence and that one paper will be enforced at all times, does not make sense.

Janice – I want to get to Cree women’s roles. Why is it important for Cree women to understand their roles through ceremonial teachings and how is this related to self-determination?

Stewart – I have to make a comment about this question. I feel it’s inappropriate for men, within this current framework of living within a patriarchal system and everybody is shaped by it whether no matter if they think that they are or realize that they are. Inside of that framework, it doesn’t suit me to talk about women and women’s roles. I really support as best I can that discussion happening amongst them.

Janice – Let me rephrase that question then, as a Cree man that understands the importance of women within the governance system why is it important for women to reclaim or resituate themselves within that traditional understanding of how we govern?

Stewart – Following from the idea of ceremony as the system of knowledge transmission and storage and linking that also to the notion that Cree society and indigenous societies were at one time matrifocal and could be again. If we’re talking about a re-emergence of a matrifocal system, well, the knowledge that guides that is in ceremony and so for a woman to come to understand what a matrifocal society looks like, how it operates and what her day-to-day functions would be; how her relationships with women and men and children will be shaped. That knowledge will all be found in ceremony; ceremony being the place where it’s both stored and transmitted. I would say if a Cree woman wants to engage and re-engage in a matrifocal society that she is led directly to ceremony. That’s the place that she would have to go. It isn’t something that can be learned in any other epistemological method or any other institution. If we want to talk now about a more abstract way of institutions as human built social structures; ceremony as an institution is

the place where that knowledge is kept. And there are women alive who have that knowledge and who can transfer that knowledge but it's still up to the learner to make sense of it. That's another one of the tweaks to the ceremonial knowledge system. It isn't pre-chewed, predigested and spoon fed knowledge that the way that the academic system out of Europe functions; they chew knowledge to death. They take it in little tiny spoonfuls and stuff it down your throat; you're expected to be able to regurgitate it at a moment's notice exactly the way that it went in. That's not indigenous knowledge. For women who want to engage in a matrifocal society not only do they have to go to ceremonies and pick up the knowledge but then they have to find a way to internalize the knowledge and turn it into a day-to-day lived experience. Like that sweetgrass, where things are braided together and in the moment you can feel it. It's like flow, people who do physical stuff (like performance artists) will experience flow and that's what it is for women wanting to engage with a more matrifocal society is to seek the knowledge, internalize the knowledge and then convert that knowledge into a flow so you become a self-determining person. You are living in the moment, living that knowledge. Ceremony is an essential component of that but it's not the only component. You have your elders, you have your young people, you've got your home life and you have the world. If this can't stand the test of the world then it's not going to fly. You're not in a laboratory or an incubator. You have to take this knowledge and once it's internalized you have to move out into that difficult world and keep your flow happening. That's when you become a performance artist; you're out there and the waves are just hitting you, ploughing through. Guys are doing stupid stuff and you're not tossed over, you're staying on beam. People are saying racist stuff and you're just flowing through it.

George

First of all, I have to say I thank Janice for this circle and I hope that in the future this will help her. My thoughts around this and what I hear the Elders say is that we have to go and research from the very beginning of creation and how our creator created the earth and then the land. From those stories we will be shown how people and how things happened. And we have to look at how the sky relates to us and not necessarily how we are related to the sky and mother earth. We are also related to everything around us on Mother Earth.

When you listen to the Elders, how the Creator is the Great Mystery and how she unfolded the earth, there are four things that the Creator molded. The first thing was all the plants, medicines, everything that grows from the earth, all the berry trees, flowers and then the creation of those that fly, the various birds and how they live and from there the animals, the four legged ones that walk the earth and then the fish. Those, all of those, our elders, native people have used all of these. The fisherman, the people that were in charge of the trees when they have grown up. When the creator made all of these, the movement of the land and the earth took place where our mother earth was beautiful when it was initially created by the creator. And from there further on, our brother arrived, we call him our 'kistesinaw', our brother, he was given the gift of spirit. He was able to speak to everything and everything spoke to him. Now today, people wouldn't understand today. The trees used speak to him, the animals used to speak to him, the grass used to speak to him. The elders say that when the creator created the earth and we lived on this earth prior to European arrival, all this land was open. There was nothing blocking anything on this earth, it was all open, our brother

was working with our brother wolf and they worked together. When the creator created the earth, the wolf and wisakecak were invited to go out and measure the amount of land around them and how far our land would be. And now, when we listen to the stories, the stories of the beginnings and how far the wolf and our brother wisakecak had gone we still hear those stories. And also, in terms of keeping our children, in terms of keeping the story and we hear the terminology used when they use 'kisaskaciwani' today that means Saskatchewan river, Winnipeg. All of those places have now been named in English. But even Saddle Lake has been given an English name which doesn't reflect the true meaning of 'oniskwapowin', they call it Saddle Lake not 'oniskwapowin'. But if you look at these words, all these have been changed by the white man, but everything has got a Cree name and when I think about how elders tell their stories, the native people were across the land because now you hear the words that are used in English; they come from the Cree foundational words, so they had an impact. Those were the stories and the directions made from the elders to the young and from there, 'wisakecak' walked the earth as directed to him from the Creator. And from there, the Cree person, was then made by the Creator. But now the white people when they teach they say that a man was created first and then the woman. But I often think about this. I really think that the woman was created first. As far as that is concerned I really believe this. Why I say this is because a man cannot provide life but the woman was given the ability to provide life by the Creator. Now when I think about that it only makes sense. That is spiritual work and as men we should be very respectful of all women, the elderly ladies, the children, the female girls, all of them.

The elders at that time took that responsibility to teach them, to take care of them so that they would know what gifts this young person was given, what path this young person should be walking. From there, the elders would then fully support this young person. They were provided the vision to know what was ahead for them; whether they were going to be good hunters, good trappers or if they would be a healer. Those things, the elders would support that and recognize that in each young man and young woman and would then give further support to ensure that they followed that path. This happened for the women also, it was a little bit different but the Elders also took charge of them. Their aunties, their grandmothers taught them how to prepare for their life path. These questions that this young lady has asked us about the ceremonies, we can't talk about each one individually in a collective circle because everything is tied together and when I quit speaking now I won't speak anymore. We were given everything, all those things that I talked about in terms of ceremony, the stories and when this young woman listens to this, she will hear the stories and from there she will figure out what she needs to learn from these stories and what kind of gifts or what she should be understanding and what to take from this circle for herself.

I am so happy, and I give thanks to this young lady who wants to know and I hope that in the future this will guide her. But, all of these laws are in ceremony, they're in different ceremonies, they direct how we live our lives; what we should be respecting.

Veronica

For me, spirituality was a story. I always wondered how, what and why did he do that. Now, as a native when I got older I started to really understand. It was basically

right and wrong. And we have the freedom to choose for ourselves right or wrong. This is where, it's like here (referring to eagle feather she is holding). One side and there's another side, but they follow the same, they come from the same place. When you look at an eagle feather they come from the same thing. There's the right side and the wrong side of life. But I can't say that about the eagle feather it is very sacred, it is a very sacred symbol.

