RETURNING HOME THROUGH STORIES: A DECOLONIZING APPROACH TO OMUSHKEGO CREE THEATRE THROUGH THE METHODOLOGICAL PRACTICES OF NATIVE PERFORMANCE CULTURE (NPC)

by

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For the degree of Master of Arts (MA)
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Abstract

This research examines Native Performance Culture (NPC), a unique practice in Native theatre that returns Aboriginal people to the sources of Aboriginal knowledge, and interrupts the colonial fragmenting processes.

By looking at the experiences of six collaborators involved in a specific art project, the artist-researcher shares her journey of healing through the arts, while interweaving the voices of artistic collaborators Monique Mojica, Floyd Favel, and Erika Iserhoff.

This study takes a decolonizing framework, and places NPC as a form of Indigenous research while illuminating the methodological discourses of NPC, which are rooted in an inter-dialogue between self-in-relation to family, community, land, and embodied legacies.

Finally, this research looks at the ways that artists work with Aboriginal communities and with Aboriginal knowledge, and makes recommendations to improve collaborative approaches.
Dedication

In loving memory of my father Junior
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Chi Meegwetch,  
Chi Meegwetch,  
Chi Meegwetch

Nikaneeagonah (All-My-Relation)
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Chapter One

Thesis Overview

I am searching for understanding. I am looking for something missing. My personal journey of reconciliation starts with the realization and acknowledgement that I am disconnected fragmented from the stories of my ancestors (Brunette, August 2008).

When I started my research journey I wanted to do two things. First, I wanted to share my story of returning to my Omushkego Cree community in Northern Ontario and engaging family, Elders, and community members in a unique process of creating Native theatre entitled Native Performance Culture (NPC). Through NPC practices a group of artists (including myself) engaged in the first phase of a personal, collaborative and community-centered project called Omushkego Cree Water Stories. This thesis shares our story, which unlike conventional approaches to Euro-American Western theatre is interested in returning to the sources of Aboriginal culture to make "poetry from the remnants found in ruins" (Favel, personal oratory, 2008).

While the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project is a specific local and community-centered example of a much larger movement in Native theatre, it is important to note that visual artist Erika Iserhoff and I were influenced to return to Cree sources of culture through our artistic practices, because of our involvement in the Aboriginal community, culture, and Cree ceremonial life. My early upbringing in Northern Ontario, my professional work in the urban Aboriginal communities in Toronto, my exposure to Aboriginal history, perspectives, and ways of knowing in the academy, and my ongoing participation in Anishnabe and Cree ceremonial sites of learning have all shaped and informed my unwavering passion and interest in returning to Aboriginal sources of knowledge through my artistic practices. Ultimately my life experiences shape
the way I approach contemporary and artistic forms of storytelling, and I cannot underestimate the influence that my lifelong journey of self-discovery through culture and ceremonies have had on every aspect of my life, thus transcending, and merging personal and professional realms, but moreover forever changing the way I see the world.

By reclaiming my Cree identity and culture through personal and professional realms of creative exploration and expression, I have also gravitated toward Aboriginal artistic teachers like Monique Mojica and Floyd Favel in the area of Native theatre who share similar values about privileging Aboriginal language, and sources of knowledge in the creative process. More recently I have also become more interested in working with traditional Cree stories on the stage. Although in reality, I am in my infancy in my artistic and ceremonial learning journeys, my life’s work is a journey to understand who I am, to search for meaning in our collective past, and understand myself by looking at our past through my experiences today.

While my experiences influence every aspect of my life, the journey of discovering my artistic voice has not been in isolation from my family, Nation, and community. Unlike Western European conceptions of art that tend to be individualistic in nature and focus on the end product, I have been fortunate to enter creative processes in collaboration with family, friends, and community, in relation to land and place. I have also been fortunate to share many transformative experiences with Erika Iserhoff my best friend and relative.

At the end of the day, the documentation of our journey in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories artistic project has been much more about personal processes of healing from colonialism rather than the end production of a play. Nonetheless, the eventual
completion of this artistic work (when it is finally finished and ready for production) will undoubtedly share our journeys with others, which may have even a greater impact.

Equally important, this thesis has been for me, about using the academy as a vehicle to document, justify, and legitimize community-centered artistic practices in Aboriginal communities as effective ways to decolonize self-in-relation. My intention has always been to document my experiences and the experiences of others involved in the project including emerging artists, artistic veterans, and Elders/community members involved in order to help academics, policy makers, educators, and arts councils better understand the value of Aboriginal community-centered arts practices.

By privileging the inter-disciplinary nature of Indigenous scholarly research in the areas of Indigenous research, anti-colonialism, literature/performance studies, health and education as the underlying academic discourses of this work, this study unveils the roots and emerging discourses of Native Performance Culture (NPC) practices. Through the scholarship of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) in the area of decolonizing methodologies, I have further positioned NPC as a decolonizing practice in Native theatre. While decolonization is the first step in the NPC process, it is vital to recognize that NPC extends far beyond decolonization, as it begins to return artists to the sources of Aboriginal culture - to our frameworks of knowing (self-in-relation) and to the sources of our local traditional and/or Indigenous knowledge (e.g. Elders, land and place, and body). By examining the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project as a first step in the process of decolonization, I have uncovered several underlying themes in the growing areas of study.

While this thesis has uncovered some general themes in the area of NPC, it is
unequivocally a personal tale of healing at the individual level. By coming to better
understand oneself in relation to the past through contemporary forms of oral traditions,
and one's freedom of expression, this journey has helped me re-member myself to my
family, Elders, community, body, and land in ways that carefully considers the effects of
the history of colonialism. I have further come to recognize through firsthand experience
and much self-reflection that the processes of returning and engaging with Aboriginal
community is wrought in power and privilege. Fundamentally, one can never sever
themselves completely from the historical and continued legacy of colonialism.

Through a style of writing that closely resembles a personal narrative I have come
to interweave my voice throughout this thesis in turn sharing my experiences. Through a
creative process grounded in Indigenous thought, the Northern river system was
privileged in the framework of the artistic work. You will also find the metaphor of the
river system and water weaved flowing throughout this thesis. From my artistic
perspective, the river is a powerful symbol that offers much meaning into the creative
process itself. In essence the river is an opportunity for artists to explore our internal
streams of our consciousness. By jumping into the river (the creative process), artists
explore the unknown unconscious realms of our existence from the inside of our bodies-
out; bringing unconscious actions, expressions, images, movements, thoughts, sounds and
gestures to the conscious level.

Above reframing the methodological underpinnings of the practice of Native
Performance Culture (NPC) to Indigenous thought, the complex interrelationships
between art and knowledge, and community art and research will be centered in this
thesis. As a result I will connect the relationship that art has to valid knowledge
production, because in my opinion, artistic practices are powerful ways of knowing and expressing ourselves. More specifically I will link Native Performance Culture (NPC) to the process of Indigenous research. While early on in this Master’s research process, I did not consciously conceptualize our artistic practices as research, over the course of the project’s examination, and upon much reflection, I have begun to more consciously, and explicitly re-conceptualize community arts, specifically Native Performance Culture (NPC) as a valid form of Indigenous research.

In the article *Touching Minds and Hearts: Community Arts as Collaborative Research* Deborah Barndt argues that community art is indeed a form of research (2009, p.351). I use Barndt’s theory to affirm my position that the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project gathered and reflected upon local Cree knowledge(s) through listening and sharing personal, family, and tribal stories, and then reinterpreting and expressing these knowledge(s) using NPC techniques of staging. From this perspective, the artistic process can be viewed as an Indigenous approach to Indigenous research, which happened at individual, local, and collective levels.

While Native Performance Culture (NPC) worked at the artist's personal subjective levels by helping them re-member self-in-relation to Indigenous sources of knowledge (including Elders, language, land, and body) it also involved re-claiming Indigenous processes of knowing and knowledge(s) in which artists have been silenced, erased, and fragmented due to the devastating history of colonialism. Therefore, I have positioned Native Performance Culture (NPC) as a decolonizing project that also happens at the individual and collective levels.

However, from an Indigenous perspective, the NPC artistic process is not solely
an individual undertaking; it is complexly intertwined in artists’ personal relationships with family, community and Nation. My hope is that this research will therefore highlight how artists can work artistically and more collaboratively with family and community in respectful ways that empower people in the collective artistic process.

Interestingly, I have also come to recognize that when working with Aboriginal family, people, and communities, my experiences as an artist-researcher unavoidably collide with the dreadful history of Western research in Indigenous communities. From this perspective, relations of power and privilege continued to play out in the creative process. For instance, as Aboriginal artists who have been historically disconnected from our community and cultures due to colonialism, as we return home, we are often returning to our communities as outsiders. Therefore, the insider and outsider boundaries inevitably shape the complex and growing inter-relationships between artistic collaborators and community members. Not to forget that the insider/outsider boundaries do not necessarily deal with the myriad of ethical issues that come up when working with Aboriginal people's personal and family stories on the stage.

Therefore, if the artistic process is not approached sensitively, it has the potential to reinforce colonial relations of power embedded in history. While I intuitively understood that community art practices have the potential to be transformative and healing, upon further examination I also began to recognize that artistic practices can also have negative impacts. Ultimately, Aboriginal communities have been historically inundated with well-intentioned researchers (and arguably artists too) who have approached communities in ways that have not necessarily promoted healing (Smith, 1999; Battiste, 2000). According to the famous Cherokee writer, Thomas King, stories
can be healing, but they can also cause harm (King, 2008). Unfortunately, there is evidence to substantiate that artists have not always acted ethically when working with Aboriginal communities. There are accounts of people (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) coming into communities and completely disregarding direction from community members, revealing cultural taboos, and secrecy (Schnarch, 2004; McNaughton, 2003), in turn misappropriating Aboriginal knowledge(s) in the name of art (Janke, 2006).

The artistic licenses of artists’ taking stories and knowledge(s) out of their contexts, and reinterpreting them, for the purpose of dramatic staging and public consumption can have dreadfully devastating impacts on families, communities and Aboriginal people in general. As a result, I have come to assert that as artists (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) we must be careful not to misappropriate Aboriginal stories and knowledge(s) for personal and/or economic gains. Like many scholars, I do not simply think that just because I am of Aboriginal heritage that I have the right to go into a community, even my own ancestral community, and take Aboriginal knowledge and stories (even my own family stories) and present them publicly for my own gains. Ultimately, the recognition that Aboriginal people have been misrepresented in art and research in the past must not be forgotten. After all, the legacy of people approaching Aboriginal communities for personal gains is often steeped in unequal relations of power and privilege.

I have used the scholarship in the area of Indigenous research methodologies, along with my experiences as an emerging artist, and the wealth of knowledge and experiences of my research partners to examine the ways that artists can work more
collaboratively and respectfully with community. I have also outlined ways that
Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists can begin to engage with Aboriginal people,
Aboriginal communities, and with Aboriginal knowing in respectful ways that assert
Aboriginal rights to represent ourselves.

Organization of Thesis

This thesis is structured in the form of nine chapters. This first chapter begins by
offering some background. In the next part of this chapter I will review my definitions for
the common terminology used throughout this research document.

The second chapter offers the reader a background on my methodology including
my personal and cultural location as the primary researcher-artist involved in both this
Master’s research and the artistic work - the Omushkego Cree Water Stories – that is the
central focus of this research. The second chapter also outlines the research project’s
design, research questions, participants, and the process undertaken. In this section I have
integrated my ancestral background by sharing many personal stories, which relate to the
subject area. By privileging storytelling as a method of knowing I am taking an
Indigenous approach to knowledge production. This approach gives readers a deeper and
felt appreciation for my complex researcher identity, cultural lens, and unique location in
the context of the Cree community, this Master’s research, and the artistic project.

In chapter three I provide a comprehensive historical overview of colonialism in
the context of Omushkego Cree people of the James Bay West side. This historical
review provides the foundation for understanding the contemporary realities and
silencing nature of colonization facing many Northern Cree communities including the
lives of contemporary Cree people and artists (including myself) who originate from this
land and place.
In chapter four I provide an in-depth look into my living ancestral connections to Omushkego Cree community, history, culture and land. I share my ancestral ties to land and place, and my journey of finding my voice through storytelling in the context of my post-secondary education, and my experiences of undoing my own internalized silence through performance writing. In this chapter I also share the story of Erika Iserhoff, a key collaborator in the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project. By offering our stories, the complexities of our evolving self-identities as contemporary artists of mixed-blood ancestry emerge. The intention is to show how we have both deepened our relationships to Cree community, history, and knowledge(s) through our artistic practices.

In chapter five, I contextualize the area of Native theatre by providing a brief background on the Native theatre movement in Canada while positioning its roots within the evolving practices of Indigenous oral traditions and the socio-cultural, political and spiritual resistance movements of the 1970’s. Here I also emphasize the link between Aboriginal performing arts and the healing movement within Aboriginal communities.

In chapter six I offer a background on Native Performance Culture (NPC) a unique approach to Native theatre specifically looking at it in the context of the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project. By sharing our project’s artistic process from a firsthand practitioner lens, I contextualize the meaning of creativity for me, as an Aboriginal woman in a contemporary context. I also contextualize the location of the artistic work in question – steeped in the discourse between artists and muskeg landscape. I also further offer background on my personal relationship to this geographic area, the history of the town of Cochrane, and the larger Omushkego Cree community living in this area.
In chapter seven I begin by reviewing some of the data collected from interviews with Native Performance Culture (NPC) veterans Monique Mojica and Floyd Favel. I also provide a historical background on the practice of Native Performance Culture (NPC). In chapter seven I take the analysis of NPC one-step further by outlining the underlying discourses in the practices of Native Performance Culture (NPC). In this case, I have found that NPC practices draw from Indigenous sources of knowledge including artists’ understandings of Self-in-Relation, which affirm connections to family, Nationhood and community; Elders; discourses with land, and embodied cultural legacies.

In chapter eight I complicate the NPC process by examining the ways that NPC practitioners work with Aboriginal community members and Elders. I begin this chapter by conceptualizing NPC as a valid form of research. I also argue that Aboriginal artists returning to our communities to do collaborative art (i.e. research) will often collide with the history of disrespectful research practices in Aboriginal communities. I highlight the importance of working with Aboriginal communities through the arts in respectful ways that honour cultural protocols. I end this chapter by identifying six major themes surfacing from the interviews with participants about respectful approaches to working with community. I outline each theme by positioning them from three distinct sub-group perspectives; 1) emerging artists/students, which includes my own experience and perspective; 2) artistic veterans/mentors, which includes my teachers Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica’s perspectives; and finally, 3) community members/Elders including two Elders that I interviewed.
In the ninth and final chapter, I summarize the research findings, share guidelines for artists working with Aboriginal communities, review the limitations of this study, as well as outline possibilities for future research.

**Setting the terms**

This section will introduce and define the common terms used throughout the thesis.

**Aboriginal** - is often used in this thesis to describe the Original people of North America. Aboriginal is a term defined by the Canadian government to refer to the three groups of Aboriginal people in Canada: “Indians” (Status and non-Status), Métis and Inuit. These three sub-groups are classified in the *Canadian Constitution Act of 1982*. You will notice that throughout this thesis the terms Aboriginal, Native, First Nation, and Indigenous are used interchangeably sometimes depending on the historical and geographic contexts. You will also notice that whenever possible, I have tried to acknowledge each person’s unique tribal affiliation. By acknowledging different Aboriginal peoples’ tribal Nations, I am not only problematizing the Canadian governments’ broadly imposed classification and definition of Aboriginal people, which tends to perpetuate a pan-Indian understanding, but I am re-asserting Aboriginal peoples’ worldviews and distinct tribal identities, which are often closely connected to Indigenous languages and relationships to the land and place.

**Colonialism** - is the second stage of imperialism (Smith, 1999), which describes the history where European settlers encroached on Indigenous lands by first exerting their “sovereignty” to the land by establishing permanent colonies, and then legitimizing their so-called “rights” to the Indigenous lands by imposing foreign European systems of
governance onto Indigenous peoples in turn subjugating and controlling the Original
people and the stolen land.

**Community** – “is the system of relationships in which the nature of person-hood is
identified. This system of relationships not only includes family, but also extends to
comprise the relationships of human, ecological, and spiritual origin.” (Ermine, 2000,
p.91) I have chosen to consciously avoid narrowly defining community based on the
colonial demarcations of First Nation bands, which are framed based on the colonial
*Indian Act* legislation.

**Consultation** –is understood as the ongoing process of relationship building and seeking
Aboriginal people’s input and direction, in a project/process that is mutually beneficial
partnerships.

**Cultural Protocols** – are approaches to working with local Aboriginal communities that
show respect for Aboriginal peoples’ unique ways of doing things. Cultural protocols
vary between communities and even between some people in the same community. The
adherence to cultural protocols is a significant point of reference for ethical ways of
working.

**Elder** –is used to describe a community member who is generally recognized by their
community as a significant person who carries knowledge and at the same time tends to
embrace the responsibility of passing down that knowledge to the next generation. From
my perspective, it is important to remember that there are different kinds of Elders. While many Elders carry traditional knowledge, teachings, and rights to ceremonies, many communities have Elders who carry significant knowledge of our language, history, and lifestyle practices. For the purpose of this thesis and the *Omushkego Cree Water* Stories project, I define the Cree Elders in this thesis more broadly including all those members of our communities who carry significant knowledge of language, lifestyle practices, and genealogical histories not necessarily only those who carry traditional teachings and ceremonial rights.

**Epistemology** - is a term borrowed from a branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge. Today this term is widely used in discourses in Indigenous research methodologies to describe the sophisticated nature of Indigenous knowledge production (Wilson, 2001). In this thesis, I will often refer to Indigenous and/or Aboriginal frameworks of knowing and/or Indigenous and/or Aboriginal ways of knowing to describe epistemology, the philosophical foundations of Indigenous knowledge and worldview.

**Ethics** – is a system of standards based on acceptable and unacceptable practices. From an Aboriginal perspective, ethics in research (and art) must be willing to privilege history, politics and Aboriginal sources of knowledge in the process of knowledge production and dissemination.
**Eurocentric** - is the centering of European thoughts, values, worldviews, experiences on a hierarchy of knowledge which in turn marginalizes and devalues all other ways of knowing. The presumptuous nature of Eurocentric tendencies is based in its inherent sense of European superiority.

**Imperialism** – for this thesis, imperialism refers to the historic empire building of Europe - a system of control motivated by Europeans’ historical insatiable appetite for global domination and territorial conquest, which is inextricably linked to economic expansion. Imperialism is “tied to the chronology of events related to the “discovery”, conquest, exploitation, distribution and appropriation [of Indigenous lands around the world] (Smith, 1999, p.21).

**Indigenous** - is a term commonly used in this thesis interchangeably with Aboriginal however often refers to the First Peoples of a particular land and place more from an international global perspective.

**Indigenous Knowledge** – “refers to the unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific condition of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area” (Grenier, 1998, p.7).

**Ininew Iskew**- Ininew means “the people” in Cree and iskew means woman.
Intellectual and Cultural Property Rights - is framed within an international legal understanding that serves to protect Indigenous peoples rights to traditional knowledge.

“Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights include the right for Indigenous people to:-

♦ own and control Indigenous cultural and intellectual property.
♦ be recognized as the primary guardians and interpreters of their cultures. This raises issues relating to representation and how stories and information is presented.
♦ the right to authorize or refuse the use of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property according to Indigenous customary laws.
♦ maintain the secrecy of Indigenous knowledge and other cultural practices.
♦ to be given full and proper attribution for sharing their heritage.
♦ Control the recording and cultural customs and expressions, the particular language which may be intrinsic to cultural identity, knowledge, skill and teaching of culture”(Janke, 2006, p.11).

Methodology – is a body of practices, procedures, and rules used by those who work in a research discipline and/or engage in a form of inquiry (Smith, 1999). Methodologies are rooted in one’s philosophical and epistemological framework of understanding the world. In this thesis methodological frameworks are understood and applied in academic, research, and artistic practices.

Methods - is a means, procedure or systemic way of accomplishing something in research (Smith, 1999) and art.
Misappropriation – is the unfair exploitation of collectively held knowledge and/or personal information of others without consent or adherence to intellectual cultural and property rights.

Native Performance Culture (NPC) - is a unique and evolving approach to Native theatre first co-developed by artistic veterans Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica. NPC is a methodological approach to creating Native theatre that is interested in researching and reclaiming Aboriginal sources of knowledge (Self-In-Relation to family, community, Nation, language, body, and land) in order to recreate expressions of life that re-member the fragmenting affects of colonization.

Omushkego - is a Cree word meaning “people of the swampland” also known as Swampy Cree people originating from the Northern Quebec, Ontario, and Manitoba provinces of Canada.

Oral Tradition –is understood in this thesis as an Indigenous way of sharing knowledge that involves passing down Traditional Knowledge/Indigenous Knowledge from one generation to another through breath and body including spoken word, stories, songs and dances. Oral traditions are constantly changing and in flux thereby responding to history, environment, and with the people who engage in its process.

Pan-Indian – is a broad definition that encapsulates all Aboriginal people of the Americas into a monolithic group. While the emergence of a pan-Indian identity has been
reinforced through colonial relations that speak to a common shared struggle for sovereignty, Aboriginal peoples have always maintained commonalities inter-tribally. However pan-Indian identity can also be problematic, because the category does not account for the distinct differences between tribal Nations, relationships to land and place, languages, and cultures.

**Self-In-Relation** - is an Aboriginal philosophical model of understanding the world linked to an Aboriginal worldview. According to Graveline (1999) Self-In-Relation is the framework upon which we form an Aboriginal identity. The approach to understanding starts with self and extends to family, community, and larger world.

**Spectacle** - is a type of performance that relies on stereotypical misrepresentations of Aboriginal people confined and constrained by colonial prescriptions rooted in history and Europeans libidinal and racial constructions of Native identity.

**Western (Frameworks of Knowing)** - is a way of seeing the world that is rooted in European traditions of rationality; it is a way of understanding that has historically relegated itself to a level of superiority (Smith, 1999). Métis scholar Fyre-Jean Graveline says that “European, Western and White may be used inter-changeably, [but] it is not the race that is targeted” (1999, p.23) [it is this limited and singular way of viewing the world as valid and everything else as invalid].
**Worldview** - is connected to a belief system and a set of collective ideas and values of a group of people. In this thesis, I connect the concept of worldview to an Indigenous epistemological framework of knowing or Indigenous ways of knowing.
Chapter Two

Methodological Framework

Personal Location

In Cree I’m known as Waban Geezis which means “first light that rises from the Eastern direction”. I am an Ininew Iskew (Cree woman) of Omushkego (people of the swampland) and French heritage. The never ending process of making meaning from my Cree given name, Waban Geezis, enriches my life in multiple and complex ways. As an Ininew Iskew I have come to cultivate a deeply held personal relationship with my self in relation to my family, community and nation based on my name. Ultimately, my name enriches my personal connection with land and cosmos, and offers me an understanding of my self in relation to all of Creation. It is herein that I honour this Aboriginal way of knowing, by first, honouring my name.

Growing up I remember my Nokum (Cree for grandmother) as an animated and gifted storyteller. Using her breath and body Nokum shared stories of familial significance. In retrospect her stories were always connected to our family’s history on the land albeit I did not always recognize their significance in relation to a Cree understanding of the world. Nokum is my lifeblood connection to a long historical tradition of storytelling. My evolving artistic and scholarly work in the areas of Indigenous performing arts is inspired by the foregoing. For Omushkego people, storytelling is essential to our humanity. Stories transmit knowledge from generation to generation. By beginning my research with my personal background, I locate myself in the research process. Positioning self in the process of knowing also honours Aboriginal worldview, as knowledge is self, family, and community derived.

Unfortunately, my lived experiences, as an Ininew iskew have been marked by the intergenerational effects of the history of imperialism and colonialism in North America.
This historical reality has had devastating impacts on Ininew people in general as well it has impacted the natural flow of our stories, ways of being, and living in relation to land. The negation of Ininew ways of knowing has been a direct consequence of the imposition of colonial praxis, the ideology of which relegates our ways of knowing to a sub-level (Smith, 1999). Unfortunately, due to the colonial impacts and forceful dismantling of Cree social structures through the imposition of European institutions, many Cree people including myself have been severed from a Cree system of understanding the world.

As an emerging Ininew artist (performance writer – playwright, poet and performer) and scholar, I still carry the stories of my ancestors and a complex narrative of self. This thesis examines how Aboriginal artists like myself are returning to our stories and working with our communities through artistic projects in efforts to reclaim personal, familial, and collective narratives, which have been erased, silenced, and fragmented due to the devastating history of colonization.

Through my artistic work in the area of Native Performance Culture (NPC) which has been in collaboration with Cree visual artist, Erika Iserhoff, and our mentorship with Plains Cree director, Floyd Favel, and Kuna/Rappahanock playwright, Monique Mojica, we have worked together to uncover Cree frameworks of knowing by honouring family and tribal stories, Cree language, and material culture in our contemporary artistic practices. This thesis aims to share our artistic journey in the collaborative and community-centered project entitled *Omushkego Cree Water Stories*.

**Indigenous Research Methodologies**

As an Ininew Iskew and the primary researcher-artist involved in both the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project and this Master of Arts research project, I have
privileged Indigenous ways of knowing, ways of being, and ways of doing research in my methodological framework. As an Indigenous researcher doing “Indigenist research” (Wilson, 2007; Rigney, 2006) I fully acknowledge and integrate my personal and subjective relationship to knowledge within the research process. According to Lester-Irabinna Rigney, Indigenist research:

   focuses on the lived, historical experiences, ideas, traditions, dreams, interests, aspirations, and struggles of Indigenous people (2006, p.45)

Similar to Shawn Wilson (2007), I also believe that by taking an “Indigenist” position, I am not simply claiming Indigenous research because I am of Aboriginal ancestry. Instead I avoid this racial pitfall in Indigenous research by instead affirming an “Indigenist” approach to research, because I believe that this research is grounded in Indigenous epistemologies (ways of knowing). Indigenous epistemologies are rooted in an Indigenous paradigm, which centers on an understanding of reality, in which human experiences are centered in the process of knowledge production. Ultimately, in order to understand the world, one must start with the self.

Looking Within

To honour an “Indigenist” approach to research, my process has begun by locating myself, my family history, and my ancestral connections to the local context land and place, in which the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project took place. These relationships are expressed through written stories and poetry throughout this thesis. Therefore my personal connection to the research is brought to the forefront of this discourse, as I share my ideas, experiences, and explicate the subjective nature of knowledge. Unlike the Western positivistic paradigm that claims objectivity, I unapologetically frame the pursuit of knowledge as being deeply rooted in the subjective
self, while extending beyond self to “Self-In-Relation” (Graveline, 1999) to the larger collective Aboriginal community.

**Looking in Relation to Community**

For me the boundaries of community are broadly understood. In this research process, the Omushkego Cree community operated beyond the limitations of the colonial demarcations of First Nations communities. My conceptualization of the Omushkego Cree community acknowledges and works with Cree peoples in the area of Northern Ontario, with those members who share a historical and ancestral bond to the muskeg land and the river systems that form our collective sense of place. Similar to Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete, I see community “as a complex set of physical, social and psychical relationships that are ever changing and evolving through time and the generations of people who identify with it” (1994, p.167).

**Finding My Place in Community through Ceremony**

Although my involvement in the Cree community reaches far back before ever starting my artistic and Master’s research projects, I must confess that my strong sense of belonging to the Cree community up North is a relatively new and evolving connection. Growing up I often felt a sense of alienation and disconnection from the Cree community, which in retrospect came as a result of my tenuous connection to my mother’s band, Fort Albany First Nation. However, my personal healing and reconnection to the Cree community has more recently been fostered through my participation in ceremonies among my Cree relatives. Truthfully my journey of reconnecting with the Cree community only began about six years ago. Interestingly, I now see the complex and deeply held relationship between my participation in
ceremonies with my identity and how this way of life, informs both my methodological approaches as an artist and researcher. I share with you a personal story about my first steps in reconnecting with Cree community through ceremony. My hope is that this storied excerpt will help illustrate the layers of complexity and experiences that shape my history, research identity, cultural location, and continuously evolving Indigenous paradigm. This story is very personal, and will undoubtedly unveil a vulnerable facet of my being. However, my hope is that you may look beyond my struggles with identity to understand a more deeply felt sense and lived reality of a person’s sense of historic dislocation, fragmentation, and appreciate the rich connections and meaning that one can learn by returning to the sources of knowledge and ways of life through ceremony.

As soon as we arrived we started setting up our tent in anticipation for the seven o’clock meeting. Lots of people arrived before us. Cars were lined up along the dirt road, and kids were running around everywhere. I didn’t know what to do with myself. Brent obviously knew what he was doing, he came fully prepared with camping gear, supplies, food, medicines and all the essentials to make our stay comfortable and productive. But inside I was still painfully nervous. Thankfully Brent didn’t judge me for it even though I’m sure he noticed it. I’ve always been known to wear my heart on my sleeve.

Dusk was setting in and I knew we were going to be called into the teaching lodge at any moment. The fire was lit and the big drum was sounded to signal everyone in. Suddenly a loud thundering voice yelled “Dancers to the Lodge!” Brent and I looked over at each other and in one look no words were needed to communicate our feelings of pure anticipation.

In those last few moments I lied inside our tent, my belly ached with anxiety. I took a deep breath and said to myself “well, it’s either now or never.” Until that point I had not made myself known, instead I inconspicuously scurried from my tent to the outhouse, to the car avoiding contact with anyone. I just wanted to hide a little bit longer.

Brent and I started walking down the hill toward the teaching lodge. It was getting dark and hard to make out peoples’ faces. I didn’t recognize anyone, but I was hopeful that I would eventually meet up with some people from the past.

Brent asked a young man passing by, “how do we get into the lodge?” The young man pointed with his nose in the direction of the pathway indicating to Brent that the men went down one way, and women down the other.
I started panicking inside because I hadn’t planned for this. Suddenly, I realized that I was going to have to walk alone.

Before I knew it, Brent was off, effortlessly walking down the men’s pathway. So I slowly started inching my way down. I was so nervous every part of my body wanted to run up the hill and back into our tent, but something deeper inside knew I had to keep on walking.

Once I got down the hill, I stood outside the lodge on the women’s side by the fire. There was a gathering of people around the fire and someone invited me in. I was so grateful for their welcoming embrace I almost started to cry.

As I warmed my hands by the fire, I smiled nervously at the people around me. I could hear the Chief inside the lodge instructing the dancers. The men were dressed in red cloth wraps and women were adorned in red skirts with red shirts, headbands, wristbands and ankle bands. Everyone seemed to be on a mission with a higher purpose in their hearts. It was beautiful to witness.

The singers gathered around the big drum inside the lodge. The old breath tracks were about to be summoned for the first time in this territory in a long time.

By this point I had only heard and read about this ceremony, and I had no idea that my first visit to this sacred place would have such a life changing impact on me. But I still had a lot of work to do.

Inside my head, I worried incessantly. What would they think of my pale skin or the auburn tones in my hair? Would they question me? Would I be accepted? Am I even allowed to be here? Or at worst, would I be asked to leave? This internal interrogation haunted me. You see, like many Aboriginal people I didn’t grow up learning about my traditions and teachings in a ceremonial lodge. I was uncomfortable with my mixed bloodedness, and afraid of making mistakes fearful of not being enough, of not belonging. It was inevitable. I was going to have to face my own internalized colonization; the inside shame of being a mixed-blood. It was unavoidable really I am part white, and whites are not allowed here. More than a quarter, but less than half. This internal dialogue has been going on all my life. It’s exhausting truthfully. Where did I ever get the idea that I should reduce my humanity, my Indian-ness to simple blood quantum percentages? It’s ingrained so deeply I wondered if I would ever rid myself of this poisonous thinking.

Before I knew it, it was midnight and the seven o’clock meeting was over. We were sent back to our tents until the morning. But the churning in my belly bowl ached all night, because I knew that I’d have to face it again tomorrow.

The next day I woke up late and Brent was already gone, helping. I couldn’t take it anymore. I wasn’t going to let these fears paralyze me to the point where I was stuck inside our tent not connecting to the land and people. After all, this ceremony is not about me, and my guilt and shame. I had to talk myself into it or avoid talking myself out of it. So without a rational thought to change my mind, I walked directly for the kitchen. No questions asked. I didn’t think about it. I just did it.
I laid my hands to the work. As I washed the dishes, I peered through the window in the kitchen hut and watched the people, Cree people, my relatives work together setting up the lodge. I didn’t know what they were doing exactly, but I watched them from a distance.

The men worked hard and tirelessly carrying large trees from the bush with such tenacity. As I watched them, I felt proud to be Indian. The women also worked together in the fields gathering medicines and tree bundles, and in the kitchen preparing food and sharing stories.

It was in the kitchen around the food that I began to feel grounded, as the circle opened up to invite me in. Together we prepared food peeling potatoes, turnips and carrots for stews and preparing wild meats. It felt good to be a part of something.

Of course like any Aboriginal gathering, the inevitable question came “So where are you from?” I was surprised to learn that many women not only knew my family name, they remembered my Nokum. This sense of knowing brought me closer and slowly I began to breathe deeper and find my place among the larger collective. I even ran into some people that I knew, friends from a long time ago, and I began to wonder how my own fears came to paralyze me in the first place.

**Looking Back at History**

While my personal stories and disconnections to Cree community have inevitably impacted the way I have chosen to approach my work as a research and artists, I also believe that “Indigenist” research must look back at history, critically. In my opinion Indigenous research should always be grounded in a historical context and for this reason I have written two in-depth historical reviews for this thesis. In chapter three I outline the historical context of colonialism for Omushkego Cree people of the James Bay, and in chapter five, I provide a historical account of Aboriginal peoples’ early relationship with the contemporary Western stage. I do not write these historical accounts to dwell on the past and affirm the history of colonialism and the colonizer, but I write them in order to help readers understand the historical and continued legacy of colonialism. In essence, I have contextualized this history purposely in order to provide readers with a fuller sense
of the history that underlies the Aboriginal performing arts movement in particular the practice of Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to Native theatre.

Looking to Elders as Knowledge Keepers

In this research project, I have also worked closely with Cree community members and Elders as research partners and participants. In this sense, I have honoured the community specifically the Elders’ voices as cultural knowledge keepers in the process of coming to know (i.e. doing academic research). According to Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) “Elders possess wisdom and insight gained from their traditional, ecological, and cultural knowledge (TEC) and lived experiences” (p.372). I honour the significant role that Cree Elders play in Omushkego communities by reasserting their rightful positions in our social structure. By returning to Elders for understanding, I am first and foremost honouring Aboriginal sources of knowledge. Secondly, I am indirectly resisting the colonial fragmenting process that has attempted to disconnect Aboriginal people from the vital function that Elders play in helping young people like me make understandings of the world.

Research Design

Research Questions

In this research I have asked three overarching yet interrelated questions:

1. What are the personal experiences of emerging artistic collaborators (including myself and Erika Iserhoff) involved in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project?

2. What are the purposes of NPC generally and specifically when pertaining to Omushkego Cree Water Stories project?

3. What are the cultural ways of working with Cree peoples, Cree communities and with Cree knowing in artistic and collaborative work?
These questions are shaped by:

1) My experiences as an Omushkego Cree woman.

2) My experiences as a professional artist working in the Aboriginal performing arts sector in Canada.

3) My research partners (in particular my teachers/mentors) who identified early on in my research process, a need for more research on the methodology of Native Performance Culture (NPC) – an evolving artistic practice in Native theatre, which was employed in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project.

4) The need for more scholarly research in the area of Aboriginal artistic practices and cultural protocols in the arts.

By answering these inter-related questions, this research attempts to offer insight into experiences of collaborative artists involved in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project. By sharing some of our experiences, I aimed to document a practice that may support Aboriginal artists working with Aboriginal communities in the future.

The overall goals of this research are to contribute to the emerging dialogue in Native theatre and performing arts around Native Performance Culture (NPC), and discuss how this unique approach to Native theatre can act as a powerful intervention tool supporting Aboriginal artists in the decolonizing project. In addition, this research aims to contribute to broader perspectives and practices involving Aboriginal community healing and transformation.

