Showing and Telling the Story of Nikis (My Little House):
An Arts-Based Autoethnographic Journey of a Cree Adult Educator

by

Brenda Isabel Wastasecoot

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Leadership, Higher and Adult Education
University of Toronto

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2017

Abstract

As I look back at my childhood, I search for what was there, in order to explore and understand how I experienced the residential school policy of Canada. I use arts based methods as my approach to Cree autoethnography. My memory map, drawings and poems of Nikis (my little house) reveal the life of a Cree family as I revisit the 1960’s of the Flats, Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. Lines are drawn and connections illustrate my spiritual journey as Cree adult educator. As I take the story of Nikis to many communities, I find a space for this truth, people are ready to hear these stories. Ultimately, this journey has brought me to my own reconciliation with the past and the residential school policy. What emerges is ethnography of the Flats, which goes beyond my loss of siblings to residential schools. I searched for Skwessis, the girl left behind, but found my wholeness, my history and my understanding of key issues: removal, sexual abuse, and lateral violence, cycles of violence and how these affected my life as a Cree woman. By allowing others to look into my house of the Flats, they can get an inside look into the experiences of a Cree family. My journey as educator is a spiritual journey as I find self-healing and strength in showing and telling the story of Nikis. I offer my life and my lived experience as
the context from which to explore the reality of being Cree and to encourage others to speak about their own culture as well.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ii

List of Figures vii

Acknowledgements xi

**Chapter 1: Waciye (Introductions)** 1

  - Asking the Ancestors 5
  - Purpose/Disciplinary Lens 6
  - Ininu Iskwew 12
  - Ancestry 18
  - The Flats Ethnography 22
  - Cree Woman poem 27

**Chapter 2: Approaching Methodology** 30

  - Photograph of Nikis 47
  - Community Map 62

**Chapter 3: Arts Based Research** 66

  - Mother’s Embrace 71
Chapter 4: Entering Nikis

Area 1: Iskodem (Door)

Beethdikeh (Enter)

Friday Nights

Piopisko Iskodem (Steel Door)

Opening the Steel Door

Removal

Area 2: Nipii (Water)

Kischi Notin (Tornado)

Area 3: Nekapewanook Bussbahboon (West window)

Ni Stess (My Brother)

Biiko bunnit Bussbahboon (Busted Windows)

Window Pains poem

Alcoholism & Violence

Broken Windows, Broken Treaties
Area 4: Meechisonathdik (Table) 119

Ni Mama (My Mother) 122

Meekisuk (Beads) 124

Muskissinuk (Shoes) 125

Hard Working 127

Area 5: Dethdiboon (Couch) 128

Grade One 130

Language 131

Chapter 5: The Heart of Nikis 134

Area 6: Nipewin (Bed) 134

Closeness and Affection 137

Vulnerable Places 139

Sexual Abuse 141

Area 7: Keewatinook Bussbahboon (North Window) 143

Witnessing poem 145

Witnessing: 146

Area 8: Nipewin (Rollaway Cot) 147
Goodbye Station 148

Trains poem 150

Train of Tears 152

Left Behind 153

Disconnection 154

Area 9: Cold Room 155

Kotuk Ni stess (my other brother) 157

Mental Health 157

My Voice poem 159

Chapter 6 Leaving Nikis 162

Area 10: Iskotewin (Wood Stove) 162

Area 11: Wapanook Bussbahboon (East Window) 164

Area 12: Kitchen Cabinet 167

Hudson Bay store 168

Area 13: Porch 171

Community 174
Chapter 7: Kipaha Iskodem (Close the Door)

Conveyance poem 181

Railroaded 183

Implications & Recommendations 184

Storytelling 186

Storytelling as Self-Healing 187

My Self-Healing 189

Minowechewitowin 191

Two Rows, Two Paradigms 194

Creating Safety in the Classroom 195

Last Words 196

Copyright Acknowledgement 199
List of Figures

Figure 1: Asking the Ancestors

Figure 2: Mistikoosee Skwessis (Little white girl)

Figure 3: The Flats at Churchill, Manitoba, Canada

Figure 4: Cree Woman Poem and Illustration Nikis (my little house)

Figure 5: Mooshoom (Grandfather) Josiah Beardy

Figure 6: Concrete Piece of History

Figure 7: Nikis (my little house)

Figure 8: Memory Map of my Community

Figure 9: Word Trains

Figure 10: Waskahigun (House)

Figure 11: Eki wikiyan okote ispih awasisiyan (I lived here as a child)

Figure 13: Iskodem (Door)

Figure 14: Piopisko Iskodem (Steel Door)

Figure 15: West Window

Figure 16: Ni Mama (My Mother)
Figure 17: Miikissuk (Beads)

Figure 18: Muskissinuk (Shoes)

Figure 19: Nibewin (Bed)

Figure 20: Witnessing

Figure 21: The Goodbye Station

Figure 22: Iskotewin (Stove)

Figure 23: Cousins to play with

Figure 24: Kitchen Cabinet

Figure 25: Harold and Maria Wastasecoot

Figure 26: Two Rows, Two Paradigms
Acknowledgements

Kinana'skomitina'wa'w (I thank you all) and Kischi Miikwetch (great thanks) to my thesis supervisor Dr. Jean-Paul Restoule for being there for me all these years. Your kindness and understanding has made this work possible, your suggestions and comments were invaluable to me. Ekosani (gratitude) to my thesis committee members: Dr. Suzanne Stewart, Dr. Sharon Sbrocchi, Dr. Peter Sawchuck, and Lee Maracle. I am so very grateful to you for taking the time to read my many drafts and for all your comments. You have helped me to stay on this path of writing and completing this work. Ekosi (thanks) to Dr. Michael Hart, the external appraiser of my thesis for your thorough reviewing of my dissertation.

I want to acknowledge my family, Ki sagihitinaw! First of all, thanks and love to my mother and father, Maria and Harold Wastasecoot. Without them, I would not be here in the world. Thank you to my daughter and my grandson and my partner for being the light and love in my life. I especially want to acknowledge my brothers: Kenneth Wastesicoot who went to the spirit world in 2015 and the youngest of my brothers Frank Wastasecoot aka “Blondie,” who passed into the spirit world to join our ancestors on March 28, 2017. Thank you to my brother Jim Wastasecoot and his wife Karen for the letters from Dad, they confirmed in me our parents love for us, their children. Thank you to my brother Walter, for your words of encouragement and for helping me to remember our Cree language. Thanks to my sister Jessie who drove me around Churchill on my last visit home (2010) and showing me all the spots on the ground where our family lived before I was born.

I want to extend my gratitude to the many listeners and participants of the Nikis Memory Mapping presentations and workshops. Your presence and the stories you shared so heart fully
with me and everyone at these events meant so much. Your questions and comments directed my path through this auto ethnographic journey, you have enriched my learning in this process. Thank you for your tears and laughter!