So, it's a long long story to talk about a woman's role. And it tells you in itself if you understood your language. nehiyaw iskwew, niya nehiyaw iskwew. Why I'm saying who I am? That's who I am, is nehiyaw iskwew. But, it means I have four spirits. I am a four-direction person. And if you know your four directions I should follow those steps. Those are my guiding principle every day.

You can't hear but sometimes we can see. When the person speaks from the heart you say "oh okay we can see that feeling coming from that person". It's also a language; its feeling, it's the language of different emotion, a different way of expressing yourself internally. Spirituality is many things and you can tell when a person is really committed to. Because even if they can't speak the language they have their emotion, they have their heart, they have their way of expressing that. And now that tells me "oh there's a very kind person. Oh there's a very committed person". It's by showing their emotion and that's one thing we haven't, we've kind of left it in the back. We've been concentrating on the physical aspect of ourselves; like, 'oh I look good, I feel good'. We spend all of our time trying to find all these different formulas to be young. George (the male elder in talking circle) and I are looking for youth. (*Laughter*) A youth potion. Trying to retain that (our physical aspect). That's one thing we spend, I can say three

quarters of our time trying to look good and feel good physically; we're concentrating on our physical. The next part is the mental. We're on a mental race right now; like you are, you are on a race.

mihko kihew iskwew

At a personal level, I remember my first five years of my childhood. It was a heavenly place to be because I knew my parents loved me. My relatives, my grandparents were around me and I had not been influenced by monias (white) education by being removed from home. I can truthfully say that the last ten to fifteen years has allowed me to be in that space again. I feel like a child again. I'm always learning and recognize that I don't have to become or do anything that's not nehiyaw (Cree). I think believing in ourselves is what contributes to that feeling. It reminds me of the Cree concept "tapiw keytamowin". Tapwe is truth. Keytamowin is - that's in your mind, it involves your mind. So, we believe in ourselves and who we are. We are not going to get mixed signals about how we do things, or who we should be obeying. Iyiniw pahminosowin, will carry us through, we really believe and we really stay grounded in those belief systems. It's going to carry us a lot further than if we go the direction where monias are telling us by law to do what they want.

Our way is to be humble. And you hear it in prayers and in ceremonies and you know 'kitimakeymowin' - to have pity on us. We are pitiful people, you know we're at that point. I hear in ceremony the teachings of the values teachings of the values. You know love, honesty, caring, sharing, determination. The term self-determination for me is the gift of being in a healing soul. And that determination is being true to who I am. In ceremony, in my mind anyway, I always visualize and in my heart, in my spirit, in my

emotion, I know that the grandmothers are directing me, directing us, directing people to come into my life that are going to enhance it in fulfilling our collective responsibility.

In ceremony we sit like this (like sitting in a circle) and everybody has a purpose, and that without that one person, without the community support to come to the ceremony, well that ceremony won't go. And everything that we do, we need to bring that into our work world, into our families; that drives how we do things. Ceremony begins when it is supposed to. It is a process. It is not like "oh god it's seven o'clock we should be doing this, the pipe holders should be here, where are those singers?" You know what I mean? It begins because ceremony starts as soon as we get there and we're involved because ceremony is also about relationships, building relationships and giving people a voice.

When you begin to learn the ceremony – often referred to as legends – they are not legends. They are spiritual stories and lessons that are about ceremony and in ceremony the world that you are in really opens up where we have the opportunity to learn from our ancestors.

The thing I find about ceremony is that it just becomes who we are. Ceremony becomes a part of our daily life and I do not feel like I have to give up anything to become involved in ceremony. I work and I pray and I have energy too; that's part of the magic of it. When we are involved in ceremony we connect; all four-dimensions are in balance.

Sherrri

Even when I feel like I am not doing a very good job of carrying those teachings or living those teachings I am trusting that it is setting me in the direction of finding more

about that, so that I can do a better job of it. Learning to do that with loving humble kindness, to carry that role and responsibility that I have been given and feeling very critical and very humbled and very much at the beginning of my journey.

It is definitely through ceremony that I understand more and more all the time about the role of women, the responsibilities of women and understanding it in the context of community, in the context of the balance, the roles and responsibilities that we all carry. So, I think there is that way of thinking (Western Thought) that surrounds us in that other world (Western) that there is a hierarchy in everything and coming to understand that there is not a hierarchy in everything; for me that's a false interpretation of the world. Being able to come to terms with how Western thought impacts me in my own life and to be able to try another way. I have realized that have a lot of opportunities to learn, a lot of lessons that keep presenting themselves and I look for that balance and I look at the experiences that I have had and see where I need to interpret things differently. I have learned to be informed more through ceremony and then come to terms with my own contradictions and find my way to a place that makes sense.

Mary

I'm still in a place where I'm learning and I feel like I really don't know anything. And I don't want to pretend that I know everything because really, I know nothing. And when I listen to George speak that affirms my belief that I still have a lot to learn, especially the language. And I almost feel a sense of sadness because I don't understand. And I want to understand.

You find a path through all of that shit and you manage to walk through it. And it's empowering to be given back my life and to know that I have control over my life

and I make the decisions in my life. I'm not going to be subservient to men and become part of their property just because that's the way that I was raised. What I always saw growing up was men coming in and out of our lives and telling us what to do, telling us how we should be.

Vince

I have been involved in ceremony for pretty well all my life and I happen to run a sweat lodge and I only know a little bit about the teachings of men. And I was told, when people come to you in your lodge and they are women, how can you work with them if you don't understand women. And I thought, 'geez that's so simple, I should learn more about women'. The more that I think that men understand about women the better off that this earth life is.

Self-determination on a daily basis is when you have to take care of yourself, learn how to take care of yourself, learn how to love yourself. Most importantly, love and accept yourself and then you can love and accept all of the creator's creations. That's what I've been told. And that's at a personal level. You can love yourself, look in the mirror and say, "I love you" {sahkitowin} every morning. And accept yourself fully then you're ready to love another and to love all of creation. That's a difficult thing to do. So, I think it's time that not only Cree women, but women all over the world, start over-taking and start...maybe not over-taking but men have been developing society for the past ten thousand years. And the place of women in society keeps on being pushed aside. And men have been growing more and more violent as this is happening, this phenomenon is happening. And we forget as men that they need to love. And I don't know who's going to teach us. I know in the heart of the ceremony there's that love and

understanding and acceptance. And, when women start becoming part of and the men start stop pushing the women out then maybe there's that balance; that sacred balance will come back. Because I believe we're out of balance. That's part of the problem. We're out of balance because we've learned these ideologies where men are supreme. And we have to unlearn those and start pondering our sisters, our mothers, our wives, our daughters, grandmothers {kakiyaw iskwewak – all of women}.