In addition, another goal of this research is to contribute to the respectful approaches of working with Aboriginal people, communities, and with Aboriginal knowledge(s). The final research question that will be answered in chapter eight specifically explores the ethics of working with Aboriginal communities in the arts. As the primary researcher-artist, I have explored some of the ethical conundrums of working
with my own personal and familial stories on the stage. Through this investigation I have teased out the significance of protecting Cree knowledge in the context of public performed presentations in Native theatre. I have further interrogated our artistic project’s approaches, assumptions, limitations and experiences; not to condemn our efforts, but to contribute to the emerging discourse on respectful practices in the arts that protects Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal communities, and Aboriginal knowledge.

Ultimately, the outcomes of this research aim to contribute to the development of philosophical guidelines to support artists when working with Aboriginal communities in the future. In chapter nine, I present twenty-two recommendations for artists working with communities. In addition, the outcomes aim to more equitably privilege Aboriginal people and community voices in the artistic collaborative process. Given the history of silencing, exploiting, and misappropriating Aboriginal knowledge(s), this research attempts to explicate the ongoing colonial encounters that can arise between Aboriginal artists and community members in the creative process.

**Research Partners/Participants**

In this research I invited 5 research partners to participate. The criterion for participants was that they were involved in the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project in some capacity albeit coming from very different perspectives. The research partners are categorized into three main sub-groups; 1) emerging Aboriginal artists which includes myself and visual artist Erika Iserhoff; 2) NPC teachers/mentors; and 3) Elders/community members. All research partners are Aboriginal originating from varying tribal backgrounds. While the majority of participants were *Omushkego* Cree, the two teacher/mentors Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica were not. Floyd Favel is Plains
Cree from Poundmaker Reserve in Northern Saskatchewan, and Monique Mojica is a woman of Kuna and Rappahannock ancestry.

**Emerging Aboriginal Artists**

As one of the emerging Aboriginal artists involved in the project, I have included myself as a primary participant. You will find my practitioner voice filtered throughout this thesis, particularly highlighted in chapter six, where I provide a firsthand artistic practitioner account of my experiences in the work. The second emerging Aboriginal artist that I worked closely with was Erika Iserhoff. She is Cree from Constance Lake First Nation, and we first envisioned and initiated the artistic work together. Erika was interviewed twice as part of this research.

**NPC Teachers/Mentors**

Monique Mojica and Floyd Favel were invited to act as co-mentors and co-directors in the artistic project. In addition these mentors were consulted in the early development of my thesis proposal in which they provided input into the direction of the research design and in the formulation of my research questions, which centered on our previous artistic work together through the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project. Monique and Floyd were both interviewed for this research. All three artists (Erika, Monique and Floyd) are publicly affiliated with the artistic and thesis projects.

**Cree Elders/Community Members**

For this thesis, I also chose to speak with one Cree Elder and a Cree community member involved in the artistic projects’ community consultation process. By talking with different people involved in the artistic work in different capacities, I aimed to gain
a fuller understanding of the issues that arise when artists and Elders/community members engage in a collaborative and community-centered artistic process. Although the group consulted with over 11 Cree Elders and 3 community members during our community outreach in July 2008, for this thesis, I chose to follow up and interview only two people involved in this process - one community member and one Elder. I strategically chose to speak with people who came to see our performance. I also chose the people based on their different involvements in the artistic project. For instance, the community member was involved in a group interview with other Elders. This particular community member also shared a personal story that was later staged. The other Elder was individually interviewed and we also worked with her personal stories on the stage. My aim in interviewing these people was to honour their experiences and unique perspectives. In this thesis, the names of these two contributing members will remain confidential to maintain their anonymity.

Research Background

The Omushkego Cree Water Stories was first conceptualized in May 2006, as a separate project unrelated to my thesis. However after the first phase of the project was completed in July/August 2008, I chose to use our experiences in this first phase as the focal point of my thesis. Ultimately, I believed that the investigation and documentation of the artistic work could greatly benefit the Aboriginal artistic community, academics, and arts funding policy makers alike. It is important to note that when I traveled up North in the summer of 2008 to conduct community consultations for the artistic project, it was not my intention to write about our experiences for this thesis. However, upon returning home, and reflecting on our experiences, I realized the value of exploring such an
undertaking. Ultimately in-depth scholarly examination and documentation of the artistic processes and experiences of Aboriginal artists working in Aboriginal communities is virtually non-existent. I proceeded then by informally approaching the Ontario Arts Council (OAC), the arts funding agency that financially supported the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project’s phase one (through the access and career development grant) to ensure that I could examine our experiences in this mentorship project, as a separate, but interrelated research project for my thesis. The Ontario Art’s Council’s Aboriginal Arts Officer confirmed that I could reexamine the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project as part of my thesis under the condition that two projects (the artistic project and master’s research project) were made clearly distinct and separate.

**Research Contributions**

Although this research intends to outline my firsthand experiences in relation to the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, it also aims to contribute to the emerging dialogue on Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to Native theatre as well as contribute to the ongoing discourse of cultural approaches for artists working with Aboriginal communities. Interestingly, Indigenous scholars in Australia and New Zealand have already begun the discourse on ethics in Indigenous arts by documenting protocols for artists including performing artists (Australian Arts Council, 2008). In this sense, this Master’s project responds to a community need for research in the area of Aboriginal performing arts approaches, as the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) and the Ontario Arts Council (OAC) have both identified a need for “greater understanding of Aboriginal art forms, research on cultural protocols, and [the connections to] traditional
knowledge(s) and training systems in Aboriginal arts” (OAC, Community Consultations Report, February 2008; Canada Council for the Arts, January 2008).

Re research Process

In this next section I highlight the process I underwent to prepare for my thesis. I also share the thinking involved during the early conceptualization and design processes of this research, in the development of my research questions, modes of analysis, and dissemination. By sharing these experiences, I intend to explicate the complexities and influences involved in choosing a research topic and designing a research project.

Preparation

Before starting my MA program in September 2007, I fasted in the Spring for 2 days for guidance and direction from Kitchi Manitou (Creator) about my research. At the time, I was searching for answers on what I should focus my thesis on. Truthfully, I felt torn inside. I applied to the MA program in December 2006 with a plan to explore the ways that the knowledge of yoga is taken up in the West by Aboriginal yoga teachers like myself. At the time I was (and I continue to be), very interested in the ethical issues of teaching yoga in the West. However as a non-South Asian woman, I was apprehensive about exploring yoga for my thesis, as I did not want to become an authority on yoga and its complex system of knowledge. Moreover, as a Cree woman, I had a lot of work to do with respect to learning and honouring my own ancestral cultural knowledge and teachings. As an emerging Aboriginal performance writer, I was also interested in exploring Native theatre for my thesis. And although I applied to the MA program with the intent (in my application) to explore yoga, in the back of my mind and heart, I was prepared to redirect my thesis exploration.
Although I felt deeply connected to both practices (yoga and theatre), since yoga as well as my involvement in Native theatre have become huge parts of my story of transformation and growth over the last eight years, I still had to go fasting to find my way. I decided to put the direction of my thesis in the hands of Spirit to guide me. During my two nights and three day fast, I prayed, reflected and sat in silence listening to myself, and all of Creation for guidance. Interestingly, answers didn’t come right away, but over time, I continued listening, praying and seeking guidance, and soon clarity, peace of mind, and direction in the thesis journey began to emerge. Throughout the entire first year of my MA program, I continued attending ceremonies and seeking teachings from Elders to help me connect with Spirit and offer understanding through our teachings.

As a practicing artist and contributing member of the Aboriginal artistic community in Toronto, I also continued to work in the Aboriginal arts community throughout my graduate studies. In 2007-08, I completed a one-year movement internship with the Centre for Indigenous Theatre (CIT). I also began working with Erika on the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project. In August 2007, I was invited by Yvette Nolan, Algonquin director and playwright and president of the Indigenous Performing Arts Alliance (IPAA), to work as the Intern Coordinator for IPAA, where I helped coordinate the Aboriginal Artistic Leader’s Summit in October 2007. In April 2008, I was invited to act as a peer assessor on the Aboriginal community arts jury for the Ontario Arts Council (OAC). In March 2008, I attended the Mukwa Geezis conference and participated in the post-secondary roundtable for the development of Aboriginal arts curriculum. And finally, in September 2008, I was invited back to CIT to teach first year movement to Aboriginal theatre students. Through these experiences, the collective voice of the
Aboriginal arts community spoke loud and clear by continuously identifying the overwhelming need for more research in Aboriginal performing arts practices. Through working in the Aboriginal arts community, listening to the needs, and continuously reflecting on the academic literature I was reading in my courses, I felt that I was directed to focus my thesis on Native theatre practices in Canada.

Deciding that I was going to focus my research on Aboriginal performing art practices was one thing, but the conceptualization of a study that would encapsulate the myriad of issues brought forth by Aboriginal artists over the last year was another thing altogether. As an emerging Indigenous researcher-artist, I wanted to contribute to the needs of my community, but I also wanted to honour Indigenous ways of knowing. Indigenous knowledge starts with the self. As I kept this in the back of my mind, I began reflecting on my personal experiences, as an emerging Aboriginal artist. I soon realized that I needed to start by telling my story and share my experiences of finding my voice before being in a position to tell the stories of others. Although there are many established Aboriginal artists out there, and their work is amazing and worthwhile studying, I felt uncomfortable and ill-equipped at this stage of my academic career telling other peoples’ stories. I needed to start from within.

While I am honouring Indigenous worldview by sharing my story, my personal story is in its infancy in comparison to other more established senior Aboriginal artists. Not to forget that my story is also not necessarily the experience of all Aboriginal artists. Nonetheless, this research attempts to tell my story as well as a bit of stories and/or experiences of Erika Iserhoff and others involved in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project. Therefore as much as this work attempts to privilege Erika’s and my own voices
as emerging artists’, it also incorporates other people we worked with, the voices of our teachers/mentors and community members/Elders.

Ways of Gathering Knowledge

Journal Reflections

As part of the data collection phase, I gathered knowledge from myself by journaling to reflect on my experiences in the artistic project as well as reflect on my participation in workshops and other interrelated artistic activities. The journal reflections were typed as transcripts and treated as data in the analysis stage.

Interviews/Visits with Partners/Participants

I also gathered knowledge from the five participants by visiting and sharing food and tea with them. Some of these visits were in the form of semi-structured interviews, while others were less formal conversations. Interestingly many of our chats ended up manifesting themselves in the forms of shared storytelling approaches.

I more formally interviewed Erika and Monique as well as the Elder and community member. Although I visited with Floyd, we did not do a formal interview, which I will expand on later on in this chapter. In the end I ended up conducting two interviews with Erika and Monique, and I interviewed the community member and Elder once. The reason that I interviewed artists (Monique and Erika) twice was that they spoke with me about their artistic experiences in the first interview, and they shared more specifically their thoughts about working with Aboriginal community in the second interview. The interviews with Erika and Monique were semi-structured one-on-one and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes in length. The interviews with the community members and
Elder were one hour in length. An information letter, consent form and a list of questions were emailed to artists (including Floyd) in advance. Questions to Elders were less extensive so I did not send them in advance.

The interviews with Monique and Erika took place in Toronto in a private space of their choice. I traveled to Monique’s home to interview her on both occasions, and I brought food with me. I visited Floyd at his home in Saskatchewan where we also shared food and I was fortunate enough to attend a ceremony with him, which I will expand on later. Erika came to my house to be interviewed on both occasions. I traveled to Cochrane to interview the community member and Elder. I picked them up at their homes, and brought them to a private space at the local Ininew Friendship Centre to be interviewed.

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed prior to analysis. I emailed artists their transcripts upon completion, sought their feedback, and requested changes. For the community member/Elder, I mailed the transcripts to them and requested changes.

Before each interview began, I offered tobacco and/or tea and wild rice wrapped in cloth in exchange for participant’s time and knowledge to honour the “ethic of reciprocity” (Sinclair, 2003). It is important to note here that not all Aboriginal peoples practice tobacco offerings so with this in mind, I worked with people according to their individual beliefs and practices. I also asked people in advance what their preference was to honour the ethic of reciprocity. In my experience, I have come to respect that certain community members and Elders from my ancestral territory prefer the exchange of other items (other than tobacco) to signify the Indigenous ethic of reciprocity. Therefore I worked with each participant differently based on their preferences and beliefs.
Although nearly every research participant was comfortable being audio recorded, Floyd requested not to be audio recorded. While Floyd did not feel comfortable with a conventional interview style, he did express his willingness in helping me do my research in other ways. Instead we spent time together chatting informally. In December 2008, I traveled to his home to visit him. During this time, we also attended ceremony, which Floyd insisted would help me in my research. What follows is an excerpt from my journal reflection about my learning from this experience.

Over the 3 days, Floyd and I shared many personal stories talked about our personal perspectives on life, art, politics, identity and spirituality. I thoroughly enjoyed our long philosophical discussions. And although we did not have a formal interview, he shared with me more than an interview could have ever offered, and I reciprocated what little I had to give - the truth in my heart. I shared with him wholeheartedly and openly, hoping that through my acts of honesty, he would recognize my sincerity.

Floyd did not want me to audio tape our conversations. He did not encourage a “proper” interview. Instead he preferred just visiting with me. Perhaps it was more natural and we shared in a different way? It was reciprocal back and forth no linear organization, it flowed. We talked about the importance of language, culture and ceremony. We shared dreams and family stories. We ate, laughed and teased each other. I even cried. We talked for hours, read passages from books, intellectualized about our visions for the future of Native theatre and NPC practices. We asked questions and shared our fears and regrets about life. I realized that the sharing process was more than a master’s thesis, it was the beginning of a promising friendship with a fellow friend, ally and colleague whom I had come to know on a much deeper level than any interview would have ever permitted. I am now so truly thankful for Floyd’s unwillingness to be formally interviewed. The process that we found together is much more meaningful and fulfilling in hindsight.

Because Floyd did not want to be audio taped I have had to rely on my memory of our conversations. In our chats, we did not follow the conventional interview method of formal questions and answers. While I was at first slightly disappointed, I think I was just more worried that I would not gather enough data properly. But I now realize that there are alternate ways of doing research, and this experience has helped me to develop my memory skills. This process of doing research is equally valuable and it has helped me develop relational ways of working with people. This approach to research ensures that I am in the moment with
the person, and I am not caught up in the next question in the process of interviewing.

Interestingly, Floyd also did not want to be treated like an authority on Native Performance Culture (NPC). He said he sees me as his colleague and was apprehensive about me coming to interview him like he has all the answers. He also encouraged me to make my own relationship to NPC practices. In turn Floyd asked me a lot of questions and wanted me to apply my own thinking to NPC and our Omushkego Cree Water Stories project in my own way. I am thankful for this.

**Relational Ways of Working**

As a researcher-artist, when working with research partners/participants, I have attempted to honour different approaches of sharing knowledge and working together rather than imposing or expecting a uniform way. Throughout this research process, I have worked in relation to each partner’s needs and preferences of being interviewed, reviewing their transcripts, and providing feedback on my analysis. This way of working together involves my continuously asking participants for their preferences of working as opposed to assuming they are willing to work in my way. It also involves being open to alternate ways of gathering data, and being able to negotiate my needs with their needs if necessary. Through this form of self-training (inspired by Self-In-Relation) I have learned that the relationship (the space between me and each research partner) is the most important aspect of this research process. Therefore the heart of my research has not actually been about gathering data for my own gains, but moreover, carefully nurturing mutually beneficial and long-term relationships with research partners.

As a researcher, I have also made an honest effort to act as a helper (whenever possible) to my research partners by using the skills I have developed as a graduate student to support them on other interrelated projects. For example, I have edited research partners’ writing and helped publish one of my participants’ interviews (upon their
request) for an online magazine. I also coordinated an event that permitted my research partners to share their work in different forums. Throughout my research process, I have developed and strengthened ongoing relationships with research partners by supporting their work. When working with Aboriginal community members, relationships go both ways. This helper role is about my giving and taking and working in relation with others in a balanced way. Ultimately, I believe that as an “Indigenist” researcher, we need to be held responsible and accountable for using our widespread skills and serving our communities as helpers whenever possible.

**Meaning Making**

In this next section I will share how I made meaning from the knowledge shared and reflected upon in the gathering phase of the research. In my opinion, data analysis happens continuously throughout the research process. Unlike some researchers, I do not see data analysis as a completely separate phase of the research that only happens after data collection is over. As human beings, we are constantly processing stimuli and information thereby making sense of our world through developing connections and associations. Moreover, since I am so intertwined in this research being that I am a subject and research participant myself, I have been in a position to see connections early on. At the same time, it has been equally important for me to take time to distance myself from the work in order to see some of the emerging themes speaking to me through the data. Sometimes when you are in the middle of it, it is difficult to recognize themes, space and distance from the work gives perspective.

My practice of making connections has been nurtured continuously by journaling throughout the research process. Journaling is a form of self-reflection that supports
understanding while also fostering critical and reflexive skills. Moreover, ongoing conversations with research partners, friends, and colleagues have also supported my processes of understanding. My dream state and states of relaxation have further fostered creativity and intuitive abilities to make sense of the research thus contributing to my inner facility to find interconnections and make sense of the thesis work.

Nonetheless, after my interviews were done, I was in a position to move deeper into the stage of analysis. Generally, researchers move into the analysis process quite cognitively by mentally analyzing data and reviewing interviews by taking interviews apart through a reductionist framework. Initially, I was very hesitant to throw myself into this cerebral process of tearing apart interviews categorically without carefully reflecting on this mental process’s core purpose and assumptions, which are ultimately embedded in the long held practices of Western researchers. Perhaps, my hesitancy to fracture the interviews/knowledge shared (often through story) lied in the fact that I have read Indigenous scholarly critiques that focused on the limits of fracturing knowledge. At the same time, I also wanted to experience this process before assuming that it is has no merit.

I began the process of formally analyzing my interviews and journals by deciding that I would use the fracturing method to answer the second research question – what is the purpose/practice of Native Performance Culture (NPC)? I began this analysis process by reading and rereading the first set of interview transcripts with artists including my own journal reflections. Once themes began to emerge from the data/transcripts, I began highlighting specific sections of the transcripts using color highlighters for different themes. I then proceeded to cut out these sections and glue the color-coded themes to
larger Bristol boards around my living room. Each Bristol board represented a specific theme. I also ended up using a similar approach to analysis to answer the final question – what are the ways that artists work with Aboriginal community?

_Honouring Creative Impulses_

While I eventually took apart the data and sorted them by themes, I also tried to remain open to the creative expression of different themes as they emerged. As a poet, I am often moved to write poetry by what people say and share with me. Unfortunately it is impossible to predict when and where my creative impulses to write a poem will strike. The urge to explore and express myself through poetry emerged at times throughout the research process, and I often honoured the bodily impulse to write. According to Lee Maracle (2008) St:olo artist and scholar,

> poetry is the language of the heart and spirit as it comes together with the body and our place in the world, as such it is the language by which we can ‘safely, metaphorically’ come to terms with our self, “lummi” or face ourselves, our inner world of turmoil with the outside world and further, it is a safe and strengthening language from which we can reconcile with our history (p.55).

Since this Master’s work is partially centered on my experiences in the artistic project, I felt that it was important to honour poetic prose, which has become a facet of my existence and a central form of my expression. By re-reading the interviews and writing poetry inspired from the knowledge shared, I sought to understand the knowledge deeper through “Self-In-Relation” (Graveline, 1999). Moreover, I believe that the language of personal narrative and poetry has the potential to open up possibilities of understanding that are otherwise inaccessible in expository writing. Ultimately I yearn to write in a way that is emotional and vulnerable and shares a deep part of myself. I believe that poetry offers this doorway of communication that merges knowledge with self. Moreover,
poetry is written in the active voice, which I believe is more suitable for Indigenous peoples, as Indigenous languages are verb-based and action oriented. Unfortunately, Western intellectual traditions and hegemonic research paradigms have historically separated knowledge from self by attempting to be objective rather than honouring our subjectivity. Through artistic forms of writing, I aim to bring a more self-centered, wholistic, verb/action based, and metaphorical form of communication to the forefront of Indigenous research practices.

In the analysis stage, when dealing with my own personal experiences, reflections, and journals as an artistic practitioner, creative expression was honoured as a valid form of research. However the identification of themes and recurring ideas was also used. In the end, I completed different approaches to gathering and analyzing data depending on what research questions I was answering. For example, when answering the first research question, “What are the personal experiences of key artistic collaborators (including myself) involved in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project?” I gathered data from my memories through journal writing, personal narrative and creative prose. Whereas, when answering the second research question, “What are the purposes of NPC generally, and specifically when pertaining to Omushkego Cree Water Stories project?” I relied on the first interview with artists and my own personal journal reflections, and I analyzed this data by sorting by theme. Finally, when answering the third research question, “What are the cultural ways that artists work with Cree peoples, Cree communities and with Cree knowing?” I gathered data through interviews with each of three sub-groups: emerging artist, teachers/mentors and Elder/community member. I began the analysis by reviewing the data collected and sorted by theme.
In the data analysis phase, I also ensured reliability by returning to academic literature, government documents, and participants for clarification. During the analysis phase, I examined validity (possible explanations for experiences) by returning to the research partners for feedback, as “local informants can act as judges, evaluating the major findings of a study” (Denzin, 1978). While my analysis focused primarily on the original questions I was trying to answer, I was also open to looking at new ideas and themes as they emerged from the data.

Expression of Knowledge

Artistic Voice

As an Indigenous researcher-artist, I have also honoured my artistic voice in the expression of data through the forms of poetry and short story. Creative expression is an inherent part of an Indigenous way of knowing and according to Gregory Cajete (1994), “art is a way of seeing, of being, and of becoming” (p.154). Furthermore, “the arts in research promote a form of understanding that is derived and evoked through empathetic experience” (2008, Eisner, p.7). My understanding is that empathy can be a doorway to more fully understanding the meaning of a relational way of being. The notion of being in relation is based in the understanding that we are all interconnected deriving from the oneness of the universe. And ultimately, empathy “provides deep insight into what others are experiencing” (Eisner, 2008, p.6). Through the self, empathy can act as the bridge of understanding “Self-In-Relation” to others including the land, animals and cosmos. As an alternate way to share knowledge, this thesis transforms the normative expository writings of theses, and brings more Indigenous, artistic and holistic understandings of knowledge to the forefront of academic research. By engaging in artistic expressions of
knowledge, I hope to make this work more accessible and meaningful to the Aboriginal artistic community.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced my research methodological framework by starting with my personal location, outlining how I have framed my research within an Indigenous methodology. I have described my research design including participants and methods of gathering, expressing, and analyzing data. In the next chapter I will introduce and contextualize the history of colonialism for Aboriginal people in Canada specifically focusing on Omushkego Cree people.
Chapter Three

Historical Context for Colonialism

Introduction

This chapter begins by providing a historical overview of the effects of colonization on Aboriginal people in general while focusing locally on the Omushkego people of the West side of the James Bay. By focusing on Omushkego people of the James Bay I hope to contextualize the local context of the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project. In the second part of this chapter, I will talk about the silencing effects of colonization on Aboriginal peoples’ voices and expressive agencies in general, linking historical forms of trauma to Aboriginal people on an inter-generational basis. The final piece of this literature review will center Indigenous stories as a theoretical framework from which Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous epistemologies are shaped. By recognizing the sophisticated mechanisms of stories within Aboriginal contexts and worldview, I hope to emphasize not only the mechanics of stories, but moreover the complex meaning of Cree narratology, and its significance in contemporary Indigenous creative and knowledge production.

Historical Review and Context

Interruption in Omushkego Ways of Knowing

The history of colonialism has had devastating impacts on Indigenous peoples in general and more specifically on Omushkego Cree people of the James Bay. The history of imperialism in North America is rooted in European expansionist efforts “to sail the ocean blue” in search of wealth to bring back to the “Motherland” or “Mère patrie”. While Europeans colonized the Americas (and many other parts of the world including parts of Asia, Africa, Australia and New Zealand), it is important to remember that the
term “European” does not adequately contrast between the divergent ways that the British, French, and Dutch interacted with Indigenous societies upon first contact, and during their colonial ventures. While it is worth noting that not all the effects of contact with Europeans have been inherently negative for Indigenous peoples (there exists divergent experiences and interactions between Aboriginal Nations and early European settlers), the history of colonialism remains wrought with unequal politics of power and oppression, which have often subjugated Aboriginal Nations' inherent rights to sovereignty. Ultimately teasing out the complexities of the early interfaces between Indigenous peoples and Europeans goes beyond the scope of this research. However the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People (1996) is an excellent source to get a more in depth historical overview of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations in Canada. Instead this historical and literature review will focus on outlining the effects of colonization on Omushkego Cree people and our Cree ways of knowing specifically.

First Contact

The stories of first contact between Omushkego Cree (also known as Ininew or James Bay Cree people) and Europeans (the British in particular) have been largely told from a European perspective (Kenyon, 1975), and thereby greatly differ from Ininew oral accounts. Unfortunately, Ininew versions of first contact have been systematically silenced in Western education, and therefore have largely been ignored in Canadian history. Therefore I would like to begin this literature review with an oral account of first contact from an Omushkego perspective.

Omushkego Oral Account of First Contact

One day, the people heard a loud noise coming from the sea and saw what appeared to be a small island. This thing was strange to them, but they
were not afraid. One of the elders paddled his canoe toward the island, and upon it, saw people. This island he paddled to was a ship with sails. The people on the ship could not speak to him, as he could not speak to them, because they did not understand each other’s languages.

The elder who headed for the ship was dressed in furs and skins. The people on the ship wanted the furs he was dressed in. They showed him clothing he could wear in exchange for his clothes. He was given a pair of pants, a coat and a hat. The elder took off his coat and his leggings and was pleased with the new clothing given to him. He was also given a drink, and shown a gun. A white man on the ship taught the elder how to prepare a gun, putting in the powder and the shot. The white man aimed and fired the gun both near and far. The elder was impressed and immediately knew that this tool would be very useful for hunting. The elder was given many things to take back to the people.

When the elder returned to the ship, he arrived wearing a wide brimmed hat. None of his people knew what the object was on his head. They thought there was something stuck to his head and they didn’t know what to call it, so they referred to it as “Chichikaawin”, which means something worn. The elder returned singing his songs. His sons thought that the people on the ship must have placed spells or curses on him. When he returned, he said “seeing the arriving visitors made me very content”.

The elder showed his people all the things he brought back from the ship and told them of all the things visitors had. The next time the ship appeared everyone paddled out to it and the elder advised everyone to trade all their clothing for articles the Europeans brought with them. They traded. The white men on the ship said they would return next summer. They must have used sign language to communicate with each other. This happened a long time ago. This story has been passed down the generations (Petagumskum, 2000 cited in Storey, M., p.18-19).

From a European perspective, first contact happened in 1631 when an English captain named Thomas James was sailing his ship Henrietta Maria looking for the Northwest Passage to Asia when he inadvertently came across the East coast of the Weneebego (Ininew word for James Bay). The Original Peoples from Waup-mag-stooee, known today as Great Whale First Nation were the first people to meet Captain Thomas James and his crew. Since that moment of contact with Europeans, Ininew life
dramatically shifted. The British subsequently claimed and renamed the waters surrounding the muskeg land – the James Bay after Captain Thomas James.

**Fur Trade Enterprise**

Since the Weeneebego’s alleged “discovery”, colonization of the area by early British and French fur traders dominated the land. Several voyages exploring the Northern Rivers of the James Bay occurred between 1671 to 1686 and were dominated by New France done in order to keep the English out of the area and monopolize the fur trade. Interestingly, during the early fur trade, Crees played a partnership role in the imperial enterprise, and only more recently in scholarship have Crees been described as "rational and calculating in pursuit of own self-interest" as opposed to past descriptions in history which represented Crees as "gullible savages" (Fererra, 1992, p.29 cited in Fisher, 1992, xiii). However the early relationship in the fur trade of cooperation and alliance between the Crees and Europeans (primarily the French) quickly transformed into coercion, which was ultimately fueled by European settlers' obsession for taking dominion over the land. Ultimately early explorers and fur traders had different relationships to land, which viewed land as hostile and able to be conquered and owned by the state. Moreover, European fur trade introduced the first signs of capitalist economies, which deeply impacted the previously held egalitarian forms of trade based in Cree ethics of sharing. Instead a production of wealth was introduced which was ultimately controlled and driven by the states of England and France. Not surprisingly there were huge economic motivations behind conquering the muskeg land, as through the fur trade's imperial enterprise, European demands for beaver pelts poured in, and

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1 The Doctrine of Discovery is a notion used by European nations and settlers to legalize and legitimize their encroachment on Indigenous lands.
allowed European explorers to gain profitably from their long travels to North America.

Nonetheless, fur traders relied heavily on Omushkego peoples' ability to understand and commune with the land. "Cree reality is characterized by a perception of the world in which humans, animals and nature all play a significant role in transmitting knowledge orally" (Fererra, 1992, p.61). With the help of Omushkego people, Europeans mapped the land and subsequently claimed it under the British Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC). Before long, permanent fur trading settlements began setting up throughout the land, which dramatically shifted Omushkego peoples' previously held migratory patterns of living in relation to the land. Soon many families began settling near the fur trading posts rather than moving camps seasonally in accordance with animals and the environment. Many Omushkego people, often women married HBC employees forming the new "homeguard" housing sites of mixed-blood Métis families. For most Cree people, life dramatically shifted as a result of contact with European settlers.

In a relatively short period of time, Omushkego Cree people became increasingly dependent on the colonial fur trading posts for new technologies including firearms and ammunition and other items like knives, hatchets, ice chisels, food supplies, and clothing (Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2006, p.169). Early on in the fur trade era, it is commonly known that Cree people were highly adept as traders, both against each other and shrewd traders amongst other First Nations when getting the best possible prices for their furs. However, the monopoly that developed after the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) and the North West Company (NWC) amalgamated in 1831 formed a conglomerate, which began controlling the “inner” Cree fur traders as brokers, playing trappers from different Nations against each other, ultimately forcing fur traders to sell at the lowest prices for
furs, which the HBC would then resell to the posts. As a result, today, HBC is considered the number one exploiter of Cree people in the North ultimately destroying their "economic independence making them dependent on goods from the post and [even] cheating many [people] on the prices of furs" (Laduke, 2000, p.53). In addition, European fur traders deliberately and manipulatively, introduced alcohol to First Nations fur traders in dangerously high concentrated forms, as a way to intensify competition between rivaling English and French fur trading companies. The introduction of alcohol had devastating effects on Omushkego social life.

**Mass Epidemics**

The increased contact with Europeans through the fur trade and later missionaries also brought mass “epidemic disease, warfare, slavery, starvation and complete and utter despair, with most [Aboriginal people] dying within one hundred years of contact” (Esquimaux-Wesley, & Smolewski, M. 2004 p.ii). Not to mention that after the collapse of the fur trade by the end of the 1700's, which resulted from the over hunting of animals, Northern Aboriginal people were left devastated, many starving without animals to hunt while having to face the harsh sub-arctic living conditions with little food supply.

**Missionaries**

By the time the fur trade collapsed, missionaries were beginning to enter the area in search of people to save. By the mid-nineteenth century, many missionaries settled permanently in the area. However, for the Omushkego Cree generation whose families survived the preceding two hundred years of despicable fur trading tactics, mass epidemics, and starvation, missionaries crept in rather inconspicuously. Nonetheless missionaries were eager to convert and "save the Indian." In reality, missionaries had a
different idea of “helping,” which did not include Cree ethics of sharing, but instead involved a “planned and organized assault on Cree beliefs and practices” that ultimately positioned Cree spirituality as the fundamental reason for their despair. Ultimately, many missionaries indoctrinated Aboriginal people into believing that their ways were “heathenish and superstitious” (Flannery, 1991, p. 69). Tactics such as the invention of the Cree syllabics system of writing created by missionary Rev. James Evans in 1841 was used extensively as a tool of the colonizer to transform the minds of the colonized. Through the syllabics system of writing, missionaries translated Christian bibles and hymns from English to Cree in order to convert Omushkego people to Christianity.

During the mid-1800’s, Christian missionaries (many of which were Anglican) began proselytizing their gospel throughout the land. While many Indigenous scholars claim missionaries used coercion, other scholars claim that Crees "were not passive subjects of missionary persuasion. They showed their readiness and willingness to adopt the new ritual forms of values. Christianity was not considered incompatible with forest life and Cree religion" (Fererra, 1992, p.16 from Niezen 1998).

Despite the different interpretations of Christianity among Cree people, Cree people who converted to Christianity were forced by missionaries to give up their “savage” and "devil-worshipping" practices. Cree spiritual beliefs and ceremonial practices including Cree Rites of Passages such as the Naming Ceremony, Walking-Out Ceremony, Snowshoe Ceremony, Puberty Rites of Passage, as well as the First Hunt Ceremony, were all banned by missionaries during this time (H. Snowboy, lecture April 2009). The Shake Tent Ceremony was also highly discouraged by missionaries. In my opinion, this period in history is one of the most shameful periods, as early European
settlers, religious leaders, and Canadian governments conspired together to plan an organized assault on the very heart of Omushkego culture, our spirituality. The remnants of this "spirit injury" (Fanon, 1963) has left longstanding residual effects on Omushkego Cree individuals, families, and communities on a multi-generational basis.

Interestingly, some people say that the infiltration of Christian ideals even influenced Omushkego Ininew people to take on a different name. According to some scholars, "Natives of the James Bay… have been known as "Cree" by the Europeans, but Crees [did not necessarily] refer to themselves as "Cree". Prior to missionary invasion, Omushkegowuk called ourselves, iyiyuu (coastal dialect) or ininuu (inland dialect) (Fererra, 1991, p.27, Atkinson and Magonet, 1990). According to Louis Bird, Omushkego Storyteller from Winisk First Nation, during missionary days the Cree began identifying themselves by the word "Cree" as a way to inform missionaries that they were indeed Christian - [Cree-stian]. (Bird, lecture April 2009).

Confederation and Everything After

By 1860, the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) surrendered “its” stolen territory, known as Rupert’s Land to Britain, and shortly after, Rupert’s Land became part of the Dominion of Canada. The British North America Act (BNA Act) was established in 1867, as Canada's original constitution, and acted as the central charter to Confederation. Section 91(24) of the BNA Act established federal jurisdiction over "Indians, and lands reserved for the Indians." Through this legislative enforcement enshrined in the constitution, the federal government of Canada implemented the infamous Indian Act legislation.

By 1876 Canada's Indian Act legislation was created and began the positioning of
Aboriginal peoples as wards of the state. This racist and oppressive legal document also gave way to a stream of oppressive and assimilation policies. Canada's coercive policies, not only imposed Eurocentric patriarchal and capitalistic institutions onto Aboriginal Sovereign Nations, in the process these coercive policies forcefully dismantled and displaced Indigenous forms of governance and social systems. Through Eurocentric and assimilation policies, the Canadian government inflicted a form of "psychological terrorism" (Episkenew, 2009, p.7), which has had profound effects on the health and wellness of Aboriginal peoples today. Moreover, from an international perspective, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (2007) recognizes the historical and continued legacy of colonialism on Indigenous people.

**Effects of Colonization on Indigenous Knowledge(s)**

**Eurocentric Systems of Knowing**

Through ongoing colonial and imperial ventures in Canada, Eurocentric systems of religion, law, education and science have been imposed on Aboriginal peoples (Adams, 1995; Smith, 1999; Battiste, 1999) through policies that have fragmented and “dismembered” (Nabigon, 1998; Absolon, 2004) many Aboriginal people from our ancestral systems of knowing, living practices, oral traditions, and relationships to land and place. Moreover, European invaders have interfered so much with Cree life to the point of transforming the minds of Cree people where the colonized have begun unconsciously taking on the thinking of the colonizer (Memmi, 1956; Fanon, 1963). Marie Battiste (1986), Mikmaq scholar, coins this transformative process as “cognitive imperialism” - as the final stage of imperialism, firmly entrenched in Eurocentric assumptions that European values are superior to Indigenous ways of knowing.

According to Jacqueline Hookimaw-Witt (2006), an Ininew Iskew scholar from
Attawapiskat First Nation, okimawkhan is a word in the context of her Ininew community that best expresses the transformational and colonial process of the mind. Hookimaw-Witt says that this process occurs through systematic brainwashing processes where Omushkego people are taught to believe that our ancestral ways of knowing are inferior to European worldview. Through okimawkhan, Omushkego oral histories and stories such as our Creation Story and legends have been silenced, erased, and fragmented reduced to folklore, myth, and children's stories. Okimawkhan can be also considered the colonial mindset that continues to justify the devaluation of oral culture in preference for written documentation, as well as the reduction of tribal stories to simple entertainment.