I am so grateful to all of you at the Centre for Indigenous Studies, First Nation House and OISE at the University of Toronto, you remain my home and community in the City of Toronto. The S.A.G.E. (Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement) program and Aboriginal Health Collaborative at the University of Toronto have given me tremendous support with the writing retreats and the education conferences here in Canada and abroad. There are many people to thank at the University of Toronto for their support of graduate students. As a single mother, I want to say how essential these services are and how much I appreciate them.
Chapter 1 Waciye (Introductions)

Waciye means “Greetings” in Cree. Welcome to my autoethnography of growing up down the flats. I am Cree from a little village called the Flats, just outside of Churchill, Manitoba, Canada. This thesis is largely a show and tell journey into Nikis, Cree for “my little house.” At the center of this show and tell journey is a memory map, which reveals the heart of a Cree family’s home and how we lived through the residential school era during the 1960’s. I call this a show and tell journey because I went around speaking to many different groups of people showing them my memory map of Nikis and telling stories about growing up down the Flats. Most of these groups or communities invited me as a Cree educator who was teaching at the University of Toronto in the Aboriginal Studies program. These communities, as I see them, were teacher candidates, conference and workshop participants as well as students who took my courses at U of T or at Anishnawbe Health Toronto. As I looked out into the many faces, I saw people from diverse backgrounds, ages, and identities. After each presentation or workshop, I spoke with them, answering their questions or listening to their comments, I could hear the compassion in their voices. This connection between us propelled me forward into more show and tell engagements with more communities across Toronto and even as far away as Gratz, Austria. Where they lacked understanding or were completely misinformed I attempted to fill in the gaps, offering my story as an example of the Indigenous people of Turtle Island. This seven-year journey has transformed my own understanding of myself as a Cree educator. It has truly been a gift in my life, giving me a way to tell my truth as the child left behind and more profoundly as a way to begin to reconcile the residential school impacts on my family and myself.
This thesis tells the stories of Nikis (pronounced nekiss), my childhood home, with an inside view into a familial experience of Canada’s residential school policy.\textsuperscript{1} Arts based research following Atleo,\textsuperscript{2} McNiff,\textsuperscript{3} and Sbrocchi,\textsuperscript{4} guided my research. The “watching and waiting and seeing what emerges” is based on the works of Atleo for her use of metaphorical mapping, McNiff who uses art as research, and Sbrocchi for mapping out her neighborhood of her childhood. Sbrocchi’s thesis on Remembering Place really narrowed my focus to mapping out my own childhood home. I wondered what my house might look like if I mapped it out. What would I find in that place on that land down the Flats?

The memory map of Nikis provides the groundwork and is therefore the foundation and framework of my autoethnography. From this mapping of memories, the stories come to life with imagery, poetry and photographs. These are the building blocks, which build my autoethnography. The stories told from this groundwork becomes the autoethnography and within this writing process are expressions of it such as the drawings and poetry.

Memory mapping is a process, I used as a method of collecting my childhood memories and exploring my innermost thoughts and feelings. I then utilized the other art forms, drawing, poetry and storytelling to create a representation, the auto-ethnography. All three approaches,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Milloy, J.A national crime: The Canadian government and the residential school system, 1879-1986. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press [Distributor].
\item \textsuperscript{4} Sbrocchi, S. R. (2005). Remembering place: Domicide and a childhood home.
\end{itemize}
memory mapping, art, and writing are like the three strands of a braid, strengthening and adding depth and layers, thereby enriching the story being told. By using my memory map as my foundation and road map, I could follow a consistent path of remembering and telling. And by including arts based research I could draw out my lived experience and my truth, my auto ethnography.

My introduction to arts based inquiry began in 2009 when I had to do a “show and tell” piece for the Arts Informed Research course at OISE, for Dr. Ardra Cole. The map idea came from a thesis written by Sharon Sbrocchi who mapped out her childhood neighborhood. This course opened my eyes to the many possibilities found in arts based research. Though I did not use maps for the purposes of mapping out spatial units, I appreciate that it is an ancient practice among Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, and among them, the Cree especially have used these “place-memes” or units of cultural information about place. This is likely why I chose to map out my house, as I like to see the whole of it, the bundle or unit of where I lived. This is why another scholar’s use of maps for her thesis inspired me to construct my own memory map as a method of research. Once I constructed the map of my house, I engaged in a remembering process and imbedded those memories onto the map. It is this process, the memory mapping process allowed a richness of memories to find their way to surface from the roots of that place on that land. This memory mapping process, which I followed, developed and resulted in this thesis.

I intended my map to be Indigenous, as my stories would bring out the ethnography of the Flats and the Indigeneity of that community. Graveline,\(^7\) Hart,\(^8\) Wilson,\(^9\) Absolon,\(^10\) Smith,\(^11\) and other Indigenous scholars before me have provided a path so that my epistemology counts as truth in this way. I too could bring out my memories of growing up as the youngest sibling who did not attend a residential school, but stayed home with our parents. I chose to carve out an Indigenous or Cree way of doing the memory mapping and use the metaphors found in my little house in order to develop a deeper understanding of what happened to my family and me during the sixties. The process of how I developed my understanding using the memory map, drawings, and poetry is in the Nikis memory map sections of chapters 4, 5, and 6. In addition, my understanding grew from the many public presentations of Nikis, showing the art and telling the stories to a variety of audiences, which I refer to and recognize as communities.

I have told these stories many times over and in many places, mostly at education conferences or to students at the University of Toronto, and as far away as Graz, Austria at the University of Graz in 2011. My friend John invited me to all his classes over one fall, winter, spring, and summer, the year 2014 and 2015, where a few hundred teacher-candidates got a glimpse into my childhood home of the sixties. The stories have remained the same and my memory has been

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steadfast and true because I have only spoken from my heart all these times. The way I have told the stories, I adjusted according to the needs of each community. In all the communities, I have shared the Nikis memory map with; there was always the recognition of a new knowledge and a new light to the story of Indigenous experience. The Nikis story has brought many tears to faces of settlers, newcomers, and to Indigenous people alike. I have cried many tears while writing this thesis, these tears came from the historic trauma of children torn from the loving arms of their families, and the careful watch of their grandparents. These tears also came from those children left behind, who are not alive today, some died of sickness, injury, brutality, or suicide. The impacts of the residential school experience are far reaching. This thesis is about me telling the stories of Nikis and finding healing for myself as a result. The telling is the healing work I can do for myself, I do believe it is how we heal ourselves, by telling others who will listen our stories and lived experiences.

I begin with this image (Figure 1) which shows a tea light on top of a rock, and a smaller rock, which is really a piece of concrete in front of it. Surrounding these are my rattle, sweetgrass, sage and tobacco ties.

Asking the Ancestors

Gregory Cajete,\(^{12} \) in his book *Look to the Mountain*, provides a research circle: a process for doing research in an Indigenist fashion. “Learning begins and ends with spirit. This learning

path begins with appropriate orientation, acknowledging relationships, setting intentions, seeking, creating, understanding, sharing and then celebrating one’s vision with reference to a place of centering.”

Figure 1 Asking the Ancestors

A spiritual journey always begins with asking the ancestors for help and guidance along the way. My ancestors are my parents and grandparents. I start every presentation with this slide and ask that we take a moment to honor the land we are on, the Mississaugas of the New Credit traditional territory. I carry a tobacco tie with me in case I am not given one where I am invited to speak. I start with a prayer of thanks and ask for help so that I can speak and listen with a good heart. At this point I also tell the listeners what to expect in my storytelling that I will be
talking about some sad issues. And then I tell them to take care of themselves, should they need to leave that’s okay. I also say a prayer for my family asking my ancestors to walk with me because telling the world about my family is a serious matter, as it might open minds, and certainly will bring new knowledge to the academy, but it might also trigger other stories of trauma for some people.

Purpose/Disciplinary Lens

Showing and telling the story of Nikis is about informing the field of adult education as it very much demonstrates the use of storytelling and other arts based methods to connect adult learners to this knowledge. The story of Nikis was very accessible and transportable. I carried the Nikis story around into the various communities here in Toronto, on campus and off campus. The stories were engaging, workshopping the memory mapping process was another step toward engaging the audience, who then became participants. Once the audience looks into the house, they become witness to the life of a Cree family. They cannot “unsee” what they have seen, or heard, or felt on an emotional level. In hearing the story of Nikis, they become the witness to the impacts of residential school policies of removal and assimilation. This arts based research creates this autoethnographic of the Flats in the sixties, providing windows to look into and doors to enter. The storyteller takes the audience into her little house and shows them the heart of Nikis, her family’s struggles with alcohol, violence, and poverty. She tells them her experiences of love, laughter, and devastation. Their reactions become evident in their tears and laughter, as they engage with the stories of Nikis.
During the workshops, the participants shared their stories with each other; these are the most memorable moments that I have of this study. Their stories varied from deep sadness and tears of one participant to exhilarating humor and laughter from another. The learning about each other was also unforgettable, when teacher candidates shared their stories of back home, as in their original homes before coming to Canada. This is what I found to be most enriching, the new knowledge about each other’s’ culture and ways of looking at the world was fascinating to me and to the participants themselves, especially if they had been classmates for over a number of years.