Reflections

Having the opportunity to sit and listen inside the sacred talking circle where stories were collected, compiled and shared within this thesis was a very powerful and moving place to be. It was in this space that ceremony took place and people shared their experiences and understandings of self-determination and Cree women's relationship to this. One of the participants spoke very eloquently about ceremony as our 'epistemological system' and it is through this interpretation that ceremony becomes vital to the survival of the teachings that teach us about our governance system, our roles and responsibilities within this and how we can transcend the colonial mindset that contributes to the confusion and dysfunction found within the minds of our people. Stewart elaborated further in my interview with him on the role of ceremony as 'the method we use to gain knowledge' stating:

Inside of the ceremonial environment we create the opportunity and we participate. We put our energy into it and we add on, along with all the other energy and all this added energy comes together to create a space where knowledge can be generated and knowledge can be transferred...So, I feel like when we talk about the indigenous epistemology and the epistemological system

being ceremony there is knowledge and it's a specific type of knowledge that's held in safe keeping within the ceremonial context.

In hearing Stewart's words, it becomes critical that we utilize ceremony - in conjunction with our language - to seek out who we are and uncover the knowledge that makes up our epistemological system that gives clarity to how we think, act and live as nehiyawak. It is this interpretation that breathes life into *why* ceremony and the teachings we are given through ceremony become important for our ability to learn about and practice self determination to govern ourselves in a way reflective of our ancestral governance systems. The male participants in this study echo the importance of learning ceremony to understand our place within our nation as a way to uncover our roles and responsibilities to maintain the sacred gender balance that existed pre-colonial era. Stewart speaks of the power ceremony can have in assisting to revitalize women's teachings thus contributing to a more balanced governance system reflective of the matrifocal system of how we governed stating:

If we're talking about a re-emergence of a matrifocal system, well the knowledge that guides that is in ceremony and so for a woman to come to understand what a matrifocal society looks like, how it operates and what her day to day functions would be; how her relationships with women and men and children will be shaped that knowledge will all be found in ceremony; ceremony being the place where its both stored and transmitted.

The male Elder, George, makes reference to this stating, "...what I hear the Elders say is that we have to go and research from the very beginning of creation and how our Creator

created the earth and then the land. From those stories, we will be shown how people and how things happened”. Vincent, a ceremonial holder, reiterates this perspective stating

I’ve been involved in ceremony for pretty well all my life and I happen to run a sweat lodge and I only know a little bit about the teachings of men. And I was told, when people come to you in your lodge and they are women, how can you work with them if you don’t understand women. And I thought, ‘geez that so simple, I should learn more about women’. The more I think that men understand about women the better off this earth life is. And, when women start becoming part of and the men stop pushing the women out then maybe there’s that balance; that sacred balance will come back. Because I believe we are out of balance. That’s part of the problem, we’re out of balance because we’ve learned these ideologies where men are supreme. And we have to unlearn those”.

It’s socially progressive and encouraging to see men realize and understand the significance of women within our sacred governance circle because it is this practice that gives balance to our roles within our governance system held in each of our nations.

The women in this study spoke passionately about their self-identification as nehiyaw iskwewak (Cree women) and how this identity affirms their position and purpose within the community. What resonated clearly with all female participants in this study was the need to continue to learn about who they are as Cree women and how learning becomes a lifelong journey and process of uncovering more of who we are and in this we become closer to our authentic selves. This is iterated by Sherri, who shared, “It’s definitely through ceremony that I understand more and more all the time about the role of women, the responsibilities of women and understanding it in the context of

community, in the context of balance, the roles and responsibilities that we all carry”. In my own reflection of what nehiyaw pimatisiwin means and how the role of Cree women figure into this searching, finding and living aspect of what this is I’ve come to realize that once we start on the path of searching and practicing it leads us to a committed act of living our life in the way we have learned about who we are as nehiyawak. By searching we are led to practicing as a means of understanding more and are thus eventually led to living daily what it means to be and practice nehiyaw pimatisiwin.

Commitment and Responsibility

When I think of what commitment and responsibility is, I think of the process that I underwent to transcend the colonialisms that kept me bound to behavior and actions inauthentic to who I am as a Cree woman and the transformation that occurred to help me reach a place where I express living my life to the best of what I know to be honest and truthful to nehiyaw teachings. In this process, I have learned that once we reach a stage where we can practice who we are, being committed to what we know through this learning journey becomes an immediate responsibility of maintaining balance in our lives to function according to natural law. When I wanted to learn more about Cree ways of knowing I did it through connecting to ceremony and it was the fast ceremony that started this journey of learning for me. In this process I made the commitment to participate in this yearly fast ceremony for four years in a row. As I emerged from the bush the first time I fasted, I came out a new person with a stronger sense of who I am and what it meant to be a Cree woman. It was in this transformative spiritual experience that helped me commit myself to wanting to learn more about who I was. It was as if the door to the past had opened for me and I was given a glimpse into the way of life that my ancestors lived for generations and it was now up to me to take on that journey to commit myself to learn more of what it meant to be Cree because in doing so I was revolutionizing my thought process which inevitably led me to change the way I acted within the world. When the door of the past becomes open through spiritual connectedness, the level of responsibility a person has to honoring, upholding and practicing our ancestral teachings becomes heightened because it was those teachings that give meaning and restore power to the wounded spirit we have through our colonized experiences. When I think about

the responsibility that's inherent in our teachings and ways of knowing, it becomes clearer how our knowledge systems have been able to survive the generations of carefully planned genocidal attempts through government policy that have tried to keep us from knowing who we are. The more we practice who we are, the easier it becomes to be committed and responsible to the birthright we are given when we are born into the nations we belong to. When I committed myself to ceremony for four years I had no idea that I would now be desperate to uncover more of our customs, traditions and now wanting more than ever to learn the Cree language. It is this thirst for learning and wanting to uncover those aspects of our knowledge system that makes commitment easy because you realize the importance of preserving our knowledge so it can then be transmitted to future generations when they want to learn. The level of responsibility I feel to living the principles and laws found in ceremony stems back to my family history and the stories I have heard about the struggle and determination that my relatives and ancestors endured. They fought to leave us with the traditions, customs and teachings that provide the pathway for us to follow to practice iyiniw pahminsowin. The following stories of the participants speak to levels of commitment and how they feel responsible to honoring, upholding and living the experiential aspects of knowledge transmitted to them through ceremony.

Veronica

You heard George tell you that 'you can't say, you can't tell (western institutions) them everything over there.' Whatever you have here, you can keep for your future and for yourself. When there are no more elders around that was what I was afraid of a long time ago. That's why I didn't go to monias school (western schools). I went to Indian

school but I didn't know it was such a big project (*Laughter*). It was a great responsibility. To begin with the reason why I went into it was because I was just nosy. I asked many questions; during ceremony, after ceremony. And the old people were so patient. They'd sit down and tell me about it. And my mother would say "quit bothering the old people". But I would say "they (the old people) have some real nice stories".

You almost have to dedicate your whole life to it. That's what you see (niya – me). We've spent all our lives studying, trying to keep something for our grandchildren, our great grandchildren. So, that we move on; in our journey as the first peoples here. And for a woman, it's twice as hard; but within the spiritual circle the grandmothers help us. The grandmothers prepare our child before it's born. They prepared us before we were born.