The devastating realities of colonialism have further left Omushkego peoples’ relationship with land in a vulnerable position. Those Cree people who remain living in relation to the land continue to face the constant threats under the forceful attack of industrialization where mining and hydro-electric development continue to infiltrate the area. Technological developments such as televisions and computers continue to adversely impact some of the youth and influence their unwillingness to practice our ways of living in the bush. As a result, many Cree youth today have moved away from living in relation to the land (e.g. hunting, fishing, and trapping) to adopting more Western lifestyles.

**Oral Tradition**

However despite the ravaging effects of colonization, Omushkego peoples continue to be highly resilient. Oral traditions and storytelling play a central role in the strength of Aboriginal peoples’ living culture. The *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project in many ways focuses on harnessing this strength by mobilizing Aboriginal youth
and communities and gathering personal and family stories that ultimately celebrate our living culture despite the history of colonialism.

While Aboriginal oral traditions continue to be highly responsive to adapting to change, Jo-Ann Archibald, Sto:lo scholar admits that while stories continue to be important in the educational process, Indigenous stories have “lost much of their social value due to colonization” (2008, p.7). Unfortunately, “western education has displaced oral traditions” (Archibald, 2008, p.15) in preference for written English language including books, which tend to assert the writers, publishers, and researchers/authors as experts of Indigenous knowledge. Moreover, the imposition of Christian mythologies in early missionary efforts and the legacy of residential schools have further contributed to the suppression of Aboriginal mythologies, which are contained in our storytelling practices. According to Tomson Highway, Cree playwright, in his published lecture, *Comparing Mythologies*:

> without mythology, we would be nothing but walking corpses, zombies, mere empty hulks of animal flesh and bone, skin and blood and liquid matter with no purpose, no reason for existing, no use, no point, nothing, mere flesh and bones and skin and blood with nowhere to go, with no guide to guide it through a life path (2003, p.18)

Ultimately, the mythologies of Christianity which were brought to the shores of the James Bay during the early 1800's have greatly contributed to reducing Omushkego mythologies to "primitive," "irrelevant," "simple entertainment" and "folklore".

*Aboriginal Stories, Legends and Myths*

While Aboriginal stories, legends and myths are sophisticated conduits for sharing Indigenous philosophies, our stories transcend the compartmentalized Western notions of science, religion, theology, geography, art, sociology and psychology. Plain and simple, Indigenous stories function as pathways for transmitting the holistic nature of
Indigenous epistemologies. As we know, stories are an important dimension of Indigenous knowledge(s), because stories act as both containers and transmitters of spiritual knowing.

**Indigenous Knowledge(s)**

While stories are important in the process of coming to know Aboriginal knowledge(s), there is no universal definition for Aboriginal knowledge (also known as Indigenous Knowledge or IK). Indigenous ways of knowing are as diverse as the tribal Nations of this land. Moreover, Cree knowledge(s) is furthermore complex and multi-layered, and cannot be adequately understood and rationalized through a Eurocentric lens, which tends to categorize, reduce and define knowledge in a particular time and place. Although Indigenous knowledge(s) across the globe share many common characteristics such as they tend to be “personal, oral, experiential, holistic and expressed through narrative or metaphorical languages” (Brant-Castellano, 2000, p.25), Aboriginal knowledge(s) also tend to be locally based in contexts through complex interrelationships between a person's relationship to land, place, and history.

Therefore, while James Bay Cree people are part of the larger Original peoples of Turtle Island, we have also experienced history differently than other tribal Nations, and we have a unique relationship to the muskeg land that is distinct from other tribal relatives. Omushkego ways of knowing are deeply rooted in one's personal relationship with the landscape beginning within, extending outside of self to family, community, Nation, and nature including the bush, land, water, animals, plants and vegetation. Moreover, Omushkego knowing not only originates from these sources, but is in constant dialogue with them.
Nonetheless, we cannot underestimate the overwhelming and traumatic impacts that colonization has placed on contemporary Omushkego Cree people on an inter-generational basis. Intergenerational trauma is widely known as a “collective emotional and psychological injury over the life span and across generations, resulting from a history of genocide” (Braveheart, 2000). Eduardo Duran reframes intergenerational trauma as “soul wound,” which rests in an Indigenous understanding of trauma occurring in the level of the soul or spirit (Duran, 2006, p.7). Duran also connects “soul wound” to “earth wound” - the destruction of Mother Earth. While Cree people and Mother Earth continue to be assaulted by a way of relating to the world that seeks to dominate rather than live in harmony, I would like to note that the term trauma from an Indigenous perspective, does not blame the victim through a pathologizing nature. Alternatively, trauma/soul wound/earth wound is best understood through a socio-political and historical lens, which recognizes the history of colonialism and the unequal power relations embedded in the colonial encounter, which ultimately informs this injurious reality.

Colonization has thus created blocks of silence and despair, which have been passed down to peoples on an intergenerational basis. According to the Aboriginal Healing Foundation, “trauma is on the inside [a subtle invisible aspect of being], as its images and grief become an unspoken internalized narrative” (Esquimaux & Smolewski, 2004, p. 10). Therefore intergenerational trauma can also be associated with a silencing process, which often forces survivors to disconnect between tongue and heart, and not voice emotions freely. I have written a poem that expresses the meaning of the silencing nature of colonization for me.
**Margin**

By Candace Brunette

The margin between my tongue and heart
Is the silent talker inside
Who has bared the truths of my soul
yet always been protected
by the quietness of my memories.

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**Aboriginal Orality and Storytelling**

The significance of stories for Omushkego Cree people is as vital as the river’s need for water’s ever flowing force - you can’t have one without the other. For Omushkego people, stories are pathways of emotional exchange, much like rivers, they act as tributary channels funneling holistic forms of knowledge throughout all of creation. The tradition of storytelling among Aboriginal people is connected to an oral culture. From this perspective, stories bind us together like sinew tying us collectively through breath and invisible cords reinforcing our interconnections through empathetic senses.

According to the Creation Stories of my close relatives, the Anishnabe People (who are my close relatives through our shared Algonquin language) Turtle Island is the birth place of the Anishnabe (also known as first people). The understanding of the Earth as being Turtle Island is shared through the Anishnabe Creation Story, which honours the selfless act of our brother the turtle who bears the weight of the Earth, and all living beings on his back (Benton-Benai, 1986). For Indigenous people, Creation Stories account for our origins they define our relationships with the world and cosmos. In this light, Creation Stories tell us about who we are, where we come from, and how to live our lives in relation to each other and the environment. Fundamentally, Creation Stories
imbue meaning and give human beings direction in everyday life. They form a narrative template that offers deep insight into our core values.

Omushkego storyteller Louis Bird has spent a lifetime collecting Cree legends and stories from the James Bay. I had the privilege of briefly meeting Louis Bird and I shared with him my struggle of locating a Creation Story for James Bay Cree people. Louis Bird regretfully admitted that he has also been unable to locate our Creation Story. Although Bird believes that Omushkego people had a Creation Story at one time, due to contact with Europeans, the impacts of colonialism, the dramatic shifts of the fur trade, and the imposition of Christianity, many Omushkego Cree people have forgotten this integral part of who we are.

**Omushkego Cree Storytelling**

Nonetheless, Omushkego people are oral people and we continue to have a long and continuous standing relationship with the practice of storytelling. Louis Bird has spent the last three decades working with Cree Elders from the James Bay area documenting our many oral stories and translating them from Cree to English to make them more accessible through his online *Our Voices* Oral History Project (Bird, 2007; 2005). According to Louis Bird, there are many different types of Cree stories. There are "legends", which contain mythologies and mythological characters such as E-hep (the Giant Spider) and Mi-she-shek-kak (the Giant Skunk). Legends are often humorous and entertaining, but they also have teachings contained within them. There is also "recent history" and "quotation" stories, which tend to share personal accounts and life experiences. Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) Sto:lo artist and scholar similarly talks about her experiences working with stories among the Sto:lo people in her book *Indigenous*
Storywork. In the context of Sto:lo Nation, Archibald says that there are many different kinds of stories such as “real life, traditional, legends, myths, adaptations, translations, and literary versions” (2008, p.15).

Above the different kinds of stories told among Cree people, there are different versions for each story. For instance each story can be adapted to different audiences and age levels. For example, kids, young adults, adults, and Elders often receive different versions of the same story. Traditional storytellers can start their stories at any time -- the beginning, middle or end -- and they have an authority and unique skill set to blend different stories together. Traditional Cree storytellers like Louis Bird often signal during their storytelling to identify and differentiate between the different types of stories being shared.

While among most Indigenous Nations there exists many different types and ways of telling stories, the contexts and times that stories are told also vary depending on the Nation and teachings associated with them. For example, traditional Cree stories about big brother also known as Weesaageechak (also known as Chapan) among the Cree, are generally only told when snow is on the ground. Other stories are only to be told by certain people during certain times of the year or during certain activities such as ceremonies, hunting, fishing, making nets and/or traveling. The contexts of storytelling are varied and are as significant as the stories being told. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important for contemporary artists who are working with Indigenous stories to become aware and sensitive of the respectful ways of telling traditional stories.

In the end, my belief is that if we only hear tragic and negative stories about our culture relating to colonialism, then we will only associate negative feelings about what it
means to be Cree. While the history of colonization has had devastating impacts on Cree people, and these stories cannot be silenced for the sake of avoiding negativity, I also believe that we need to find creative ways to celebrate our resiliency and transform our stories, exploring our unique living culture, history, and relationship to land and place through narratives that raise our spirits and foster our unique relationship to who we are as Cree people.

And while Omushkego Cree, may not at this time (or to my limited knowledge) have maintained a story for the creation of the Earth, we must acknowledge and celebrate that we have carried other types of stories very well including stories of the giant animals (likely dinosaurs) that roamed the earth long before human's arrival, the re-creation of the Earth (flood story), and countless legends. These stories shape and maintain our unique Cree identity and relationship with the muskeg land. There are also countless personal life stories, family stories, and collectively held shared historical stories that equally shape who we are. Ultimately, Omushkego stories need to be kept alive. Moreover, I believe that we all play a role and have a responsibility to keep our knowledge moving through storytelling. Whether we are traditional storytellers like Louis Bird or contemporary artists like myself or grandmothers, grandfathers, mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles, or children in the context of our families, our communities, or the larger Indigenous collective, we each carry stories within us, and we all have something to share.

**Conclusion**

By providing a historical account of the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal people in particular Omushkego Cree people of the James Bay, one can more fully appreciate the magnitude of colonial oppression on a people and their oral traditions, as
well as its inter-generational effects. Moreover, one can come to recognize how truly resilient Aboriginal people have been throughout history despite colonization.

In the next chapter, through a form of writing that closely resembles a personal narrative I will share my own personal background and relationship to Omushkego Cree history, communities, and land and place.
Chapter Four

Our Story

“The truth about stories is, that’s all that we are.” Thomas King, 2003.

Introduction
As the primary researcher-artist involved in both the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project as well as this Master’s thesis, I felt that it was integral to share more about my personal location, ancestral background, and some of my personal experiences, which have greatly shaped my unique perspective to academic and artistic research. I share this anecdotal information throughout the following chapter(s) in the form of storytelling, an Aboriginal approach to sharing knowledge. I believe that this background information will give you a better understanding of my unique perspective, as I fully acknowledge the subjective role that my Cree cultural identity, ancestry, and experiences and how they play into my decisions to pursue the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* art project with Cree community and conduct Indigenist research in the academy.

My Story and Ancestral Origins

My mother Doreen Pichette (born Brunette) is a Cree woman with French ancestry. She was born and raised in Clute, a small township on the outskirts of Cochrane, in Northern Ontario. My mother gave birth to me at the age of 17. She sacrificed many adolescent events in her life to give me everything I have today. Growing up my mom was not your conventional mother. She was not like the other mom’s whom I often compared her to, but now that I’m older I more fully appreciate her unique eccentricities and what she has to teach me. My mother has also always been a strong advocate for Aboriginal peoples’ rights. For the last 25 years, she has selflessly and tirelessly worked on the frontlines of the judicial system, as the Native Criminal and
Family Courtworker in Northern Ontario. She has traveled hundreds of thousands of miles across the North acting as a liaison for Aboriginal people struggling through the colonial “justice” system - a Eurocentric system of control where Aboriginal people continue to face the highest rates of incarceration in this country. My mother’s advocacy work in the justice system has played a primary and influential role in many of my lifelong decisions including my decision to take Aboriginal Studies in university, pursue Indigenous research at the graduate level, and even return to the sources of our Cree culture, and work artistically with Cree Elders including my own grandmother. My mom continues to be my biggest role model and one of my best friends.

On the other hand, my father Julien Pichette always identified himself as a French man. He was also born and raised in Cochrane in Northern Ontario. Although both of my paternal grandparents have Métis ancestry, this genealogical inheritance was rarely acknowledged in my father’s family growing up. It was a distant and often silenced memory rather than a living legacy. Unfortunately, my dad passed away when I was only a teenager leaving my mother to raise me and my twelve year-old sister Holly, as a single parent. Regardless of my father’s premature death, he still managed to make an enormous impact on our lives. He always had a strong connection to the bush, and he often brought my sister and me with him for long trips up the river systems. Now that my sister and I are older we have come to appreciate the gifts that our father left us – a legacy of embodied memories and experiences of being on the land and traveling the Great Northern Rivers.
However I must acknowledge here that my connection to Cree worldview really came alive through the special relationship that I have with my maternal grandmother. Her name is Daisy Brunette (born Rueben) also known as Washkogee, Little Grass. My Nokum was born in the bush along the coast of the James Bay near Fort Albany and Kashechewan First Nation in Northern Ontario. My Nokum’s mother, my great-grandmother Christiana Rueben (born Wesley) gave birth to her with the help of her mother, a local midwife– a long held tradition of midwifery practices among Cree women in the North. There were no medical doctors around when my Nokum was born, so Cree women relied on our collective knowledge of the birthing process, which was carefully passed down from generation to generation. Unfortunately, many Cree women and babies died during the birthing process, because it was so dangerous. And sadly, my great-grandmother lost her life in this sacrificial process.

Nonetheless, my Nokum was born in neebin (summer) in a field where she was released from crevice between her mother’s legs gently slipping onto the Earth into tall
blades of grass. The local priest later named her Daisy, and it is believed that during her birth, my Nokum swallowed a small piece of grass, which lodged into her lung and stayed there dormant for nearly sixteen years, until one day, it nearly took her life. This is the reason for her name, Washkogee. As a child these kinds of stories were told to me over and over again. These stories are deeply connected to Cree ways of life and our connection to land and place, and they continue to saturate my being and give life meaning.

Like many Omushkego grandchildren, my Nokum was one of my first teachers. I spent a lot of time with her as a young child. However due to the social impacts of colonization on most of my grandmother’s generation (those who attended residential schools), our family’s birthright embedded in the Cree language was not passed down to us. My grandmother was apprehended from the land and her close-knit family and forced to attend an Anglican-operated and government legislated residential school in Moose Factory from the age of seven to sixteen. In residential school, she was coerced to speak English and not permitted to speak her mother tongue; she was even beaten when she
spoke Cree. She was forced to abandon her “heathen” and “savage” ways and coerced into adopting European Christian values. In this school she learned how to clean “properly,” cook European foods, and most importantly how to pray using the Christian bible. The many Cree children who attended residential schools prayed at least four times a day - before each meal, before bed every night, and every Sunday during mass. The hallways were clean, orderly, and quiet, and although children were everywhere, laughter was not. Like many residential school survivors, my grandmother also embodies these kinds of stories. Sometimes she talks about them, but many times, she sits quietly in silence.

At the age of sixteen, my grandmother left the residential school and met my grandfather Wilfred Brunette in Moosonee. Moosonee began as a fur trading post set up in 1903 by Revillion Frères, competitors to the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC). Since then, Cree and Métis families began permanently settling at the site, which later became the town of Moosonee. My grandfather was a French man who worked for the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), and together my grandparents fell in love, and married each other at St. Thomas Anglican Church in Moose Factory. Shortly after their marriage, my grandparents settled for a short time at Moose River Crossing. According to my Nokum, during their time at Moose River Crossing, my uncle John and auntie Cecile were born, both birthed with the help of a local midwife. My grandfather hunted to sustain their way of life, and he was becoming proficient in the Cree language.

There is a story my grandmother tells us about my grandparents living at Moose River Crossing. I believe this story is significant, as it illustrates Cree women’s strength, tenacity, sense of humour, and deeply held trust and relationship to the river system. My
grandmother often talks about traveling long distances from Moose River Crossing into Moosonee by foot to stock up on supplies like flour, tea, lard, and sugar. One time when Nokum was well into her second pregnancy she was getting very tired so she convinced my grandpa to come with her and help her carry the groceries back home from Moosonee. Along the way, my grandparents had to cross the high train tracks above the wide Moose River to get to the other side. The Dominion Construction Company built the railway bridge at Moose River crossing in the 1930’s. Many local Cree people from the James Bay worked on building the bridge at Moose River Crossing, and for generations countless Cree people of the North have traveled the great Moose River for trade. My Nokum was four years old when the train tracks were built - a white manmade structure she was well accustomed to negotiating her body around in order to survive.

On the other hand, my grandpa was not as comfortable with the height of the train tracks which hovered across the ferocious Moose River. My grandmother still laughs as she recalls my big burly grandpa’s pale white face and his voice trembling with fear as he attempted to cross the train tracks. My Nokum proudly says that she convinced grandpa by saying “if you love me, you’ll do it.” Of course, he loved her, so he did it. They had seventeen kids together including my mother.

Despite my grandmother marrying my grandfather out of love, she faced the consequences of these actions. The Indian Act required Indian women who married non-Indian men to take the citizenship of their male spouse. Because non-Indian men could not live on reserve (another Indian Act provision), she was forced to leave the land and place she called home. According to the Canadian government, my grandmother was no
longer considered a “Status Indian\(^2\)”. At the time Native women in her situation, and their children were also denied Native Treaty Rights based on the government’s racist and sexist legislation\(^3\). After losing her “Indian Status”, and subsequent band membership and Treaty Rights, my grandmother, like many Cree women who married men, were forced to leave the area - the source of our Cree spirituality, the place where our ancestors traveled and hunted sustaining our family’s health, language, and living practices for generations. Let me be clear here, I am not simply referring to Fort Albany, my grandmother’s official First Nation affiliation, nor am I talking about the boundaries of our family trap lines, which are technically located off the band’s land demarcations, marked and regulated by the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR), but rather, I am referring to the spiritual essence that transcends these European colonial constructs - I am referring to the spirit of the land and river systems that breathes life into all the living beings who have inhabited this place since time immemorial. Ultimately, we cannot underestimate the devastating impacts of the forceful relocation of my grandmother from this land and place. We also can not diminish the impacts that this severance has played

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\(^2\) Up until 1986, Native women lost their Indian Status when marrying men, whereas, whereas Status men who married non-Status women did not face the same discriminatory treatment. Instead the non-Status wives of Status men gained Status. These sexist provisions stayed in place until April 17, 1986, when the government finally amended the \textit{Indian Act}\((due to International Human Rights violations) with the passing of Bill C-31.

\(^3\) Although the Bill C-31 amendments to the \textit{Indian Act} reinstated my grandmother and finally registered my mother in 1986, my sister Holly and I continue to be denied Indian Status based on rigid and sexist guidelines. The \textit{Indian Act} states that “children of reinstated women who married non-Status men fall under Section 6(2) (this is my mother) and can only pass Status to their children if the father also has Status (our father does not); on the other hand, the children of Indian men who married out are registered under Section 6(1) and pass their Status irregardless of the Status of the child’s mother (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2008) p.124). Ultimately, the gender biases of the past continue to play out in today’s Indian Status registration process. Moreover, other discriminations against Native women continue to play out. For example, my paternal father is not reported on my birth certificate, but the government assumes that my father is non-Status, and thereby automatically renders me non-Status under the second generation cut off rule. While the recent Sharron McIvor case fought and won at the Supreme court level may finally redress these inequities, it is still too soon to tell what will happen.
out on her children, my mother and her sixteen brothers and sisters, as well as my
Nokum’s grandchildren – the location that I speak from.

Upon leaving Moose River Crossing and the James Bay area, my grandparents
relocated South to the township of Clute along the train tracks toward Moosonee. Clute is
located on the outskirts of Cochrane in North Eastern Ontario. In many ways Cochrane
acts as a gateway for many of the isolated Northern First Nation communities, which
continue to be without year-round road access. While my grandparents left the James Bay
area a generation ago, they still raised their kids in Omushkego Cree territory, and
thankfully among an Aboriginal community in the small town of Cochrane. The small
town of Cochrane is where I was born.

My parents Doreen Brunette and Julien Pichette met each other in Cochrane, fell
in love much like my grandparents did, and had me and my sister Holly. Although their
life together was cut short with the sudden and premature death of my father, they left me
and my sister with many fond memories. In my recollection, my father was always a
bushman. Most of my young life I remember him being in the bush hunting, guiding or
on the river fishing. He knew the land like the back of his hand. He often stayed out until
the sun went down and came home at night with fresh catches of the day. In our home,
we fried up and feasted on fresh partridge, whitefish, pickerel, pike and moose regularly.
I carry many memories of my dad and our countless family trips on the Abitibi Rivers. I
remember one time ice fishing with him. I must have been five or six years old, but I got
real cold out there on the lake. I was peering into the icy hole carved into the lake
thinking to myself that the steam surfacing from the hole looked warm, and in my
desperation for warmth, I stuck my leg inside the hole to warm my frozen feet. To my
dad’s horror, he looked over and yelled “what are you doing?” Needless to say, his ice fishing ended early that afternoon. Dad warmed me up over a fire and put me over his shoulder carrying me across the lake all the way home. I got teased for that stunt for a long time, but I learned a powerful lesson about winter water.

My father’s sense of humor and zest for life was a contagious force, which my mother readily admits “is the reason I fell in love with him”. Although my mother endured a difficult childhood including experiences of racism, neglect, abuse and alcoholism, she often says that it was my father who taught her to laugh again. And although my mom is Omushkego, in many ways my dad was connected to the Abitibi rivers much like the ancient Omushkegos.

![Figure 3 – Me and Dad after a Day of Fishing](image)

At the age of seventeen, I lost my living connection to my dad when he died of a massive heart attack at the age of thirty-eight. I still miss him dearly, and the heartache and grief associated with the loss of a parent at a young age still strikes me like a thunderbolt sometimes. I often think if there were ever a place he would be in spirit, it would be the river.
Interestingly, when I began the journey of working with Cree Elders and gathering Cree water stories, I segregated in my mind my father and our interconnected relationship to the river. I deliberately chose solely to privilege Cree Elders stories, because Aboriginal experiences have too often been relegated to the margins of Canadian history. In my fractured and colonized mind, I told myself over and over again that my father’s story is not a part of this history. However more recently, I have come full circle. I fully acknowledge my personal relationship to the river, which is closely tied to my dad and our countless excursions on the Little and Big Abitibi Rivers. From an Aboriginal perspective, everything is interconnected, and when working with Self-in-Relation to Cree history and connection to land, my dad’s story cannot be segregated.

### With Me

**For Dad**  
**By: Candace Brunette**

Smells of pine trees spellbind me  
invisible treasures in silence remind me too  
of the lunatic rivers and lost embraces  
of my childhood.

You left this physical world many moons ago  
For a long time I was a young woman trying to forget  
Searching for love in nothingness  
Getting lost in strange beds  
Always feeling more lonely, after.

As the black bird cries in a warm summer’s night  
you leave traces of nothing on the surface  
yet for the first time I realize  
you are always here with me.

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**My Story of Disembodiment**

Like many women of Aboriginal ancestry, I have experienced the residual effects caused by the historical trauma and legacy of colonization. I believe that historical trauma
socializes the minds of the colonized in a way that often teaches us to disassociate ourselves from our body’s innate abilities to aid us in the process of knowing. Moreover historical trauma disconnects our tongue from our heart and interferes with our abilities to express ourselves truthfully and creatively. For many years, my inner truth was stifled and my expression of self was unconsciously filtered through the lens of the colonized other. I walked through life trying to be what I thought I should be based on dominant Western standards. I rarely admitted my true feelings out loud for fear of being rejected. I rarely listened to my inner voice or followed my intuition. Instead I was conditioned to live and act in fear rather than expressing myself from an authentically personal and truthful place. I did not know how to listen to my body and honour my emotions. Through this process of colonial subjugation, I was ultimately silenced in my expressive life.

As a mixed-blood Aboriginal woman, I also struggled greatly with my self-identity. By being who I am, a mixed blood “half-breed” woman someone whose heritage draws from both the colonized and the colonizer’s stories, I have experienced alienation from both sides. I have often felt like I did not quite fit in anywhere. Struggling with my self-identity, I have also often felt lost and isolated. With my lighter complexion, I have struggled fitting into the colonial expectations of what an authentic and “real Indian” should look like. Although my lighter skin continues to afford me some privilege (for example not being visibly Native meaning therefore I have experienced the privilege of choosing to disclose my Aboriginal identity when I feel safe to do so), I actually only represent this lighter complexion from the outside. On the inside, I often felt like a puzzle piece put into the wrong box. Irregardless of my lighter complexion, my location as an
Aboriginal woman has been marked by the historical trauma entrenched in the collective memories of my Aboriginal ancestors, which are embedded in embodied realities.

While “the body is a habituated site that carries the historical and cultural markings” (Pelias, 2008, p.191; Driskill, 2008; Young and Nadeau, 2005), it can also act as a resource in the process of reclamation and decolonization. Ironically, in an attempt to reconcile my disconnections with my body, I initially wandered to other people’s cultures (South Asian yogic practices) for solace and comfort, because I did not feel comfortable or Native enough to access my own. In retrospect I began my healing and reconnecting the interconnections between my mind, body and spirit through participating in hatha yoga and meditation training, which are both practices originating from Hindu and Buddhist religions. In returning inside my body I developed internal embodied faculties within, which have also greatly assisted me in my artistic expression. In performing arts, the body can be a tool in discovering stories as well as telling stories. Thankfully, I eventually mustered up the courage, self-worth, and strength to explore my own Aboriginal ancestral traditions and ceremonies. While I do not in any way claim to be an authority on Aboriginal ceremonial life, I have begun my journey and I have found my place within the circle.

**Awakening My Body**

The transformative process of finding my expressive and artistic voice through embodied practices began after I started seeing a therapist who reinforced yoga as a way to cope with my stress. The practice of yoga (postures, breathing and meditation) supported me in ways unimaginable. The embodied practice brought solitude and silence into my life, which helped me begin to acknowledge, face, accept, and begin to let go undoing years of accumulated tension absorbed in my body. The practice further instilled
a sense of discipline and self-knowing. I slowly began redirecting the mental negative
chatter in my head and through a practice that involved self kindness and patience, and
eventually my mind started slowing down, I began breathing more deeply, listening and
trusting my body again. Soon I also began observing the complex interrelationship
between my body and breath, which in turn dramatically affected my physical and mental
wellbeing. I also learned later that one’s ability to follow one’s breath and trust one’s
body is dramatically interconnected to consciously acting on impulses, is an instrumental
part of exploring and expressing our innate creativity as well as performing and writing
from the body.

**Creative Incubation**

Fundamentally, our relationship with our body is an important vehicle for the
creative process. The ability to trust and relax freely is inherent to the process of
creativity. The creative space which often starts in own bodies becomes a nestling ground
for creativity. I often think about fertility as the perfect metaphor for the creative process.
In many ways, there is an undeniably powerful interrelationship between creativity and
fertility. As I prepare for pregnancy and motherhood, the next stage in my life’s cycle, I
am ever so conscious of the subtle energetic and symbolic relationship between these two
symbiotic forces. In the womb, our mothers bodies nurtures our being with life force
much like the life force required to create an artistic masterwork. If we were privileged
and fortunate, our mothers were given support by the men in their lives, their/our
families, communities, and Nations, and through this support (emotional, physical,
intellectual and spiritual) energy, and space inside our mother’s womb was created to
make room for the new life growing inside of her. During this awesome period of
creation, our mothers and us breathed as one. In the womb, we felt each and every thought, emotion, and action of our mother’s. And this first physical experience (in this lifetime) was encoded in our own body, and continues to play itself out today in often unconscious ways. From an Indigenous perspective, these felt memories are encoded within, but they also transcend time going back generations, meaning that your mother’s, and her mother’s and her mother’s experiences are encoded within each of us, inter-generationally.

More relevant to the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, from an Indigenous perspective, women’s innate ability to allow life to grow inside her and birth it through our bodies is strongly connected to our relationship with water. Water is a central source of inspiration in our creative work. During pregnancy women’s bodies become a vessel of water that nourishes the physical manifestation of the spirit of creation itself. While this delicate process of creation does not happen in isolation from men, but in unison, and in balance, with their love, and support, I acknowledge the female body’s responsibility for co-protecting the space where creation manifests. And in this spirit, I encourage us to find this special place inside of ourselves, and reflect upon how it is interconnected to our own sense of creativity.

**Finding My Voice**

My journey of finding my voice and expressing it through Indigenous performing arts began during my undergraduate degree at the University of Toronto. While I did not give birth per se, this moment in time was a deeply embodied and liberating experience. My passion for storytelling surfaced quite unexpectedly in an Indigenous theater summer course. The course was taught by Anishnabe professor and scholar, Jill Carter, and the course introduced me to plays written by Indigenous female artists like Maria Campbell
and the three sisters Muriel Miguel, Gloria Miguel, and Lisa Mayo of Spiderwoman Theater, Monique Mojica, and the infamous Turtle Gals. The oral-based texts studied in class spoke to my experiences in deep and complex ways. For example, the play _Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots_, written by Monique Mojica, resisted the historic colonial misrepresentations of Aboriginal women as “traitors and whores” – stereotypical labels often imposed on Aboriginal women that I could relate to dealing with. Moreover these oral counter narratives resisted the Western hegemonic discourses of Canadian history taught in public education where Aboriginal women’s voices have been systemically silenced. Moreover these oral counter narratives resisted the Western hegemonic discourses of Canadian history taught in public education where Aboriginal women’s voices have been systemically silenced. Growing up, like my Nokum, my mother, and aunties, I was often called “squaw” on the playground by my white male counterparts. However through oral texts in Native theatre, I learned how performance writing could talk back (through breath and body) to these imposed colonial misrepresentations, and in turn undo the silencing nature of my experiences, and the tensions accumulated in the body.

More importantly, in the theatre course, my teacher and mentor Jill Carter also gave students space and encouragement to write and share our own stories through a performance, which I pursued wholeheartedly. I chose to tell the story of my birth – a deeply personal story about my mother running away from violence in the home, living on the streets, and getting pregnant with me at sixteen. The opportunity to explore my place in the world, and the effects of colonization on me and my family, and share my story through breath and body in an oral performance, not only strengthened my inner

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4 Squaw is a derogatory term used to label Native women as whores and/or sluts.
voice, but ignited the burning desire inside of me to continue exploring and expressing myself through orality and embodied ways of writing.

Weeks after my performance, I (quite courageously in retrospect) approached Jani Lauzon (co-director of Turtle Gals and Barker-Fairley Writer-In-Residence at U of T) to work with me in an independent study course to begin writing my own play. Over eight months, Jani and I spent countless hours sharing personal stories, theatre resources and approaches to writing through techniques that privileged the body demonstrating Jani’s mantra “our bodies are our books.” In April ‘05, I performed a short work in progress entitled *Wandering Womb* – a work that explored my disenfranchised history, mixed blood ancestry and tenuous connection to First Nation community.

That summer I continued my learning when I participated in the three week Storyweaving summer program with Muriel Miguel through the Center for Indigenous Theatre (CIT) in Peterborough Ontario. In Jan. ‘06 I joined the Young Voices Program with Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) in Toronto. Both CIT and NEPA’s Aboriginal youth-based programs offer emerging Aboriginal performers and writers an opportunity to express ourselves through orality. With the direction and generous support of Anishnabe/Cree Dramaturge, Lisa Ravensburgen I wrote *Old Truck*, a second play-in-progress that was presented at the Weesaageechak Festival in 2006 and 2007. *Old Truck* is a story inspired by real life experiences examining the effects of alcoholism on family. Since this time, I have further developed *Old Truck* with the support of Muriel Miguel and I continue to complete theatre training in the areas of Butoh Dance, Pochinko Clown, Grotowski River, Authentic Movement, and Laban-Bartinieff Movement.
Erika’s Story

In the next section I would like to share a little bit about Erika Annie Iserhoff - the key artistic collaborator involved in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project. I hope by sharing a bit of her story and her ancestral origins that you can appreciate the important role that she has played in this artistic work. Moreover I hope that by sharing her story it will help readers better understand her unique relationship to Omushkego Cree territory, shared history, and the Native Performance Culture (NPC) process.

Erika Annie Iserhoff was born in South Porcupine Ontario, a small town located outside of Timmins in Northern Ontario. Her mother, Johanne Levesque, a French Canadian woman, and her father, Charlie Iserhoff, a Cree man from Constance Lake First Nation, raised her to be a strong woman. Erika’s parents met each other in Cochrane in the early 70’s and had two daughters, Tokoska and Erika. In Cree Tokoska means “to step forward”, but many people today know her as Marie.

Erika’s Ancestral Origins

Erika’s paternal grandmother, Margaret Iserhoff (born Wesley) was a band member with Constance Lake First Nation, but her biological parents originated from Mattice a small settlement near Groundhog River located outside of Hearst in Northern Ontario. Margaret’s father originally came from the Fort Albany area, but he was forced to relocate to Constance Lake First Nation after Treaty 9 was signed in 1929. Prior to confederation and the creation of the reservation system, Cree people did not live permanently in First Nation communities. The permanent settlements and way of living on the land was actually forced onto Cree people not that many generations ago. Nonetheless, Margaret, Erika’s granny grew up near Constance Lake where she was
raised by Métis foster parents before she was sent to residential school near Sioux Lookout.

On the other hand, Erika’s paternal grandfather, Gilbert Iserhoff was originally from Chissasibi (also known as Eastmain) located on the East coast of the James Bay. Her grandfather Gilbert was a tall and gentle man who fought in WWII. However, after fighting for this country’s freedom, Gilbert was forcefully enfranchised thereby losing his Indian Status. Interestingly, many people do not know that Cree men from the James Bay area fought in both World Wars in the largest numbers, and like Gilbert, those who returned as War Veterans for this country, were very badly mistreated. According to Erika, her grandfather Gilbert rarely talked about his experiences in the war.

Margaret and Gilbert met each other in Northern Ontario in the early 1950s, and had two sons – Charlie and John. Unfortunately, Charlie’s brother John passed away of cancer at a very young age. Their dad Gilbert worked for the Ontario National Railway (ONR) most of his life, and the family moved around a lot, often relocating to small towns along the Northern railway system. Margaret and Gilbert raised their sons in various settlements including Island Falls, Moose River Crossing and later Porquis Junction.

Growing up, Erika and Tokoska spent a lot of time with their paternal grandparents specifically at their house in Porquis Junction, a former railway community located outside of Iroquois Falls. As a child, Erika remembers spending hours upon hours with her grandmother Margaret visiting, listening to old country records, playing cards, and cooking. According to Erika, her grandmother was a deeply superstitious woman who often warned her not to whistle at night among other things. Erika also recalls
spending lots of time watching her grandmother skin animals for local trappers in the area. While Margaret was a small woman in frame, she still embodied enough knowledge of the bush, hunting, trapping and skinning animals that local non-Native hunters often relied on her skills.

Erika’s childhood also involved a lot of moving around. In her early years, she grew up in Toronto before moving to Cochrane with her mother permanently after her parents separated when she was two years old. Erika also spent time living with her father in Timmins. Today, she is the proud mother of three children Austin, Isaac and Anika. At the age of nineteen, Erika moved to Toronto to pursue a fashion design program at George Brown College. She is currently working toward a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Ontario Academy of Art and Design (OCAD). On top of this, Erika has worked in Native theatre for over 10 years as a costume and set builder. She was awarded a Dora Mavor Moore Award in 2009 for her costume design in the play Agokway written by the talented two-spirited Anishnabe playwright and actor, Waawaate Fobister.

Erika’s deepest passions are as a traditional craftsperson, contemporary jewelry maker, abstract ink drawer and clothing designer. In her teenage years, she had the opportunity of working with Cree senior craft-woman, Lucy Linklater in Cochrane, who taught her traditional Cree beading techniques and designs and how to work with leather, felt and embroidery. These early experiences in traditional forms of art have shaped Erika’s unique perspective and the ways that she is learning to intersect Cree material culture into her costume and set design approaches.