Of course, I did not collect their stories; I only listened to them with respect and appreciation for their journeys in life. I observed for myself, how participants engaged with the Nikis story, I told them. Sometimes they were very quiet; each group is very different from one another. This difference in response and volume depends upon the purpose of our time together. For example the teacher candidates were very loud and eager to learn how they might be able to use the process in their classrooms. Whereas, a smaller group of Indigenous students sat quietly reflecting on their childhood homes, and shared with a deeper knowing of the process and how it helped them to bring out their tears or anger, and with humor as well. This observation of what they did with their own memory maps also helped me to see its possible applications and implications.
I have collected evidence\textsuperscript{13} such as the piece of concrete from a residential school site, (one that was demolished) and by telling a story about it, I have conveyed its meaning, as in what it means to my family, and me. Another example of evidence is the construction of a memory map and the stories I told from this map to my students brought them into the story and allowed them to bring their perspective to it. After fifteen years of teaching in adult education now, I find that stories and the telling of stories are effective teaching tools. Telling and showing the story of Nikis (my little house) as a Cree woman is also a self-healing process, a liberation of the voiceless and the displaced, which has been my lived experience. By providing my lived experience as narrative, I am attempting to bring a deeper understanding to the public audience and educators.

Because I am a Cree adult educator teaching at the University of Toronto I am always thinking about ways to open up a conversation with students who are most often not Indigenous. Along with providing the information of facts and circumstances, I do try to help them make a connection to the bigger picture of what it means to be Indigenous on this land and in the country of Canada or North America. Throughout my teaching career I have found that by being myself and showing who I really am as a human being, students are more receptive and able to discuss openly with me their needs as adult learners. The rapport between teacher and learner can become fragile when we start talking about our two rows\textsuperscript{14} and the two boats we, historically travelled on as equal nations on Turtle Island. The journey we take together in the classroom


will involve looking at a very sad history for all the students. For the Indigenous students their responses are no longer surprising to me, they are either angry or saddened. As educators we must make some time and some space for these students to unpack what this information means to them and at times this may require some sharing of emotions. Once the students do hear my story of growing up Cree and female, a few of them will come to me and disclose their experience of violence or sexual assault. This is the way of the Cree educator: to be real and ready for realness.

This is what I like about autoethnography; I am telling the story and using my life as the context from which to speak. This is very much an Indigenous approach and a Cree style of teaching by using the oral traditions and oral narrative, storytelling. Being myself has meant speaking from my lived experience the issues faced by Indigenous communities both the historical and contemporary challenges. The purpose of my research was to show and tell my story of what Canada did to my family, and how we fractured as a family by their removal and assimilation policies, namely the enforcement of residential schools, enacted for nearly 150 years. Over this period, many families were shattered and the fabric of our Indigenous societies and civilization almost died. Our systems of government, kinship and wellbeing came under attack for generations. The result of this attack has been devastating for my family as a whole. However, my story is limited to one Cree family who fell into disorder and despair. My research question is, “how can I use arts based memory mapping process to engage and expand my understanding

of my lived experiences in this little house during the sixties and how can this process help to illustrate the impact residential schools had on families?” Broadly, this is my research question; however, simultaneously I am also mapping my journey of understanding as a Cree adult educator.

I am using arts based research to learn about who I am, what I believe, what I know and what I value as a storyteller and teacher. Then as I reflect on these pieces, I am journeying through this path of learning and making meaning of my memory map, my new understanding is explicit through the analysis of the memory map. At the same time, I am informing the audience about Nikis as I tell the stories from the memory map.

As an Indigenous writer, artist and storyteller I find my most authentic voice in arts based inquiry. In poetry, I can speak from the heart all that I am feeling or I can tell a story and liberate my thoughts. This is how I have learned about who I am, and how I continue to learn about me. I have also utilized this approach to learning in my work with students as their teacher. I have always tried to provide a path for them to find their own truth about themselves. Who am I to say, this is the one and only way for you to learn? I cannot say that, because I have not been there in your brain for your entire life, I cannot possibly know what is going to be most effective for you as a learner. Therefore, I can only trust that a student is in my classroom to learn, and I can only facilitate their need for a space and time. What they do with the information I provide is their decision.

For instance, I encountered one student a few years ago, who could not bring herself to write. She was stuck, when it came to the research paper assignment. I knew there had to be a way to work through her inability or resistance, whatever it was that kept her from writing this paper for
my course. I asked her if she liked to write poems, draw, or anything else instead of writing the paper. She burst into tears, and spoke about her family of origin, and her adoptive family. She had a flood of emotions and thoughts and an incredible story to share. Therefore, we agreed she would do some doodling and see how she could satisfy the course objectives. In the years that followed, she has become an awe-inspiring artist and a medical student. She only needed permission to tap into her imagination and to trust her creative mind. Using art based methods as an educator can accommodate students who may be learning about their history as an Indigenous woman or man for the first time. Survivors of the sixties scoop can also educate themselves using art based methods. Educating themselves on who they are and where they came from can be a painful and very lonely journey. It is difficult to go back home, whether you grew up there or have been away for most of your life.

In using the memory map of Nikis, I hoped to uncover and understand more clearly, how the separation from my siblings and the removal and assimilation policies of the residential school era affected my life. I said already, I did not attend residential school; I stayed home with my parents all year round. My parents and I felt the loss of my siblings, my house endured the pain, and anger they brought home with them as this was most evident by what they did to our house. This is why I am relying on my memories of our house to be my anchor as I journey back to my childhood and see what I can see happened there. To reach a wider audience this reality of alcoholism and violence in my childhood home in the sixties needs revisiting in order to raise awareness to the blows left by the Indian residential school policies. The affects left devastation in my home and in my community. The windows of my little house tell the stories of being shattered, which then leads to the memories of how my life was shattered, how our family suffered by this removal policy enforced by Canada. The rest of the little house, including the
furniture, holds stories of these impacts, offer a unique perspective from a child left behind when all her siblings went to residential school. This study means to add to the voices of the survivors, not to take any validity away from them, but add another voice, that of a child left behind.

Ininu Iskwew

I will first tell you who I am as the researcher and how I see the world and my place in it.\textsuperscript{16}

Researching one’s history and bringing forth one’s narrative includes locating myself as the researcher, as a Cree woman, and as Indigenous scholar who is rooted in Cree culture.\textsuperscript{17}

My ancestry is Cree; I use the word Cree, as it is the most common reference used for who we are as a people. The word Cree was a shortened term from the Jesuit missionaries name for us, which was ‘kristinaux.’ My mother told me we are Ininu, which is the people. The late Elder Peter O’Chiese, a well-known Elder and highly respected Traditional teacher, gave me my spirit name. The name he gave me means “All Colors Sitting Feather.” He told me I would have to find my purpose in life, that it is in this name, which he sang in a song along with all the other names he gave that day, after a week of fasting and ceremonies at Mile 20, north of Thompson, Manitoba. I decided I would go and work with all colors of people and teach them about the Cree of the Muskeg, also known as the Swampy Cree. However, my mother always said we are “Ininu.” This means people, and the word Cree came from somewhere else, we are not “Cree”

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}
she said, we are “Ininu.” So here, I am an Ininu Iskwew, a Cree woman. As a child, I learned everything from my mother, she and my father spoke to me in Cree. I spoke only Cree until I started school at age six. My identity originates where I lived as a child and the house I lived in gave me my perspective of the world around me.