Most of us don't talk about our responsibilities. We never go near there. But as women we have great responsibility. Three quarters of the work that needs to be done is supposed to be done by women. The man because he's physically stronger; the grandmothers said they would keep the man going because we were suppose to be like this in the circle in our home fires taking care of our children we can't be running off doing other things. Because, the child that the creator and our mother loaned us, it's not ours. We have to give that child direction and guidance so that on his journey he came as a spirit and a human being and he has to keep that spirit to go back. That's how I understood the old people. You were born as a spirit and then you entered the body, the creator loaned you and you have to live with that body for however long.

So it's just like you going to school. You got a commitment. Half way through you might say I just want to quit. You may say, 'I just want to walk away from here, this

is getting too damn hard'. Well, try Indian law. Try living within that law. There's no quitting and there's no turning back. You have to continue even if you have to crawl, to finish the job. You try and finish it. It's right to the last day of your life. Now if that's not commitment, without commitment there would be no struggle. So, for us there's no easy street.

George

A lot of times today, we see that we're called all sorts of things because of the way or what we believe in but I'm so proud of this, I'm so proud of my language, I'm so proud of the ceremonies because those have guided my path to this day. I have suffered a lot in the past as I was growing up as a child when I went to school. When I think about this, it's really difficult to talk about and to think about. I've seen those difficult days but I am sincere that I can hold on to things that have been given to us as native people, as Cree people. I will never let those go.

Mary

I'm still shocked sometimes in how it all comes together. What I've learned is how important I am as a woman, what my role is and how important that is and it's a responsibility. When I go to work - I work in a school with the kids - I don't see it as a job but as me fulfilling my responsibility as a Cree woman to look after these kids; to help them see what their gift is and to be able to guide them in that direction. Sometimes it's not easy, when I don't even know a lot of times what my direction is. And I really want to thank Veronica for talking about the spirit name. Because, when you said that it was like that little light when on inside me. That's why I think I become lost a lot of times, it's because I still don't have my spirit name. That really explained to me why a

lot of times I get frustrated and why I want to quit. It's only been through ceremony that I've come to understand that quitting is not an option. I'm not being given that choice to quit. Now that I've started on this journey I need to always remember to stay on this journey. The Sundance has taught me that. At the same time I started to go to school here at Blue Quills was the first time I was actually an active participant in the Sundance ceremony. That ceremony taught me that you can't quit and a lot of times I want to, you know. I just want to say "f--k it you know I've had enough" because when I was downtown Edmonton sticking needles in my arms, my life was easy. I didn't worry about my kids, I didn't think about my kids, I didn't think about anything; I didn't have to and my life was a lot easier. Whenever something came up all I had to do was go downtown and get what I needed to make it all go away. Now it's just sitting there right in front of my face and sometimes I wish it would go away. But in those times I always happened to...when things got bad I knew people came into my path and then you know there is a way to get through it.

I feel like there's this sense of coming home and a reminder that I can't quit. That's what the ceremonies have taught me; that I can't quit and so I use that everyday. A lot of times, I want to quit school; I really do. Every time I have to write a paper I think, 'oh I should just quit' but, I don't.

Sherri

I am grateful to those ones who have committed their lives to ceremony and traditional knowledge. To those who held that and carried that because there were people like me who were wandering around and finally found a way, finally was set on that path. So I am grateful to my grandfather because I know it was him that set me on my path.

And it kind of surprised me because it wasn't my experience growing up; at least I didn't interpret it that way. As I've gotten more involved in ceremony I've realized that's what it was but he set me on this path to ceremony. And it took me a while even after he did that, to commit to it. It's through that, that I've begun to develop I guess my own understanding and that's all I can do is interpret it in my own way...of my sense of responsibility to be who the creator sent me here to be and to do my part and learning what I can and carrying that and holding that; like the others have done for me. So that I've got something so that the next generation has something.

It's through ceremony that I've really strengthened that sense of hope that I have, about our people, for our people; that we have what it takes and this was a teaching that was shared with me by some people in Northern Manitoba.

I see that time when more and more of our people will embrace these teachings if we can hold onto these and do our part in carrying these forward. And that's our big responsibility. You know, we hear and see what's going on in our communities today and our people continue looking for theoretical models to address that. I don't see that we're going to find that (answer) there. I see that we're going to find our answers in our ceremonies and in our knowledge. Whatever little part I might be able to do in carrying that forward I think is what my responsibility is, that I can. But I see that when we can all govern ourselves according to those laws.

mihko kihew iskwew

What I've learned from our elders is that what little I learn it's my responsibility to teach it. I'm the eldest sister and I honor my brothers, my son, my nephews and grandchildren, the little boys and the men, my cousins because we need to journey

together on this, we can't do this alone. That's the directions, of the grandmother's who sit in the north, that's their teaching. If we understand our roles – that the men are our spokespeople - but they are also there to support us then we can invite them and then they know what their roles are. We can live in much more balanced way of life. I am thinking of my own learnings along the way, where I was always elevating men and serving but that's not who we are. They (the men) are supposed to be assisting us in our roles as women, in teaching our children.

It's important now for me to carry on what this vessel is about in terms of doing what needs to get done for the next generation and the other generations. That's one of the teachings we learn, we are responsible for the seventh generation. I thank our grandparents seven generation ago and even Veronica and their generation when monias (white – western) education was honored as the only way to go to make a living. People like Veronica and George chose to go our way, in terms of ensuring that they kept the traditions for us and when we were ready they would be there. There's commitment once you get on the spiritual journey and the ceremonial journey.

Reflections: Spirit, Ceremony, Empowerment

When we learn about commitment we also learn about responsibility. Unlike western philosophy or laws, indigenous people learn about these values through our experiential journey in searching about who we are and in this journey we discover the breadth and depth of what these indigenous principled ways of living mean. Through practicing indigenous ways of living we learn what being committed to this way of life entails and we become deeply responsible to follow this pathway given to us by Creator's law. The level of commitment we learn extends beyond any policy, law or legislation

created and dictated by nation states or governments created for us to adhere to. Because the principles and laws found in indigenous ways of knowing are alive and live through our experiential understanding of unraveling their meaning, they have more influential power to become entrenched in our memory, in our blood, and it is these memories that we remember and turn to when seeking change within our lives for social justice, peace and freedom from the colonial practices inflicted upon us.

Every participant that was a part of this study spoke to their commitment levels and the responsibility they felt to live, uphold and pass on the knowledge they acquired through ceremony and the teachings inherent in the ceremonial practices they were/are exposed to. Each participant connected their journey to understand nehiyaw ways of knowing to having a sense of responsibility to ensure future generations know who they are and the history associated with being First Peoples and what that entails. Veronica (female elder) articulates her commitment to learning Cree traditions and teachings stating:

When there are no more elders around - that was what I was afraid of a long time ago. That's why I didn't go to monias school (western schools). I went to Indian school but I didn't know it was such a big project (*Laughter*). It was a great responsibility. And the old people were so patient... You almost have to dedicate your whole life to it. That's what you see (niya – with me). We've spent all our lives studying, trying to keep something for our grandchildren our great grandchildren. So, that we move on; in our journey as the first peoples here. And for a woman, it's twice as hard; but within the spiritual circle the grandmothers help us....Try Indian law, try living within that law. There's no quitting and no

turning back. You have to crawl, to finish the job...It's right to the last day of your life.