*Our Inter-Connection*

As Cree women of mixed-blood ancestry, Erika and I share a unique bond. We have known each other since we were seven years-old, and we are also distantly related through our grandmothers. Over the years Erika and I have also shared a mutual sense of disconnection from our Cree culture and heritage. Our disconnections have been a direct consequence of the silencing of Cree knowing in our own families, our tenuous connection to First Nation communities, Cree language and living practices (living on the land through hunting, fishing and trapping practices).

We have also often struggled with what felt like opposing Cree and French worldviews, which ultimately stem from our sometimes conflicting familial and ancestral genealogies. Like many mixed-blood Aboriginal people, we felt the tensions between both worlds (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) play out in our family dynamics. Understandably, this tension filtered into personal conflicts with our self-identities. Therefore, in our artistic project, while on one hand we wanted to privilege our Cree ancestors’ voices and contribute to undoing the silencing effects of colonization, we also yearned to reconcile the personal and familial tension within each of us.

![Figure 4 Me and Erika Grade 8 Graduation](image)
Conclusion

My hope is that this chapter helps illuminate how Erika and my own personal stories, familiar connections, cultural legacies, and histories have come together to work artistically in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project. By better understanding our familial histories and personal struggles with identities, I hope to give readers a better appreciation of the driving forces behind our motivations to collaborate together and return to our Cree communities to engage in an artistic process.

In the following chapter I will provide a historical overview of Aboriginal people on the contemporary stage beginning with the infamous Buffalo Bill shows through to the more recent Native theatre movement in North America. I will also link the emergence of Native theatre in the 1970’s to a healing movement, which has led contemporary Aboriginal artists to unite together to tell stories that undo the silencing nature of colonialism. More specifically, this chapter will frame Native Performance Culture (NPC) as a unique approach to Native theatre within a decolonizing framework, in which artists are consciously returning to Indigenous sources of knowledge to create art, and thus decolonize and Indigenize Western Euro-American theatre practices.
Chapter Five

History of Aboriginal People on the Western Stage

Introduction

In this chapter I will begin by positioning Native theatre on the Western stage as a contemporary form and expression of Indigenous oral tradition and Aboriginal performance-based culture. However following that I will review some of the literature on the history of Aboriginal people performing on the Western stage through the infamous Wild West Shows. This historical review will demonstrate how the early participation of Aboriginal people in Western theatre in the Americas was a colonial institution, which controlled Aboriginal peoples’ expressive agency, as well as Aboriginal peoples’ collective and individual voices. Moreover this historical review will illustrate how the misrepresentation of Aboriginal people historically continues to have serious implications for contemporary Aboriginal artists today who often face the aftermath of these widespread misconceptions.

In this literature review I will also offer a historical background on the emergence of contemporary Native performing arts in Canada in the 1980’s, positioning the movement in Native theatre as a resistance movement where Aboriginal artists first began reclaiming their rights to represent themselves on the Western stage. Moreover, I will connect Native theatre to the revitalization of oral traditions and to the larger Aboriginal healing movement.

It is important to recognize that while the performance nature of Aboriginal culture flourished in this land long before the emergence of Europeans and the Western stage, through an elaborate performance culture (Petrone, 1990). It was not until the 1980’s that a growing number of professional Native writers, directors, actors and
technicians emerged and marked the beginning of a renaissance in Native drama (Highway, 1988). Equally important, I firmly believe that there are unique elements to contemporary Native performance on the Western stage that need to be understood when compared to other contexts past or present. For instance, while there are performative elements in both Aboriginal social and ceremonial contexts, this goes far beyond the scope of this research. Ultimately, the Western stage is a public context often wrapped up in professional, economic, and capitalistic constraints, which make it quite distinct from other contexts where Aboriginal performance cultures may play out. Therefore, it is very important to distinguish between the performative nature of Aboriginal culture in different contexts. The context of the Western stage is a public context, rather than a social, sacred and/or private context.

Nonetheless, in this chapter I will highlight the connections between Indigenous epistemologies and contemporary forms of Native creative processes in the context of Native theatre focusing particularly on Native Performance Culture (NPC) practices. I will end by positioning NPC as a decolonizing approach to Native theatre, because it draws from Indigenous frameworks of knowing while simultaneously resisting oppressive Western Euro-American colonial systems of thought.

Aboriginal people’s agency in the context of contemporary performing arts and the western stage only began to flourish in the mid 1980’s (Highway, 1998; Petrone, 1990; Geiogamah, H., & J., Darby, 2000; Appleford, 1990; Murphy, 2007). Although Aboriginal people were on the stage long before that, performing in the infamous Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows, their expressive and artistic agencies were arguably contained and therefore limited (Murphy, 2007).
While it is important to recognize the influx of Native people participating in contemporary performing arts, it is equally important to realize that “Native drama” flourished in this land long before that through an elaborate performance and oral based culture (Petrone, 1990; Huntsman, 2000; Carter, 2009). According to Anishnabe scholar, Jill Carter, “the tradition…did not simply begin with a theatre company in the latter part of the twentieth century. Its authors stand upon a tradition that predates written history” (2009, p.26). Similarly, in her Master of Arts thesis entitled The Roots of Cree Drama Geraldine Manossa (2002) also connects contemporary practices in Cree performance to traditional Cree narratives. Ultimately, these kinds of assertions connect the contemporary practices of Aboriginal performing arts to the long held history of oral tradition and the evolving nature of an oral culture. Ultimately the revitalizing of oral traditions is an ongoing “frame of reference” (Smith, 1999, p.37) for contemporary Aboriginal artists.

Nonetheless, despite Native theatre’s roots in orality, the movement in North America has built its foundation on the social, political, cultural and spiritual resistance movements of Aboriginal people happening in the 1960's and early 1970's (Mojica, personal communication). However in order to fully appreciate the triumph in “the renaissance” (Highway, 1998) of “Native drama,” it is in my opinion important to first explore the historical context and early relationship between Aboriginal people in North America and the Western theatrical stage.

*Early Spectacle on the Western Stage*

Let us go back to North America during the late-nineteenth century – a time when the expansion of these nations was attracting thousands of European settlers to the “New World.” In this period, many European settlers’ relocated from Britain, France and
Holland to the Americas with high hopes. However, conflicts between Aboriginal Nations and settlers eventually began to manifest due to European settlers increasingly disrespectful encroachment on Aboriginal lands as they moved West on the frontier. “The frontier was considered a part of the landscape of the American “Old West” - a place where civilization (associated with white male colonists) and savagery (associated with Aboriginal peoples) collided and according to European hegemonic narratives “brought out the worst in everyone” (Reddin, 1999, p. 15).

The infamous Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show began in 1867 in the United States and quickly became the business of staging the volatile encounters between the infamous “cowboys and Indians.” The Wild West Shows have been documented as the longest running, most financially successful, and most widely traveled show to have existed during this time (Blackstone, 1986). Like many of these types of companies (there were over 80 different types of western shows), the Wild West Show was managed exclusively by white male colonist, Colonel William Cody (also known as Buffalo Bill) an American expansionist and Indian scout⁵. We cannot underestimate the complex interconnections between the Wild West Shows, land grabbing, and buffalo killing as each acted in part of a larger colonial project which fuel the imperial enterprise. For instance, Buffalo Bill Cody was a buffalo killer involved in the despicable slaying of thousands of buffalo. Buffalo killing was a military tactic commonly used to destroy Plains tribal groups’ main source food in order to push them off the land in order for new settlers to take over the land and fuel European expansionists’ growing American cattle industry. It is estimated that over 4 million buffalo were exterminated by buffalo killers during this period.

⁵ Indian scouts were government hired military figures responsible for getting Native people off the land through violent force and even death.
While buffalo killing and land grabbing worked in tandem, the Wild West Shows on the other hand acted as a decoy increasing the public’s misperceptions of Aboriginal people as savage and barbaric thus reinforcing the idea of Aboriginal people were hostile threats to new settlers’ economies. The strategic misrepresentations of Aboriginal people directly helped legitimize new settlers’ buffalo killing and land grabbing efforts.

**Business of Staging and Misrepresenting**

Depictions of Aboriginal people in Wild West Shows almost always painted expansionists as victorious and “Indians in the wilderness” as bloodthirsty savages⁶ and/or noble savages⁷ (Reddin, 1999). It is widely known today that although these shows were promoted as “authentic factual events,” they were instead propaganda serving to glorify European settlers’ sense of superiority and legitimize their increasing encroachment on Indigenous lands. Fundamentally, the Wild West Shows built themselves on two widely held misconceptions: first, the image of hostile, wild, and barbaric Indian in need of civilizing; and second, the West as a place of promise and opportunity (Blackstone, 1986).

The Wild West Shows also represented all Aboriginal people as Plains Indians forcing actors to dress in Plains regalia and headdresses while completely ignoring the diverse tribal backgrounds of Aboriginal people. Interestingly, most “show Indians” were not even Plains Indians, many of them were Hopis (Moses, 2005). Nonetheless, Plains Indian representations were plastered everywhere creating overarching associations with

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⁶ A bloodthirsty savage represents Aboriginal people as wildly untamed, heathen and ignoble; a sub-human who contests European colonization and treats them with treachery and cruelty while clinging to a dying culture (Moses, 2005)

⁷ A noble savage represents Aboriginal people as someone who has lived free from colonization but welcomes assimilation (Moses, 2005).
Aboriginal people, which continue to plague mainstream consciousness today. People still often assume Aboriginal people as having to wear a headdress, hunt buffalo and live in a tipi. Arguably, these associations can be linked to the colonial history of the Wild West Shows.

![Figure 3](image)

**Figure 3** *Buffalo Bill Cody and an unknown Aboriginal Person, 1800’s*

From Musee McCord Museum (online database)

Although “show Indians” performing on the Western stage were often of Aboriginal ancestry, they have been misrepresented in much scholarship and media “as not having the good sense to realize that they were being exploited” (Reddin, 1996, p.7). Therefore it is important to note that during these times of extreme poverty when Aboriginal people had little power, many people found refuge in performing in the Wild West Shows, and therefore despite their mistreatment, many Native people continued to work for the shows, because the minimal financial earnings supported their families (Blackstone, 1986). This historic sacrifice is not only worth noting, but has merit in not condemning our peoples for their actions, but instead understanding their actions within a historical and socio-political context.
Nonetheless, the Wild West Shows were widely popular performed for mass audiences not just across the Americas, but internationally. Ultimately the misrepresentations served European colonists’ hunger for power, as through the widespread misrepresentation of Aboriginal people and the West, expansionists profited widely and drove emigration to North America. Moreover, through the shows, expansionists justified their despicable land grabbing tactics by misrepresenting themselves as superior to Aboriginal people, and thereby reinforcing Aboriginal people to a sub-human, inferior and “Othered” level. Furthermore, the globalization of prescribed misrepresentations of Aboriginal people illustrates the imperialistic collaboration between Europe and the Americas, which ultimately reinforced Europe’s imperial conquest for global domination.

At the end of the day, the Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows demonstrate how early Western “theatricality was a disciplinary institution, imposed on Native people in the late 1800’s, which contained and controlled Native peoples [expressive] agency” (Murphy, 2007, p. 75-76). Moreover, the Wild West Show (and other shows like it) served the hidden agenda of conquest and domination of Turtle Island - a plot steeped in colonial and imperial relations of power.

**Controlling Expressive Agencies through Government Policies & Prohibitions**

Despite the growing demands to see Aboriginal people “playing Indian” on the Western stage, it is important to note that during this period, colonial governments were deeply threatened by the agency of “Indian bodies” in motion - in particular, “Indian dancing” (Murphy, 2007). Therefore Native bodies in Canada were strictly controlled
through legislation, which legally kept Native people on the reserve\(^8\), as well as prohibited Native peoples’ expression of Indigenous knowledge and culture by banning traditional Ceremony, feast, song and dance. From 1886 to 1951, the *Indian Act* legislation in Canada actively banned Ceremonies such as the Sun Dance and Potlatch (Waldram, Herring and Young, 2006). Ceremonial dances were regarded as “demonic,” “savage-like” and “crazed” and deemed incompatible with the Canadian governments’ intentions to permanently assimilate Aboriginal people. Ultimately, the expressive agency of “Indians bodies” was seen as a “hindrance to civilization,” because it asserted Native peoples’ self-determination (Murphy, 2007).

**Silencing Nature of Oppression**

The prescriptive and colonial misrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the Buffalo Bill era and the government prohibition policies are arguably deeply entrenched with the “silencing nature of oppression” (Dunlap, 2007; Freire, 1967, 1978) which has historically justified the erasure, silencing and fragmenting of Aboriginal people from our expressive lives and oral traditions. While not all forms of silence are associated with oppression, I am referring to an imposed silence where a dominant culture suppresses another from expressing themselves freely. This imposed silence reinforces powerlessness and denies peoples the freedom of expression. This form of silence contributes to internal blockages where silence becomes a “learned behavioural pattern” (Esquimaux-Wesley, 2004) a way of censoring stories, emotions and disconnecting from the expressive nature of sharing. Sharing is an important aspect of Cree culture. However unfortunately, the colonial process has systematically ruptured Aboriginal people from

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\(^8\) After the questionable signing of treaties in Canada, the government confined and even sometimes forcefully relocated groups of Aboriginal people to reserves. Reserves are small pieces of land divided up among tribal groups in order to confine Aboriginal people to living permanently on the land.
this process of knowing and sharing through stories. Therefore the right to express freely is firmly entrenched in socio-political relations of power embedded in a history of colonization.

From a more global and legal perspective, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (2007) asserts that Indigenous people have the right to practice and revitalize cultural traditions and practices. In article 14 of the Declaration it affirms Indigenous peoples rights to:

“Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures” (United Nation, 2007).

**Reclaiming the Western Stage - Aboriginal Artists Talk Back**

**Native Theatre Movement of the 1970’s**

While the governments controlled Native peoples’ bodies and expressive agencies through legislation for over a hundred years, by the mid-twentieth century it became increasingly difficult to control Native voices in the arts. According to Albert Memmi (2006) “all writing [is] suspect and controlled by the colonizer with the exception of the arts”. Howard Adams, Métis scholar, says that Aboriginal participation in literature and art reveal the history of colonization and subjugation thus giving voice to counter-narratives (1995).

Since the reverberation of Native voices in the arts, Native theatre companies such as Native Earth Performing Arts (NEPA) have blossomed across the country, and by the early 1990’s, a number of Aboriginal training programs such as Centre for Indigenous Theatre (CIT) were created throughout many cities in Canada (Clements, 2005). In addition many Aboriginal Studies Programs in universities and colleges were developed and as a result Native theatre courses have manifested as part of their growing
curriculum. Arguably, it has been in these various sites of learning that Aboriginal voices have gained strength and resisted the dominant Western hegemonies thus forming the growing canon of Indigenous dramatic literatures of Turtle Island. While Indigenous voices are now more commonly heard in university and college Native Studies discourses, there still remains limited scholarly research in the area of Native theatre and dance from an Aboriginal perspective.

**Aboriginal Artistic Healing Movement**

While the Indigenous performing arts movement began as a political act to honour Indigenous oral traditions and resist the impositions of European narratives on Indigenous peoples throughout history, the processes of telling Indigenous stories on the contemporary stage have also been associated with the Aboriginal healing movement. In the article, *Theatre as Suture: Grassroots Performance, Decolonization and Healing* Cherokee scholar, Qwo-Li Driskill (2008) links Indigenous grassroots theatre in North America to both healing and the processes of decolonization. Driskill also asserts that Native grassroots theatre addresses the “kinesthetic reality” of colonialism and the embodied effects of historical trauma encoded in Indigenous bodies. Similarly, in her book, *Taking Back our Spirits: Indigenous Literature, Public Policy and Healing* Jo-Ann Episkenew (2009), Cree scholar, also introduces Native drama as an effective way for Indigenous communities to heal from the traumatic effects of colonialism embedded in the coercive policies of the government. Episkenew describes how colonialism has silenced Indigenous peoples and she connects Indigenous community theatre to healing this form of systemic silence. Jill Carter (2009), Anishnabe scholar, further asserts that Native theatre is a “project of healing” where Aboriginal artists are “re-appropriat[ing]
stories… around survival, sovereignty, and continuance of the original nation of Turtle Island and to the spiritual restoration of their peoples” (2009, p.8).

**Native Creative Processes**

While Aboriginal peoples’ bodies and voices have been historically controlled and silenced through the processes of colonization, telling Aboriginal stories on the contemporary Western stage publicly has been a huge achievement for Indigenous artists and the healing of our communities. As an emerging artist today, I stand on the shoulders of hundreds of talented Aboriginal artists. However until now, very little scholarly attention has been spent on the artistic processes that support Aboriginal artists’ in creating their work and expressing themselves through art specifically Native theatre. In 1991, a collaborative discourse between Plains Cree architect, Douglas Cardinal and Sto:lo poet Jeannette Armstrong was published in the book entitled *The Native Creative Process*. This book is the first written document to connect Aboriginal epistemology to contemporary Aboriginal artistic processes of creation. Other than this highly acclaimed source, very few Indigenous performing artists have had the privilege (e.g. academic attention and financial support) of researching, reflecting and documenting their artistic methodologies (philosophies) and methods (techniques) of creating Native theatre.

It is likely due to the systemic underfunding of the Aboriginal performing arts sector in Canada that most contemporary Aboriginal performing artists, ad hoc groups and Aboriginal arts organizations have not been in a position to fully envision, explore, and document their evolving approaches in Native theatre. Ultimately Canadian theatre is wrought in white privilege where historically Euro-Canadian theatre companies have centered on white middle class values, building on the hierarchies of European forms of "high art", "high culture" and classical European theatre methodologies. At the end of the
day, European forms of classical theatre in this country have been historically well funded. On the other hand, Native theatre has remained at the grassroots level often marginalized in the dominant Canadian theatre community, reduced to "community arts," not given adequate attention or resources within professional artistic and academic settings. In professional artistic settings, Native theatre schools struggle to keep their doors open never mind having the necessary support and resources to investigate, develop, and document the evolving nature of Indigenous theatre methodologies. The reality of the struggle of the contemporary Native performing arts sector is clear when looking at the lack of operational and multi-year funding and the limited infrastructures in place to support Aboriginal performing arts organizations in Canada today (IPAA Report, 2008). In a report written in 2005, Marie Clements poignantly outlines the historical context of Native theatre in Canada, arguing that Aboriginal theatre companies did not begin (like their counterparts in the dominant Euro-Canadian theatre community) with “a great grandfather benefactor.” Interestingly, the Native theatre sector in Canada also did not experience the large infusion of arts funding in the 1950’s, which contributed to the building of the dominant Canadian Western Euro-American system’s core infrastructure.

**Roots in Western Euro-American Theatre Traditions**

While many Aboriginal theatre artists agree that most of the current techniques (theatre methods) employed in their approaches to creation are often rooted in Western Euro-American theatrical traditions, to acknowledge this reality - that most Native theatre artists approach their work by relying on borrowed methods from European theatre (and modern dance) systems, is not to diminish the important work that contemporary
Aboriginal artists have done and are doing. After all, early Native theatre practitioners had to legitimize themselves within dominant theatre discourses by fitting into the European system. While some techniques are ultimately “the result of the adoption of “high” or “professional” dramatic structures, the history of which is essentially pan-European, adapted from the varying elements of classical, medieval, and modern drama” (Huntsman, 2000, p.81), many Aboriginal artists also agree that “no pure traditional form of Indian theatre presently exists – one must be created” (New, L. 2000, p.3; Favel, 2008 personal communication).

However, from my perspective, the continued use of Western Euro-American theatre techniques in Native theatre practices does not mean that Aboriginal theatre artists are using Western systems of thought to frame their work. Similar to the differences between methodologies⁹ and methods¹⁰, theatre methodologies and theatre methods are similar to the differences between artistic approaches in Native theatre (such as Native Performance Culture) and techniques (such as Laban or Grotowski River). To appreciate this difference, one must recognize that a methodology is a collection of theories, concepts, and beliefs that form a philosophical underpinning, whereas a method is a tool of gathering and interpreting knowledge (Smith, 1999).

Privileging Indigenous Frameworks of Knowing

Nonetheless, this thesis is interested in contributing to a public dialogue, and growing discourse on the divergent ways that Aboriginal performing artists are resisting as well as embracing European-based theatrical traditions in ways that align with

⁹ The term methodology is rooted in the areas of research in the academy. Generally, a methodology is a collection of theories, concepts and beliefs that form the philosophical underpinnings of a way of researching (a way of knowing). Indigenous methodologies are rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing and the holistic nature of Indigenous knowledge(s) often transcend the compartmentalized methodologies of disciplines (qualitative, ethnographic, etc.) within the academy (Smith, 1999).

¹⁰ A method is a tool or way of gathering knowledge that serves the methodology (Smith, 1999).
Indigenous methodologies and worldview. Arguably, it is through a process of artistic negotiation with Western theatre practices, that Aboriginal theatre artists are sometimes developing unique and innovative approaches to transforming Western theatre to Native performing artistic practices. Through this process of negotiation, Aboriginal artists are grounding their theatre practices in Indigenous epistemologies. Epistemologies are the underlying core theories of knowledge production.

From an Indigenous perspective, Indigenous theories are grounded in our stories whether traditional stories or lived stories, myths, legends, beliefs and ways of knowing, which is complexly braided in an understanding of “Self-In-Relation” to family, community and the world (Graveline, 1999) including all living beings and the cosmos. This Indigenous philosophical system of understanding the world not only shapes our Aboriginal values and daily activities, it also shows us a pathway to knowing, which informs our methods and techniques.

**Indigenizing Western Euro-American Theatre**

While Indigenous artists have been creating and expressing themselves in contemporary performing arts in Canada for over three decades now, many artists continue to uncritically take on Western theatrical methodologies (and their techniques) to guide their processes of creation. At the same time, there also exists a growing body of Aboriginal theatre practitioners who are actively questioning the underlying assumptions, biases and conclusions of Western theatrical systems, and thereby calling for the develop[ment of contemporary theatre methods based in the] methodology[ies] and performance practices of our ancestors” (Favel, 1990, p.69). According to Linda Smith

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11 Self-In-Relation is an Aboriginal philosophical model of understanding the world linked to an Aboriginal worldview. It is the framework upon which we form an Aboriginal identity. The approach to understanding starts with self and extends to family, community, and larger world (Graveline, 1999).
(1999) methodologies are based in the philosophies and epistemologies of a culture.

Two examples of artistic approaches in Native theatre that align their approaches of gathering, meaning making and expressing knowledge with Indigenous epistemologies in the process of creation are the Storyweaving Ensemble Method co-developed by Kuna/Rappahannock sisters Muriel Miguel, Gloria Miguel and Lisa Mayo of the Spiderwoman Theater tradition; and Native Performance Culture (NPC) developed through the collaborations of Floyd Favel, Plains Cree theatre director and playwright, and Monique Mojica, Kuna/Rappahannock playwright, actor and movement teacher. Ultimately these two artistic approaches to Native theatre (and likely many others which I am not familiar with) are rooted in Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. While these approaches simultaneously draw from Western Euro-American theatre techniques and Indigenous system of thought (epistemological lens), Storyweaving and NPC approaches do so, without sacrificing the integrity of an Indigenous system of knowing. While some of these approaches employ techniques from Western theatrical disciplines, I believe that the techniques are transformed into a larger Native creative process through an "Indigenizing" (Smith, 1999) process.

While the Indigenizing processes of the Storyweaving Ensemble Method is beyond the scope of this research, you can get a more in-depth understanding of the unique history and artistic practice of the Storyweaving Ensemble Method by referring to Anishnabe scholar, Jill Carter's PhD dissertation to be published in 2010. Alternatively, this thesis will focus on the philosophical practices of Native Performance Culture (NPC) examining the ways that this approach to Native theatre transforms Euro-Western theatre methods through a decolonizing process. This investigation of NPC will take place by
looking at the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project specifically.

**Decolonizing Western Theatre through Native Performance Culture (NPC)**

According to Maori scholar Linda Smith "decolonizing does not mean, a total rejection of Western knowledge" (Smith, 1999, p.39) rather, decolonizing and Indigenizing is more about centering Indigenous processes of knowing in our contemporary ways of creating knowledge thereby honouring our epistemological frameworks.

From my perspective, as an emerging Native Performance Culture (NPC) practitioner, we must be careful to not situate the NPC approach to Native theatre within an authenticity discourse that fixes Indigenous knowledge in the past. Within an authenticity discourse, for a contemporary Indigenous approach to creation to be considered "Native," practitioners must do things exactly as done in the past. Ultimately "at the heart of views of authenticity is a belief that indigenous cultures cannot change, [cannot be influenced by and adopt Western approaches of knowledge production] cannot recreate themselves and still claim to be indigenous" (Smith, 1999, p. 74). Simply put, this ideological form of cultural essentialism\(^\text{12}\) fixes Indigenous contemporary knowledge production (including practices in Native drama/theatre) in a monolithic and unchanging past. Arguably, this mentality is rooted in a European colonial system of thought that has historically reduced Indigenous ways of knowing to a sub-level of knowing.

Alternatively, I will argue that Indigenous peoples, culture(s) and Indigenous ways of knowing are highly adaptive and resilient able to change and transform when it

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\(^{12}\)“Essentialism is a complex concept that is commonly understood as the belief that a set of unchanging properties (essences) delineates the construction of a particular category – for example, indigenous people, African Americans, White people, women and so on”. The tendency among cultural anthropologists is to fix Indigenous knowledge(s) within a “historical artifact far removed from contemporary life…Activities or identities thus that fall outside of this narrow backward-looking classification are deemed unauthentic, impure, or phony” (Denzin, 2008, p.142).
serves us to do so. If you look at Aboriginal history, Aboriginal cultures have always been open to willingly adopting European practices as long as they served our needs and aligned with our core values and worldview. For example the adoption of the horse and rifles are perfect examples of the ways that Aboriginal people in Canada consciously embraced European practices in ways that served our way of life. Therefore we must be willing to recognize that Indigenous ways of knowing are heterogeneous and fully capable of being dynamic while simultaneously retaining the integrity of our unique value systems. To simply confine Indigenous ways of knowing (including forms of Native drama including storytelling and oral traditions) to the past does not only discredit our resiliency and abilities to transform ourselves while simultaneously maintaining the integrity of our value system, it is firmly entrenched in imperial and colonial mentalities that reduce Indigenous knowledge to one that cannot change.

However, while Indigenous knowledge(s) are highly sophisticated, complex, and constantly evolving, they do require one to be immersed in Aboriginal cultural and living experiential contexts. These culturally informed experiences inform the philosophical lens. While cultural contexts can be urban or rural they often involve having a connection to community, working facility of Indigenous languages and experiential knowledge(s) ranging from living in relation to the land, and participating in ceremonial practices. In my opinion, these cultural contexts inform the central integrity and epistemological underpinnings of our unique ways of knowing. For instance, Indigenous processes of knowing are in dialogue with All-Our-Relations, and Indigenous lifestyle and ceremonial practices give breathing room for this inter-dialogue between humans and all beings to occur. Without respect for the heart of Indigenous systems of thought, which is embodied
in our teachings and languages we enter the possibility of speaking from outside a
cultural framework outside Indigenous frameworks of knowing.

Without being firmly rooted in Aboriginal cultural contexts, we also risk speaking
from a colonized position, because the oppressive regimes of colonialism have
undermined Aboriginal peoples' access to our ways of learning, and have thus caused
many Aboriginal people to unconsciously internalize Western frameworks of knowing.
Western frameworks not only privilege mind over body, emotions and spirit, they tend to
sever our processes of knowing from All-Our-Relations. Therefore the uncritical
adoption of Western frameworks of knowing can be oppressive in the decolonizing
projects of Indigenous artists. In fact, uncritical adoption of Western frameworks often
continue to subordinate Indigenous ways of creating art in comparison to Western
frameworks, thus reproducing harmful relations of power steeped in colonialism.

Therefore, the answer to decolonizing Native theatre practices lie in consciously
and discriminately questioning the core assumptions, biases, and political underpinnings
of Western Euro-American theatre methodologies as well as methods (techniques). In my
firsthand experience, NPC practitioners are interested in this decolonizing project. As you
will come to see in the following chapters, NPC practitioners are actively questioning the
underlying theories, beliefs, conclusions, politics, economics and social aspects of
Western theatrical traditions in order to see where they align with Indigenous sources of
knowledge and cultural contexts.

In the context of the Native theatre community in Canada, I have witnessed some
Aboriginal theatre artists bolster Western ways of creating theatre over Native
Performance Culture (NPC) approaches. In the process these artists reduce NPC to not
actually being theatre at all. The marginalization of NPC approaches within Native theatre contexts, is not only steeped in colonial relations of power that privilege Western systems over Indigenous ways of knowing, the act of hierarchal comparisons creates divides in the Native theatre community. By reducing NPC to a “not theatre” category, some Native theatre practitioners create a dichotomous us versus them attitude, which tends to place Native theatre discourses within a Eurocentric mentality. These relations are steeped in power that manipulate the Aboriginal artistic community into dichotomous thinking, creating conflicts and opposing camps of real theatre and other, thus strengthening forms of colonial oppression.

While I believe that the divide among some Native theatre artists can be connected to forms of internalized colonialism, lateral violence also plays a central role in this ongoing divide. Lateral violence is an adverse effect of colonialism that reveals itself through the expression of animosity and uncooperative relations within a community. These relations play out within the Aboriginal arts community against/between members who are facing similar injustices entrenched in the history of colonialism. Personally, I believe that Aboriginal artists are some of the most vulnerable people to be affected by lateral violence, because the systemic underfunding of the arts in Canada and the Aboriginal arts system itself forces community organizations and artists into competitive positions for the limited amount of arts funding.

**Conclusion**

By acknowledging the history and diversity in contemporary Indigenous performing art practices, one can appreciate the unique approaches, interests and challenges of Native Performance Culture (NPC) practitioners today. It is equally important to recognize how many contemporary Aboriginal performing artists are
honouring the underlying nature of Indigenous epistemologies by using Euro-American
theatre methods to take up oral traditions in a contemporary context, and in turn are
reshaping the arts and decolonizing European constructions of high art.

In the next chapter, I will give readers background on the focal point of this
research – the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project. By sharing a firsthand practitioner
perspective, I will review this NPC project by sharing a project description and providing
readers with a better sense of our artistic processes of gathering, making meaning and
expressing Cree knowledge on the stage. I will also offer a brief background on the
historical context of the project in order to illuminate the tensions that exist in everyday
contemporary realities of Omushkego Cree people living in the North.
Chapter Six

Artistic Practitioner Reflections

We all have streams flowing in us and our streams are teeming with fish and other forms of life. All we need to do is reach down and bring something up to the surface. But the most important part is when you bring one of these creations to the surface, don’t be judgemental and compare it to all of the other fish in the world. Be thankful for it, because it’s yours. That’s where you should write from, that’s where you should perform from (Theobald, E., 2000, p.362).

Introduction

This chapter shares my firsthand experiences as a NPC artistic practitioner involved in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project. By reexamining the activities undertaken in this artistic process, I as the primary researcher of this Master’s thesis aim to better understand the NPC artistic project’s purposes, processes, and ways of working with community in order to document an example of Native Performance Culture (NPC) in an Omushkego Cree context.

Sources of Inspiration

Every creative work starts somewhere, in a moment of insight of inspiration where a tiny voice within urges us to explore it a bit further to delve into our emotional worlds a bit deeper. Sometimes the work comes out of silence and sometimes it comes out of a need to understand and reconcile the past.

The vision of the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project surfaced a few years ago through sharing personal stories over tea with my best friend and relative Erika Iserhoff, a gifted Cree woman. Through a shared dismemberment from Cree ways of knowing, a spark and creative impulse emerged through a vision to gather Cree family stories, legends, mythologies, collective history, material culture, and work with Cree Elders to co-create a piece of performing art that tells the stories of Cree people collectively.
Through the process of beginning to co-create a play, we hoped to re-member ourselves to our Cree community and Cree culture through art. The *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project began with this intention – a higher self purpose to reunite with our Cree ways of life.

**Omushkego Cree Water Stories**

*Project Description*

The vision of the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project was to tell Cree life stories about living on the land and in relation to water on the contemporary stage through performance. By using movement, body, text and sound as well as visual art, stage and costume design, this work-in-progress sought to build on the evolving philosophical approaches and practices of Native Performance Culture (NPC), a unique approach to Native theatre co-developed by artistic veterans Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica. Phase One of the project took place in Cochrane Ontario and surrounding areas for 10 days in late July and early August 2008.

This Master’s thesis aims to reflect back on the first phase of the project and document some of the collaborative artists and community members’ experiences and learning. By reflecting on the artistic process, which involved a preliminary community consultation, creative explorations on the land, and in the body for script development and stage design, I will share my experiences in hopes to foster a dialogue on the diverse practices of Native Performance Culture (NPC) practitioners.

**Native Performance Culture (NPC) Mentorship**

While the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project is a collaborative community-centered project first envisioned by Erika Iserhoff and myself, teachers and mentors Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica played a major role as mentors and co-directors in
shaping the work thus far. Over the last 20 years, these two artistic veterans have become highly skilled and knowledgeable in the area of Native theatre and have contributed greatly to the Native theatre movement in North America. Moreover, Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica have spent the last two decades working together developing integrated practices in Native performance, which include both Indigenous and non-Indigenous methods for training actors and creating Native theatre. For this reason, Erika and I felt that these artists were the most suitable teachers to guide us in our vision, because their philosophical approach to Native theatre aligned with our values, which centered on reconnecting with Cree knowledge(s) through artistic practices.

Native Performance Culture (NPC) is a unique approach to creating Native theatre that is interested in “returning to the sources of Aboriginal culture” (Favel-Starr, 1991) to create contemporary performing art. In chapter six, I will review the practice and historical background of Native Performance Culture (NPC) in more depth. Our mentorship with Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project centered on the application of Native Performance Culture (NPC) principles in an Omushkego Cree context.

Artistic Collaboration

As emerging contemporary Aboriginal artists, Erika’s and my own artistic interests intersected when wanting to work in collaboration with each other and research Cree history and material culture and work with Cree people in a community-centered process. Moreover, our shared artistic vision rested in a sense of responsibility as Cree women to uncover Cree stories in relation to water, and restore Aboriginal knowledge(s) which we experienced as systematic erasure, silencing and fragmenting due to the
devastating history of colonialism. As emerging Aboriginal artists, we aimed to reinterpret Aboriginal history and ways of knowing through our own contemporary artistic lenses and reflect our reinterpretations back to our communities in order to remember, restore, and revitalize Cree knowledge(s) in a contemporary context. While Erika and I share mutual artistic interests, we also shared a sense of disconnection and a yearning to remember ourselves to our Cree ways of knowing.

Engaging Community

The artistic vision came to life when we began working with Cree community members and gathering real life stories about Cree peoples’ experiences of living in relation to land and water. The vision of the artistic project was to engage Cree community in Cochrane and surrounding areas in a creative process by asking people to share their personal and family stories, which would then be transported to the contemporary theatrical stage. Over the 10 day duration, Erika and I visited with over 13 Cree Elders, community and family members and listened to their stories. From this perspective, the project returned and engaged community in the process of writing a script collaboratively, which took many stories and weaved them together in a montage of short vignettes. This tapestry of stories was meant to reflect local people and a shared history. In reality the engagement of community has only just begun the community consultation process, as we have learned consultation is an ongoing process. In chapter eight, I will share research findings from interviews that examine the ways that artists engaged and worked with Aboriginal community specifically.

In the early consultation process, Erika and I engaged Cree community members throughout Omushkego Cree country including our own family members, community
members and Elders currently living in Cochrane, Moosonee and Moose Factory. Cochrane and Moosonee are both small Northern municipalities, which both have large Aboriginal populations. Moose Factory is a First Nation community. While these particular communities were centered in the consultation process, the community members and Elders that participated originated from Omushkego Cree territories beyond these confines. In the staging of stories for the script development, the collaborative team ended up privileging specific stories from four key community members/Elders living in the town of Cochrane and two Elders living in Moosonee. For the workshop presentation, the artistic group chose to present our work-in-progress in Cochrane.