As a Cree child growing up down the Flats I looked out at the world around me and was very confused about my people. I did not understand why my parents were always going drinking, why my father was violent toward my mother, or why my siblings would have to leave us every fall. Sadly, I took my cues from the women around me in the ways that they were treated by their husbands or partners. The violence became a normal occurrence and I being a girl, learned to be a victim of the same kinds of assaults. I learned to be quiet and demure on the outside, while on the inside I was screaming for help. I learned to survive the men’s anger and abuses by becoming invisible or by finding places to hide until the storms blew over.

I was one of those little girls who was most accessible to the rapist in my community. My parents were alcoholics and they would sometimes leave me alone to go drinking. My siblings were away every year, making me the only child in our house. In addition, I was a child and could not yet fight for myself or speak against the rapist. I was a prime target for his sickness. When I chose to do this autoethnography, I knew I would have to also disclose about the sexual abuse I experienced. This abuse is a key issue, which continues to plague many communities today.  

We must find a way to address the abuse as communities. In identifying myself as a

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victim of childhood sexual abuse upfront, I do this to encourage others to come out with their stories as well. However, I walk with this identity as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and I speak from this lived experience as storyteller and educator. As girls and women we experienced similar acts of violence. It seemed all the anger felt by the men in our community, fathers, uncles, older brothers, came down on us. My mother’s black eyes, my aunts’ bruised faces, my cousins with slash marks on their arms told me that women were the lowest of the low. We were not important; we were not valued in my community. I teach from this lived experience as a way to create safety for learners and to promote anti-violence and anti-oppression activism.\(^\text{19}\)

For our society to heal we must begin with ourselves. As Bishop reiterated, “the personal is political.”\(^\text{20}\) Our activism as educators must begin with healing ourselves and modelling this to our students, as we are the ones to light the way on this new path forward. So I feel at home in autoethnographic research and so I begin with my life and my place of birth. As arts based researcher I use a creative process to illustrate this story\(^\text{21}\) and to engage and connect with adult learners\(^\text{22}\). In the collection of images, I incorporated a few photographs to strengthen my visual storying of Nikis. One of the surprises which came to me were two photographs, both of which I was afraid I would never find. After finding a photo of the actual house I grew up in, I also


hoped to find a childhood photograph of myself. It seemed that none existed; this made me feel like I really was invisible. I knew my parents did not have a camera and did not have a collection of photos to speak of, so I began my search for me.

In my search for childhood photos, I had access to this photograph (Figure 2) by connecting with relatives on social media. As I said, because I had no photographs to speak of, I put out a request for childhood photos of me from the Flats. An older cousin shared this photo with me on December 8, 2015. In this photo, I am standing to the right of the woman sewing. The woman is my mother’s cousin, my aunt Jemima sewing a pair of boots also known as “mukluks.” Aunt Jemima Rabiscah was my mother’s first cousin, and so they were like sisters, making her my aunt. The women down the Flats did this kind of beadwork for their livelihood, including my

Figure 2 Mistikoosee Skwessis (Little white girl)
mother, who often sewed into the night with only the lamp light to work by. This photograph shows the Indian Crafts store, which was a coop for local artists to sell their crafts directly to the tourists. This venture did not last very long, and soon enough the Hudson Bay store resumed being the intermediary.

At first, I could not believe it was actually me in the photo. I had not seen a childhood photo of myself before. I look so calm showing no signs of trauma. Maybe this was before the rape. The other two children are brother and sister and they lived across the road from me. Their father was a trapper with his own trap line somewhere down the Bay line. I remember they always had husky dogs, which I loved to go visit, and puppies, which were so enjoyable to play with. Their home was a safe home for me; I would go there when I needed a safe place to sleep. I decided to label this photo “Mistikoosee Skwessis,” the name my father gave me since I can remember. He would ask me, “Awena mah kina?” Meaning, “and who are you?” He would laugh with delight at my reply, “Mistikoosee Skwessis,” which means, “Little white girl.” It was his affectionate way of teaching me who I was, a Cree girl.

In the town of Churchill, Manitoba, I attended a public school where we, myself and all the other children from the Flats, learned to speak English. Much of my English education was by intimidation, humiliation, and the erasure of who I was at home. Slowly I began to leave my culture at home, and learned the “superior” way to be, was “white.” What I mean by “superior” is really about what I saw as the more valued culture in the textbooks and lessons taught to us by

the teachers. The fact that we had to learn English said to me that my language was not relevant in the larger Canadian society. Though my parents spoke to me in Cree, I would reply to them in English, until all I spoke at home was English. I quickly became a fluent English speaker, to the point where I would interpret for my parents.

I left Churchill, Manitoba when I was seventeen, and went to school down south, graduating from Crocus Plains High School at Brandon, Manitoba in 1980. Immediately, I went to Brandon University and attained three degrees from there. Before coming to Toronto, I taught in a First Nations counselling degree program at Brandon University for nine years. I learned to use a circle teaching style of learning and interaction with students. The program provided an integrative approach, incorporating both Indigenous and western theory and practice. I continue to hold onto the valuable lessons I learned there as a teacher, and try to bring this kind of human connection to adult learners I work with. In 2008, my daughter and I moved to Toronto for my PhD in Adult Education and Community Development at OISE, University of Toronto.

Ancestry

Before my mother became ill, I was able to sit with her and construct a list of all my siblings including the ones who were deceased. My oldest sister lives in Thompson, she and I are twenty-five years apart. The next one was a girl named Bertha, who died at age one from a teething infection, she is buried at Kaskatamagan. My oldest brother passed away in 2015, he had diabetes for many years. My second oldest sister lives in Churchill, she is an artist there for many years, and her specialty is moose or caribou hair tufting. Then there was a boy named Wayne, who died as an infant, but my mother did not say why he died. My second oldest brother
lives in Peguis First Nation, a retired teacher of many years. My mother had the next two infants, a girl she named Rose, a boy named Robert, both died of either scarlet fever or influenza, and both buried at The Pas. Then there is my brother, third oldest, who lives in York Landing. My sisters, third and fourth oldest sisters, both live in Winnipeg for many years now. We lost our brother Horace, to leukemia, when he was around fourteen years old. His final resting place is Churchill. Another infant, Absalom, died of measles at six months old and buried in Churchill. My fourth brother lives in Thompson. My fifth brother Frank (Blondie) has been in a coma now for three years in a Winnipeg hospital. Another infant girl was stillborn at Mile 412 along the Bay line and buried in Churchill. Lastly, I was born in 1963, at Fort Churchill, the seventeenth baby and fifth surviving girl.

I asked my mother about her family and my father’s family. She was able to tell me the names of her children, the ones who passed on, and the ones who survived to present time, along with her siblings’ names. Together with the work of Flora Beardy in *Voices from Hudson Bay, Cree Stories from York Factory* I could piece together our family tree. My mother, Maria Jean Wastasecoot and father, Harold Hudson Wastasecoot were born at York Factory, one of the oldest fur trade posts in the country.

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Mother’s Ancestry

My maternal grandmother was Flora Thomas, from Fort Severn, Ontario. Flora Thomas’s mother was Maggie Peter, and her father was Thomas Thomas, Jr. My maternal grandfather was Josiah Beardy, and his parents were Mary and Magnus Beardy from Shamattawa, Manitoba. Mother’s maternal grandfather, Thomas Thomas, Jr. was one of eight children born to Thomas Thomas, Sr. from Carmarthen, Wales. He was a surgeon for the Hudson Bay Company from 1789 to 1795, and then became a Superintendent of Southern Factories at Eastmain, Moose Factory, and Albany from 1810 to 1814. Thomas Thomas, Sr. then became Governor of Northern Department at York Factory and then retired to Red River Settlement in 1819.25

Father’s Ancestry

My paternal grandmother was Sarah Jean Gray and my paternal grandfather was Absalom Wastasecoot, both born at York Factory. His maternal grandparents were Maria and William Gray, Sr. son of Samuel Grey from Tingwall, Shetland. Samuel was a laborer for the Hudson Bay Company from 1851 to 1885 and died in Churchill on April 2, 1922. His paternal grandfather was Charles Wastasecoot, who signed Treaty 5 at York Factory.26 There is no information of his paternal grandmother. My father’s sister, my Aunt Elizabeth Oman attended


residential school in The Pas and at Elkhorn, Manitoba. Both my parents attended the Mission day school in York Factory. My mother told me they had to learn the Bible.