This level of commitment and responsibility also resonates with people who never grew up in ceremony but through their transformative experience in and through ceremony feel deeply connected to living and maintaining that way of life found in ceremonial teachings. Mary gives clarity and brings life to this in her story as she states:

What I've learned is how important I am as a woman, what my role is and how important that is and it's a responsibility...because I work in a school with kids I don't see it as a job but as me fulfilling my responsibility as a Cree woman to look after these kids; to help them see what their gift is and to be able to guide them in that direction. It's like now I've started on this journey and I need to always remember to stay on this journey. The Sundance has taught me that...And, that ceremony (Sundance) taught me that you can't quit and a lot of times I want to, you know. I just want to say "f---it, I've had enough" because when I was downtown Edmonton sticking needles in my arms, my life was easy. I didn't worry about my kids. I didn't think about my kids, I didn't think about anything you know; I didn't have to, my life was a lot easier.

Commitment and responsibility naturally become a part of our life when we get on the spiritual path because the flow of energy directs us to situations, people and places that remind us of what we've learned in ceremony and it is in these moments that we are gently reminded of what our purpose is. Mihko kihew iskwew and Sherri speak to this point stating:

mihko kihew iskwew

It's important now for me to carry on what this vessel is about in terms of doing what needs to get done for the next generation and the other generations. That's one of the teachings we learn, we are responsible for the seventh generation. I thank our grandparents seven generation ago and even Veronica and their generation when monias (White – western) education was honored as the only way to go to make a living. People like Veronica and George chose to go our way, in terms of ensuring that they kept the traditions for us, when we were ready that they would be there. There's commitment once you get on the spiritual journey and the ceremonial journey.

Sherri

I am grateful to those ones who have committed their lives to ceremony and traditional knowledge. To those who held that and carried that because there were people like me who were wandering around and finally found a way, finally was set on that path. So I am grateful to my grandfather because I know it was him that set me on my path. And it kind of surprised me because it wasn't my experience growing up; at least I didn't interpret it that way. As I've gotten more involved in ceremony I've realized that's what it was but he set me on this path to ceremony. And it took me a while even after he did that, to commit to it. It's through that, that I've begun to develop I guess my own understanding and that's all I can do is interpret it in my own way...of my sense of responsibility to be who the creator sent me here to be and to do my part and learning what I can and

carrying that and holding that; like the others have done for me. So that I've got something so that the next generation has something.

Each participant echoes the same message about commitment and responsibility once they began on the journey to seek out the meaning of their identity and in this process began to develop responsibility to learning for the sake of our future generations yet to come. It is in these practices of commitment that becomes a place of where we can look to for answers in finding how we can find solace in knowing that our ways of knowing and living become powerful tools in helping us transcend the distractions sent to us in policy, law and legislation created by colonial governments. Our people need to return to our ways of knowing so that we can be who our ancestors envisioned us to be when they committed their lives to practicing the knowledge that keeps us alive and gives meaning to who we are.

Recognizing the Sacred Role of Nehiyewak Women

The introduction of patriarchy through western thought and belief systems has made it difficult for contemporary indigenous women to be honored for their important role in contributing to the survival of our nations. In hearing the stories and honoring the voices of the participants in this study it was possible to experience the revered respect given to women in our Cree society. In nehiyawak society, women are seen as life givers that have the power to bring and create life. The teachings that come from this sacred role are found in our creation stories, our pipe teachings and other ceremonial teachings that come to us when we make the journey to seek and practice nehiyaw pimatisiwin. In listening to Elders who understand the impact colonialism has on women's roles they reference the spiritual strength and power nehiyaw iskwewak have within our

ceremonies. An example of this is provided by Veronica's reference to women being on their 'moon time' and the strength they exhibit during this time of month. It is believed that during this time when a woman is on her natural moon cycle she possesses such power that her energy has the ability to override the men's pipe and energy during ceremony. It is for this reason that women are taught to be mindful of this revered power given to them by Creator and to respect the teachings that go with this gift. Veronica's observation of the power and sacred role that Cree women occupy within ceremony is important as it highlights the importance of women within our societies as observed in ceremony.

Another example of Cree women's revered roles within our ceremonies is when women are asked to be present in order for the ceremony to be complete. In our fasting ceremony, women occupy half of the teepee and contribute to the function of this ceremony in preparing the sacred feast food that is offered to our ancestors asking for help. Every evening during the fast ceremony a feast is held. The purpose of this feast is to offer food to our ancestral grandmothers and grandfathers seeking help in guiding the ceremony so it is conducted in a good way. In the feast, the male ceremony helpers, referred to as 'oskapeyosak' (helpers) serve food to all those who are present for the ceremony. Symbolically, this exhibits the revered importance placed on Cree women within our ceremonial structure(s) which is a reflection of how we are to govern. In ceremonies, these "oskapeyosak" serve everyone, including the women and children. They also take guidance from the female ceremonial holders present to help them learn the protocol of being an 'oskapeyos' (helper) to the ceremony. These roles and responsibilities given to Cree women within ceremony are important because they reflect

the value placed on women within our governance structure. These examples epitomize the stark contrast between how Indigenous and non-Indigenous women are revered and respected within our societies. Western feminists have much to learn from hearing the stories, teachings and sacred roles occupied by Indigenous women within our pre-contact governance structures. Although it may have been interesting to have an additional layer present within this research addressing the relationship indigenous feminism has to this project that particular analysis is beyond the scope and intent of what this thesis research was about. The purpose of this research was to bring to life the stories and teachings that give Cree women the strength and power to overcome the legacy of colonialism and see the power in our sacred role(s) as women. By uncovering our own nehiyawak epistemological process(es) it highlights the value we place on our own ideological frameworks that are capable of deconstructing colonial mentalities.

By finding out our sacred roles as nehiyaw iskwewak it is possible to decolonize and revive a governance structure that reflects a respectful gender balance and honors the power and strength women have in giving life and sustaining our nations. The most important lesson I learned during this project is that indigenous knowledge is not something you acquire for the sake of producing research but should be seen as a living entity used to transform how we think, act and do research within the academy. Even though I am a Cree woman who has grown up on the reserve, attends ceremonies and has a basic understanding of how following protocol is important in our society I was still confronted by my own colonial mentality during the research process. By this, I am referring to the way western thought has impacted how we as indigenous researchers conduct research in our own community. For example, if I was truly practicing how

knowledge is acquired and transferred from knowledge holder to knowledge seeker I would have ideally been able to host a women's pipe and be able to speak to all the teachings held within this sacred ceremony as my thesis defense. This example represents the complexity associated with being an Indigenous person attending a western academic institution conducting sacred research in their home communities. This is why it becomes important that Indigenous researchers see the research they conduct as an opportunity to engage in a ceremonial research process that transforms their way of thinking and thus contributes to social, political and economic transformative agendas within their communities. If Indigenous research is seen in this light the research we embark on becomes the spark that ignites social change within the nations we come from.