**Historical Context for the Project**

Since Cochrane ended up being the primary site for the larger Elder’s group meeting and our workshop performance as well as the place that Erika and I drew our early experiences as we both grew up in Cochrane, in many ways, the small town of Cochrane ended up being one of the primary contexts from which we drew material in the research and development stage of the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project.

**Silencing of Aboriginal Voices**

While Erika and I both grew up in Cochrane, in retrospect, the small town societal norms were covertly hostile to Cree history and our vulnerable sense of Cree identity. Ultimately, small town social values that hinge on the preference of Western ideology and higher socio-economic class over Cree ways of knowing were pervasive growing up. Furthermore, these Eurocentric values often acted as vehicles for some Aboriginal people to gain entry into certain social groups. However I as a mixed-blood Cree woman did not have this social capital, and therefore, I was ever so cognizant of these unwritten rules. In reality, many Aboriginal families living in rural Northern Ontario faced the erasure of
Cree history, dismissal of Cree rights, and sovereignty to land, and racial stereotyping of Aboriginal people in education, government, law, religion and media. At the end of the day, Cree people who asserted Cree ways of life often did so at the margins of town. Ultimately growing up in small town Northern Ontario somewhere beneath the erasure and silencing of Aboriginal peoples’ existence, sat an eerie feeling in the pit of my stomach where a deep wound within me festered around this country’s unacknowledged past. In many ways, our artistic work wanted to air this internal wound, shed light on this history, and give a vehicle for my body’s voice to express itself through performance.

In my opinion, the rich contributions of Aboriginal Nations to local history and connections to land in Cochrane and surrounding areas historically have been largely unacknowledged in meaningful ways that give the voice and power to local First Nations people to tell their versions of history. Although power relations in local governments are shifting with the newly elected Mayor, Lawrence Martin, who is Cree from Fort Albany First Nation, it is safe to say that historically Aboriginal narratives have been erased from the area’s history. While local tourist economies rely heavily on Aboriginal misrepresentations in their advertising and promotion, I feel that these misrepresentations continue to be controlled by non-Aboriginal conceptions. In fact, there are only a handful of local historical narratives that actually acknowledge Aboriginal peoples unique and living relationship to land, and involve Aboriginal people in a meaningful way, and the ones that I am familiar with are largely problematic and inaccurate.

First and foremost, the history of contact between Cree Nations and European settlers in the James Bay area is simply not told enough, and if it is, it has been largely told by a European perspective. And although the town of Cochrane is proud of its Polar
Bear mascot “Chimo,” which is apparently an Inuit word for “welcome,” neither polar bears nor Inuit people have a longstanding history in this area. In my opinion, the inaccurate depiction of Cochrane’s connections to Aboriginal culture through associations with Chimo and Polar Bears, in my mind actually trivializes the true local Aboriginal histories to this land and place. In addition, local museums have largely focused on pioneer history and the false narratives of early settlers. Meanwhile, Cree and Ojibway Nations have lived in the area for thousands of years while the town of Cochrane was only incorporated in 1910. As contemporary Aboriginal artists, Erika and I recognized the need for local Aboriginal narratives to be told publicly in Cochrane in order to dispel the myths and misrepresentations of Aboriginal people historically. We also wanted to educate people cross-culturally, and even within our own families about the real life experiences of Aboriginal people who live right in our backyard.

**Misrepresentations of Aboriginal People**

Furthermore, we should not underestimate the effects that the tokenistic and colonial misrepresentations of Aboriginal people in media, education and tourist economies continues to have on society’s general attitudes toward First Nations people. Local trading posts in the North are mostly owned and operated by non-Aboriginal people, but tend to be geared toward tourist economies that thrive on selling “authentic” pan-Indian souvenirs often mass produced in places like China. However in reality the history of these tokenistic instruments of coercion are rarely questioned even though the images themselves were originally fabricated by the colonial enterprise based on European fantasies about Aboriginal people, which have historically served to relegate Aboriginal people to a “fixed signifying position,” as an object that fulfills the libidinal desires of the white European gaze. The problems with these inaccurate depictions of
Aboriginal people is that the exploitation and “commercialization of Indian images… reminds the general public of the glories of the old frontier” (Sawchuk, 1999, p.97). In unconscious and subliminal ways, the tokenistic images celebrate colonialism, because the notion of the colonial frontier is rooted in a set of images created by early European expansionists that painted Aboriginal people as “inferior” and “degenerate.” These images still conjure up widespread misassociations with the “discovery” of the Americas including iconic images that either romanticize and/or demonize Aboriginal people, but always serve to “Other” Aboriginal people. By “Othering” Aboriginal people, non-Aboriginal people dehumanize Aboriginal people thus reducing them to emotionless caricatures of the past. The boundaries of these fictitious cartoons relegate Aboriginal to “Other” thus reducing Aboriginal to a sub-level when compared to more “civilized” Europeans. “The trafficking and manipulation of colonized peoples’ representation and images… is a key strategy of [ongoing] colonial discourse” (Moereira-Slepoy, G. 2002, p.7)

Unfortunately, the ongoing misrepresentation of Aboriginal people today in trading post merchandise and other areas like the media and outdated educational resources continues to pose challenges for contemporary Aboriginal people, because it misinforms the public about who we actually are. Moreover, traditional and contemporary Aboriginal artists cannot compete, when selling Aboriginal art against these cheaper mass produced and exploitative merchandises. The merchandise not only exploits the history of Aboriginal people, perpetuating falsities of the colonial frontier, they dehumanize and continue to silence contemporary Aboriginal people.
However, the most problematic and tokenistic figure, in my opinion in our small town’s history is the infamous Chief Commando figure - a carnival symbol and character who dressed in a Plains Cree headdress and came out during the Cochrane Winter Carnival every February. According to Pakes (1999), Plains Indian culture is a common stereotype used to encapsulate all Aboriginal groups. These stereotypes are rooted in 19th century European colonial art that historically perpetuate images and associations of tipis, buckskin clothing, beadwork, feathered headdresses and horses with all Aboriginal groups. While the images of Plains Cree culture are somewhat accurate for some Plains tribal groups, they do not accurately represent the diversity of Aboriginal tribal groups or the uniqueness of local Omushkego Cree people of the James Bay.

Thankfully, the infamous Chief Commando character resigned in the early eighties and the headdress was given to the local Ininew Friendship Centre in Cochrane. Interestingly, both Native and non-Native local people dressed up as Chief Commando albeit likely for different reasons. Early on I understand that the initial Chief Commando mascot was played by non-Aboriginal people. From a non-Aboriginal perspective, the tradition of “playing Indian” is not new, and continues to be a rampant phenomenon in American culture today (Deloria, 1998). Later on, I understand that Aboriginal people living in Cochrane decided to take back the right to represent themselves through the dressing up as Chief Commando.

Irregardless of this history, the misrepresentation of Aboriginal people embodied in depictions such as Chief Commando are arguably rooted in inaccurate and racial stereotypes based in the false images of the colonial frontier. While the reclamation of Aboriginal rights to represent ourselves is a huge feat that should not be simply criticized,
I would like to emphasize that the continued associations of Aboriginal people with these kinds of images is a prescribed stereotype rooted in a colonial discourse.

**My Experience of Playing Indian**

The truth is at the age of seventeen I unwittingly wore the Chief Commando headdress when I competed in the local Miss Chimo Princess Pageant part of the Cochrane Winter Carnival. As part of the beauty pageant competition, a group of contestants and I created a dance performance based on the infamous YMCA song. I was elected and willingly dressed up as the Aboriginal figure in the YMCA number. At the time I remembered seeing the Chief Commando headdress at the local Friendship Centre so I asked my pageant sponsor (the Ininew Friendship Centre) if I could use the headdress for the show. The YMCA spectacle was a huge hit on pageant night.

Through this experience, I have come to coin a spectacle as a performance based in stereotypical images. In this instance, the stereotype was based in the Chief Commando character: a colonial prescriptive image of Aboriginal people associated with a Plains Cree stereotype. Spectacles tend to be emotionally vacant representations that are not storied up or based in inner truths and real life experiences. Moreover, the stereotypical images inherent in spectacles are generally not put through any sophistication artistic process, which often attempts to develop a real emotion filled character, story and/or idea artistically. Instead spectacles are non-artistic, because they rely on deeply held and socially perpetuated associations that are conjured up by the power of the stereotypical image itself.
While I now recognize the problems with “playing Indian” and dressing up as Chief Commando, primarily because it perpetuates a Plains Indian racial stereotype embedded in the fantasies and prescribed representations of Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginals, I also recognize how these stereotypes continue to misinform the commonly held notions of “authenticity” and “real Indians”, the formation of which is built on non-Native fantasies. More importantly, I also recognize that at the time “playing Indian” was unfortunately the only acceptable way for me to express my pride in being Cree albeit it was based in a European prescription. Moreover, through self-reflection and research, I have become more aware of the social impacts of uncritically participating in colonial misrepresentations of Aboriginal people, which are fundamentally rooted, confined and constrained by imperialist and racist attitudes. Moreover through my early experiences of “playing Indian” in a carnival spectacle, I have become increasingly political in my performing art work, which not only challenges Eurocentric misrepresentations, but has
more recently moved toward centering Cree ways of knowing and real life stories in artistic processes.

**Right to Represent Ourselves**

Ultimately my participation in Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to creating Native theatre is rooted in a political agenda that aims to contribute to the cultural survival and revitalization of Cree ways of knowing through contemporary art practices. As an artist, I recognize the significance for Aboriginal peoples to represent ourselves and tell our own stories to share our own inner truths. This right to represent ourselves inside-out is a form of voice and expression (Smith, 1999) that is rooted in the holistic nature of real life experiences, which is an Indigenous approach. And while many Aboriginal artists spend much time today countering the hegemonic dominant misrepresentations of Aboriginal people historically, I also believe that as artists we must move beyond simply resisting the colonial past to simultaneously reclaiming our unique tribal identities and reconnecting ourselves to our origins of knowing.

**Resisting Pan-Indian Identity**

Although I did not grow up in a First Nation community per se, I was fortunate to grow up in the landscape and territory of my Cree relatives and ancestors. While the process of colonization has fragmented me from learning Cree lifestyle practices (traditional hunting, fishing and trapping techniques) and Cree language, I did experience and witness glimmers of my Omushkego Cree culture beneath the surface of the silence. While the culture was not fully intact, in the subtle, invisible, and unspoken but palatable ways, our culture is alive in the daily interactions among my family and community members.
Nonetheless, at the age of eighteen, I left Northern Ontario and my large close
knit family, to pursue a post-secondary education in Toronto where I entered Anishnabe
(also known as Ojibway) and Haudenosaunee (also known as Iroquois) territories. In an
effort to learn more about my Aboriginal heritage and the real history, I began taking
Aboriginal Studies courses at the University of Toronto. The courses offered at
University of Toronto understandably centered on local Anishnabe and Haudenosaunee
languages as well as pan-Indian perspectives on Aboriginal history, politics, law, health
and literature. Despite the general overarching focus on pan-Indian experiences in my
studies, I did not necessarily see my Omushkego Cree history and culture reflected in
course curriculum. As a result of not previously being strongly rooted and aware of my
Cree culture, thus fragmented, I became increasingly confused and unable to necessarily
always distinguish between tribal differences, and moreover appreciate the uniqueness of
my own Omushkego Cree history and culture. At the same time we cannot underestimate
how the experiences of many James Bay Cree people from this region are diverse as well.

I would like to stress here that pan-Indian identity is the synthesis of an
overarching and common Aboriginal culture. While Aboriginal tribal groups share many
similarities, we also embody many differences. It is important to acknowledge that the
pan-Indian movement has been an effective way for Aboriginal tribal Nations to unite in
the resistance to European invasion, and through this union, we have harnessed strength
collectively. However at the opposite end of the spectrum, pan-Indian identity has also
obscured the cultural differences among Aboriginal tribal and language families. To
complicate the problems with pan-Indian identity further, we must also acknowledge that
Aboriginal people have always shared different aspects of our evolving cultures among
each other through inter-tribal relations. Ultimately sharing aspects of our culture is not a new phenomenon.

Therefore, in many ways the journey of returning to Cree Elders to co-create a play about James Bay Cree history and culture is about resisting the overarching pan-Indian identity and reclaiming the uniqueness of my tribal roots. While Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to Native theatre are relatively new, the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project has attempted to localize the approach to a James Bay Cree West side context. This Omushkego Cree approach to NPC is still in development. While it is under the tutelage and co-direction of two non-Omushkego Cree artistic veterans (Monique Mojica and Floyd Favel), the two emerging artistic collaborators of the work (Erika Iserhoff and myself) are Omushkego Cree women. At the same time, we must also acknowledge that as mixed-blood Cree women, we have experienced tenuous connections to our Cree culture and communities, which are likely unique from other Cree people in the area. However, this thesis demonstrates how Aboriginal artists who have been fragmented from community can begin to reclaim and reconnect fragments of Aboriginal culture by returning to Cree stories, legends, material culture, language and collective history to create art.

**Gathering, Meaning Making and Expressing Cree Knowledge**

In the following section I would like to reflect more on the creative processes employed in the script and stage development for the first phase of the collaborative and community-centered performing art project entitled Omushkego Cree Water Stories.
Significance of Stories

Stories played a central role in the gathering, meaning making and expressing processes of the script and stage development. For Cree people, stories are as vital as the river system’s need for water’s ever flowing force - you can’t have one without the other. Therefore it seemed only natural that stories were privileged as the pathways of exchange between artists and Elders/community members. Like river’s arteries, stories act as tributary channels funneling creativity, memories, and shared history throughout the community. In the context of Native theatre, the transformative abilities of stories, is an undeniably powerful force that facilitates creativity, movement, and change. While the project itself aimed to tell stories on the stage publicly, the process of gathering tribal stories from community members honoured storytelling as a vehicle of transmitting knowledge. As artists, the retelling of peoples’ stories through improvisational methods also helped us develop inter-relational meaning with the stories. Improvisation was used as a tool to explore the theatrical elements of particular stories shared in more depth.

Significance of Water

The significance of water was also a central source of inspiration in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project. Omushkego means people of the swampland, and nipi (water) saturates the porous soils of our Northern landscape with rich healing properties. As artists, we aimed to reconnect ourselves to the healing properties of water. In preparation for the creative work, Erika and I participated in a water ceremony and gathered many stories centering on water. We also researched and collected information about the Northern river system and their complex ecosystems as well as James Bay Cree peoples’ historic and present relationship to the rivers, swamps, and bay.
In the process we learned about the intimate and evolving relationship that Cree people have to water. Not that long ago, Cree people relied on our collective respect and understanding for the power of water. It was our water ways that brought us together as a collective group of people. According to Harry Achneepineskum, the Cree word mammamattawa actually means “the river where they all joined” (1973) and illustrates perfectly the peoples’ important relationship to the river system. In addition, traditionally, Aboriginal women held pivotal roles in the family and band to gather water, protect, and pray for water. However rapid changes in Aboriginal social life influenced by colonialism, and economic development throughout the North have put our waterways in vulnerable and detrimental positions. Large dams are being constructed throughout Omushkego country diverting water from their natural drainage system. These widespread interferences in the natural flow of creation are having dramatic effects on the basin levels of many Northern lakes, rivers and the James Bay itself. This poem was inspired by our artistic group’s travels on the Abitibi River.
Weeping Waters
By: Candace Brunette

I see deadheads
tree stumps emerging from the skin of water.

Like a carefully crafted driftwood
rivers act as carvings of creation
on the canvas of earth.

But rivers edges are swelling up
exerting ever growing boundaries
in certain parts
and drought
in others.

In the name of electric progress
water takes on many forms.

I see deadheads
tree stumps emerging from wrenched dried up water.

We never think about the tears of water
as she stands still in time
manipulated
habituated
washed away
from her ever flowing.

Re-membering Rupert River
By: Candace Brunette
For: Stacy Bear

The heart is un-Ltd.
A place inside
that always
has room for the great river’s
ever flowing presence.
While early missionaries and governments coerced Cree women to abandon our collective responsibilities to protect the water through ceremonies, the increasing globalization and privatization of water resources is also eroding Cree peoples’ rights to our collective responsibilities for our water system. Hydro-electric dams, mining and other resource development in our ancestral territories are further exploiting Mother Earth and the cycles of Grandmother Moon and her water ways. These industrial enterprises have infiltrated our ancestral lands and contaminated our drinking supplies. In the face of modernity and industrial progress entrenched in imperialist and colonial ventures, it is becoming increasingly important for Cree people in particular Cree women to protect our waterways and renew our understanding, ways of knowing, and relationship to water.

Therefore throughout the creative process, Erika and I continued to trust in our unique female relationship to water. Through the lunar phases of the moon and our life giving birth rights as water bearers, we recognized the role that Aboriginal women play in sustaining humans’ respectful relationship to water. Therefore we felt compelled to explore our personal and familial relationships as Cree women to common river systems in our area. By gathering family stories in relation to water, we also discovered the tenacity of Cree women, and our many birthing stories. By framing the stories through water, we have attempted to re-member ourselves to the significance of water. We also wanted to inspire Cree people individually and collectively to remember our responsibilities for protecting and praying for the cleansing and renewal of the water, swamps, lakes, rivers, bays and oceans.
Engaging Land in Creative Discourse

The arctic watershed\textsuperscript{13} and Northern river system therefore acted as a framework to guide our creative investigation. The land and river systems provided artists with an entry point for discussions with Elders and family members in the community consultation process. In the creative research process, we discovered that the historic relationship to land and place transcended First Nation colonial land demarcations imposed by the \textit{Indian Act} legislation. Instead, interconnections between people were reinforced by our historic ties to the major tributary channels of the Northern river.

\textsuperscript{13} A watershed is draining system where all surface water drains into a same body of water. The arctic watershed covers over one-third of Canada reaching as far Southern Alberta to central Ontario to Baffin Island, and parts of North Dakota and Minnesota in the U.S. Basically, all the rivers within this geographic region, energetically flow upstream North into Hudson Bay and James Bay. However hydro development changes the rhythm, timing, and rate of the natural flow of fresh water.
systems, which have historically connected people in the James Bay area. The river system revealed itself and manifested as a form of creative expression, travel, and exchange, and formulated an Indigenous framework to our artistic approach.

The artistic inquiry also occurred in direct dialogue with the land and water. Through travels by boat and car to nearby rivers, artists had an opportunity to listen and dialogue with the land directly. Through embodied experiences in relation to land, artists witnessed the devastating changes in the landscape through the infiltration of hydro-electric development in the North. As we visited various historical landmarks near Cochrane including the Abitibi River, New Post Falls (a former Native settlement) and Moose River Crossing we took footage, gathered audio recordings, and collected sensory information. One day we traveled by boat along the Abitibi River, and we spent another day hiking along the river and walking along the train tracks, breathing, sharing childhood stories, and investigating the landscape. During these outdoor excursions, co-directors encouraged emerging artists to investigate the landscape, creative sparks were palatable and many creative possibilities were discovered, which have yet to be fully channeled into the work. Interestingly, through exploration on the land, artists began to see more fully how the train and rivers systems of travel, conflicted yet paralleled with each other, and through this discovery we decided to juxtaposition these two divergent modes of transportation in the artistic work. Ultimately the train and river as modes of travel poignantly illustrate two different ways of living in relation to land.
The focus of our work also involved researching and gathering sources of Aboriginal knowledge relating to James Bay Cree culture and history through interviews with family members and Elders. We also researched museum archives, examining Cree material culture. We began asking questions and learning words in the Cree language, listening to family and Elders’ life stories, and working with Cree legends to investigate them to make meaning from them. This information was brought together and applied by examining the theatrical elements of different stories in order to develop narrative and stage structures.
Approach to Set and Costume Design

As part of the philosophical approach to NPC, artists employed a unique approach to set design, which involved researching Cree social life as a point of departure. As a visual and textile artist, Erika took on the central responsibility of sketching, designing and building a small scale set structure based on a central idea agreed upon by the group. Ideas were often inspired by the knowledge shared with us by Elders. In meetings with local Elders, artists learned about the practice of shadows hand puppets as way to tell stories and how this technique to telling stories was often used by Cree people on the prospector tent walls to teach children. The prospector tent has been used for many years by Omushkego Cree people in the James Bay area in traditional and modern ways. Therefore the collaborative team began exploring the dramatic qualities of shadow storytelling techniques on the stage. For our research and development, Erika recreated a small scale prospector tent as the main structure for the stage. The prospector tent is made of poles and canvas, which easily translates shadows on the stage with proper lighting. Much like European theatre practices and its relationship to contemporary forms of Aboriginal storytelling, the prospector tent represents the ways that European and Cree practices come together to serve a functional purpose in a uniquely Indigenous way.

Figure 10 “Cree Shadows Stories on the Prospector Tent”
As a costume designer, Erika was also interested in researching and integrating Cree material culture into her creative process in textile design. Through archival research, Erika learned about a Swampy Cree coat no longer created or worn by Omushkego Cree people. Unfortunately, these coats now only reside in national museums and European collections. However the collaborative vision of our work became to replicate the Swampy Cree coat for the stage. Therefore the reclamation of stolen Cree knowledge that was once “discovered, extracted, appropriated and distributed” (Smith, 1999, p.58) through Anthropological Western research, and then housed in museum “collections” and private galleries is a part of the Native Performance Culture (NPC) unique approach of reclaiming and recreating Indigenous knowledge for artistic expression. The artists’ attempts to reclaim lost ancestral practices through researching artifacts and reproducing them for the stage has become a newfound facet of the project’s unique approach to costume and set design.

Erika Iserhoff was also interested in investigating and developing embodied ways of creating costumes. Therefore as a costume designer, Erika embodied the characters in the stories to feel them in her body before creating and/or conceptualizing her costumes. In this excerpt Erika shares her experiences and thoughts of developing costume ideas from an inside-out approach.

By embodying the characters and moving around with you in the stories, I could see what you could possibly be wearing. I had a lot of imagery and animation was happening. A lot of visual standpoints. (Iserhoff, 2009, personal interview)

**Approach to Script Development**

As an emerging performance writer, I was similarly interested in reclaiming stories for the stage by working with Cree life stories (including my own) and shared
collective history in the script development. While the script for the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project has a long way to go before it is complete, my evolving creative process has also centered on privileging an embodied form of writing that honours the breath and living body in the development as well as the transmission of stories for the stage. Although performance is the medium of expression for my writing, my creative process begins by engaging the body and taking embodied approaches to writing, which employs improvisational investigations in the studio. Through embodied investigations, the body becomes an epistemological site of investigation, where I discover characters’ physicalization first and develop intimate and evolving relationships with characters’ before committing text to page. This approach to playwriting is greatly influenced by the Spiderwoman Theatre and Monique Mojica’s approach to writing. After sitting with Elders and listening to their personal life stories, artists went into the studio and re-told stories through embodied techniques inspired by the infamous Storyweaving Ensemble Method.

“As an artistic approach, we began our studio work by warming the body up through different exercises that connected artists with our breath, spinal movement, and voice. After a warm up, the artistic group moved into practicing various improvisational exercises including movement, sound and gesture techniques inspired by Muriel Miguel’s Storyweaving Ensemble Method approach. When artists felt in the zone and interconnected with each other, one artist would then enter the creative space while others observed by the side line. The artist in the creative space through improvisation would retell a story (either a personal, family and/or Elder’s story) through movement, sound and gesture. After the short improve, the other artists who were observing, would reenter
creative space and repeat and/or retell poignant parts of the story back to the artist. This process was repeated for each short vignette explored in the creative space. Later on, artists would weave the short stories together into a tapestry of stories. As a poet, I also used my personal poetry, which is embodied in nature as a creative entry point into improvisational script writing. For a couple of vignettes I used my own personal poetic texts as gateways to finding the voices of characters and developing the script.

**Weaving Stories Together**

The Storyweaving Ensemble Method\(^{14}\) is a unique approach to Indigenous theatre developed by Muriel Miguel. As storytellers, we re-told approximately 10 personal, familial and Elders stories on our feet using embodied texts that privileged gestures, movements and sounds. Ultimately, the weaving of several stories together through a montage of poetic narratives is a signature aspect of the Storyweaving Ensemble Method. The fusing of several stories together was an aspect of our artistic approach, which was inspired by Storyweaving. However it is important to recognize that one of the fundamental differences between the Storyweaving Ensemble Method and the approach taken in the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project thus far, is that our project’s artistic practice did not necessarily take an ensemble approach nor did we work through a process with collaborators that allowed each collaborator to tell their own stories themselves. For instance, Elders did not tell their own stories on the stage. Although Erika and I worked collaboratively, and engaged community in an artistic process, we were ultimately retelling some peoples’ personal stories on their behalf. While we retold community members’ stories with their permission, as artists we must recognize that we

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\(^{14}\) Muriel Miguel’s approach to telling and weaving stories together is stylized, involving a keen eye for detecting patterns between stories, and making meaning from stories by stringing them together in a unified multi-layered performance of narratives.
ultimately controlled aspects of the reinterpretation and expression of certain peoples’ stories.

_Tapping into Embodied Cultural Legacies_

By telling stories through the body, we also tapped into embodied forms of writing and telling stories metaphorically. The body then becomes a book that unveils a deeper story, a metaphorically embodied story that transcends generations tapping into creative spaces and cultural legacies within. The belief that memories are encoded within our bodies and transcend generations is a common idea among many Aboriginal performing artists. I believe that within our bodily vessels we each carry a living map of our past and its interconnections to our ancestors, ancestral lands and all living beings. Whether we are conscious of this reality or not, we are living expressions of our ancestors manifested in the present form. Our relationship to our mothers and her mother and her mother before that, is our cultural legacy embodied within. As Aboriginal people, this embodied cultural legacy is our living connection to this land and place, and this inner truth affirms our sovereignty. Our expressions of life through contemporary and traditional forms of art illuminate this complex and deeply held understanding of the world. Our bodily connection through the creative process of suspending the dominant logical linear mind, Aboriginal artists tap into the energetic and embodied fields of creativity.

Unfortunately, Indigenous bodies, minds, emotions, and spirits have been socially manipulated and controlled for hundreds of years under the colonial governments’ regime, and this oppressive interference has in many cases adversely impacted Aboriginal peoples’ interconnections to the inter-dialogue between our bodies, minds, emotions, and
spirits. Nevertheless, many Indigenous artists continue to assert that “blood memory” and/or “cellular memory” is stored in our bodies, muscles and DNA, and can be tapped into and expressed through creativity, improvisation and orality.

Activating blood memories through orality is a central aspect of the Native Performance Culture (NPC) approach. The concept of blood memory in this research is rooted in an Indigenous epistemology, which is found in one’s personal, cultural and ancestral location through an intergenerational connection that transcends time (Murphy, 2007, McLeod, 2006). Blood memory is also connected to a relationship with Indigenous language, land and history (McLeod, 2006). It is worth noting that the term blood memory has caused some controversies over the years, primarily because it conjures up a scientific and genetic biological understanding (Allan, 1997). Nevertheless, the Indigenous performing arts community uses the term blood memory, as a spiritually grounded metaphor to link contemporary people with ancestors of the past. Honouring our ancestors is an inherent aspect of Indigenous worldview.

**The Power of Creativity**

**Body as River of Truth**

From a creative starting point, I believe that artists can dig into embodied blood memories through the process of creativity, and tell stories that are connected to the past. Through the creative process, artists have the power to uncover unconscious cultural legacies. Ultimately the body is a river of memories and experiences, which make it a source of knowledge if we are willing to listen to its many internal messages. Our bodies feel and express all of our emotions, and emotions are the roadmap to creative exploration. The creative centre is embodied inside and is the place where our emotional
voice is rooted. The creative centre is our inner truth embodied within. The creative centre is not tangible, logical or rational, but felt and holistically understood. The creative centre is expressed through our bodily impulses, sensations and emotions. I firmly believe that artistic processes that honour the body can tap into cultural legacies embodied within.

Sadly, Indigenous people have been taught to ignore our bodily impulses, to hold our breaths and bite our words – to not speak our truth. This oppressive socialization has reinforced the cutting off between inner impulses and our expressive selves. However, through improvisational approaches to expressing ourselves, Aboriginal artists can begin to tap into subconscious and deeply held knowledge through bodily impulses, voices, gestures, and movements in safe and creative spaces that gives us an opportunity to look at ourselves, to face our humanity and retrace our relationships to the past. Through contemporary approaches to orality, Aboriginal artists can renew our relationship with our bodies transforming it from passive container to active agent. We can also begin to develop a relationship with our bodies as receivers, carriers and transmitters of ancestral memories encoded inside.

**The River as a Metaphor for Improvisation**

Through deep improvisational work, Aboriginal artists can return to stories and knowledge that goes back generations. This process of creation not only illuminates the shadows (the unconscious) facets of our historical legacies, the ones that have been silenced, but the river of improvisation allows the intuition to guide us, which can show us the way home. I like to use the river as a metaphor for improvisation, because the river of improvisation requires artists to jump in and let go, to follow up the stream of bodily
emotions, sensations and imagery. Like the river of life, humans should not control our bodies in improvisational exploration. For me improvisation is the imaginary space that artists enter to access embodied knowledge revealing the subconscious (shadowed) realms. By entering the unknown/improvisation/the river, artists unveil untold (sometimes silenced) stories and internal narratives that shape our lives. In many ways, jumping into the river is an opportunity for artists to face ourselves. By jumping into the river, artists explore humanity from the inside-out, bringing subconscious actions; images, movements, thoughts, sounds and gestures to the conscious (lighted) level. The hidden revelations revealed in the creative process through the river improvisation can be used to tell stories, build characters, and/or support personal reflection, growth and transformation.

**Acting on Impulses**

The artist’s body is the most basic tool in accessing the river of improvisation in the creative process. It all begins with the body where the artists use our own experiences to guide the creative process. Impulses are inner currents of feelings, hunches, and intuitions, which happen at the guttural level. Impulses are therefore inner guides that direct words and actions. Acting on impulses means listening to the one’s inner voice by following the body and responding with movement and sound. In this instance, the artists’ impulsive reaction is a conscious state. Through improvisation, artists are encouraged to follow bodily impulses, moving into actions, and then soon a river of images emerge, and suddenly inner stories unveil themselves. Unfortunately, as humans we have been socialized to cut off ourselves off from our impulses. As Indigenous peoples this severance has been particularly severe since we have been historically
controlled by government and legislation. While not acting on every impulse is a good thing otherwise we would be in big trouble socially. However as colonized people, we have been overly silenced in our expressive conscious-impulsive lives. I believe that improvisational forms of expression have the power to teach Aboriginal people (like myself) how to act on internal impulses again and in turn undo silencing nature of colonization. Once an artistic practitioner gains comfort in improvisational exploration and acting on impulses, physicalization, and vocalization are played out in the studio space, and before you know it, complex stories unveil themselves. Interestingly, practitioners will begin to realize that each image accompanies emotions and a context for that emotion. Thus, the body carries clusters of images and moreover the body has the power to evoke and express a realm of emotions and stories. For me this understanding embodies the power of orality and performance.

Furthermore, we cannot underestimate the complex relationships between improvisational impulses, our perceptions, and past experiences, and how these are all shaped by relations of power embedded in a history of colonization. By developing our bodily consciousness and expressiveness through embodied creative practices, and then learning to act on impulses through creative improvisation, students can discover the subtleties of this complex system of embodied communication. We also begin to recognize how everything is interconnected. How our past is expressed in our movement patterns. Ultimately, acting on impulses for the sake of creative investigation can be a powerful change agent, which has huge implications for Indigenous people who have been systemically marginalized, fragmented, and silenced in Canadian society. After all, inherent to one’s creativity is one’s sense of personal freedom to express oneself freely.
The right to express oneself is part of a sharing process complexly intertwined in relations of power rooted in history. While the process of sharing can be healing, the process also gives artists’ space and agency to express inner dissonances and transcend pain through sharing our wounds, disconnections, and conflicts.

More importantly, creative expression can reaffirm inner joys, life lessons, and reconnect fragmented memories of the past. It can also help us understand each other cross-culturally. Ultimately, expression is inherent to our learning and development as human beings. This process of sharing requires an unveiling of inner truths, and through sharing our emotions, humans come to a deeper understanding of our selves in relation to others. This mutual understanding is developed through invisible and subtle senses of empathy. Empathy is intertwined in one’s personal experiences and emotions. At the heart of my being I believe that one can only truly understand another through a shared emotion. In my opinion, the arts evoke emotions helping people understand each other more deeply, relate to each other and experience life more fully, by feeling rather than just thinking. In the end, creativity fosters a felt sense - a powerful catalyst for change and transformation especially among Aboriginal youth and people cross-culturally. From this perspective, creativity is centered on a process of transformation rather than a product.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have contextualized the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project from a personal practitioner perspective. I have provided the reader with an overview of the project description, the artistic approach with community and in collaboration with artists involved. I have also provided a brief context for the location of the project, and shared a little bit about my personal relationship to the community that we worked with.
And finally, toward the end of the chapter, I reflected on my underlying beliefs embedded in the embodied Native creative process.
Chapter Seven

Native Performance Culture (NPC)

Introduction

The chapter begins by providing an overview of the history and philosophical foundations of Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to Native theatre. More specifically this chapter shares research findings from interviews and/or conversations with participants Monique Mojica, Floyd Favel, and Erika Iserhoff as well as my own personal journal reflections. In the process of analyzing the data from interviews and journal reflections, I have uncovered a decolonizing methodological framework (Smith 1999) which has provided me with the appropriate language and terminology to best articulate the emerging themes and sub-themes embedded in the practice of Native Performance Culture (NPC). The two larger themes uncovered are:

1. Revitalizing of Indigenous ways of knowing, and
2. Resisting of Western Eurocentric and colonial systems of thought

By linking these overarching themes (and inter-related sub-themes which I will outline later in this chapter) I aim to demonstrate how NPC approaches to Native theatre are Indigenizing Western Euro-American theatre practices, thus decolonizing Western theatre. However, before I expand on the themes I would like to first share some background information on the history and philosophical practice of Native Performance Culture (NPC) in general.

History of Native Performance Culture (NPC)

The term Native Performance Culture (NPC) was first coined by Plains Cree artist, playwright, and theatre director, Floyd Favel, in 1991. According to Favel, at this time, there was a need for Aboriginal theatre artists to apply Aboriginal worldview and
systems of knowing to Native theatre approaches. Early NPC collaborative investigations occurred during this time, and involved several artists including Muriel Miguel, Monique Mojica, Maariu Olsen, Pura Fé, and Sadie Buck. However, over the last two decades, the movement in Native theatre has evolved in different ways, as the original theatre artists involved in early NPC investigations, have since gone on to develop their own techniques and approaches to creating Native theatre. This thesis is looking specifically at the theatre practices of Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica through their co-mentorship in the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project that occurred in the summer of 2008. Please refer to appendix D for the artistic biographies of Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica.

In December 2008, I had the privilege of meeting with Floyd Favel to talk more about the history of Native Performance Culture (NPC). During my visit, Favel shared that his initial inspiration to use to his Plains Cree culture as a launch pad to create contemporary Native theatre approaches and techniques was greatly influenced by the words of his former teacher, Jerzy Grotowski. Jerzy Grotowski was a world-renowned Polish theatre director in the 1970’s, and Favel was one of Grotowski’s last students. Favel shared many stories with me about his travels to Italy to work with Grotowski. During his training with Grotowski, Favel was encouraged to work with his own mother culture to develop his own unique work. Grotowski believed that every artist has to find their own way. It was here that a seedling was planted deep within Favel, and since then, Floyd has been directed through many dreams to continue developing a unique approach to Native theatre based on the sources of his Plains Cree culture. Over the last thirty years, Floyd has also collaborated with Indigenous artists around the world including countless First Nations artists across North America, Butoh artist, Natsu Nakajima from
Japan, and Yakut and Tuvinian artists of Russia, which he equally contributes to having enormous influences on his evolving approach to Native theatre from his own perspective, which ultimately centers on returning to Indigenous sources of knowledge to create theatre.

Early on in the conceptualization of NPC, Favel referred to NPC as a “method” however has since moved away from the fixed and prescribed connotations of the term “method” to describing NPC as a fluid and evolving process. Favel has also described NPC using the formula: Tradition X Method = Theatre. However he has since moved away from this definition to explaining NPC in equal interrelated parts: Tradition/Process/Performance.