My parents were married on August 4, 1938 at York Factory, they moved to Churchill sometime in the fifties. They had had altogether seventeen babies, me being their seventeenth child. They had lost six infants before I was born, including a girl who was stillbirth before me. My brother Horace was an adolescent when he died of leukemia. I remember seeing him once in a Winnipeg hospital before he died, but I only saw his feet propped up on pillows. I was born in 1963 at the Fort Churchill army hospital. I had a very difficult birth. The doctor told my mother, I was not supposed to be born. Therefore, I was a miracle baby! Because of losing too much blood, my mother and I stayed in the hospital for a whole month before going home to our little house down the Flats.

My family history is central to this thesis and therefore it’s important to locate myself in relation to my family and my siblings. As I set out to locate myself, my past and my self-in-relation to my family, I provide this background of my ancestry as the path I have come from. This thesis is about self-location and self-in-relation. Using memory maps to paint a picture about life and place and time. The map provides the location and the time period, the memories provide the stories about life in the community, or in other words a process for eliciting ethnographic detail about a life lived.

\[27\] Ibid.
Indigenous paradigms are rooted in location and situating self as discussed extensively by Absolon,\textsuperscript{28} who says, “location links the experiences of self with the experiences of others, facilitates connections and associations and heals relations” (p. 73). Locating self, shows that I am an “insider” and brings validity to the story I am about to tell. Memory maps are a means for remembering, for graphing the community and the culture of that community.

This thesis is about self-location and self-in-relation. Using memory maps to paint a picture about life and place and time. They are situated in place and time and are a means for remembering, for graphing the community and the culture of that community. They are also a means for stories about life in the community, or in other words, a process for eliciting ethnographic detail about a life lived.

Autoethnography is a way to do qualitative research whereby the researches seeks to describe and analyze his or her life experiences through self-reflection and connecting to the broader context of culture, politics and social realities. By showing my memory map to a wider audience, I am using my life story to tell a larger story about life in the community when siblings went to residential school.

First we need to visit the community of the Flats. Here is a map of my community from the sixties. Among the families were Cree, Metis, Dene, Inuit and a few non-Indigenous people. The map situates my family, the Brightnose family at the center of the community.

The Flats Ethnography

I found this map titled “The Churchill River Flats,” created by a community member, a non-Native. Though she did not live in the Flats, I must say this is an accurate map, but I don’t ever remember the names of the roads as being “Moccasin Crescent” or “Churchill Flats Ally.” I think the maker of this map added these names of the roads in for whatever reason. Still, it is a map, which shows where we lived back then, and how the community existed in the sixties. I did call the Churchill library and they said it was part of their archival collections.
This “Churchill River Flats” map (Figure 3) exists in the archival collections at the Churchill Public Library. The house, which says, “Harry Brightnose,” at the center of this image or bottom right inside the circle, was mine. Our name back then was Brightnose. I grew up Brenda
Brightnose until one of my older brothers uncovered our actual name was Wastasecoot. Our Cree name was anglicized to Brightnose as part of the Indian registration process\(^\text{29}\). Upon turning eighteen, I sent five dollars to the vital statistics and received a name correction. Since then I kept Wastasecoot, though some family members spelled it differently and yet others continued as Brightnose.

Most of the families moved to town once the new housing was ready starting around 1970. My family moved into a brand new townhouse in the summer of 1973. I had thought about doing a memory map with other community members, people who lived down the Flats, and then I decided not to, as I was unable to take on such an ambitious project. Each family has their own story to tell about their house, so I will let them do that if they want. I decided I would only map out my house. As an insider, I know it best.

“There was no affordable housing in town, so we always lived on the outskirts,” my older sister told me as she drove me around Cape Merry and the old Flats pointing out spots where our family lived at times before I was born. Little did I know she was home with me for the first three years? “Always being left by our parents,” she said. She was referring to my parent’s absences due to their alcoholism. In all, she identified three locations prior to my little house. All of them are outside the town of Churchill. My trip to home in August, 2010 was to see her

\(^{29}\) See Call to Action 17 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action, available http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Calls_to_ACTION_English2.pdf
and my cousins who still live in the town of Churchill. We also drove around the Flats, we stopped at the corner where my house once stood, and I was surprised to see another house in its spot. Cottages, that is what they were now, summer houses.

A bulldozer came and demolished my house when we moved to town in 1973. I was ten years old, and ready for the better life. I thought my life would be better with all the luxuries of town life, but the drinking continued, and so did the violence. My thinking was only wishful dreaming, but also I had built myself up to this expectation from the Simpson-Sears catalogue. This too, formed my view of the world around me. I came to believe that white people were perfect and did not have any problems; I formed a very negative identity of myself as a Cree girl, those glossy catalogue pages only affirmed this in my mind. All the women in the catalogue were white, skinny, and had all the nicest furniture, not like our broken down chairs and beat up table. Everywhere I looked, whether it was a mail order catalogue or in picture books at school, I could not find any people that looked like us, at least never in a positive light. I learned to become inferior to the white people. Growing up poor and then the abuse, I endured from my own people that I thought so little of myself. How else would I know that white people also had their problems, also beat their wives, also hurt their children, if I never had a white friend or ever entered a white person’s home?

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Growing up down the Flats, I had the company of my cousins and aunts and my mother. I have fond memories of my two Aunts, they and my mother were three sisters. My mother, being the oldest, provided her sisters with her stable love and support. We were all girls, all of their children living down the flats. Across from me was a house with three girls who stayed at home with their parents and across from them was another girl who we played with on a regular basis. All of us had one thing in common: we did not go to Residential school. We all went to school in town. However, my house was in the middle of the village, so we had a lot of traffic, kids coming and going all the time. There was always someone to play with on any given day at any hour of the day. Nevertheless, I was always missing my older brothers and sisters. They were away for most of the year. From September to the end of June, it was just my parents and I in our house.

For one thing, I knew I would not have survived without my sister cousins in the community who provided support, friendship and physical closeness throughout my childhood. We had a common bond; it seemed that the males victimized us all in our community. The women around me all needed each other, for support and for safety.

It took many years of counselling and releasing of emotions to let go of this negative self-image and find myself again. I wrote many poems as a way to heal myself\(^\text{31}\) and accepted invitations to do readings at special events. Even through the fear of speaking out and with shaky hands and tears streaming down my face I would go and read my poems. The speaking out has been

empowering for me and has helped me to free myself from the past. I have written about the
Flats, my mother, my siblings, and have used poetry to say how much I love them. My poems
are a way to speak the “actual reality” about who I am as an Ininu Iskwew.  

The Cree Women poem in Figure 4 is the result of directly contradicting the stereotypes and
violence toward Native women. I wanted to honor Miss Helen Betty Osborne, whose life was
taken in 1971 by a car load of men at the The Pas, Manitoba. When I heard about a March
taking place from Norway House to protest the early release of her killer, I felt angered once
again by this history of systematic killing and brutality against my precious, beautiful sisters
across this country. So I asked myself, who are we really? Who are we as Indigenous women of
this land? Do you want to know the truth about us? Will you let us tell you, in our own words?
I wrote this poem (Figure 4) back then, and I still to this day believe “this is who we are.”