In reflecting on the process of how the information was obtained I wish I had more time to spend with my participants. Ideally, this research process would have been an ongoing project over a two or three year time period to show the progress made by those who were a part of the research project. In hindsight, I would have hosted an initial talking circle to identify the prevalent themes that came from the research idea, conduct follow up individual interviews with all the participants, and then close the project with a final talking circle to see the transformative changes that took place as a result of the research. By conducting research in this way, it would be easier to identify how the research process becomes transformative anti-colonial research.

Chapter 6

In order to break down and destroy a culture, you have to get to the root of it. The heart of Aboriginal cultures is the women. So it makes sense to start making policies that would banish the women, the givers of the language and the culture and the life. The ones who brought in the Native children and made them Native. It made sense to make that policy so that white women could come in and take over that over that role and start teaching the white ways (Anderson, 2000, p. 3)

Closing Thoughts What do the Stories Mean?

It is fitting that I begin this last section of this thesis with the powerful words held in this quotation because they help construct the picture of how important it is for indigenous women to re-claim and re-institutionalize their role within our nations so that we may reconfigure the governance circles we come from to reflect our indigenous ways of practicing what iyiniw pahminsowin (self-determination) means. Indigenous women must re-assert and take back our rightful place within our nations so that we may assist in the healing, transforming and strengthening of our people to be set on that path of finding themselves so we become the thriving powerful nations that existed prior to colonial imperialist agendas. When we begin to think about our responsibilities as women as holding the socio-spiritual power to shape and determine the outcome of how a nation functions, the severity of women's roles become heightened to a level of vital importance. Both men and women within indigenous nations and governance circles must unlearn the psychological oppression we have internalized through years of colonization and take on that journey to de-colonize hurt, pain, confusion and anger that lay within these layers of our contemporary identities. This becomes possible when we are truthful and honest with ourselves about the lives we lead and about how they align with our traditional teachings held within the ceremonial framework. Our lives are

guided by these deep rooted principles found in the systems of knowledge our ancestors left for us to unwrap in the sacred bundles they kept protected from euro-western intrusion. We must begin to think of women's issues as our nation's issues because it is our women that give life to the children that become a part of the nation, and it is the women that raise, socialize and teach these children that grow up to contribute to the daily governance operations in each of our communities and nations. This line of thinking is affirmed by Armstrong (2001) who states, "In traditional Aboriginal society, it was women who shaped the thinking of all its members in a loving, nurturing atmosphere within the base family unit. In such societies, the earliest instruments of governance and law to ensure social order came from quality mothering of children" (p. 9). The recommendations that come in this section are derived from the voices, teachings and knowledge transmitted through the stories of the participants that were a part of this study. Their strength in their nehiyewak identities becomes the foundation upon which others can learn from so they too can be set on the path to self-determination.

Acimowin wapahmaskosis – Telling My Story as a Cree Woman

We have to learn to find strength in our stories and begin to unpack the power that lays buried in our memories of our family, community and nation. These stories become the platform where we take back our lives and seek justice through reclaiming our history and articulating the power held in this act of voicing and naming the colonial symptoms that imprison us within our own homelands.

Becoming immersed in ceremony and committing myself to ceremonial teachings allowed me to go through my own spiritual and intellectual transformative experience. This personal transformation is articulated by Alfred (2005) as a key factor in living what

he calls an 'authentic existence' as Onkwehonwe which is premised on the ethic of courage (p. 28). The 'fast ceremony' was the pivotal point in my life that allowed me to seek out 'truth'. This process of searching for truth is what Burkhart (2004) refers to as seeking out "knowledge in *and through* experience" and "embodying lived knowledge" (p. 20 – my emphasis). The 'fast' provided the place and space for me to suspend and set aside outside factors that inhibited my ability to think beyond the realm of a western narrative-normative construct that so easily pervades a contemporary Indigenous existence. A Cree understanding of this process of 'truth seeking' is best articulated by my aunt, a ceremonialist and educator, who said "it is in each individual to seek out and understand the truth of our existence and we do this through the fast ceremony every year when we go out on the land with all our relatives" (Personal communication, Dr. Leona Makokis). It was through my 'fast' experience that I understood the inter-relatedness and inter-connectedness of what 'all my relations' meant (Talking Circle Dialogue). I began to formulate my own epistemic interpretation of what a Cree women's identity meant through the interactions and experiences I underwent in becoming more exposed to and involved with ceremony. This point is further emphasized by Ryser (as cited in DuFour) who states, "through the cultural practices of each distinct people, individual human beings come to know their personal identities and learn to know truth" (2004, p. 35). A significant aspect of 'coming to know' and translating what 'you know and what truth is' into daily action becomes the transformative platform in practicing 'iyiniw pahminsowin'. Finding out what 'iyiniw pahminsowin' is can be found when we have a firm grasp on our identity which then becomes the foundation for how we interact, act and take action within our daily existence. Having a solid understanding of 'who you are

and where you come from' is integral to practicing and pursuing iyiniw pahminsowin. In taking the journey to find out what it is to be a 'nehiyaw iskwew', I learn to regulate and control my activity to benefit the family, community and nation I have been born into. As indigenous peoples and as indigenous women, we have to all find our voice in reclaiming our stories held in the memories of our families, communities and nations and learn how to use these as tools of decolonizing.

It was not until I took control of my own life by uncovering and deconstructing the history of where the colonial words, images, policies and laws that define who we are as indigenous peoples in relation to the Canadian nation state that decolonized thinking begins. In unlearning the colonizer's language and his-story is where I began to exercise what Memmi (1991) says is "wanting to understand the colonial relationship to which I was bound" (p. xvi). When we begin to uncover the strength and power that lies in our sacredness as women, we start on that path of beginning to reclaim who we are which subsequently translates into taking control of our destinies as an individual within the collective, of each nation we are born into. In order to transcend the colonial-ness that exists in the minds that hold us captive to colonial ways of thinking, behaving and acting we must find ways to shed those layers that continue to keep us prisoners to the nation state's agenda of conquest through assimilatory policy and legislative practice.

Self-determination is the act(s) or journey we take to seek out who we are so we know what our responsibilities are to our nation thus allowing for a clearer vision of what we must do in our lives to contribute to the betterment and governance of our nation. Resistance to colonialism starts with reclaiming who we are and revitalizing our own

indigenous ways of being and living what we learn through this experiential anti-colonial journey.