Over the years, Favel has also proposed the use of Indigenous architecture as a framework to transpose literary structures onto the stage through Native theatre. In doing so, Favel has developed a large repertoire of pedagogical approaches to teaching Native theatre including the use of certain legends and stories in story creation, and the development of different techniques inspired by his Plains Cree culture such as the use of the Plains Cree tipi structure, pictographic scores, and round dance principles, as Indigenous entry points into teaching Aboriginal students how to access embodied presence, how to move through space, and how to develop story creations based on the sources of Aboriginal cultures.

Favel and Mojica have also collaborated to build upon the Indigenous documentation process of pictographic scoring, which involves a process of documenting performance and movement scores through the use of pictographic images. Almost always inspired by their genealogical roots in Aboriginal culture(s) and their ongoing
fascination and investigation into the performative elements of Aboriginal culture(s), both Favel’s and Mojica’s approaches to Native theatre are continuously growing and expanding.

Favel’s use of the Plains Cree round dance as a way to teach embodied awareness to Aboriginal theatre students is an excellent example of how Favel has returned to Indigenous sources of Aboriginal culture to create theatre techniques. Basically, Favel uses round dance to help students’ learn about embodied awareness, movement patterns in the body and theatrical presence. In order to fully appreciate the ways that Favel has used Plains Cree round dance, one must first be familiar with round dance singing and drumming. Round dance is a Plains Cree social dance often performed during winter community socials and/or at Pow Wow’s. The round dance drum beat is a unique quick triple beat where the third beat is nearly silent found in the subtle echo (also known as scratch) of the drum. The movement of the third beat is usually held by the silent breath of the singers and the energetic bodies of the dancers as people dance around in the circle. As a Plains Cree man, Favel was greatly inspired by round dance so he investigated the movement in the body to help train Aboriginal bodies for stage performance. By isolating the round dance third beat, Favel has helped Aboriginal students better understand movement through round dance by reducing the dance to a core technical principle. Obviously, this technique is best understood in a holistically embodied and experiential sense rather than this simple written explanation. While this investigation of energy and movement in the body can be explored in other forms of Indigenous dance in the context of Native theatre training, this is just one example of how
NPC practitioners use Native social life as a departure point to create techniques that train performers in better understanding energy in the body.

Favel has also worked extensively with pictographs in his approach to Native Performance Culture (NPC). In the summer of 2001, Favel taught (for the second time) a course through Brandon University in Manitoba which was documented in the article *The Plains Cree Grotowski* written by James Forsythe. Here Favel researched the action of pictographic art through a training class and research laboratory in Native theatre.

Similarly, Monique and Favel are expanding on the application of NPC philosophy by investigating Monique’s Kuna heritage through the examination of Kuna frameworks of knowing in her creative processes of playwriting, stage design and costume design. In her most recent and exciting work to date entitled *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, Moijca is collaborating with Kuna Visual Artist (and extended relative), Oswaldo (Achu) Deleon-Kantule. This work also involves Moijca’s mother, the celebrated Gloria Miguel. Under the direction of Floyd Favel with dramaturgical support of Ric Knowles, artists are looking at the elements of Kuna culture including molas\(^\text{15}\), cacao medicine, Kuna lullaby chants, and knowledge(s) embodied in pictographs (reclaimed from museum archives) in the collaborative development of the play. For more information about the evolving and revolutionary artistic processes of this project, refer to the article *Chocolate Woman Visions an Organic Dramaturgy Blocking-Notation for the Indigenous Soul* by Jill Carter (2009).

In the cases listed above, the primary philosophical principle of Native Performance Culture practitioners was centering Indigenous knowledge in the teaching

\(^{15}\) Molas are a form of clothing design created by Kuna women of Kuna Yala in Panama. Molas act as a source of knowledge and expression of Kuna culture and oral traditions.
pedagogies and artistic approaches. While, these artistic practices have yet to be academically researched and documented in-depth, I mention them here, because I believe that these examples demonstrate the evolving, personal, and local contextual nature of Native Performance Culture (NPC). Ultimately, NPC practices are as diverse as the cultures that practice it (e.g. Kuna artists will approach it differently than Omushkego Cree).

By putting Indigenous architectures, Indigenous ways of knowing, and Indigenous cultural and historical heroes at the centre of the theatrical process, NPC artists/practitioners are in turn decolonizing Western Euro-American theatre by reclaiming Indigenous ways of knowing in the creative process.

In my limited experience with NPC, practitioners almost always privilege Indigenous stories as the primary framework of Indigenous knowing. For example, in the play *Princess Pochahontas and the Blue Spots* written by Monique Mojica over two decades ago, Mojica explores the feminine cultural and historical hero, Pochahontas as her central character. However, intertwined in this historical recount (and arguably counter-narrative) of first contact between the Powhatan people and the British, is the untangling of the real and mythological character of Pochanhontas, and the suturing of the pieces of herstory, which has been historically ruptured, misappropriated and sexualized upon by Europeans insatiable and libidinal desires to conquer land and Native women’s bodies, as ultimately “when there is no more to trade, our men trade us.” (Mojica, 1986, p. 46) According to Mojica, the contract of the image of the “Indian Princess” itself and the widespread misappropriation of the story of Pochantontas is the inheritance of the myth that substantiates the systemic mistreatment of Native women in
contemporary society today. Ultimately, the play *Princess Pochahontas and Blue Spots* questions two things - who gets to tell herstory/history and whose cultural legacy is centered at the core of a play.

The centering of traditional Aboriginal stories is another way that Mojica has approached her evolving work. For example, in her more recent play *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, the Haudenosaunee/Algonquin Creation Story of Skywoman Falling is weaved within the story. According to Mojica, traditional stories are an important part of the NPC process. Mojica says:

[Contained within] traditional stories there is a lot of freedom of interpretation. Traditional stories are supposed to act as guides. (Mojica, personal interview, 2009).

Interestingly, Mojica does not stop there in her approach to NPC. Her playwriting not only privileges the voices of Indigenous cultural and historical heroes like Pochahontas, as a character, and traditional stories like Skywoman falling, as the catalysts for creation. Mojica further relates these stories to her own personal experiences by interweaving her real life testimonies into the script. Mojica also emphasizes that:

[while] a large part of NPC for me is the journey to reclaim, retrieve, recover the cultural knowledge that we as urban “halfbreeds” don’t know or don’t consciously know, NPC then becomes a vehicle not only for decolonization, but also for regeneration and reconstruction providing we are not afraid or ashamed of the “not knowing.”

In the context of the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project (and my personal experiences), Favel and Mojica as the co-directors and mentors, encouraged Erika and I to find our Omushkego Creation Story. Unfortunately, like many Omushkego Cree people from the James Bay, we faced challenges locating our Creation Story. While we referred to some Elders, family members, books and even the internet (not a reliable but desperate source nonetheless) many local people told us we do not have a Creation Story.
As a result, Erika and I felt lost in the NPC process, and feelings of shame, inferiority and guilt surfaced, as we associated our lack of connection to being "half-breeds." Ultimately, these real emotions surfaced and we had to face these emotions in the creative process. I have written a poem to express my dissonance.

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16 Historically, half-breed was considered a derogatory term for many mixed-blood Aboriginal people. However, in 1973, Métis author, playwright, and artist, Maria Campbell reclaimed the term when she wrote her the auto-biographical novel “Half-breed” which tells her story of courage and strength.
Starvation Story
By Candace Brunette

My belly full of stories is empty, bone dry.
Faint whimpering howls of ancestors
Speak to me in a foreign language
I am unable to comprehend.

They cry.
Eerie whistling in the wind
quivering with cold, damp, rumblings of hunger
for the feast of story and song
I am unable to give.

Like invisible ghosts walking among us
lost in the blackened depth of nothingness
I’m left to face my own unacknowledged past.

I’m haunted by spine chilling voices
getting louder yet still incomprehensible.

Transforming blood
boiling, simmering, and raging
rising temperatures
longing for the quenching thirst of water.

Like mad floods crashing up against jagged rock landings
Bloody internal stagnation of dehydration
leaves blood thicker than water.

Smashing, vomiting and streaking of madness
for the injustices of the past.
I have no map home
to the gentle ever flowing river ways
of earth and ancestors.

Instead I recite starvation stories,
the only ones I have.
They do not sustain or nourish my body.

Insatiable appetites
mass dehydration
starvation.

Our collective bones ache of malnutrition
for the feast of stories and songs long forgotten.
I find myself searching for meaning
in the shadows of my lonely imagination.

Home is the light.
The story.
The feast.
The song.

But what happens when we don’t know our way home?
Interestingly, I have finally come to a place where I am beginning to channel these feelings of disconnection and turmoil into the creative process. For example, this poem has more recently been used as a catalyst for the script development. Despite our difficulties finding a Creation Story, in the first phase of the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, we ended up working with a traditional Omushkego legend of E-hep, the Giant Spider (Bird, 2005). While not our Creation Story per se, this legend continues to teach us much about our connection as human beings to creation and the spiritual world. From this perspective, NPC approach to Native theatre honours the theoretical basis and framework of Indigenous narratology by paying homage to our creation stories, legends, and mythologies.

The collaborative team explored the legend of E-hep through the cultural framework of storytelling using the dramatic qualities of ancient Cree shadow storytelling techniques on the stage. The cultural practice of shadow storytelling was shared with artists by Cree Elders involved in the community consultation process. In conversations with Cree Elders, they told us about how during the long winter nights, parents would often tell stories using the shadows of their hands against the prospector tent walls. As a result, the collaborative team was inspired to reclaim the way Cree people tell stories through stage design and script development. According to mentor and co-director Monique Mojica:

> the way we tell stories is at the heart of NPC. It is about shape and rhythm of our stories. NPC is about honouring Indigenous forms of orating… How do we tell a story? Those stories have a different shape, they may start in the middle, and go back several thousands of years, and then jump into a prophecy, and then go back to where the character was in the middle and take four days to tell. They may take two weeks to tell. How do we orate? What are our structures? [Therefore NPC] is not the content of our
stories wrought and squished and hammered into a European structure (Mojica, personal interview, 2009).

In Phase One of the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, artistic collaborators completed a workshop performance where Erika as the stage designer replicated a prospector tent as the main structure for the stage. With the help of lighting, we used the prospector tent walls to tell the legend of E-hep through shadows.

![Figure 11 – Omushkego Cree Water Stories Workshop Performance](image)

**Theme One: Revitalizing Indigenous Ways of Knowing**

As discussed earlier, the Western stage has historically been an active agent in the system of colonialism, which has historically mobilized relations of power serving European systems of thought. On the other hand, Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to theatre act as a grassroots resistance to this colonial history, which thereby approaches theatre by drawing from decolonizing methodologies that attempt to dismantle the colonial systems and return to Indigenous sources of knowledge in the process of creation. In the following section, I will share the different ways that NPC practitioners are reclaiming Indigenous sources of knowing.

**Reasserting Self-In-Relation Framework**

Firstly, Aboriginal ways of knowing embody a relational connection to
knowledge. The interconnected nature of Aboriginal ways of knowing is based in the framework of understanding “Self-In-Relation” (Graveline, 1999), which puts the subjective self at the center of knowing and doing. "Self-In-Relation” is an Aboriginal philosophical model of understanding the world linked to an Aboriginal worldview. According to Graveline (1999) it is the framework upon which we form an Aboriginal identity. The approach to understanding starts with self and extends to family, community, and larger world.

In my experience in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project, Erika and I were able to begin reconnecting ourselves to a learning process of “Self-In-Relation” and to the context of Omushkego knowledge systems by first returning to our families, community, Elders, and Nations to seek stories and understand ourselves in relation to a collective Cree history and worldview. From this perspective, the artistic work transcended a project per se to having far reaching implications into our personal realms of existence. In a journal reflection I note that "this is not simply a project, it is my life" (2008, personal reflection). In a journal reflection I also stated:

NPC is as much about personal self-understanding and coming to grips with culture and identity as it is about art. Art is an expression of self at its core level (August, 2009).

In my conversations with Floyd Favel about NPC, he talked about performers as having to sacrifice self in the performance. I understood this to mean that artists need to open their hearts and reveal our inner truths in our creative expression. Favel also spoke about the significance of artists having to work on themselves and face themselves in the process of creation. In my experience, the creative process gave me an opportunity to express unspoken internal narratives in a safe space, and create a dialogue with them. In some cases I began to reconcile the past and come to terms with my unacknowledged and
subconscious feelings of disconnection. Past experiences inevitably fueled the project’s
direction, they were channeled into the creative work. However at some point artists must
be willing to transform our personal stories into something else - a new story. Arguably,
the transformative process of self into artistic creations is the difference between
creativity and therapy.

Nonetheless, the devastating impacts of colonization have fractured many
Aboriginal peoples from "Self-In-Relation" processes of knowing. Therefore, many
contemporary Aboriginal people are not necessarily familiar with this form of knowledge
or creative production. Nonetheless, this NPC process re-centers "Self-In-Relation" to
family, community, Nation and all our relations in the process of knowing. The following
excerpt from my personal journal reflects the significance of my journey of re-centering
self. Perhaps, the centering of self in artistic approaches is one of the primary reasons
why so many Aboriginal people have been historically drawn into artistic modes of
expression. I share with you here an excerpt from my journal.

The artful journey of exploring the depths of my humanity through self is
a vulnerable place to go. It is the pathway of any artist who takes time and
courage to jump into the darkness of our own inner truths. I didn’t know
what I was getting myself into, but as much as it has been about me, the
process has shaped me too. It is reconnecting me to my family in deeper
ways, to my culture in unimaginable ways, it has re-membered me to the
missing links that colonization had fractured me from, re-membering me
to our collective history, to my Cree language and to a firmer and more
grounded sense of identity. I needed to make these relationships to heal.
(personal journal August 2008).

Reclaiming Significance of Language

The second source of knowledge centered in the approach to Native Performance
Culture (NPC) is the significance of language. We cannot underestimate the significance
of Cree language in perceiving and interpreting Cree ways of knowing and stories. Cree
language is the fundamental structural lens by which Cree worldview is perceived, understood and expressed in everyday life. Our language contains our worldview, and without it, we are missing a vital essence of our inherent birthright. Ultimately, Aboriginal verb and action centered languages reflect the complexities of Aboriginal worldview in ways that the colonial English, French, and/or Spanish noun-focused languages cannot.

In the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, NPC practitioners privileged Cree language in both the gathering of stories from our Elders as well as the expression of stories in the script and performance. For instance, Cree language was privileged in community consultations during visits with Elders through the use of translators. As performing artists, we also worked with the Cree language in our script development and performance where Floyd Favel highly encouraged us to learn the proper meanings, pronunciations, and memorization of the words for our workshop performance.

**Returning to Elders as Sources of Knowing**

In the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, Erika and I also returned to Elders as sources of Aboriginal knowing. By working with Elders from our ancestral territory, we reasserted Elders' positions as living libraries in our Cree social structure. Unfortunately, colonization has deeply impacted the role of Elders in Indigenous social systems. Although many Elders continue to carry “knowledge of significant events, personal reminiscences, genealogies and traditional knowledge,” there is a need for community members to recognize and “tap into the vast reservoir of Elders knowledge” (Caillou, 1995, p.74). As Aboriginal contemporary artists, we recognize Elders as carriers of substantial life experience, wisdom of the land, knowledge of our Cree history, and territory that can inform us, as human beings and inform us as artists in our life’s work.
Erika and I attempted to honour our Elders' voices in the play by integrating their testimonies in the script development. The delicate process of working respectfully with community members and Elders' knowledge(s) and stories will be reviewed in more depth in chapter eight.

**Remembering the Centrality of Land**

In Cree cosmology, there exists a silent dialogue in the bush between humans and the spirits of the land and animals. By reconnecting artists with the ecological source of knowledge, we had an opportunity to reconnect with a significant facet of the holistic nature of Indigenous knowing. In the case of the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, Native Performance Culture (NPC) practitioners were particularly interested in privileging the voices of the land and water in the processes of researching and gathering knowledge. We also privileged land in the process of meaning making and in the centrality of the stories told, which always centered on water stories and living on the land.

The remembering of place-based knowledge was an interesting discovery in the creative process. Erika talked about how her travels to the former settlement by the river and train tracks stirred childhood memories for her father after she went home and shared with him her experiences on the river. The process of traveling to different places on the land also stirred long lost memories for many Elders and family members who we interviewed later. Ultimately the land influenced the process of creation, because family stories and memories are rooted in the land.

However, sadly Aboriginal lands (and thereby stories) have not been spared in the wrath of imperialism and colonialism, and Omushkego people of the James Bay are intimately aware of the continued colonization of the rivers and waterways. Hydro-
electric development has displaced entire Cree communities on the East side of the James Bay, and ongoing plans for new developments continues to threaten the few natural rivers flowing on the West side of the James Bay. This reality became ever so clear (and heart wrenching) when the collaborative team tried to find the mouth of the Abitibi River one day, and inadvertently came across a newly developed hydro station built over the last few years. This story acts as a powerful metaphor illustrating the dual disconnection between artists to stories and to the sources of stories – embodied in the land and rivers that carry them.

**Remembering the Body as a Source of Knowing**

As performing artists writing a play that gathers Cree water stories for the stage, the body played an important role in both the expression of stories in performance as well as in the creative investigation for the script of the play. In this sense, the body acted as a methodological tool in a way of knowing that relies heavily on bodily sensations and closely relates to an Indigenous way of knowing. According to Gregory Cajete (2000) in his book *Native Science* which highlights the epistemological frameworks of Aboriginal worldview, Cajete states that the body is a source of “thinking, sensing, acting and being” in Aboriginal ways of knowing. Unlike the Cartesian mind/body split, Aboriginal ways of knowing have always centered on a holistic framework that integrates mind, body, emotion and spirit.

In the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* process of creation, Erika and I used our bodies as a way to investigate stories through embodied forms of writing. By working with other peoples’ stories in our bodies, we developed an intimate and evolving relationship to the emotional undercurrent of their narratives. As creators of the work, we also began to understand the Elders’ stories more deeply (through evocative forms of
feeling) by moving their stories into bodily language (movement, gestures, sounds) transforming stories into metaphorically and embodied texts. I understand that metaphoric forms of communication precede the language of words and are built on a shared and felt language. By evoking emotions, we share parts of ourselves that are otherwise inexpressible through words.

**Theme Two: Resisting Western Colonial Systems of Thought**

The next theme I would like to highlight in Native Performance Culture's (NPC) approaches to Native theatre centers on identifying, acknowledging, and resisting (when necessary) biases in Western colonial systems of thought.

**Identifying Our Own Internalized Colonialism**

As previously mentioned, the re-centering of Cree language was a foundational aspect of the NPC approach. Furthermore, as non-speakers of our Cree language it was a huge leap for Erika and me, and interestingly, much resistance surfaced as a result of privileging Cree language in the artistic process. I distinctly recall saying aloud to the group with much frustration in rehearsals that "I can't learn these words! I am not a speaker!" In retrospect, I recognize that my resistance to learning the Cree language was a form of internalized colonialism. Ultimately, my unwillingness to put the work into centering Aboriginal language/ways of knowing was in a way acting as a colonial mask that if unchecked can often serve to subordinate Aboriginal ways of knowing to a level of lesser importance.

In my interviews/conversations with Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica I learned that early investigations of NPC were without their challenges around internalized forms of colonialism. According to my teachers, many early NPC practitioners demonstrated (like many Aboriginal people) a disconnection to Aboriginal ways of knowing. As a
result of peoples' disconnections, many early practitioners expressed resistance and fears about reclaiming and representing Indigenous knowledge (including languages) on the stage because they did not have a “working practical knowledge of our languages, songs, dances, stories and histories” (1996, p.85). While the NPC approach to Native theatre was not conceived on the assumption that all Aboriginal theatre artists have a working background in Aboriginal ways of knowing, the philosophy rests more in the notion that learning Aboriginal knowledge is important. However sadly the effects of colonization, in some cases, have forced the colonized to take on the thinking of the colonizer - in this sense many artists continue to use the justification that they do not know, and therefore they should not take action. In this regard, some Aboriginal theatre artists do not take the time to explore Aboriginal sources of knowledge in their artistic work, because they have come to believe, that they are so distanced from Aboriginal sources that they cannot speak to that world, or that they believe that they do not have the rights or authority to represent Aboriginal knowledge on the contemporary stage.

The pervasive resistance to privileging Aboriginal ways of knowing in our personal and professional lives can be seen as a form of internalized colonialism, which can ultimately interrupt the NPC creative process. According to Monique Mojica, many Aboriginal artists are reluctant to take up the decolonizing project in Native theatre. She says:

there is resistance to it, because it is unfamiliar, because it brings up everyone’s fears. “Well, I don’t know that. I don’t have my language. I grew up away from the community. My mother went to residential school. I’m a half-breed”.

However, in my opinion, when has not knowing, become a reason for not learning?

While there are many Aboriginal theatre artists who continue to not privilege Indigenous
frameworks of knowing in their creative processes, NPC practitioners like Monique Mojica still recognize that it is important for the Aboriginal arts community, to embrace a plethora of diverse Native theatre practices. Mojica says:

while it is the work of some artists [including myself] to decolonize the arts, we still need to fight for Native artists’ rights to pursue whatever form of art they wish (Mojica, 2008, personal interview).

Ultimately, I also believe that we must be willing to make room for all kinds of approaches in Native theatre, otherwise we are simply pushing and prescribing our own agendas onto artists, and this act, in and of itself is oppressive and colonial. Therefore, as contemporary Indigenous artists today, we have to be willing to be open to a multitude of ways of creating art otherwise we are imposing, restricting, and limiting the choices and scopes of Native theatre practices. After all there are legitimate Aboriginal theatre artists who are only interested in telling Native content on the contemporary stage, rather than like NPC practitioners challenging the underlying European structures that hold up the content. These contemporary Aboriginal artists are still a part of our Aboriginal arts communities, and we share a common vision with them of contributing to the diverse discourses within contemporary Native performing arts in Canada. Ultimately, we must be open enough to make room so that we all have a place in the circle.

However, at the same time, perhaps by naming the resistance as a possible form of subconscious internalized colonialism, we can give a voice to the internalized colonialism that lives somewhere in each of us, and often (not always) accompanies a lack of appreciation for differences including the uniqueness of Indigenous ways of knowing. Ultimately, I believe that by critically questioning the underlying European structures of Western Euro-American theatre, NPC artists are summoning Native theatre practitioners (who wish to participate in this movement) to become more conscious of the
European methodological assumptions in our contemporary artistic practices. Fundamentally, this critical questioning of ourselves is the first step in the decolonizing process of Western Euro-American theatrical hegemonies. And by questioning the underlying processes in Western theatre, NPC practitioners are trying to identify where European methods to theatre do not necessarily align with Indigenous epistemological frameworks.

**Intervening on the Fragmentation Process**

An underlying theme in the resistance to Western Euro-American theatre practices found in NPC approaches to Native theatre is a discourse on the importance of intervening in the colonial fragmentation process. Ultimately Floyd Favel's push to return to Aboriginal systems of knowing in contemporary Native theatre practices does not mean that he denies that colonial fragmentation has caused real and felt barriers for many Aboriginal artists to know and access their ancestral knowledge(s). In fact, Favel emphasizes the need for contemporary Aboriginal artists to reconnect the fragments of our cultures, and recover from the history of colonialism. Through the words of Polish philosopher Czeslaw Milosz, Favel eloquently encourages his students to “make poetry out of the remnants found in ruins” (personal oratory, August, 2008). As we know, NPC’s philosophical cornerstone is based in the goal of “developing [theatre] practices [based in the frameworks] of our ancestors” (Favel, 1990, p.69). The underlying driving force of NPC approaches to Native theatre is to “return [artists] to our ancestral culture of origin to develop theatre methods based in ancestral songs, dances, languages, and ancestors” (Favel, 2008, personal communication).

According to Mojica, "NPC is about returning to our systems – our systems that already exists. NPC is about hooking ourselves up to the culture that is already intact. [As
artists], we are building a bridge from our own fragments and remnants – a bridge to the source of culture” (Mojica, 2009, personal interview). According to my teachers, fragments of culture are “parts of stories” no longer intact or no longer shared openly as a result of colonization. Therefore the system does not need to be re-conceptualized or recreated. However some parts of the systems may not necessarily be visible, overt or in everyday use in every cultural community and personal relational context. Therefore the vision of NPC is to reconnect our personal consciousness to this system of knowing by remembering ourselves and our communities to Aboriginal sources of knowledge in order to revitalize and renew our connections to an Indigenous system of thought, the Indigenous system of thought that unfortunately many of us have been historically severed from, in the process of colonization.

The revitalization of Indigenous knowledge(s) is the foundational purpose for the intervention practice of Native Performance Culture (NPC). “The purpose of connecting dots is to build a bridge”. Floyd Favel and Monique Mojica both say that Native Performance Culture (NPC) acts a decolonizing “intervention recovering the fragments and remnants of Aboriginal cultures in an effort to become whole again.” An intervention is generally situated between two things. In this case the NPC decolonizing intervention interrupts the legacy of colonization and the continued disconnection between Indigenous artists and self-in-relation to Indigenous knowledge(s). The NPC approach also intervenes between Indigenous artistic practices and our unconscious privileging of Western Euro-American systems of thought.

In the case of the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, parts of Cree history were recovered and sutured together through forming a larger play and narrative that
revealed a collectively shared Cree history. As NPC practitioners and artistic researchers, we learned about the lost practices of Cree shadow storytelling techniques, ways of communing with animals, the contributions of Cree people to the building of the Northern Ontario railway, stories of mistreatment of local James Bay Cree people by RCMP and Ministry of Natural Resources officials, stories of living on the land and in relation to water, and the changes in the waterways as a result of increasing industrialization. Through archival research, Erika also learned about the lost practices of Swampy Cree coats. All of these aspects of Cree shared history, cultural, and familial knowledge(s) were applied into the artistic work in different ways and discussed in detail in the artistic practitioner chapter six.

As emerging Omushkego Cree artists, we felt indebted to sewing these fragments of Cree history, storytelling techniques, and material culture together for both ourselves and our communities. By engaging our community through storytelling and researching the performative elements of Cree social and ceremonial life in the body, we collectively discovered innovative and responsive ways of revitalizing and restoring Cree ways of knowing through collaborative and community-centered contemporary art practices. Ultimately, the intervention process is a healing approach.

**Countering Colonial Narratives**

Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to Native theatre also naturally resist colonial and oppressive biases embedded in the hegemony of Western Eurocentric history. By first and foremost honouring the real life experiences of artists and Elders, NPC counters the colonial narratives that have historically objectified Aboriginal people, our stories, and our lands. Ultimately, this form of resistance is embedded in a political struggle for self-determination, the right to represent ourselves, and is embedded in the
political struggle for the preservation of Indigenous ways of life. A good example of this culturally grounded and political act is the fact that the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project was interested in telling stories of the land and privileging the real effects of water contamination on the land and the people and living beings who depend on it.

**Resisting the Objectification - Reclaiming Rights to Represent Ourselves**

As contemporary performing artists, we have also resisted further objectifying Aboriginal knowledge(s) to actually integrating the fragments of Omushkego Cree culture into a living, breathing, and moving tapestry of contemporary Indigenous artistic knowing. Therefore the stories and knowledge are not static like colonial token representations of Aboriginal people, but instead the tapestry of knowing is living and breathing, and constantly changing in the bodies of the storytellers who tell the stories. In this sense we are reclaiming Indigenous peoples’ rights to represent ourselves.

In the process of writing and telling the real life stories of Aboriginal people, Aboriginal artists are also countering the history of the Western theatrical spectacle. The notion of the spectacle is rooted in colonial mentalities deeply held in the libidinal racial fantasies of European constructions of Native identity. By reasserting Indigenous voices (individual life stories and collectively held shared history), Aboriginal artists are taking our rightful place and expressive space on the Western stage on our own terms. Ultimately, Indigenous artists are reclaiming our rights to represent ourselves. Moreover, Aboriginal artists are countering European hegemonic narratives in history by privileging the testimonies of family members, Elders and community members, and in turn undoing the silencing effects of colonization. This process of creation thereby disrupts dominant discourses in Western ways of thinking and Western hegemonic history.
Resisting Art as Product

As an emerging professional Aboriginal artist operating within the constraints of the dominant arts funding system, I have struggled developing a professional artist identity. Ultimately, “in our Euro-American, post-Enlightenment Western world we live with powerful common-sense notions of art that act to exclude the vast majority of people from the identity of “artist”” (cavanagh, 2009, p. 71). I can personally attest to the struggle of finding my place as a “professional artist” or “legitimate” artist. First of all, I did not complete a formal fine art degree, which seems at times to put me at a disadvantage when compared to other more classically trained playwrights and actors. I have also done most of my training within the Aboriginal performing arts sector, which sadly is all too often reduced to a sub-sector within the larger arts community. More than this, I have struggled calling myself a professional artist, because I do not necessarily fit into the strict categories imposed by the arts funding system.

To best illustrate my struggle, I will share with you a story that I hope will offer some insight into the ways that the Western European art system can sometimes limit and constrain community centered artists like myself. I vividly remember the first time my Anishnabe teacher Jill Carter introduced me as a playwright to one of her colleagues at a university event. I immediately became very uncomfortable with her introduction, and I quickly interjected to set the story straight. I said, “Oh no, I’m not a playwright.” I had the belief firmly instilled in me that in order to be crowned an artist I had to be paid for the production of my work. Up until that point, in my mind I had not been awarded this title, because I had not officially produced any of my works in progress. You may think that this is an absurd way of thinking, but in reality, it is not that crazy, as most of the arts councils today continue to determine funding based on the criterion of paid production.
However, like I often do, I went home and further examined my discomfort and beliefs, and I did research, which helped me realize that the mindset that in order to be considered a legitimate artist, one must produce and be paid for their work, is fundamentally rooted in the “commodification of art and knowledge associated with industrial capitalism of the 1800’s” (Berger, 1972 cited in Bardnt, 2008, p.352). I have also begun to see how this belief system is entrenched within power relations based in Western hegemonic conceptions of art as product. Therefore, if artists do not fit within these narrow Western concepts of art production, then we are often reduced to being just a “hobbyist” or an “amateur” artist and at best a “community arts practitioner.” I challenge our communities to see beyond these narrow European confines of professional artist identities to acknowledging the creative process as an inherent right that should be accessible to all people.

In my interview with Floyd Favel, he strongly encouraged Aboriginal art practitioners to transcend the institutional grant processes regulated by the national and provincial arts funding systems. Ultimately, these systems are subdivisions operated, funded and controlled by the state. In my conversations with Floyd, he openly criticized Aboriginal artists for solely depending on the Aboriginal arts system to support their artistic work. He alternatively asserted that dependency on the arts funding system stifles possibilities for true artistic vision. He also argued that the stranglehold of the arts funding system often forces artistic visions into the confines of Western European structures and institutional regulatory barriers. Ultimately, Favel believes that reliance on the system does not open artists up to the Native creative process, but instead closes them off (Favel, 2008, personal communication), because it reinforces the need to produce
products of work, which I argue is based in the Western framework of art as product, versus art as process. The arts funding system's focus on product versus process is one of the reoccurring tensions that Native Performance Culture (NPC) practitioners face when working creatively within the confines of an arts funding system.

**Reframing Art as a Way of Knowing**

In dominant Western philosophical and scientific thought, the senses have been reduced to “impediments” and emotions have been cast away to sub-levels of knowing. However, in the arts, the senses are the primary vehicles to one’s imagination, empathetic experience and evocative world (Eisner, 2008). While the notion that art can be considered a legitimate form of knowledge does not have a long history in Western consciousness, Indigenous ways of knowing have always honoured and respected the senses and the “metaphoric mind” in the process of knowing (Cajete, 1996). Ultimately, Aboriginal oral cultures have long appreciated and privileged the ability of the "metaphoric mind" to help us come to know through our stories, songs and dances which communicate to us through feeling what otherwise cannot said and seen directly. In this sense, Indigenous art and Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to Native theatre challenge Eurocentric assumptions of what are considered valid forms of knowledge.

**Native Performance Culture (NPC) as Indigenous Research**

Aboriginal community art practices such as Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to Native theatre not only challenge conventional understandings of art as product, and our notions of art as valid knowledge, but also challenge hegemonic conceptions of what is considered legitimate research. Deborah Barndt (2009) first blurred the often unquestioned boundaries between research and art when she addressed
the hegemony of valid knowledge and research and connected them to a long held system of power that has historically privileged Western consciousness and positivistic scientific frameworks of knowledge that center mind over body (2009). More relevant to this Master’s research and the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, I will build on Barndt’s ideas of art as research, but from an Indigenous perspective. In the following chapter I will further contextualize, NPC as an Indigenous form of research by examining the ways that artists-researchers work with Aboriginal community in the process of creating knowledge.

**Conclusion**

In ending this chapter I must confess that the dimensions of analyzing and classifying Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to Native theatre have been somewhat disjointed for me. Ultimately I did not want to write up this chapter as a prescriptive step-by-step approach to NPC practices, but instead I have aimed to analyze the underlying discourses and discussions beneath our collective practice. In figuring this out, I have realized that to distil the NPC process itself, is like trying to make a river stand still. The NPC creative approach is constantly changing and depending on many variables including the artists themselves, our cultural locations, the place-based locations, artists experiences, values, and beliefs, it is constantly in flux. When beginning this research journey, I thought that I would end up outlining NPC’s history, highlighting some key principles, and then providing a step-by-step process; however I have come to see that this was not only an ambitious and lofty goal, it was virtually impossible. I can only hope that this thesis offers some perspectives into the evolving practices of Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to Native theatre.
Chapter Eight

*Returning Home to Work with Community*


**Personal Reflection**

I would like to begin this final chapter by sharing with you an excerpt from my journal that I wrote while traveling up North to work on the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project.

Erika and I sit here thinking about how to reach out to community members. We recognize that we will likely be considered outsiders despite our ancestral ties to this land and place. Erika and I talk about the need to develop relationships with community based in trust and respect.

At the same time I am on my own personal journey of healing and reclaiming myself as a Cree woman. I am searching for understanding and reconnection to the past. I am looking for something missing within me. Without this connection to, who I am, I continue to be haunted by the missing links and silenced stories of my ancestors.

My heart is wide open, but yet the question “who has the right to represent Cree stories and culture?” keeps resurfacing in my mind. Ultimately, I am afraid to take what does not belong. So much has been stolen, misused, and misappropriated. Yet my journey of reconciliation starts with my self, with the realization and acknowledgement that I am disconnected from the past – but a fragment of a broken whole. Holding on, clenching my fists, gripping my fingers, scratching my nails, at the doorway of understanding. Do I have the right to enter? Do I have the right to tell our stories? (personal journal, August 2008).

**Community Art as Research**

While there exists an undeniably collective aspect to Aboriginal ways of knowing, this personal journal reflection written a few days before my arrival to Northern Ontario for the art project, carefully depicts the complexities of my growing relationship to Cree knowledge and self-identity. And sadly due to the fragmenting effects of colonialism, this story is a similar tale for many emerging Aboriginal artists who are returning home to their communities to reconnect to culture through community art practices.
At the same time, as an emerging Aboriginal scholar in Canada, I can now see that at the time of my artistic work, I was struggling greatly with how to reconcile the tensions based in the history and effects of Western research in our Indigenous communities. When returning, engaging and working with the Aboriginal community through art, we are bumping up against this reality. Ultimately, as an emerging scholar, I was familiar with the academic literature that critically examines the history of outsiders going into Aboriginal communities to do research.

Over the last decade, there has been a surge of qualitative research in the social sciences that critically interrogates the legacy of disrespectful research between Western researchers and Indigenous peoples. The primary catalyst for these growing scholarly discussions in the academy has been the *Decolonizing Methodologies* book written by Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith in 1999. In this groundbreaking text, Tuhiwai Smith summons the need for scholars to interrogate the history, assumptions and implications of Western research practices when involving Indigenous peoples. Moreover, Smith connects the practices of Western research to imperialism and colonialism.

When looking more specifically at research involving "Aboriginal art" in North America, we will see that historically "Aboriginal arts have been researched, documented, collected, and archived more from an anthropological perspective rather than an artistic discourse and sensibility" (CCA, 2008, p.18). Therefore Aboriginal art has been researched primarily as objects of inquiry. Ultimately, museums have built their institutions on the objectification and displaying of Aboriginal cultures thus misrepresenting Aboriginal art, and leaving lasting residual effects on Aboriginal communities.
**Working Respectfully**

As artists engaging with Aboriginal communities, we must instead be willing to work ethically and culturally, and thereby, respectfully. Interestingly, Australia has begun the discourse on cultural protocols in the arts by documenting Indigenous artistic practices (Australian Arts Council, 2007). According to the Australian Arts Council, cultural protocols can be important guideposts for artists who want to work with communities in respectful ways (2007). These guidelines encourage ethical conduct and mutually beneficial partnerships that equalize relationships of power, protect cultural heritages, and Indigenous cultural and intellectual property rights (Janke, 2003, WIPO, 2006).