Cree Woman

A distant drum beats in my heart
Ancient tides move in and out of my veins
My blood flows with its vibrant color
In the depths of my soul

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32 Okpalooka, C.L. & C.B. Dillard. Our healing is next to the wound: Embarkened Feminisms, Spirituality, and


The wind whispers in the trees
Remember who you are...

My heart drums to an ancient rhythm
Its song pushes through my veins
My breath like the ocean tides
Moves in and out of me
My mind like the endless universe
Is an eternal spring of creativity!

From sunrise to sunrise
I am the earth, ocean, trees, sunlight
All of these have made me flesh, blood, breath, mind
I am life itself, sacred, powerful
You cannot kill me for I will never die
You cannot chain me for I will always have freedom
You cannot shame me with your words
Or your eyes, for I hold the truth within every cell
Of my body. I am complete, whole, pure.

The wind still whispers in the trees
Remember who you are…
Figure 4 Cree Woman Poem & Illustration
Chapter 2 Approaching Methodology

Auto-ethnographic Journey:

I’ve come to think of my research as more of a journey, than a study, as this path that I have been walking for the past eight or so years has moved me in and out and through a production of creativity and a process of coming to know. This is a circular as opposed to a linear path. Doing arts based research, as a way of delving into my past has been very spiritual as well and not always logical, nor rational. This is not a nice tidy study with a chronological checklist of answered questions. It is a path of both process and product as is the way of autoethnography. It is a very open, flexible process of learning, creating, telling stories to public audiences, hearing their questions and trying to answer them, which leads me back to more memories and more stories.

To bring the story of Nikis (my little house) to the forefront and to bring light to what happened to Cree families, whose children were placed in residential schools, I used arts based autoethnographic\(^{35}\) approach to my research.\(^{36}\) First, I started with sketching, or drawing out my thoughts, feelings and memories. Next, I constructed a map of my childhood home and added my memories to each area on the map.\(^{37}\) In all, there emerged thirteen distinct areas from the Nikis map. The visual stories and the language of art were effective at reaching people of

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diverse backgrounds. It caught their attention and gave me an opportunity to “show and tell” the sad parts, the happy parts and the humanness of my family. It broke down the walls of secrecy and made the plight of a Cree family more visible. I let the audiences into my metaphorical house, and we had open conversations about what happened there. Their questions and comments triggered more memories and more stories emerged. I learned as I went through this process, I journaled, spoke to my committee, emailed them my thoughts, and reflected for many hours, days, and weeks. I had to wait for long periods and try new ways to delve into my past, without finding any instant answers; I learned to accept the ambiguity of arts based research.

I speak as a Cree researcher, storyteller and educator, who brings an insider perspective of the Cree people, often pathologized by non-Indigenous researchers. The Nikis map I created as the child who lived in this house and experienced all that happened there. I then analyzed the map as an adult in an academic setting so that I could interpret it for others. The way I tell the story of Nikis might vary between communities. As I scan my power point slides and the many presentations I have prepared for the different groups, I can see that this is the way of the Cree. The Cree storyteller does not speak the same way to a child as they would to an adult, she does not use the same words in an academic setting as she would for people who come to the Meeting Place Drop-in Centre.

When I spoke to the teacher candidates at OISE for instance, I arranged the art in my presentation so that I could appeal to their need as teachers. Teachers are always looking for ideas when planning their lessons. When I spoke to an adult literacy group here in Toronto, I

wanted to get them to work on their own memory maps and they did. This was the first time they felt safe enough to come out with their stories of arriving in Canada. The purpose for this study, as I said in the previous chapter, is to open the conversation between Canadians and myself. I offer my life and my lived experience as the context from which to explore the reality of being Cree and to encourage others to speak about their own culture as well. It is very much a reciprocal process, whereby the audience listens to me and then I listen to them. After the presentations, there are often those people who want to say more about their lives. One Anishnawbe who survived ten years at residential school came to thank me after my presentation. He asked me for a copy of my “window pains” (spelled pains instead of panes) drawing and poem. I gave him one and we hugged. Another older white man at another presentation I did for “storytellers” caught me as I was heading out the door. He wanted to tell me he had been a staff member at the Brandon Indian Residential School.

So many people shared their experiences with me enriching my life with their stories. I carry their words with me as they strengthen me; their sharing propels me forward into more communities to gather more heartfelt sharing and strength building. It tells me that the process of memory mapping is a spiritual journey, as I did have to travel back there to my childhood and go deep within myself to find that little girl. Mistikoosee Skwessis is a very shy and timid child, and for good reasons. She is Cree, polite and unassuming. She is not loud and boisterous because this is not the way she learned to be in the world. She is gentle and kind to others as she learned to be careful with other people’s hearts and souls. Yet she is wise and powerful, surviving many vicious attacks physical, sexual, and spiritual. We see how the removal and assimilation policies affects this child and her family, through my adult reflections of her memories. I look at the words written on the map and draw out the meaning behind these
memories and stories. By adding more context from personal and political events at the time, memory mapping becomes a process of self-reflexivity and location of self.

The main reason I tell this story and tell it now after the Truth & Reconciliation Commission of Canada, (TRC) has completed its five-year mission, is that we have to hear from those siblings of survivors who also were “left behind” to pick up the pieces of their parents broken hearts. Coming from first voice, brings authenticity to the story. It provides a truth not widely represented in academia. Without these stories, one would have to rely on the colonial gaze about the Indigenous people as usual. One example is Jayewardene’s study of Crime and society in Churchill. To be fair, it is an old study (1972) and much has improved in the awareness and understanding of Indigenous issues by the academic community. However, drawing on her study of the same community I grew up in provides a perfect example of how we view the world from very different lenses. Jayewardene, a non-Indigenous outsider, wrote about the broken windows being an unexplainable phenomenon. She could not see past the shattered glass and into the history of the Indigenous people who lived in these rundown houses. Evidently, she did not have the understanding of the historic trauma left by colonization and the residential school policy.

I challenge this shortsightedness and provide an explicit explanation by reconstructing the reality of that era in Canada for Indigenous people living outside or out of the way on the wrong side of the tracks. By using art-based methods, the memory map of Nikis provides this unique vantage

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point, from inside the shattered window. From inside Nikis I tell you what it was like to grow up down the Flats and to lose my siblings every fall. I have taken on this Cree way\(^{40}\) of doing research because so many arts based researchers before me have carved out a space in their objections to the positivist paradigm.\(^{41}\) Without their insistence on reversing the colonial gaze, I would still be on the outside, on the “wrong” side of the tracks. With the advancement of arts-based research, I am able to speak from the inside of the house and be the house. People look in, listen, and engage in this very essential conversation. I bring my knowledge by way of stories as a Cree educator.\(^{42}\) This freedom to say and to think in our own unique way, a cultural way, is made possible by arts based research. The wonderful book, Stories of the Road Allowance People by Maria Campbell, highlights a good example of this kind of work.\(^{43}\)

This memory mapping (show and tell) journey is sacred because the place I am writing about, the place down the Flats where my house once stood is a sacred place. Moreover, I do not mean the space around it is not sacred; in fact, all the earth is sacred. I just am recognizing how the space where I lived was a sacred space, not a bad place at all. Yet growing up, I learned to hate it, to be ashamed of it, and to try to escape as soon as possible. Here is how I arrive at this conclusion about my sacred space. The land itself is land, which was on the river flats outside of a settler frontier town. Nevertheless, before that, it was our land. We were not always squatters


as the white people called us. My grandfather, Josiah Beardy, travelled this area, as did the Cree of the muskeg. They travelled by foot, rode on sleds pulled by dogs, and canoed this vast region stretching as far east as Fort Severn, Ontario. People would put in orders for his paddles as you can see in this photograph (Figure 5) below, he loved to sit by the water and carve paddles. Sadly, he was the only grandparent of mine still living when I was born. Fortunately, I met him and loved him dearly. My parents and I would visit him at the York Landing Reserve, near Thompson, Manitoba.