Our Language as Resistance

One of the recurring themes inherent in the stories of the participants within this research was the importance of our indigenous languages to our identities. When I sit with fluent speakers of our nehiyawewin language there is a sense of sadness, anger and confusion that takes over because I cannot understand what is being said and I don't get to participate in the conversation. Before having a stronger sense of identity I really didn't care to learn my language because like most Indian kids assimilated to function with(in) western society it's 'not cool' to be 'different' and the language of choice and of importance is the one most often spoken; for me this was english because I attended monias (white) school my entire life. Learning nehiyawewin was not a priority until I came to a place in my life where I wanted to learn about who I am and became more exposed to ceremony where the ceremonial holders spoke entirely in Cree. Now more than ever am I committed to learning the language because our laws, teachings and ways of life are contained in the nuances contained and held within the Cree language.

Veronica, the female elder, a part of this study emphasizes the importance of learning and protecting our language to preserving our way of life, she states:

Now I know we are running after our language because of ceremony, because of the law (our nehiyawak Law). We want to understand, we want to be able to identify with it. And she knows (referring to one of the participants that teaches a Cree Immersion Program at Blue Quills First Nations College). She understands the importance of our language, that's why she's trying. She's teaching and she

wants all of our people to be able to grow up the way we grew up, the way we understood. Our Cree language tells you our ways, the prayers and about the pipe if you listen to it. It gives you direction. It gives you your direction. But the sad part is, most of our young people don't understand the language. I could be speaking Chinese and praying in Chinese if I knew how, they (our young people) wouldn't understand it either. And even when I say it in English it has very little meaning. That's why I tell them (the young people) to learn this. You heard it, keep it, put it in your heart, because I said there's a language in their heart.

Before the talking circle began for this research data collection, Veronica conducted a women's pipe ceremony, and it was this ceremony that set the context of *why* it's important to remember ceremony in everything we do because we are guided by the prayers held by the grandmothers and grandfathers that kept those teachings for us through these pipe teachings in order for us to be guided by our Nation's laws. As empowering as it was for me to begin to learn the women's pipe teachings five years ago I now encounter frustration when I can't understand what Elders and knowledge holders are saying because I feel like a part of my spirit is missing since I can't understand the meaning held within the language that pipe holders use to perform their ceremonies. Language is paramount to our survival as unique indigenous nations because it houses our systems of knowledge that carry the answers of how to transcend colonial symptoms found in our contemporary identities. Battiste and Henderson (2000) emphasize the importance of our indigenous languages in the transmission of our indigenous knowledges, stating:

Since languages house the lessons and knowledge that constitute the cognitive-spiritual powers of groups of people in specific places, Indigenous peoples view their languages as forms of spiritual identity. Indigenous languages are thus sacred to Indigenous peoples. They provide the deep cognitive bonds that affect all aspects of Indigenous life. Through their shared language, Indigenous people create a shared belief in how the world works and what constitutes proper action. Sharing these common ideals creates the collective cognitive experience of Indigenous societies, which is understood as Indigenous knowledge. Without Indigenous languages, the lessons and the knowledge are lost (p. 49).

Indigenous women must see the value and power in learning, preserving and transmitting our indigenous languages and take on the responsibility to learn and transfer what they've been taught to their children because there is socio-spiritual power in constructing strong nehiyewak identities in this. Through my own transformative experiences I have come to realize that I cannot continue to learn about who I am without taking the step in learning my language because so much of my identity is housed within the language and until I learn it I will continue to exhibit feelings of emptiness.

Uncovering our Traditional Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is a funny thing because it comes to us when we least expect it and in some of the most unconventional places. Unlike western knowledge, indigenous knowledges are alive, experiential and deeply spiritual moments when we have that moment of connection to our ancestral way of teaching and in these sacred moments we learn. We then take these experiences and implement them within our lives in hopes of practicing what we've learned to incorporate our ways of being into our lives

so that we remember who we are. For me, I continue to learn about this unique ancestral system of learning and in doing so am reminded that our learning comes through our ability to be open to our experiences and how these experiences teach us about our indigenous principles and laws held within the bundles our ancestors carried with them in our ceremonies. As I started this thesis process I knew that I would continue to learn more about who I am as a Cree woman and was open to whatever teachings I was meant to get out of this process because this is directly linked to a ‘transformative scholarship research’ agenda (Wilson, 2004; Alfred, 2004). In this process I have learned more about cultural protocol, the importance of songs and the significance our creation stories have to teachings us of who we are and where we come from. In the stress associated with writing I had to find a way to connect to my spiritual self to transcend the mental logic that can sometimes be a burden to expressing creativity held in our spirit. In doing so I learned a Cree song that came to me and it is this song that I now sing when I need guidance to get me beyond the intellectual mental bondage that sometimes hinders us from connecting to our spiritual selves. This experience is what Burkhart (2004) describes as “the knowledge carried in one’s heart”. He elaborates further stating:

Knowledge is shaped and guided by human actions, endeavors, desires, and goals.

Knowledge is what we put to use. Knowledge can never be divorced from human action and experience....knowledge was gained by experience and *is* lived (p.

21/22, my emphasis).

In Deloria’s last piece of academic work on this earth-life he, wrote about the power and strength that our indigenous medicine men carried with them. It is fitting that I include this work in this thesis because, I too, have come to realize the profound power held

within our ceremonial framework in stripping our colonial-ness from our contemporary existence in order for our nations to overcome the colonial disease that infects the minds of our people. Deloria (2006) captures the importance of our traditional practices and religions stating, “We need to glimpse the old spiritual world that helped, healed and honored us with its presence and companionship. We need to see where we have been before we see where we should go, we need to know how to get there, and we need to have help on our journey” (p. xix).

Acts of counter-hegemonizing will *only* be found in the revitalization of our indigenous knowledge systems and our ability to *live* what we learn. In this process we transcend our colonized identities and transform into people that live, abide by and put into action those principles and laws that are the spiritual blueprints that have revolutionized our thinking. Our ability to live what we learn is also reinforced by Angela Cavendar Wilson’s (2004) position of indigenous knowledge recovery within the academy stating, “Reclamation of Indigenous knowledge is more than resistance to colonial domination, it is also a signifier of cultural revitalization and mounting Native nationalism (p. 84). By focusing on indigenous knowledge recovery in all aspects of what we do we begin the journey to reawaken ourselves to our ceremonies, our songs and the stories that are the incubators of where our knowledge is stored where it awaits for transmittance from those who want to know.

Seeking and practicing iyiniw pahminsowin occurs when one realizes his/her Indigenous identity and takes appropriate action to utilize those teachings and incorporate them into their daily lives. In this thesis I have outlined what a nehiyaw philosophical framework is through the lens of Cree teachings and have argued that it is imperative that

indigenous peoples look to how their women organize themselves in hopes of pursuing, practicing and living what self-determination is within their nation. Indigenous people are accountable to their people through ceremonial teachings given and passed on to them through their generational lineages and it is up to them to unearth these teachings in order to find their own principles/ teachings of what 'iyiniw pahminsowin' is. I have a generational responsibility of upholding, living, practicing and transferring nehiyawak (Cree) ways of knowing through the lived knowledge in my own personal understandings of Cree teachings that lie within iyiniw pahminsowin. This honor and obligation has been bestowed upon me through my relatives who have been apart of and continue to be a part of this community socio-political movement in hopes of creating a space for the future generations to live as nehiyawak.