Ultimately, cultural protocols are rooted in local value systems, as well as the artists’ sense of responsibility and accountability toward Indigenous communities. In a Canadian context, Greg Young-Ing (2008) has connected cultural protocols in the arts to a form of “Customary Law” which he asserts works in accordance with traditional systems of governance (Young-Ing, 2008, p.62). According to Young-Ing, the adherence to cultural protocols or Customary Laws protects and thereby respects Aboriginal systems of knowing. Young-Ing shares some examples of how these laws play out in the arts.

Certain songs, dances, stories and dramatic performances can only be performed/recited by certain individuals, families or clan members in certain settings and/or certain seasons and/or for certain Indigenous internal cultural reasons;

Crests, motifs, designs, and symbols are owned by certain individuals, families and clan members;

Artistic aspects of TK, such as songs, dances, stories, dramatic performances, medicine gathering, shamanic techniques,…can only be shared in certain settings or spiritual ceremonies with individuals who
have earned, inherited and/or gone through a cultural and/or educational process;

Art forms and herbal techniques can not be practiced, and/or certain motifs can not be used, until the emerging artists has apprenticed under a master artist;

Certain ceremonial art can only be shared for specific internal Indigenous cultural and/or spiritual reasons and within specific Indigenous cultural contexts (Young-Ing, 2008, p. 62).

**Context Driven**

While many Indigenous scholars connect cultural protocols to our systems of governance and traditional teachings, some protocols have also been created in resistance to colonial encounters in order to protect Indigenous peoples’ rights. However, whatever their origins, protocols are by no means cookie cutter “pan-Indian” approaches that should be rigorously applied in every context. Cultural protocols are context driven, often rooted in local value systems, and therefore should not be universally prescribed and applied to all Aboriginal people. This means that cultural protocols are often different based on the locations and interactions of the people and the work itself. Therefore to impose one tribal Nation’s protocols onto another tribal Nation would not only be inappropriate, it actually disregards and disrespects the uniqueness of each individual Nation. Furthermore, even within one specific Nation or community for that matter, different people may prefer different approaches to working together based on their personal upbringing, values, and beliefs. In my experience, the best way to approach cultural protocols when working with community members is to slowly develop a relationship with people, and to ask - what is your preference of working together?

While cultural protocols are informed by Aboriginal ways of knowing, they have also been impacted by the history of colonization. Therefore artists engaging with
Aboriginal communities need to be sensitive to the colonial impacts on Aboriginal people. Being sensitive means working in relation to people, and being “in relation” (Graveline, 1999) requires artists-researchers to establish meaningful and long-lasting relationships with peoples that are mutually beneficial. Ultimately, relationships are the foundation of working respectfully (Wilson, 2008). In this sense, cultural protocols are living within and between us. They are actually living in the space between people working together. In this sense cultural protocols are inter-relational entities that are always changing and transforming (McGregor, 2008) as we develop and nurture them. The dynamic and evolving nature of the space and relationships between people shows us that cultural protocols are influenced by change, and not a fixed ideal/guideline of the past, but moreover based in a relationship between artist-researcher and Aboriginal people and communities. This understanding further informs us that as artist-researchers, we need to be constantly engaging, revisiting, and accommodating people and each other throughout the collaborative and community-centered artistic process.

**Process of Negotiation**

Moreover, a process of negotiation between artist-researcher and Aboriginal people and communities needs to happen for cultural protocols to be established. This means that Aboriginal communities are not passive agents in the process, and that community members are actively engaged and have a voice in how the project unfolds. According to Anishnabe scholar, Deborah McGregor (2008), negotiation often requires compromise and ongoing dialogue (public lecture). As an artist-researcher, we need to acknowledge that we often carry most of the power in the collaborative artistic relationship. At the end of the day, we are often in control of the administrative duties of
artistic funds, as well as the ways that Aboriginal stories, knowledge, and people are represented to the public in our work. Therefore, we must be willing to acknowledge and share our power and take responsibility for the ways that our collective knowledge(s) are represented to the world. Therefore we must be willing to check our assumptions and open up a dialogue with community members for them to have a voice in the process. Otherwise, through our own assumptions, our communities can be re-silenced in the artistic process. This silencing can be both oppressive and perpetuate the history of colonization. Therefore community members and collaborators in the artistic process need to be consulted often, not just once, but ongoing throughout the artistic process. This is especially important when artists are working directly with peoples’ personal and family stories and knowledge(s).

Collaborative Process

Ultimately, the collaborative process in art making tends to “focus on social creativity rather than on self-expression” (Gablik, 1995, p.76, cited in Houston, L. C., 2007). There is no prescription to the process of collaboration in the arts, but rather the process sits somewhere on a continuum that supports collective opportunities for involvement of different people with different expertise. In collaborative work, there is generally a shared goal that brings different people together for a common purpose. Therefore should a group of people come together for the purpose of art making, it is important to collaboratively develop a common and shared goal. In the case of the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project, the collaborative team was interested in developing Native Performance Culture (NPC) approaches to telling Cree life stories on the contemporary stage. The collaborators then proceeded to explore the goal in a
relational and cooperative way that basically strived for social cultural change in a project of decolonization. These collaborative relationships were founded in a mutual set of values, steeped in cooperation, respect, relationality and a shared vision.

**Community-Centered Process**

The *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project also centered on a process of engaging community, and through this process we entered the project by doing a community consultation. According to the Australian Arts Council, Aboriginal consultation is a necessary part of community-based art processes (2007). In my opinion, artists have a responsibility to consult with Aboriginal communities, if they are interested in relating their work to a shared collective history of Aboriginal people from a particular place. It is also especially important to consult with Aboriginal people when working with personal, family, and tribal stories. Although consultation with Aboriginal communities takes more time and resources, it gives artists a better understanding of how to engage respectfully with local knowledge in ways that avoids misappropriation and/or exploitation of local Aboriginal knowledge(s). We cannot underestimate the impacts of misrepresenting local Aboriginal people, and how this can leave lasting legacies on Aboriginal communities, ultimately perpetuating harm (Smith, 1999).

My experience tells me that consultation reinforces respect and reaffirms Aboriginal peoples' collective control over Aboriginal systems of knowledge. When artists are of Aboriginal ancestry and/or contributing members of their communities, I believe that it is still necessary for us to consult with community. In my mind, consultation can be often seen as a lofty term, but in reality consultation is really quite simple: basically, it is about asking. It does not need to happen in boardrooms and through formal and bureaucratic paper-based processes. It is about not assuming that we
know all of the answers. Instead consultation is the key to building respectful relationships that seeks input and direction from community members. It is about working with each other with an open mind and asking for community’s contributions to a collectively shared vision. Otherwise without asking we are just assuming that we know how to do everything and that we can speak on behalf of our communities. This presumptuous way of being has not only left its colonial marks on our communities, it can have devastating impacts on Aboriginal community members who have too often been silenced and ignored in processes that directly affect their lives. Although we can never appease everyone, we must try to involve and invite community members to join us and contribute to the process. Ultimately, our artistic work is not in isolation, but in relation to community, and consultation has the power to facilitate this collective process of creating knowledge and working together.

Final Analysis

*Working with Aboriginal Community*

In this next section I will share my data and analysis when looking specifically at the ways that Native Performance Culture (NPC) practitioners worked with Cree community members in the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project. In this section I will share the recurring themes that emerged from my interview data and I will present each of the themes by highlighting each participant groups’ voice by categorizing their voices into the following three subgroups: Elders, teachers and students. The six overarching themes that I found in the research include: 1) Family, 2) Community, 3) Language, 4) Land and Place, 5) Protecting Indigenous Knowledge, 5) Moving, Healing and the Body, 6) Interconnections between Responsibility and Identity, and 7) Creating Art out of
Atrocity. Under each of these themes, I expand on the theme through the subgroup voices of Elders, teachers, and students.

**Family**

The theme of the significance of family was raised by all three subgroups. Whether it was rules around which family stories could be shared, or the process of consulting with family members to understand stories and how to work with them, the weight placed on family surfaced often.

**Elders**

When I interviewed Elders about ways of working together, the significance of family came up over and over again. My first encounter with this point of view emerged when I met with the first Elder, Donna in the consultation process. While this particular Elder was not interviewed as part of the Master’s research, I have incorporated her voice here because her words dramatically influenced the direction of my thesis. Although Donna ended up sharing a family story with me, she was very adamant about the ways that family stories should be shared. Before she shared her story with me she reminded me that certain stories should only be told in the context of family. Donna also emphasized that certain stories needed to be kept in the family and not publicly documented in books or on stage. My interview with Donna was not only a pivotal moment in the artistic research, but it later became a major catalyst for looking more closely at the ways that Aboriginal artists can work more respectfully with Aboriginal communities.

The two other female Elders, Peggy and Mary, whom I formally interviewed also both talked about the importance of sharing their stories for their families to hear. They
Both said that they often think about their grandchildren when they shared Cree history and their personal stories with us. They also both said that they felt that it is their responsibility to pass on that knowledge for their family members to remember.

**Teachers**

Similarly, my teacher, Monique Mojica talked about the importance of remembering a sense of family in the artistic process. In our interview, she reminded me of how during the creative process she kept bringing me back to the houseboat because that was the most direct emotional connection for me to the water. Monique said that “your story of the houseboat is the story of those Cree women driving on the river. It’s just about finding out what’s the connection”. For Monique finding the relationship between our real life experiences (which are tied to family stories) and the experiences of Cree shared history is an important facet of the Native Performance Culture (NPC) creative process.

More personally, Monique also talked about her own relationship to her family in her artistic process. She said that as an Aboriginal artist she feels responsible for creating space for her mother to “keep working not as a young actor, but as a senior actor that still wants to work, but doesn’t have the support from an [infrastructural] system that sees her as vital and creative.”

**Students**

As a student of Native Performance Culture (NPC), Erika talked about the significance of family in her artistic experiences. She shared with me that throughout the process she found herself reflecting back on the times that she spent with her grandparents growing up. The artistic research and exploration gave her a chance to
remember, research, and share a bit of their world, a world wrought with difficulties, injustice, and pain, a world largely misunderstood by her other genealogical heritage embodied in her French grandparents’ lineage.

While Erika identified a sense of responsibility to tell her Cree family stories through art, she also candidly shared how she often felt torn between her Native and French family members in the creative process. Erika confessed to feeling guilty for not paying homage to the stories of her French ancestors. She also revealed a certain level of discomfort sharing Native stories exclusively on the stage while having her French family members in the audience. In her interview she said:

When it came to doing the performance it was difficult for me inviting my non-Native family members to see the performance, because I still felt like I couldn’t say certain things in front of them. I felt worried about what their impressions would be afterward and whether they would feel excluded from my work. I also worried that they would feel blamed.

**Community**

The theme of the significance of community was raised by all three subgroups. Whether it was around the interconnections among community members in a shared history, or the processes of artists consulting respectfully with community members to the ways that dislocation affects artists’ sense of belonging to community, the weight placed on community surfaced often.

**Elders**

The two Elders interviewed also both talked about the importance of working with Elders from the community. They stressed that they did not want the knowledge embodied in our Elders to die after people pass on. The two Elders also stressed the importance of gathering Native people together and sharing our history. They both emphasized that we carry a collectively held history that is interconnected. Mary, the
second Elder, I interviewed, said that between families “we all know their stories and they know our stories.”

When I asked Peggy to share with me how we could better collaborate with community in the future, she shared a story with me about when she worked in the prison system as an Elder. In the prisons, Peggy spent countless hours visiting inmates to get to know them better. She played cards and watched movies together and eventually they would share their stories. In reflecting on the meaning of Peggy’s story, I have interpreted it to mean that it’s so incredibly crucial for artists (wishing to engage Elders in a process or creation) to visit with Elders and to take time to develop relationships with them based on trust.

**Teachers**

My teachers talked about community and how our project aligns with community and Elders in the process of creation. The co-director, Floyd Favel, shared his thoughts on the ways that our collaborative team approached community. He stressed the importance of making meaningful connections to community members. He reminded me that “no matter what kind of protocols we followed the connections would not have been made if personalities were abrasive.” This significant comment reminds me that it is not just what we say or do, but more importantly, *how* we say or do it.

When I interviewed Monique she shared with me her personal experiences of approaching the Kuna community in her artistic project *Chocolate Woman Dream’s the Milky Way*. In this collaborative project, Monique worked very closely with a family member who acted as a cultural advisor and key collaborator, his name is Oswaldo (Achu) Deleon-Kantule. According to Monique, Oswaldo (Achu’s) role in the project
was pivotal since he was the primary link to the community in Kuna Yala. Achu’s great-grandfather was a distinguished and well respected Kuna leader, and according to Monique, having Oswaldo (Achu’s) ongoing direction throughout the creative process was integral to ensuring that the collaborative team approached the process and the community in a respectful way based on Kuna tradition. In a subsequent research visit to Kuna Yala, actor Jose Colman played the same role.

**Students**

As NPC students working in the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, we also talked about the importance of community in the sense that through the process we began to recognize a shared community history surface through our many conversations with people. Slowly, through one-on-one visits with people (including our own relatives), we began to reconnect our family stories to this larger cultural context, and we also began to appreciate how we were all interconnected as a collective community. The process of reconnecting to community through art was highlighted in both Erika’s interview and my own journal reflections.

However, as Aboriginal artists of mixed blood ancestry who were returning to community to reconnect later on in life, we also talked about our concerns with being excluded from community. For instance, when I interviewed Erika Iserhoff, she said:

> I hoped that they would see me as a Cree person and not an outsider, but people would often say ‘you look like your mom’ and that made me feel more white, because she is white. It’s like when they are saying that you look like your mom, you are French-Canadian, and when they say you look like your dad, I interpret that as I look Cree. (Iserhoff, personal communication).

Similarly I talked about my fears and struggles with not belonging to community, and how I sometimes felt a dark shadow of insecurity following me. In a journal entry, I
reflect on my feelings and the complex relationship between one’s sense of belonging, colonialism, and oppression with the way we look on the outside and how this shapes our personal self-identities, the ways we are treated, and sense of belonging.

The way we look to others on the outside often determines the way we are treated. Unfortunately, being Aboriginal is often measured (by both Native and non-Native people) by the way we look on the outside. If I fit that certain acceptable (and colonial!) aesthetic of Indianness, then I am not excluded or othered. If the perception that others have of me, is all that I have to tell me who I am, these lonely experiences shape my existence. Unfortunately, without a grounding in my Native language, culture and community, many Aboriginal youth (like myself) struggle with a dislocated sense of identity. As mixed-blood Aboriginal youth with conflicting familial and cultural dynamics, the confusion sometimes gets exacerbated. Our socialization in dominant western ways further exploits us, confuses us, and our experiences of exclusion sadly define the boundaries of who we think we are. Until the time comes, when we find the agency and courage within, to resist, and reclaim, “who we actually are, have always been, and will always be” (personal oratory Lee Maracle, 2009). My experience has been that art in tandem with culture, family and community has the ability to transform our self-identity.

However reconnecting with Aboriginal culture, language, and community through contemporary forms of art, is not an easy task. In a journal reflection I share the difficult process:

reconnecting with community can be difficult because artists can be perceived as outsiders. The insider/outsider mentality can trigger artists’ own inner feelings of alienation and internal oppression of being disconnected and not belonging. As artists we can get caught up in our own fears. Ultimately identity issues surface in the process. It is important for veteran artists working with emerging artists to be sensitive and understanding to this common experience.

Language

The theme of language was raised by all three subgroups. Whether it was around the significance of privileging Cree language in the gathering and sharing of stories, to the creative impulse that language conjures up for artists, to identifying at a personal
level the importance of learning our language and how it contributes to understanding Cree worldview, the weight placed on Cree language surfaced often.

**Elders**

Both Elders emphasized the importance of working with community in ways that preserve Cree language. They also both expressed an appreciation for our artistic group’s efforts of privileging the Cree language in the interviewing process and in the script development. Mary emphasized the importance of privileging the language in the consultation process. She said that it is a very effective way to reach Elders’ in the sharing process, because it shows respect for our ways. At the same time, Mary emphasized that “it’s important to find good translators [because] sometimes [translators] feel like they are being investigated or something so they [translators] don’t want to say what the other person is saying.” This Elder also said that when working with translators “it is better to give them [Elders] the option of who to work with.”

**Teachers**

As a fluent speaker of the Plains Cree language, Floyd felt particularly connected to the ways in which we worked with the Elders in the Cree language. Through his language facility Floyd was able to connect with the Elders on deeper level. Floyd expressed his heartfelt connection to the Elders’ through a mutual literacy and understanding. Floyd’s fluency in the Cree language also served as a significant asset in our group’s abilities to expand, connect, and interweave Cree language throughout the evolving script.
**Students**

I want to share an excerpt of an article that I read before ever meeting and working with Floyd Favel. In fact, this piece of writing is what drew me to wanting to work with Floyd in the first place. The article was entitled *The Theatre of Orphans/Native Language on Stage* and it highlights the significant role of language in the arts. Floyd wrote, “language is related to place; it is our umbilical cord to our place of origin, literally and symbolically” (1999, p.33). In a journal reflection as part of this thesis, many years later, I reflected on the impact of Floyd’s words in this article:

“Floyd’s words resonated deeply in me, leaving a lasting impression on my being. The Cree language makes my heart sing and has ignited a creative impulse inside me to reconnect with my Cree language and culture through performance.”

**Land and Place**

The theme of land and place was raised by all three subgroups. Whether it the significance of the bush as a teacher for Elders, the inter-dialogue between land and artist in the creative process, or the fracturing of emerging artists to ancestral ties to land, land and place were reoccurring themes for participants in this study.

**Elders**

The Elders interviewed both talked about the bush as a teacher. In their many stories, they both shared their life experiences of living and surviving in the bush. They expressed how this knowledge needed to be passed on to the younger generation. In speaking with them, I felt an internal strength embodied in their intimate and living relationship to the bush. They both emphasized the importance of living in relation to land and sharing this knowledge through our project. Inspired by the stories our Elders
shared, Erika and I explored and developed two ideas central to Cree peoples’ connection to the muskeg land. The first relationship to land was explored through the development of a tamarack tree character. The second relationship to land was explored creatively through the retelling of a starvation story. In the script in development, two central Cree female characters are lying in the cold winter night and in their desperation for food they begin praying to the goose to come and take them away. It is personally one of my favourite parts of the script in development, as it explores two different women’s relationship with land and death.

**Teachers**

According to Monique Mojica, “land is an influence [in the artistic process], because stories are rooted in the land.” In the case of Monique’s personal work, *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, land in Kuna Yala became a central site for the creative investigation, a place that she returned to physically, emotionally, spiritually and intellectually throughout the creative process.

Throughout the creative journey, I also remember Floyd reminding Erika and I that stories are everywhere. In my visit to Floyd’s home in Northern Saskatchewan, he shared stories about his travels to foreign lands, and stories about his deep ancestral connections to the place he calls home - Poundmaker. At the end of our visit, Floyd was driving me back to the airport in Saskatoon, and as we passed a small mountain he looked at me and said, “see that mountain? There is a story about that place.”

**Students**

In my interview with Erika, she talked about the effects of colonialism on our relationship to land. She said, “I knew that I wasn’t going to go there [up North] and it
would just be bush Indians. We’re going back home and we wanted to be in the wilderness, and connected, but there is still all these things that are part of our history.” In our conversational interview, Erika and I both talked about the irony of our artistic work in the fact that we recognized the continued disconnection between our actions and the words of our Elders. On one hand, our Elders expressed how they desperately wanted the youth to reconnect with the bush, and while Erika and I were interested in the stories of the bush, we were still performing them in the Friendship Centre at the end of the day. Erika worried that “they [the Elders] might hope that we are taking this knowledge out into the bush and actually using it, but instead, we are performing it in the Friendship Centre.”

In a similar vein, my journal reflections talk about how the performance is but a first step in the right direction.

The performance acknowledged and validated our collective knowledge, and through this process much traditional ecological knowledge was given space to emerge. After the performance, grandmothers and aunties began sharing their cattail remedies and tikinagan making skills. I learned things about my grandmother that I never knew. The performance was a catalyst for sharing. While we did not actually go into the bush, something else quite remarkable happened.

The significance of the aftermath of the performance is worth deeper exploration, as it suggests that the performance itself re-ignited long forgotten memories encoded within. While performance is enacting an imaginary world on the stage, it is still worthwhile because it is giving space to look at and reflect upon a world that allows audience members to engage with their own memories.

**Protection of Indigenous Knowledge**

The theme of protecting Indigenous knowledge was raised by all three subgroups. Whether it was the discomfort of Elders/community members revealing certain kinds of
knowledge to outsiders, or the NPC process of abstraction as a way to codify and protect knowledge, to students feeling ill equipped or not connected enough to culture to have the rights to represent knowledge on the stage, the significance of protecting Indigenous knowledge surfaced time and time again.

**Elders**

I must emphasize here that when I met with Elders to talk about their experiences in the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project there were some discrepancies between whether or not stories should be written down. One of the Elders involved in the initial consultation did not agree with Cree stories being written down in books, whereas another Elder interviewed said that she didn’t mind this, but could not speak for others. The last Elder interviewed felt that it was very important to document Cree history before it was lost.

Interestingly, as I engaged with the notion of sharing stories, one of the Elders shared her concerns about other artists who had come into the community in the past asking Elders for their stories and legends. According to this Elder, her father participated in this project and according to her he was not respected in the process. She shared with me how her father participated in several interviews and video recordings, but was never given audio or video tapes or a letter to update him or his family on what happened to their stories. This Elder said that the people never showed up again after that. She felt deeply concerned about the way this artist approached that project. In this instance, this Elder was particularly concerned with the protection of Aboriginal stories.
**Teachers**

In my interviews with Monique Mojica, she talked a lot about the Native Performance Culture (NPC) process, and how she believed that NPC processes of abstraction can be an effective way of protecting Indigenous knowledge and stories. Abstraction is the use of an abstract symbol or a metaphor. However, encoded within it is knowledge. However, the meaning of the knowledge encoded is not necessarily shared. According to Mojica:

theatrically abstracting something means not telling the whole story and retaining only a phrase, word or image. The process of abstracting protects the story that may be too harsh and traumatic and revealing to be said literally on stage. You don’t want to be tearing your guts out on stage every night, you need a technique, you need a process that protects everybody involved energetically, emotionally and culturally. The process of abstraction pares down experiences to a core essence...Through abstraction one comes to a metaphoric level (Mojica, 2008).

Similarly, Floyd talked about the NPC process and how the process tends to explore facets of Aboriginal culture technically rather than literally. Technically speaking an artist would explore and reduce an aspect of Aboriginal culture (e.g. Round Dance) for an artistic purpose. Floyd and Monique both talk about the problems with putting culture on stage without putting it through a creative process. They both said, otherwise, the art becomes cliché. Instead, Floyd and Monique advocate and encourage artists to take elements of Aboriginal culture, and investigate them theatrically, as a starting point or as a creative entry for their work. According to these artistic veterans, this way, you do not reveal too much and you protect Indigenous knowledge.

**Students**

Interestingly, in reviewing my journal reflections, I found myself very concerned throughout the artistic process with not having the right to express Cree stories. In this
sense I found myself concerned with protecting Indigenous knowledge. It was as if I was constantly trying to reconcile my fragmented self-identity with the need to protect Indigenous knowledge. I also found myself trying to reconcile the unequal relationships of power between artists and community members in the process of artistic representation. In September 2008, right after the artistic work up North I wrote:

    when working with other peoples’ stories I realize that they can initially choose what to explore and what not to explore. In the sharing of stories community members have an initial choice to share what they feel is safe sharing, but after that, they don’t generally get a say in how their stories are represented on the stage.

    In reflecting on my discomfort I recognize that it pinpointed an important fact, as artists, we ultimately control the way our work is represented. When our artistic work is representing a cultural group, a particular community or a shared history, we must be cognizant of the ramifications of misrepresentations. And more importantly, when we are claiming to be undertaking a collaborative and community-centered approach, we must truly engage the community in that process.

*Moving, Healing and the Body*

The interconnected theme of moving, healing and the body was also interestingly raised by all three subgroups. Whether it was Elders coming to recognize art as a way of healing from the traumas of the past, or teachers acknowledging the role that the body plays in channelling emotions that fuel the creative and healing process, or students examining the ways that experiences on the land can bring up memories of the past through the body, the interconnection between moving, healing and the body were revealed in nearly all the interviews of this study.
**Elders**

In my interview with Mary she shared how she could see interconnections between telling stories through art and healing. In this excerpt she shares her thoughts about art.

healing through art now that’s different I like it. We can tell people to pray about it, sing, and art now that’s something new. I think it’s good it can hit different people because not everybody can do the healing thing the true Native way. It’s good, someone will be affected by it, and find it interesting. It’s not until one person come[s] along and speak[s] the same language that you speak, that’s when your healing starts.

This Elder illuminates a powerful point - art is healing as it can shed light onto the darkest aspects of our selves. It can break silence. The Elder’s emphasis here was it can “help us let go”, because the performance is an opportunity to “share and honour the stories in a positive way.”

**Teachers**

Similarly, Monique Mojica talked about the role of theatre in healing. She said, theatre can identify problems and break silence, but it is only the first step in healing. Theatre gives space to look at stuff, but it needs to go further to be healing. Just because I can tell the story doesn’t mean I have done it. I was just able to identify and talk about the problem. I can create something out of that and put it out there, but it does not mean that the healing is finished. Maybe it is just the beginning, maybe it is the first drop.

As a teacher, Monique Mojica also talked about the interconnected role of moving, healing, and the body through what she saw as some of her responsibilities when working in the *Omushkego Water Stories Project*. Monique said that she felt responsible for ensuring that artists (Erika and myself) were physically, emotionally, spiritually and intellectually moving ourselves through the artistic process. She said “my role was to make sure that whatever you and Erika were going to stir up inside yourselves… didn’t
hurt you and you didn’t get stuck and to keep it moving, to keep it channelling it into the work, into the art.”

Floyd, on the other hand, talked about the interconnections between the body, moving, and healing in a way that interferes with the artistic process. Floyd said that in nearly every project “something or someone gets in the way of doing the work.” Floyd also asserted that artists work with the unconscious realm. And therefore must often remove mental blockages in the process of creation. Floyd also said that NPC allows “artists to work on themselves, to face their own issues, flaws, and even anger and end up working on their own minds, learning how to control their minds, and becoming more conscious of their own streams of thought.” The sense that artists are moving to more conscious states of mind is an important facet of healing.

Students

As a student, I talked about the interconnections between moving, healing and the body when I felt physically blocked in the studio work and unable to explore creatively through improvisation after traveling up the river. I will share with you an excerpt from my journal.

The experience on the river stirred a lot of unexpected emotions and memories inside of me about my father. When he died I did not cry for a long time. Although emotions surfaced from time to time, when I went back on the river I saw his handwriting in a log on the houseboat and I realized that a part of him was there. All of a sudden, I guess I was choked up with the emotions and I felt vulnerable. I just wasn’t prepared to get right up onto my feet and reveal my pain. It was difficult and I didn’t feel safe at that moment to show that to everyone. I struggled a lot with the work that day after the trip up the river. Monique noticed it and she was really gentle with me. She shared her stories about her own blockages in the creative process, and she helped me breathe through the emotional pain. The emotions were so overwhelming that I was scared and this blocked me from going deeper into the improvisation.
When creating art, you are ultimately working with a very real part of yourself, with your emotions. Your emotions act as a barometer for your life. They point you in the right direction. Working with emotions is sensitive. You have to figure out what they are saying. You have to know who you are. It takes a lot of courage to channel your emotions into artwork. Mental and emotional fears will manifest into blockages in the body that prevent you from exploring through improvisation. As a stage performer, you have to use your breath to breathe deeply into those areas of the body, to release the unexpressed emotion. Ultimately, an artist needs to feel safe and protected to do that deep healing work.

Responsibility and Identity

The interconnected role of identity and responsibility was also a recurring theme discussed by all three subgroups. Whether it was around Elders identifying the importance of knowing one’s past, as an important facet of forming a sense of identity, to teachers announcing the interconnection between declaration of identity and taking the responsibility of following local protocols in the artistic process, to students not feeling strong in our identity, and therefore not firmly rooted in a sense of community to engage in community art practices, the significance of responsibility and identity emerged often.

Elders

Both of the Elders I interviewed stressed to me the importance of finding pride in who we are, as Native people. Surprisingly, in the interviews I learned that both grandmothers interviewed had children with non-Native men. Interestingly, they both felt the need to stress to me, that as a mixed-blood Aboriginal woman that it is still very important for me to find out who I am as a Cree.
**Teachers**

In a similar vein, my teacher and mentor Monique Mojica also talked about the importance of claiming and/or declaring Aboriginal identity in our work. But in a different way she connected the idea of declaration of one’s identity to being inextricably linked to taking responsibility and following the local cultural protocols when working with Aboriginal communities. In her interview Monique says:

I have heard it many times that “I don’t have to go through the protocols” or “we don’t have to do things following the structures that exist in the cultures, because well, we’re half-breeds.” I think it’s just lazy and irresponsible. It’s about not wanting to be inconvenienced. It’s time to take responsibility.

**Students**

As NPC students, Erika and I both talked a lot about our fears and struggles with respect to identity throughout the artistic process. Our own internal conflicts often surrounded our own conflicting self-identities being of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage. We started our artistic journey from a place of felt disconnection from Cree culture, community, and language. Yearning to reconnect with that part of ourselves brought us together and through a shared vision with other artists and community members, we went on a journey to better understand who we are. Ultimately, the journey is not over, but we shared a part of the road together.

**Creating Art out of Atrocity**

The idea of creating art out of atrocity was another recurring theme discussed by all three subgroups. Whether it was around Elders identifying the importance of telling tragic stories that have been silenced, but need to be told offer relief and healing, to teachers talking about the artistic pitfalls of falling into the seductive trap of continuously recounting our wounds on stage, to students learning that certain stories were off limits
because they stirred up the unspoken past, the theme of creating art out of atrocity
emerged often.

_Elders_

In the context of the _Omushkego Cree Water Stories_ project, one Elder shared a
tragic family story about starvation, in which only one person - her aunt - survived. As a
collaborative team with her permission the artistic group worked with this family story in
the studio and on the stage, and retold the story in a way that we hoped would uplift the
spirits of this Elder’s family by ultimately connecting death with the spirit of niska, the
goose. When I met with this Elder for an interview after our workshop performance, she
asked me if our artistic collaborative team would meet with her aunt, the sole survivor of
the starvation story. She told with me that her aunt wanted us to hear her version of the
story. In our interview, this Elder insisted on the importance of meeting with her aunt,
and while we have not met her aunt, we intend to do so for phase two of the project. The
significance of this story illustrates how the NPC approach to theatre can transcend
artistic practices of the past, and embark on a process that is responsive to community
member needs and direction. In this sense, the collaborative and community-centered
project aims to work in partnership with community members in a process that centers on
building relationships.

In the interview, this Elder also reminded me that “we [Aboriginal people] have
got a lot of tragic stories going on in families.” She also said that “some people are so
scared to let it go. I don’t know what would become of them if they talked about it… so
they keep it in.” This same Elder talked about the importance of protecting people in the
storytelling process, and she talked about the relationship between stories being told and
how audiences can often be adversely impacted and triggered emotionally by stories.

This Elder shared with me that “in the past before my healing journey, I would have been hurt by the misuse of my stories, but now that I am in a better place to cope and it doesn’t hurt me as much.” Through my understanding of what this Elder shared with me, I have come to recognize the important relationship between storytelling and collective historical trauma. Basically, as storytellers, we have to become conscious of the ways stories affect others and the possibility of re-traumatizing people through stories if we are not sensitive to the impacts that they can have. Through this Elder’s gentle words and wisdom, I am reminded of the beautiful age old saying in our communities “to walk in beauty and to walk lightly.” As artists, we must be aware and sensitive of the impacts of telling stories of atrocities, and how they can collide and trigger memories embedded in colonialism and historical trauma of our communities.

**Teachers/Mentors**

Similarly, artistic veteran Monique Mojica talked about creating art out of atrocity. She readily admits that her past creative works have been often driven by this creative incubus. For example, the play *The Scrubbing Project* created by Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble in 2002 and 2005 involved Mojica telling stories relating to the genocide of Indigenous peoples. From her experiences, Mojica poignantly asks – what are consequences of creating art out of atrocity? She attributes that the initial question was inspired by the literature of genocide among the Jewish from the holocaust in Europe. While she questioned the affects, she also asserted that the consequences of not creating art out of atrocity are more severe. However she also warned me that there are pitfalls to doing this, because it can often be a seductive trap that perpetuates the victim
narrative where artists get stuck in a cycle of telling horror stories with no relief or
transformation. For Mojica, a seasoned artist, she has been more recently inspired to start
creating her work from a new place, from “a place of connection instead of a place of
rupture.” One of the primary reasons that Mojica’s approach to NPC is so unique is that
she has become more interested in returning to the source of culture to create a bridge
back to the origin of knowledge. According to Monique, to work from the place of
regeneration, renewal, and transformation is much more liberating.

**Students**

From a student perspective, I experienced firsthand the surfacing of family
tensions after I told a personal family story of atrocity on the stage that was not
previously talked about publicly. In a journal reflection I talk about my experience. “My
family does not talk about certain things so I felt like I was pushing people to go to places
that they were not necessarily comfortable going.” While I attempted to protect my
family’s anonymity by rewriting the story, and changing characters’ names, I even used
poetic language and other forms of abstraction to protect my family’s anonymity.
However, my mother saw through the abstraction and later expressed her discomfort with
me publicly airing our family’s secrets. The difficult question surfaced—what are the
consequences of creating art out of atrocity?

Like many artists, I used my own personal and family stories of atrocity as
vehicles of inspiration and starting points to create my artwork. While I did not disclose
any names or specifics in the play, I later discovered that it still affected people in a
negative way. It stirred up the past, and in listening to my mother share her discomfort
with me privately after the workshop performance, I realized that just because it was my
family’s story did not necessarily give me the right to take it and share it on the stage publicly. I was fortunate in the fact that the private community workshop performance avoided me taking the script into the public domain entirely. The workshop allowed us to share our work with an intimate group of people and receive feedback from family and community in a form of consultation. Since this time, I have removed that section of the play from the script altogether.

However, ultimately, as an Aboriginal artist, I want to contribute to healing and raising our family, community, and Nation up, not disclosing taboos and sending negative reverberations throughout my family and community. This experience was not only jolting for me personally and professionally, but eye-opening, because I learned that the relationship between me and my family (in this case my mother) is more important than the artistic work itself. I thank my mother for having the courage to voice her discomfort with me and for teaching me to honour our feelings and express them.

While in this case, I made a conscious choice not to expose this family story out of respect for my mother and our family, I also believe that we must be careful not to impose a prescriptive approach for dealing with these kinds of situations. Ultimately, art is meant to be provocative, to push people out of their comfort zones and instigate change. While I don’t have the answers of where the boundaries of tension begin and end to simply censor art because some people are not prepared to look at the past and undo silences can have extremely damaging effects. Moreover this kind of prescribed approach infringes on people rights to full freedom of expression.

At the same time, as artists working collaboratively and respectfully with family and community members and most importantly dealing with real life experiences, we
must be willing to listen and respond to peoples’ personal boundaries around disclosure issues. While there are more experienced artists who may have innovative and responsive ways to honour the essences of stories without disclosing people publicly, I have not come to a place in my career and development where I feel comfortable or confident doing this on my own.

**Conclusion**

To summarize, in the interviews with the three sub-groups of Elders, teachers and students seven recurring themes emerged from the data: family, community, language, land and place, protection of Indigenous knowledge, the interconnections between body, moving and healing, the interconnection between identity and responsibility, and finally creating art out of atrocity. This research illustrates some important findings for artists working with Indigenous communities, in particular the need for artists to protect Indigenous knowledge when taking up personal and family stories and putting them on the stage. In addition, research findings have highlighted the importance of working responsibly in relation to community, family, language and land. It has highlighted the impacts that artistic processes have in both stirring up identity issues for artists as well as shaping them. And finally, this research has begun to question the impact of creating art creating art out of atrocity for both the artists and the communities whom have been affected by the violence.