![Figure 5 Mooshoom (Grandfather) Josiah Beardy](image)

So what if I switched everything around, and reversed the gaze, as they say. The white people would be on the outside of our village, living on a small pocket of land. They would be the squatters. Through many discussions with colleagues, came the topic of “emplacement” and the
process of colonizing and displacing the original people of that land/space. If I really resist this process of emplacement, then I can go back and turn the table completely around. Only then, by resisting this concept, can I see we really are the first peoples of this land. I can then see that we are the true owners of this land. Nevertheless, there have been many resisters to this emplacement process, they have never forgotten who they are, who we are in relation to the land. How did I not know? Growing up in the sixties, my view was limited; I only saw my village and my people. I did not see the waves of oppression, which would have occurred prior to my arrival on the scene. Moreover, when there is no one telling you what happened and who you really are, you have only lies to believe. The white teachers fed us these lies. I came to believe the propaganda imbedded in the storybooks, in the desks, in the chalkboard and on the walls, with the pictures of royalty staring down on us every day. As children, we were forced to rehearse this propaganda, we sang “God save our gracious queen and long live Victoria.” Victorious, over us that is. I had learned that somehow, the fight was fair and we had lost it, we had submitted to the new regime. The prayer, the mantra, drove our young minds into a state of lull. “Our Father, who art in Heaven” held the power over us and we were to never challenge such authority. That is what I learned in school. I learned to disappear under the emplacement of Christianity and Colonial rule.

Telling the story of Nikis has been incredibly validating for me. It has helped me to put some order to my childhood down the Flats because of being able to build a new understanding for myself in the analysis of the Nikis map. Here, I quote Nadia Ferrara’s *Healing through art:*

ritualized space and Cree identity. "Storytelling is a way of ordering and giving form and significance to the world, exemplifying mythopoetic thought by metaphorising it" (p. 12).

Telling the story of Nikis is my way of making sense of the chaos of that time. It has helped me to see through those shattered windows, but this time as an adult who has already survived the worst of it. I go back there through that little wooden door and open it in the hopes of finding myself. This is why I tell these stories, so that I can free myself. Whenever or wherever I speak to different groups I rarely refuse, because I really enjoy telling stories. I love hearing people laugh and I mostly enjoy connecting with them through my stories from down the flats. I also love to write and connect with people in this way.

This thesis includes discussion on how I have used arts based methods to inform my approach to teaching adult learners about life in the Flats as a way into key issues facing Indigenous communities. In the following pages, I talk about using maps with Indigenous adult learners and with post-secondary education students.

When I taught a writing course at Anishnawbe Health Toronto, I used the memory mapping exercise with Indigenous adult learners. This offered them a creative path to writing, whereby they were free to draw or construct a memory map of their community or childhood home or school. The arts based method of memory mapping helped the students to locate themselves and begin to tell their life stories to each other. One of the men mapped out his reserve and happily


46 Anishnawbe Health Toronto at 179 Gerard St. East provides Community Health Worker Training program.
shared it with us. Because I was their teacher and they had come to trust me over a period of months, the sharing of their maps was deeply emotional. A few of the women disclosed their childhood experiences of sexual abuse. This program provided additional supports to the students, including traditional ceremonies and access to Elders and counsellors on site. It should be noted that the healing aspect of these courses were intended to provide a safe environment where this kind of emotional sharing is made possible. No doubt, my being Indigenous also helped to create a level of trust for the students.

As I carried my map of Nikis around to all these different communities, I also carried around this small piece of concrete (Figure 6). I carried it from the Brandon Indian Residential school site at Brandon, Manitoba. The meaning making process also came from these artifacts. These are now artifacts infused and alive with meaning. My use and appreciation for artifacts stems from my teaching background as well. In 2001 or so, I taught Aboriginal Counselling at Assiniboine Community College in Brandon, Manitoba. Most of the students were usually non-First Nations and had varying degrees of exposure and knowledge of First Nations history. There was an
Indian residential school on the north hill and several First Nations communities surround Brandon. Although the Brandon Indian Residential School now rests in a pile of rubble, there still exists in Brandon a long history of separation and lack of understanding of First Nations people. I had to find creative ways of helping them to connect with Canada’s historical treatment of Indigenous peoples. The challenge I faced was how to teach them about Residential Schools, without blaming them or leaving them feeling “bad.” Being a counselor, I wanted to be sensitive to their needs and hoped to make the learning as positive and empowering for them as possible. In my experience in using anti-racism education, I had tried teaching from the perspective of pointing the finger at a particular race/society. This kind of awareness meant more denial, and less openness to listen. It would only result in learners resisting the opportunity to examine fundamental differences in worldviews between First Nations and Western societies.

This “Concrete” activity came about when I was trying to introduce the topic of Residential schools. I first went to the site on the north hill of the Grand Valley road, and walked in and around the rubble of the now collapsed Brandon Residential School. I had heard a few of the stories about the school and was very aware of the impacts it had on individuals and their communities. My own siblings had gone to the school in Dauphin just two hours north of Brandon. This was a very huge topic and I wanted to be respectful to the many children who attended, whose lives were shattered, and to those whose lives were taken and buried in unmarked graves on these grounds.

The first class went well. There were eight women in total. One was First Nations and one was Metis, the majority of them being non-First Nations. For the most part, the group seemed vaguely aware of issues facing First Nations people. They were keen to learn what they could
from the course. The first activity I did with them introduced the sharing circle model and the sacredness of the Eagle feather. They expressed how surprised they were when their emotions welled up into tears. They also expressed their appreciation for being able to sit in this circle and wanted to be able to have more of the same throughout the course.

Then came the day that something magical happened; it was a surprise for all of us, teacher included. For this class, I brought a piece of concrete I had taken from the pile of Residential School rubble. This piece of concrete was part of a floor, its top side was smooth, shiny marble, and underneath it was the rough broken cement, now exposed to the light of day. I did not tell the group what it was. Instead, I asked them to tell me. The words “concrete, rock, stones, cement, and debris,” were written on the board as words not to use in their descriptions. I wanted them to have a new relationship to the object, to find their own words. I instructed them to use as few or as many words as they wanted. The object went around from person to person, words like "a piece of history, and someone’s memories," were used to sum up this fragment of the old Indian Residential School's concrete flooring.

Once the object returned to me, I held it in my hands. Then I told them the object was a piece of the floor of the Brandon Indian Residential School. At that instant, one woman gasped and her eyes flooded with tears. Later she revealed her childhood friend had attended the school and she never had an opportunity to talk about it until this activity. I could sense the uneasiness of the other students. There was certainly some emotions surfacing for them regarding the Indian Residential School, which had stood on the North Hill for many decades.

I held the object and ran my fingers upon its smooth marbled surface, and began explaining from the vantage of my own family’s experience and my own knowledge of what happened to one of
my friends who went to the Brandon Residential School. I told them "many children’s feet stepped on this surface, children who were taken from their homes and families and were forced to speak only English."

I then sent the concrete object around again. This time their words were much more expressive. They now had a new relationship to this tiny piece of history; it was a part of their history as Canadians. There were more tears as each student shared their own memories or ‘awareness’ of the Residential School on the hill. They were able to make a connection to the piece of concrete in their hands by voicing their grief, embarrassment, shame, feelings that were long held and unspoken, feelings hidden even from them. Their recognition of what the object represented to them was significant. This new awareness began a new relationship to this part of their history as Canadians. In a sense, they began to see how they were related to this issue as settlers or as Indigenous people, by the very act of holding a piece of this history in the palm of their hands.