Throughout writing this thesis process I was reminded of what my role and responsibility was within this research and furthermore, to my community and teachings that guide my existence as a Cree woman. Understanding and practicing the teachings of Cree Elders drives my reason(s) for undertaking a thesis that reflects who I am, where I come from and what role this research can have for potentially instigating positive change within my community.

Bibliography

- Abbott-Mihesuah, D. A. (2003). *Indigenous American Women: Decolonization, Empowerment, Activism*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Alfred, T. (1999). *Peace Power Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Alfred, T. (2004). Warrior Scholarship. In Abbott-Mihesuah, D. A. and Cavender Wilson, A. (Eds.). *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Alfred, T. (2005). *Wasase: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, Ltd.
- Anaya, S. J. (1996). *Indigenous Peoples in International Law*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Anderson, K. (2000). Powerful History of Native Women. *Herizons Magazine*, 14(1), 15-18.
- Anderson, K. (2000). *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*. Toronto: Sumach Press.
- Anderson, K., & Lawrence, B. (2003). (Eds.). *Strong Women Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival*. Toronto: Sumach Press.
- Armstrong, J. (2001). Invocation: The Real Power of Aboriginal Women. In Miller, C. and Chuchryk, P. (Eds.). *Women of the First Nations: Power, Wisdom, and Strength*. Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press.
- Battiste, M. and Henderson, J. (2000). *Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage*. Saskatoon: Purich Publishing Ltd.
- Burkhart, B. (2004). What Coyote and Thales Can Teach Us: An Outline of American Indian Epistemology. In Waters, C. (Ed.). *American Indian Thought*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Bruno, S. (2003). *Aboriginal Women: Journey Towards A Doctorate*. Unpublished master thesis. University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB.
- Cavender Wison, A. (2004). Reclaiming Our Humanity: Decolonization and the Recovery of Indigenous Knowledge. In Abbott-Mihesuah, D. A. and Cavender Wilson, A. (Eds.). *Indigenizing the Academy: Transforming Scholarship and Empowering Communities*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

- Chisan, S. (2001). *Building Effective Teacher-Learner Relationships Guided by Traditional Cree Teachings*. Unpublished masters thesis. San Diego State University. San Diego, CA.
- Deloria, V., & Lyle, C.M., (1998). *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Deloria, V. (2006). *The World We Used to Live In: Remembering the Powers of the Medicine Men*. Golden: Fulcrum Publishing.
- Dufour, J. (2004). Ethics and Understanding. In Waters, C. (Ed.). *American Indian Thought*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Ermine, W. (1995). Aboriginal Epistemology. In Battiste, M. & Barman, J. (Ed.), *First Nations Education in Canada: The Circle Unfolds*. (pp. 30-35). Vancouver: UBC Press, University of British Columbia.
- Ermine, W., Sinclair, R. & Jeffery, B. (2004). *The Ethics of Research Involving Indigenous Peoples – Report of Indigenous Peoples’ Health Research Centre*. Indigenous Peoples Health Research Centre: Regina, SK.
- Green, J. (1997). Options for Achieving Aboriginal Self-Determination. *Policy Options*, 18, 2, 11-15.
- Green, J. (2007). Taking Account of Aboriginal Feminism. In Green, J. (Ed.). *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*. Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Gunn-Allen, P. (1992). *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon Press Books.
- Hampton, E. (1995). Memory Comes Before Knowledge: Research May Improve if Researchers Remember Their Motives. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 21, 46-54.
- Hart Anthony, M. (2002). *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal Approach to Helping*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Kimmel, M. (2000). *The Gendered Society*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ladner, K., (1996). Nit-acimonawin oma acimonak ohci: This Is My Story About Stories. *Native Studies Review*, 11, 2, 103-115.
- Little Bear, L., Boldt, M., and Long, J.A. (Eds.). (1984). *Pathways to Self-Determination: Canadian Indians and the Canadian State*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

- Little Bear, L. In Class Lecture, February 2006 (IGOV 540 - Native American Political Philosophy).
- Lyons, O., (1984). Spirituality, Equality and Natural Law. In Little Bear, L., Boldt, M., and Long, J.A. (Eds.). *Pathways to Self-Determination: Canadian Indians and the Canadian State*. (pp. xxx-xxx). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Makokis, L. J. (2001). *Teachings from Cree Elders: A Grounded Theory Study of Indigenous Elders*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of San Diego, San Diego, CA.
- Makokis, P.A. (2000). *An Insider's Perspective: The Dropout Challenge for Canada's First Nations*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of San Diego, San Diego, CA.
- Martin-Hill, D. (2003). She No Speaks and Other Colonial Constructs of the 'Traditional Woman.' In Anderson, K., & Lawrence, B. (Eds.). *Strong Women Stories: Native Vision and Community Survival*. (pp. 106-120). Toronto: Sumach Press.
- Mander, J., & Tauli-Corpuz, V., (2006). *Paradigm Wars: Indigenous Peoples' Resistance to Globalization*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- Mihesuah, D. (1998). Commonality of Difference: American Indian Women and History. In D. Mihesuah (Ed.), *Natives and Academics: Researching and Writing About Native Americans*: University of Nebraska Press.
- Memmi, A. (1991). *The Colonizer and The Colonized*. Boston: Beacon Press
- Monture-Angus, P. (1995). *Thunder in My Soul: A Mohawk Women Speaks*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Monture-Angus, P. (1999). *Journeying Forward: Dreaming First Nations Independence*. Halifax, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Napoleon, V. (2005). Aboriginal Self Determination: Individual and Self and Collective Selves. *Atlantis*, 29(2), 31-46.
- Smallface-Marule, M. (1984). Traditional Indian Government-Of the People, By the People, For the People. In Little Bear, L., Boldt, M., and Long, J.A. (Eds.). *Pathways to Self-Determination: Canadian Indians and the Canadian State*. (pp. xxx-xxx). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Schnarch, B. (2004). Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession (OCAP) or Self-Determination Applied Research. *Journal of Aboriginal Health*, 1(1), 80-95.

- Smith, A. (2005). *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Cambridge, MA: USA: South End Press.
- Smith, A. (2005). Native American Feminism, Sovereignty, and Social Change. *Feminist Studies*, 31(1), 116-132.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York, NY: Zed Books Ltd.
- St. Denis, V. (2007). Feminism is for Everybody: Aboriginal Women, Feminism and Diversity. In Green, J. (Ed.). *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*. Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Struthers, R. (2001). Conducting Sacred Research, An Indigenous Experience. *Wicazo Sa Review*, 125-133.
- Trask, H.-K. (1999). *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawaii*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Turner, D. (2006). *This is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy*. Toronto, On: University of Toronto Press.
- Wilson, S. (2001). What is Indigenous Research Methodology? *Canadian Journal of Native Education*. 25, 2, 166-174.