In the next chapter, I will conclude this research by discussing the research findings, and sharing a list of guidelines for artists working with Aboriginal communities in the future. I will also outline some of the limitations of my research and offer recommendations for future research.
Chapter Nine

Concluding Thoughts

A Synthesis of Research Findings

This thesis documents an important juncture in the growing movement and evolving discourses of Native theatre practices in Canada. While Native Performance Culture (NPC) has been, and continues to be in development for over 20 years, the original artistic veterans involved in NPC (Monique Mojica and Floyd Favel) began to question the underlying dramatic structures and methodologies embedded in Euro-American theatre, thus spinning into re-existence a repertoire of practices rooted in the Original teachings of this land. This process of returning to our ancestral practices through contemporary artistic forms is significant in appreciating how Indigenous art is as much about Indigenous processes of knowing, as they are about the artistic end product itself.

Moreover, this research pinpoints the incredibly powerful role that collaborative and community-centered approaches to Native theatre can play in helping Aboriginal communities remember fragments of culture, which have been systemically silenced and ruptured due to the devastating history of colonialism. This research also highlights the ways that NPC approaches to Native theatre privilege Indigenous ways of knowing, and intervene in the colonial process, thus contributing to the decolonizing of artists at the level of self-in-relation to family, community and Nation. Furthermore this research highlights the challenging role that NPC artists face when trying to maintain a commitment to self-decolonization through the arts, while simultaneously honouring their creative impulses and also operating within Western Euro-American funding and marketing structures that do not support Indigenous peoples unique processes of creation.
Nonetheless, Native Performance Culture (NPC) practitioners interviewed for this thesis continue to consciously privilege Indigenous knowledge(s) in their approaches to creating Native theatre for the contemporary stage. Moreover, they inspire the younger generation including myself who is only just beginning my journey, to walk our collective trail, the trail they cleared before me. More importantly, these artistic veterans reassert that Native theatre is not merely Native content wrought and stuffed into European dramatic structures, but instead they give voice and celebrate the inter-dialogue between Indigenous sources of knowledge (e.g. Self-in-Relation, Elders as sources of knowledge, and human beings’ interconnection to land, and embodied legacies within) ultimately informing artistic processes of knowledge production.

By reasserting that NPC practices are part of a larger continuum of coming to know from an Aboriginal perspective, I hope to reveal the significance in that Indigenous artistic processes are indeed valid forms of knowledge, and research. From this perspective, hegemonic Western and scientific assumptions about knowledge and research are questioned and interrogated. I also fully acknowledge that Native Performance Culture (NPC) is not a systematic step-by-step procedural process of creation, knowledge production, and/or research: instead NPC is unequivocally subjective, fluid, and intuitive, but this fact does not make it any less valid or significant to the world.

The process of NPC centers the ancient and sophisticated Indigenous framework of knowing - storytelling, which through this portal, empathy is given room to manifest and grow, thus helping humans make meaning of the world through our interrelated
experiences. Therefore I strongly maintain that the space that NPC processes of knowing uphold and protect is the heart of Indigenous thought. Ultimately, the artistic process offers artists the space to make our own meaning; it is not imposed externally nor prescribed by an outside “authority.” Instead through storytelling, we are encouraged to think for ourselves. Once understanding is revealed through meaning making, artists articulate and express the otherwise inexpressible matters of the heart that are spoken through the rhythm and songs of our individual and collective breath and bodies. These narratives are not rational or logical; they are holistically embodied, ultimately teaching us to better understand ourselves through the stories of others. The world should not underestimate the space between the storyteller and their heart, the milieu, where listeners/audiences come to know themselves.

Moreover, through personal experiences, self-reflection, and sharing with others, I have discovered that my pathway to emancipation from the devastating multi-generational impacts of colonization is to honour Indigenous processes and sources of knowledge in a contemporary context. By accessing the rich and powerful streams of knowledge embodied in our connections to family, community, Nation, language, land and place, I have empowered myself, because ultimately to know myself, I must understand my past. This is my experience. By reclaiming Cree ways of knowing through contemporary artistic practices, I come to see that NPC is indeed a valid and important process of knowledge production. For me up until now NPC has been less of a product, and more of a process of emancipation from the stranglehold of colonialism, a transformative process of decolonizing the arts, and more importantly, remembering my Self-in-Relation to Indigenous sources of knowledge. Therefore, throughout this thesis I
have interweaved academic discourses relating to Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous research, and decolonizing methodologies.

This thesis also teases out the different places that emerging Aboriginal artists, artistic veterans in Native theatre, and community members are when it comes to engaging in artistic practices and self-decolonization. While we come from different places, together, we find a common ground, through a shared vision and an artistic process that attempts to honour Indigenous knowledge, personal stories/experiences, shared history, and re-member the fracturing and silencing nature of colonization. It is therefore equally important to note that each group (emerging artists, artistic veterans, and Elders/community members) comes from a different time, place, and perspective. Therefore each group and individual within the group has a different interpretation and expectation of the artistic process, and these differences must be acknowledged, respected, and negotiated.

Nonetheless, the devastating history of colonialism has interrupted each of us in some way from full freedom of expression. While the younger generation of emerging artists’ aim to understand oneself by going back to the past and undoing the silencing nature of oppression by performing stories through breath and body, the older ones, the Elders, share their knowledge and stories to help the younger generation understand where we come from. The artistic veterans in Native theatre lend their expertise and passion for the art of telling stories on the contemporary stage. In the early exploratory phase, artistic mentors/teachers nurture creative energy within students, and protect the creative space where emerging artists enter to explore their inner embodied and imaginary worlds. Therefore each group carries a responsibility and a role to contributing
to the creative process. What this new research does in many ways, then, is underscore the milieu (the space between people) in the Aboriginal artistic process: the space between younger emerging Aboriginal artists, artistic veterans in Native theatre, and Cree community members who wish to participate in this process.

Though I must concede that many contemporary Aboriginal artists (especially in this research) contend with the legacy of disrespectful research practices when returning and engaging with Indigenous community, I assert that artists must be willing to acknowledge our power and privilege when working with communities in the artistic and creative process. In this case when engaging the larger Cree community, insider and outsider mentalities emerged, and the process painfully reinforced (for emerging artists returning home), the colonial fracturing of community.

While it can be challenging for Aboriginal artists with tenuous connections to community to face the effects of colonization, it is still paramount for artists to acknowledge the culture of power, and how each of us sits somewhere within the continuum of interlocking systems of power that play out in our everyday lives. In this instance, emerging artists had the majority of power. We controlled the administrative responsibilities of the project funding, the way the consultation was approached with community members, we were also responsible for the ways stories were used and represented on the stage in the play. Therefore to respectfully work with Aboriginal communities, Aboriginal artists in my opinion must undergo ongoing consultative processes that privilege Aboriginal community members’ voices. Especially when working with other people’s stories, we must engage with people at the individual and
community level and ask them how they prefer their personal stories to be represented on the stage.

Ultimately, as contemporary people, we must always contend with the dreadful histories of colonialism that has taken the voices of our communities, objectified, and misrepresented them historically. Contemporary artists must also be willing to question our own internal biases and presumptions by simultaneously working at a very deep personal and subjective level facing our own internalized colonial mentalities – after all we have all been affected by colonialism. To simply argue that Aboriginal artists can effectively engage with Aboriginal communities, just because we are Aboriginal, in my opinion is not enough to ensure that artists are working with communities in respectful ways.

Interestingly, I have discovered that working respectfully is something that also happens in the intangible space between people. While the approach is elusive, and continuously changes from community member to community member, ironically, the process of approaching Aboriginal communities in respectful ways is not systematic or prescriptive. From my experience, the process truly begins by listening to peoples’ individual and collective needs, responding to them, asking a lot of questions, negotiating differences, and communicating in an ongoing fluid and reciprocal way. While I admit it is a tall order for artists wishing to work with Aboriginal communities through contemporary artistic and collaborative practices, it is necessary. I would like to end this section by sharing a list of suggestions for contemporary artists working with Aboriginal community in collaborative and artistic processes. The following recommendations are
based on my experiences working in a Cree local context in Northern Ontario and they are also informed by academic literature in the area of Indigenous research.

**Recommendations for Artists Working with Aboriginal Community Consultation**

1. Artists doing collaborative artistic work should try to locate themselves in relation to the community and people that they are working with. This involves being explicit about who artists are, where they come from, as well as outlining early on what their intentions are in the project and its process. The consultation process is an excellent time to begin building relationships with community members. From my experience working in the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project, my family connections were incredibly important in helping me make relationships with community members. Once I shared my family location, community members were able to connect me in the larger community, and this connection built trust.

2. In my opinion, artists should enter the community consultation process with a general idea of the scope of the artistic project, and the ways that community members may be able to engage in the process. Ideally, this germ of an idea would originate and come from the community. However artists can also approach communities with one of their own ideas in mind. However, artists should also be willing to re-direct the scope of their work, should community members be uncomfortable with aspects of it or have a different set of ideas and priorities in mind. Therefore, artists wishing to work with a specific community should consult with Aboriginal community members early on (preferably before the arts grants are written), and be willing to change their direction when instructed.
3. Artists should consult with community members continuously at several stages throughout the artistic process (e.g. initial invitation to collaborate, research and development, interviews, workshops, and follow up/updates, etc).

4. When working with Elders/community members, artists should, when possible, privilege peoples’ first Indigenous language including during interviews, and if instructed by community in the retelling and staging of their stories.

5. When interviewing Elders/community members in their Original Indigenous language, it is useful to ask Elders what translators they prefer to work with.

6. When working with Elders/community members, it is also useful to be open to storytelling as an inherent and valid way of sharing knowledge. Rather than coming with specific questions, and approaching like an interview in a prescribed way, give Elders/community members the room to share in the way they prefer to share. For example, Elders/community members often prefer to answer open-ended questions in the form of stories.

7. When working with Aboriginal communities in the consultation process, it is integral that food be offered as a way to show respect for what is being shared. Aboriginal people are feasting people. This means that food has always played an incredibly powerful and spiritual role in the sharing process. We honour people by preparing and sharing food together.

8. When working with Elders/community members, artists should plan and be willing to telephone and/or give Elders personal invitations to attend the consultation meetings, interviews, and workshop presentations. In my experience, Elders appreciate the one-on-one verbal communication. The time one takes to
personally develop a relationship with someone is sorely underestimated in this day and age! Posters and advertisements are not necessarily the best route and should not be done in isolation from a myriad of approaches when reaching out to Aboriginal community. At the end of the day, the moccasin telegraph is firmly intact.

9. When working with Elders it is also important and respectful to provide them with transportation. Honestly, we learned this one the hard way, and the Elders that we worked with gently reminded me later that we forgot about them, and that some of them could not easily walk to the community centre for our presentation. I will never forget this again.

10. When working with Elders, it is important to honour their time and knowledge by offering a gift and an honorarium to show appreciation. Budgeting for Elders’ honorariums is critical. We must begin (if we haven’t already) training ourselves to see Elders as embodying enormous amounts of knowledge and skills. This cultural competency alone is equivalent to a senior artist and/or an experienced scholar.

11. When working with Elders and other community members, it is more respectful to ask rather than assume culturally appropriate ethics of reciprocity. For instance not all Elders will appreciate tobacco and/or other medicinal offerings. Many Indigenous communities have been highly Christianized, and the assumption that every Aboriginal person practices tobacco offerings can damage relationships. It is always better and more respectful to ask in advance. Everyone is different and
we want to foster relationships that do not impose one’s belief system onto another.

12. When working with Elders, it is useful to bring many Elders together, because they enjoy each other’s company and will feed off of each other in the sharing process. The collective group dynamic facilitates sharing, and is inherently an Aboriginal approach.

13. When recording the voices and stories of Elders and community members, it is important to get their permission. This can be done by asking for oral consent and honouring oral traditions. However be sure that Elders/community members are clear about the ways that their knowledge will be used.

14. When working with Elders and community members, it is important to provide copies of all documents and audio or video transcripts to people involved in the interviews and consultation.

Ownership & Control

15. In my opinion, artists doing collaborative artistic work must be willing to share ownership of the artistic work. In traditional Indigenous contexts, there is no individual ownership of Indigenous knowledge. Similarly, the process of creation is built on an interconnected system of knowledge that is in relation to a shared history, land, community, Nation, values, and stories. This shared process of coming to know is not owned by anyone in particular: it is collectively held in trust. Therefore as artists engaging in community centered and collaborative projects, we carry huge responsibilities and must ensure that we get direction from community members specifically about how the show gets produced and where it gets seen.
16. Artists should not publish Elders’ information, stories and/or pictures without their consent. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge people’s contributions so trying to get consent is important to acknowledge them publicly. However, artists must also be willing to protect community members’ anonymity if they prefer that.

17. In my opinion, consent should be able to happen orally when working with Aboriginal people. It may be useful to invite a witness into this process to help remember the agreement. However, if Elders/community members are comfortable with written consent and/or audio/video consent, that is fine too. Ideally an agreement is negotiated with all related parties well in advance.

**Ethics of Representation**

18. It is unacceptable not to gain consent from community members when using their stories even if the stories used will remain anonymous or confidential, and may be fictionalized. In this case, the agreement around the use of stories needs to be explicitly understood.

19. It is especially important to be sensitive when working with Aboriginal peoples’ personal stories and/or collective shared history. Since Aboriginal lived experiences are complexly intertwined with historical traumas of the past, many times, sensitive, and difficult stories will surface. It is critical for artists to be sensitive to this reality, and not over-indulge in the pain and suffering of others just for dramatic action. As Indigenous artists, we are responsible for telling stories with integrity and recognizing the effects/affects of telling certain stories on people, families and communities. Telling stories that only re-traumatize audiences and re-victimize Aboriginal people is not useful or transformative. As
Aboriginal artists, we must be willing to lift our people and stories up, and tell stories that give us hope for tomorrow. Telling stories about our resilience, sense of spirituality, and connection to land and place in spite of colonialism is in my opinion much more responsible and ethical. While this doesn’t mean that as artists we avoid negative stories, I believe that we have to go there, but we also have to look at the bigger picture, and ask ourselves: what is the central message of our work?

20. At later stages of the creative process, it is also important to ask community members if they are comfortable with the ways that their stories are represented. Consent is only half of the consultation process in my opinion, while it offers permission to explore the story for creative purposes, the second step of consultation involves asking people about how they feel about the way their story was represented. This second stage can happen during a semi-private workshop presentation where community members are invited and given an opportunity to share their impressions and feedback in a safe and open environment. Aboriginal people have too often been misrepresented in history, media, education, and in the name of art. As contemporary artists, we have to consider this devastating past in our processes of creation. By giving people a voice, we engage in a larger process of healing and transformation that extends beyond the artist, and begins to move into the community.

**Defining the Project**

21. As an artistic collaborative team, it is important to begin a project by defining each member’s role and responsibilities by looking at each person’s strengths and carefully negotiating where each person can best offer their gifts/talents. Often
roles are clearly understood in the beginning process. However sometimes roles and responsibilities for members will emerge over time. It is worth noting that when emerging artists are in the early learning stages, they may face difficulties knowing where they can best contribute their skills and talents. In these cases, it is important to give these artists room to explore what they are interested in as long as they have the support of more established artists who can direct their learning process.

22. When a group of artists want to engage with a community, it is often useful to partner with a local Aboriginal organization in the area (e.g. Friendship Centre or a youth organization). Partnerships can take on many shapes and forms. Organizations can play different roles such as providing sponsorship and/or offering a space for the community to gather and hold interviews, conduct studio work and/or give presentations.

**Limitations of Study**

In the next section, I would like to highlight some of the limitations of my research. I recently heard an age-old saying that “every answer is only as good as the question being asked.” When I heard it, it reminded me of my thesis and my research questions. I have learned a lot in this research process, and one of the main things that I will take away with me is the importance of researchers carefully constructing our research questions. In many ways, this research project has asked two very different sets of questions. My first set of questions surrounded the NPC process itself. My second set of questions centered on the ways that Aboriginal artists (in our NPC project specifically) engaged with Aboriginal community. In the beginning I was convinced that these two
sets of questions were so interconnected that I could not have one without the other. However I now see them as quite distinct and in many ways very different research projects. In this sense, the questions I chose made this thesis exploration increasingly complex. As a result of keeping two sets of questions, I ended up having to review two bodies of literature, and conduct two forms of analysis. In retrospect I think I sacrificed certain areas so that I could do it all, and therefore I could have explored certain areas more rigorously if I had focused on one over the other.

Secondly, because the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project is in its infancy and preliminary stage of development, it was difficult to provide general overarching themes for NPC through a singular project. With more research on NPC in the future, hopefully a broader understanding of the reoccurring themes across various NPC projects will emerge.

And finally, the last potential limitation of my research, and I hesitate to outline it here because I see it, both as an advantage and disadvantage - my closeness to the research topic. From an Indigenous perspective, knowledge comes from self, and in no place in this research document have I proclaimed otherwise. I am ever so present and centered in this research. However, I have to confess that because of my closeness to the area of my research– the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project and Native Performance Culture (NPC) at times it was difficult for me to separate the two topics and my experiences in my mind. They are so interconnected to me.

I also recall at times in the Master’s research process finding it difficult to be clear that I was looking at the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* project at a particular juncture in time. Since my relationship to the artistic project was constantly growing and shifting
through time, my understanding of the research was also expanding and becoming increasingly complex to pinpoint. At one point, I had to consciously decide to put down my artistic project work, because the work and changes were developing at rates that I was not capable of distinguishing what aspects pertained to my research. I realized that I needed to give myself permission to put the artistic project down, digest it, and reflect upon it. Ultimately, I had to accept in myself as an artist that I was going to suspend my artistic activity, and simply try to capture a snapshot of the project’s process-in-progress at a particular point in time. Once I made the decision to put the artistic work down, I believe that the limitation of being too close to the research dissolved.

However I have also come to appreciate the unique challenges that artist-researchers may face when exploring their own work, and processes of creation in academic and scholarly discourses. I believe that artist-researchers wishing to document a process within academic and scholarly discourses must be clear within themselves, and comfortable with their decision when pertaining to talking about our artistic processes in research. Ultimately, I have come to appreciate that talking about and analyzing an artistic process is much different than doing an artistic process. While I believe that both purposes (talking about and doing) are equally important, artist-researchers must be clear why we are doing this, and for what purpose. In my instance, I have always maintained that the purpose of this research is to document NPC in practice to help researchers, scholars, and policy makers appreciate the complexities of Indigenous performing art practices, to better understand the role that NPC plays in decolonizing self-in-relation, healing communities and contributing to transformation.
Moreover, I always hoped that this research could help people recognize the challenges that Aboriginal artists face when maintaining a commitment to self-decolonization through the arts, honouring our creative impulses while working within the confines of the funding and marketing structures that do not necessarily reinforce our collaborative and community-centered approaches to creating art and returning to Aboriginal sources of knowledge in the creative process.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Through this research process I have identified some interesting areas of research that may be useful to explore in the future. In terms of examining Native Performance Culture in a more comprehensive way, it may be useful to examine the work of Monique Mojica (with her collaboration of course) in her most recent Native Performance Culture (NPC) project entitled *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*. This work in progress is a culmination of Mojica’s life’s work in this area of NPC, and I believe its examination would speak to the unique approach to Native theatre in more comprehensive ways than the preliminary work of the *Omushkego Cree Water Stories*.

Through this research process, it has also become apparent that the exploration of the collective and individual experiences of Aboriginal professional artists working in the Aboriginal arts sector in Canada is much needed. Through my work in the Aboriginal arts community and my interviews with professional artists Monique Mojica and Floyd Favel I have heard of many of the trials and tribulations that Aboriginal professional artists face in trying to make a meaningful and self-sufficient career as artists in a contemporary context. Aboriginal artists are the lowest paid artists in Canada and struggle greatly fitting into the limited funding frameworks offered through the federal and provincial arts
councils. The type of research that could investigate Aboriginal artists’ constraints operating in the limited funding mechanisms of the Aboriginal performing arts sector in Canada could greatly impact the livelihoods of countless artists.

While this research contributes to the beginnings of developing models and guidelines for performing artists working with Aboriginal communities, the role of protocols in the arts deserves much more lengthy examination, specifically when looking at the recognition and protection of Aboriginal artists intellectual and cultural property rights.

And finally, the most interesting in my opinion of the areas worth more investigation, is the role that Native performing arts training models play in helping Aboriginal people heal from the multi-generational and traumatic affects of colonization. While this area of research has been highlighted in my work, to fully appreciate the power of the arts in decolonizing ourselves requires much more attention, and moreover has far reaching implications for Indigenous communities in the future.

At the end of the day, discourses in Aboriginal performing arts are far too often under researched in the academy, and misunderstood in the dominant Western professional arts community. But more than anything, Indigenous research in the arts needs to align with the political needs of the Aboriginal arts community as a whole, otherwise we must ask ourselves, who benefits from this research?

Final Considerations

The ultimate purpose of this thesis was to document the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project as an example of Native Performance Culture (NPC) in practice. Through the research process I have reaffirmed that NPC is a unique and evolving approach to
Native theatre that simultaneously draws on frameworks embedded in Indigenous ways of knowing, Indigenous research, and decolonizing methodologies. Through this research project, I have been able to share, reflect upon, and examine my personal experiences and the experiences of collaborators involved in this project. I would like to thank all those who have shared this walk with me. I am ever so grateful for your willingness to share your stories, your teachings, and a part of yourself; after all, sharing is the crux of an Omushkego Cree way of being.

**Catch our Breath**  
By Candace Brunette

Ancestors talk to us in the small pauses in between breaths.  
The sounds of silence reminds us of the language in between words.

The linking of never ending tides revealing raw e-motion inspired by our relation.

These tiny moments of intercourse arise from places beneath the dark earth’s crest evoking motions caught between the skin in the blood memories transcending generations.

In those tiny moments our ancestors Catch our breath.
References


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Appendix A

Participant Information Letter

Hello, as you know my name is Candace Brunette. I am a Master of Arts graduate student at the University of Toronto in the Adult Education and Community Development Program. I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in a research project that examines how contemporary Aboriginal performing artists can work respectfully with Aboriginal peoples, communities and with Aboriginal knowledge.

This letter outlines the study itself and information about your rights as a participant/partner in this research. You will find a consent form attached, which is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about anything mentioned here, please feel free to ask anytime. Please also take the time to read the information attached carefully.

Project Title
Performing Artists in Omushkego Cree Communities: Exploring the Ethical Protocols of Sharing Aboriginal Knowledge(s) in Native Performance Culture (NPC)

Research Objective
The objective of the research proposed is to answer the following questions:
1) What are the purposes, research processes and cultural protocols of contemporary performing art practitioners?
2) How do NPC practitioners work respectfully with Aboriginal peoples, community and with Aboriginal knowledge(s)?

Research Design
The research involves 5-8 interviews with collaborators involved in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project including: interviews with emerging Aboriginal artist, interviews with Aboriginal performing art veterans/mentors/teacher, and interviews with Cree Elders and community members. Through the information shared in interviews, the researcher-artist will collect data to create a model of cultural and ethical protocols for performing artists working with Aboriginal peoples, communities and with Aboriginal knowledge(s) in the future.

Locations of Study – Toronto and Cochrane in Ontario, and Saskatchewan, Canada
The interviews will be conducted in a professional and/or private setting depending on each participant’s preference and convenience.

What does my involvement in this study entail?
If you agree to participate in this study, you will meet with the primary researcher-artist on one occasion, and may be contacted afterward for a follow up meeting over the telephone. The first interview will private in-person, it will be audio-tape recorded, lasting approximately one to one and half hour in length. The interview will focus on your experiences working with Aboriginal people’s stories centering on the recent
Omushkego Cree Water Stories project. The interview process is intended to be interactive rather than formal question-and-answer interview. A sample of interview questions is attached to this information and consent form.

The primary researcher will then transcribe verbatim your interview and email or mail you a draft of the text for your review before including it as part of the analysis of the research. The first draft of your transcription should be completed for your review within 4-8 weeks following your first interview. You will be given ample time to offer your feedback and make any edits you see fit. Afterward, the researcher will then proceed to analyze all of the data collected from all the interviews. This analysis of the interviews will be written up thematically into a summary of findings. Should you request to review a draft of the summary of findings, the researcher will send this to you for your review, feedback and final approval before it goes to publication. The review of the analysis will likely take place by April 2008. Please be assured that the researcher will keep you informed as to her progress throughout the research process.

What risks are there for you in participating in this study?
There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research. As a participant you are free to answer only those questions you choose, in whatever way you feel comfortable.

What are the benefits for you?
By participating in this study you will have the opportunity to reflect on your experiences working with Aboriginal people and communities and using Native Performance Culture (NPC) methodologies. As a result, you may find that these conversations and processes help you clarify your understandings of working with Aboriginal community as well as the importance of performing arts within Aboriginal culture in a contemporary context. You will also be contributing to the evolving understandings of the role of ethical and cultural protocols in contemporary Indigenous performing art practices. The knowledge gained in this study will be used to help scholars and policy makers understand the arts and develop a model of cultural and ethical protocols for contemporary Aboriginal artists working with Aboriginal people, communities and with Aboriginal knowledge(s). You will be e-mailed a copy of the summary of the findings from this study, and you may request a free copy of the complete thesis once it is published. With your permission, you will have the option to be fully acknowledged in the publication of the research; as well you may also have the opportunity to co-present (if you wish) the findings to the larger Aboriginal artistic community in the dissemination phase.

Privacy and Confidentiality
All data generated during this study will remain confidential. If you wish to not be publicly affiliated and/or acknowledged in this research, then you will be asked to choose a pseudonym (a fictitious name) to help ensure your anonymity, however, you may decide to be acknowledged using your real name. Should you prefer to remain anonymous, your real name will not be used in any publications, or in any presentations about the research. I will not discuss any individual experiences of any participants without their consent, with the exception of sharing general information about the
progress of the research with my thesis supervisor, Dr. Jean Paul Restoule. Data collected during the course of the research will be stored in locked filing cabinets and secured password protected computers. Only myself and my supervisor Dr. Jean Paul Restoule will have access to the data.

You will receive copies of the raw data from your interviews (includes audio tapes as well as written transcriptions) for your own personal and family records. I will keep copies of this data for up 2-years after the research is complete at which time I will destroy the data. I would also like to honour your intellectual property rights by giving you the option to instruct me on how to deal with your interview data should you want this information held in trust somewhere (e.g. local Aboriginal organization) for the preservation of Indigenous historical memory. This means that I will be held responsible for coordinating the safe delivery of your interviews to an organization of your choice.

It is also anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with you and others in the following ways: directly to you in the form transcriptions, summary of findings and the final thesis, as well as through published articles in scholarly journals, in policy reports to Native and non-Native governments and arts organizations, and at scholarly conferences/meetings.

**Conditions of Participation**

It is crucial that you understand that you may withdraw from the study at any time without consequences, judgment or need for explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your video-taped interviews and all accompanying notes will be destroyed.

You are always free to raise questions or concerns with me and/or my supervisor throughout the study, and may refuse to answer any questions at any time.

**When will your participation begin?**

I plan to begin interviews in early November 2008. The research project will conclude by August 31, 2009.

**Questions?**

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact me or my thesis supervisor Dr. Jean Paul Restoule.

You may also contact the Office of Research Ethics at University of Toronto at 416-946-3273 if you have questions about your rights as a research participant.

**Primary Researcher**

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Appendix B

Consent Form

I agree to participate in the research study conducted by Candace Brunette at OISE/UT, under the supervision of Dr. Jean Paul Restoule. I have made this decision based on information I have read in the participant information sheet, and have had the opportunity receive additional details I needed about the research. I understand that I may decline to participate in any part of the study if I so choose and that I may withdraw this consent at any time by notifying the researcher of my decision to withdraw. I will also keep a copy of this information letter and consent form for my own personal records.

There are several options to decide on in participating in this research project. Please initial the following items:

1. I grant the researcher permission to audio tape my interview Y/N?
2. I want to be acknowledged using my real name Y/N?
3. I do not want to be acknowledged instead you may refer to me by a pseudonym Y/N?
4. The pseudonym (fictitious name) I choose for myself is

Chosen Pseudonym:

5. I grant permission to be quoted directly Y/N?
6. I want to review and approve my interview transcription? Y/N?
7. I want to revise the draft of the summary of findings before it is published? Y/N?
8. I want to receive a copy of the final thesis when it is done? Y/N?

Your signature on this form indicates that you 1) understand to your satisfaction the information regarding your participation in this research project, and 2) agree to participate as a research partner.

Name of Participant: Name of Researcher:

Signature: Signature:

Date: Date:

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix C

A Sample of Research Questions

Research Questions for Emerging Artists & Teacher Mentors

General Questions about NPC 1st interview
1. What is Aboriginal art to you?
2. What is Native Performance Culture (NPC)?
3. What is the history of NPC?
4. What are the cultural purposes and influences of Native Performance Culture (NPC)?
5. What is the process of NPC?

Specific Questions about Working with Community 2nd interview
1. What are do you think is the roles and responsibilities of contemporary performing artists working with Aboriginal community?
2. How do you do to prepare for working with Aboriginal community?
3. How do you gather information in the research and development stages?
4. How do you work with yours and other peoples’ knowledge songs, language, legends and personal stories?
5. How do you ensure that you are working with Aboriginal people in a collaborative way?
6. How are tribal differences handled in the taking up of cultural protocols?
7. How do you think about working with and mentoring emerging Aboriginal artists?
8. How do you relate to the land when you are working?
9. What cultural protocols were employed in the Omushkego Cree Water Stories project?

Research Questions for Elders/Community Members

Specific Question about their Involvement in the Project 1st interview
1. How did you end up participating in the performing art project?
2. What personal and culture stories knowledge did you share with the artists/collaborators?
3. What sorts of concerns did you have about sharing your knowledge?
4. Have you benefited from your participation in the project?
5. How do you feel about the handling of your knowledge so far?
6. Did you feel that you were involved enough in the artistic process?
7. Could artists have approached you differently?
8. How do you see yourself being involved in future?
9. What is your vision for the project?
10. What happened after the performance presentation was over?
11. Did you talk about your experiences with others?
12. Did any new memories surface?
13. Did you feel different about the stories after you saw them reflected in a performance?
Appendix D

Artist Biographies and/or Artists Statements

**Candace Brunette** is a woman of Omushkego Cree and French heritage. Born and raised in Cochrane in Northern Ontario, Candace believes that her intimate connection to land is a central source of inspiration in her artistic, scholarly, and community work.

As an Indigenous female artist (playwright, poet and performer) Candace carries the stories of her ancestors and a complex narrative of self. She presented her second play-in-progress *Old Truck* at the Weesageechak Festival in Toronto in 2006 and 2007. She has also published poetry in *Initiations: An Anthology of Young Native Writers* and in *Yellow Medicine Review - A Journal for Indigenous Art and Literature*. Candace is a proud graduate of the Aboriginal Studies Program at the University of Toronto; where she is completing a Master of Arts in Education. Her graduate research is entitled *Returning Home Through Stories: A Decolonizing Approach to Cree Theatre through the Methodological Practices of Native Performance Culture* documents a personal and collaborative project entitled *Omushkego Cree Water Stories* and the processes of contemporary artists working with Cree community to put personal and tribal stories on the contemporary stage.

Above her artistic and scholarly work, Candace is an emerging movement educator with over 8-years of teaching experience in wellness and theatre training contexts. Candace’s passion for understanding human movement began through the holistic and embodied practices of Yoga, Breathing, Meditation, and Pilates. Her training in Hatha Yoga began in 2001 where she completed an intensive teacher training certificate. Since then, Candace has completed a rigorous certification with Esther Meyers Yoga in Toronto accumulating over a 1000 hours of teacher training. Her style of teaching has evolved to taking a more somatic approach with an understanding of the sociological effects on the body. Through a theoretical perspective that acknowledges the effects of colonization and intergenerational trauma on the body, and the ways that this history effects Aboriginal peoples’ inhabitation of our bodies is the foundation of her evolving work. Her teaching philosophy is built on facilitating conscious awareness of the body and breath interconnections in order to experience the body from within. This gentle approach to being in the body helps students uncover subconscious ways of being, and facilitate release, which makes more room for positive and conscious change. Candace is working toward a Certified Movement Analyst (CMA) certification with the Laban/Bartenieff & Somatic Studies International Program. Candace’s long-term vision is to collaboratively co-develop a system of movement for Native theatre students that infuses Indigenous, holistic, and embodied frameworks of knowing.

**Erika A. Iserhoff** is a woman of Omushkego Cree and French Canadian ancestry. Growing up in Northern Ontario she was fortunate to have mentored with senior traditional craftswomen from the James Bay area. Today Erika is a multi-disciplinary artist who works with a variety of mediums continuously bridging her cultural knowledge with contemporary approaches. Erika enjoys creating artwork using traditional materials,
integrated into painting, film and photography. She also enjoys embodied approaches to creating her work as her experiences in Baby Clown with John Turner opened her up to this realm of creation. Erika has also worked extensively in the Native theatre community in Toronto and Saskatoon as a Costume Designer, Set Designer and Arts Administrator. She has worked with the Turtle Gals on both productions of The Scrubbing Project, with the Centre for Indigenous Theatre, and Earth in Motion for the dance piece Agua. Erika has also worked with Native Earth Performing Arts as the Community Liaison. She is a graduate of George Brown College Clothing Design Program, and is currently completing her degree at the Ontario College of Art & Design with a major in Fiber Arts. This year Erika won a Dora Mavor Moore Award for outstanding costume for her work in Agokwe written by Wawatee Fobister and produced by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. She is also apart of the Omushkego Artist Collective and Chocolate Woman Collective.

**Floyd Favel** is a theatre director, playwright, journalist and essayist, and performer. His work is concerned in the place where tradition, process and performance meet. His work has been presented or featured at the National Arts Centre, The Globe Theatre, Festival d’Avignon/France, The Canada Dance Festival, New Dance Horizon, The National Museum of the American Indian/Washington D.C., The Canadian Museum of Civilization/Ottawa and most recently, his solo show was presented at the Denver Art Museum, in Denver, Colorado. He has taught workshops based on his own derived methods and techniques at the National Theatre School of Canada, University of Victoria in Australia, Enowkin Centre, Full Circle Performance, Raven Spirit Dance, and at the Moscow School of Dramatic Art. His articles and essays on theatre, culture and the environment have published in the Netherlands, Canada and the United States. His dramas have been published by Coteau Books, Playwrights Canada Press and Gare de Theatre/France. Mr. Favel is a Cree Indian and resides on the Poundmaker Reserve in central Saskatchewan.

**Monique Mojica** is an actor and published playwright from the Kuna and Rappahannock nations. Based in Toronto since 1983, she began training at the age of three and belongs to the second generation spun directly from the web of New York’s Spiderwoman Theater. Her play *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots* was produced by Nightwood Theatre and Theatre Passe Muraille in 1990, on radio by CBC and published by Women’s Press in 1991. She is the co-editor, with Ric Knowles, of *Staging Coyote’s Dream An Anthology of First Nations Drama in English, vols. I & II* published by Playwrights Canada Press.

Monique is a long-time collaborator with Floyd Favel on various research and performance projects investigating Native Performance Culture. Theatre credits include premieres of: *The Rez Sisters* (Native Earth), *Red River* (Crow’s Theatre) *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* (Nightwood Theatre/Obsidian/Mirvish) and *Home Is My Road* (Factory Theatre) as well as the one-woman show, *Governor of the Dew* by Floyd Favel (NAC/Globe Theatre)
Monique received a Best Supporting Actress nomination from the First Americans in the Arts for her role as Grandma Builds-the-Fire in Sherman Alexie’s film *Smoke Signals*. She is a co-founder of Turtle Gals Performance Ensemble with whom she co-created *The Scrubbing Project* and *The Triple Truth*. Monique was last seen in the role of Caesar in *Death of a Chief*, Native Earth’s critically acclaimed adaptation of Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar (Native Earth/NAC) and in the role of Martha on the series *Rabbit Fall* for APTN.

She was the Artist in Residence for American Indian Studies at the University of Illinois in Spring ’08 and her upcoming projects include *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*, a new inter-disciplinary collaboration with Floyd Favel, visual artist Oswaldo DeLeon Kantule and the newly formed Chocolate Woman Collective. She continues to explore art as healing, as an act of reclaiming historical/cultural memory and as an act of resistance.