I asked the group "is this object sacred?" Their responses varied from, "yes, it could be to someone," to "not likely." I then asked, "what makes it sacred? Who decides if it is sacred or not?" I also asked them to think a moment about how they might be received by their community if they took this object to them and presented it as a sacred object. We all agreed that they may be met with doubt and possibly have their mental stability questioned. The question remained, “what brings sacredness to this object?”

"How might this object be described by survivors of the Residential Schools?" Yes, some might not want to touch it at all and possibly want it out of their sight and most definitely not consider it as a sacred object. "But, what if this item could be used for healing?" The idea that healing
and wellness may make it more a sacred object was considered at this point. It could provide a starting point for people who have been affected in some way by the Residential Schools. It could be used as a "healing tool," I further explained to the group. Another fundamental question arose for me while doing this exercise: What do “White” people think about those schools, and where do they get to really look at the whole issue in a serious and purposeful way? Each learner was able to talk about their knowledge or connection to the school on the hill. Some had driven by it all their life and never really acknowledged its existence. Another learner, the Indigenous one, spoke about her mother having gone to that very same school.

By the end of the course, the learners wanted to do something to honor the lives of the children buried at the Residential school and so they each made something to take up there and to place it out on the grounds as a memorial. One woman brought home-baked bread and a jar of jam. Another made a wooden plaque, with words of love and caring. We each said a prayer sharing our sadness, regret, and hope, and left there with a renewed hope, maybe things might change now. Maybe it will be different for our children.

In their e-journals to me that first week, one woman's response was of embarrassment and shock. She had not known what really happened to the children in that school. It no longer surprises me to see how so many non-First Nations people my age do not know about the government controlled Indian Residential Schools and their actual purpose: to assimilate and “Christianize” First Nations children. Their reaction is often one of disbelief and astonishment.

In a follow-up discussion of the topic of Residential Schools, the Indigenous woman told us about her mother's response when she described our activity to her. Her mother had been a child in one of these schools, and after hearing about the "healing tool", she wanted to go up there and
get a piece of the debris for herself. The woman then took her mother up to the site. In my understanding, she was given permission to look at her experience in that school and so took the opportunity to start her own healing work. These “found objects and memory” are discussed by Kalmanowitz and Lloyd\(^47\) as reconnecting to one’s past and finding meaning by bringing these objects “inside-out and outside-in.” The use of objects can provide a way of empowering survivors and give them permission to talk about their relationship to the object. In this way their experience is honored.

I could see, through this exercise, how having them connect to an object can open up their minds to connecting to the concept of “residential school.” Eisner’s article on “Art and Knowing,”\(^48\) points to this kind of knowledge as the recall part, the recognition part of the residential school history, in this case. The theoretical or practical understanding of how they were related to this issue, took a bit longer, a few weeks later, and was most evident in their actions at the end of the course. At the end of the course they decided to take a wreath and other items to commemorate the residential school site.

Another example of using objects was the use of artifacts I saw in a movie called “Inside Hana’s Suitcase,” about how a teacher used a suitcase from the Holocaust Museum to address the


increased incidents of bullying in her school. It allowed the children to see from Hana’s perspective of what hatred can do to humanity. The children were immediately connecting their own stories of bullying with the horrific result of violence upon this young girl, Hana. I wondered if I could do the same with a Native child’s suitcase he/she could have taken on their journey to residential school. Inside the suitcase of a five or six-year-old, one might find their most sacred items, maybe a new jacket with beautiful beadwork on it, made by the loving hands of their mother. The fact that the children were being assimilated into Canadian society would have meant the destruction or removal of these items as they would have been deemed irrelevant to the national policy. This suitcase idea kept me thinking of how it could be used today in education about Canada’s residential schools. Children would likely relate to the plight of the Native child as much as they would to a child who experienced the holocaust.

It’s really about helping students to connect to the issue, by way of objects, such as this concrete piece or artifacts, such as this memory map. Similar to the artifacts, putting my memories down on a map representing my childhood home and community made a tangible object of my family’s past that provided me with an opportunity to honour the experience of surviving abuse. Connecting to the object or the map means connecting to the people who experienced the residential school era. We can use this suitcase or these memory maps to teach not only about residential schools but also about indigenous worldviews. Alternatively, a turtle rattle or


medicine pouch, etc. How do these items represent a child’s spirituality and connection to family and community? Using such artifacts to teach on these issues, which grip the heart of Indigenous peoples, are both compelling and tangible.

This past year I taught a course for adult learners on the issues of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Included in their work was an art assignment to “Honor and Remember” one of the women listed on the CBC website\(^5\) Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women: Unsolved cases of Indigenous Women and Girls. The assignment intended to make each of the learners not only aware but to connect in a meaningful way to this issue. Finding meaningful ways to connect to Indigenous knowledge and experience has lasting influences upon adult learners. Using the memory map to tell my stories has also served to educate about issues faced by Indigenous communities. By using myself, my life, as an open book, they can look in and see visually, where everything happened in one family’s house. In the workshops I have delivered, most participants have come away with a better understanding of these issues as well as a deeper appreciation of the current struggles faced by Indigenous communities.

In researching and writing about myself, I have learned that I too am a survivor of the Residential School policy. Canada’s policies of removal and separation of families put me in the path of disintegration of family and community. With no one to care for children like me, those left behind by older siblings and left with parents incapacitated by alcoholism, I fell into a deep hole of family violence, sexual abuse, poverty, neglect, and mental un-wellness.

\(^5\) [http://www.cbc.ca/missingandmurdered/](http://www.cbc.ca/missingandmurdered/)
The following section provides an archival photograph of my house. I use the photo to explain the invisibility one must challenge when reconstructing our lives as Indigenous peoples. We have to challenge this negative mindset among our youth and ourselves. Our history is more valid than everyone else’s narrative here on Turtle Island, and must be returned to the places where it was erased. I explain this in more detail in the next section.

The photo in Figure 7 was my childhood home where I lived in the sixties, with my mom and dad all year round and my siblings who lived with us in the summers. My siblings were away at a residential school for ten months of the year. This photo (Figure 7) reaches the media in the winter, during the month of April of 1968, when my siblings were away at Residential School in Dauphin, Manitoba. I would have been five years old that year, the year that a man raped me. He took advantage of my parents’ alcoholism, offering to ‘babysit’ me so they could go to another drinking party. In this autoethnographic account of the residential school impacts on our family, I speak as a sibling who did not attend residential school. It is with this very unique vantage point, where I witnessed the coming and going of my siblings, as I stood on the train station platform, seeing the train leave taking them away from us and then returning them home again for the summers. This house speaks for me by way of a memory map, drawings, and poems, methods of an autoethnographic inquiry. Nikis is at the heart of this story of the coming and going of siblings. It provides a space in the landscape of Canada’s nation building and holds a place for truth telling, this is an Indigenous storytelling. This story emerges from my memories of this house, which is why I called it Nikis, meaning ‘my little house.’

Figure 7 Nikis (my little house)

This photograph (Figure 7) appeared in the Winnipeg Tribune in the spring of 1968, with the caption “Frustrated Churchill threatens to secede!” The townspeople threatened to leave Manitoba and join the Northwest Territories due to the lack of services and infrastructure. The house in this photograph was mine and it stood in the squatter village known as the Flats, across the railway tracks from the town of Churchill, along the Churchill River, with other rundown houses.

http://go.galegroup.com.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA228994881&v=2.1&u=utoronto_main&it=r&p=AONE&asid=024b361a7ccca53e6369a7d0c79c6114

53 University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg Tribune Fonds, PC 18 (A81-12).
dilapidated houses. Almost every family was Indigenous: Cree, Dene, Inuit or Metis. This was my house, but my family was nonexistent in the article. We are only used, that is, our house epitomized the dilapidation needed to alarm the Manitoba government into action. In this Winnipeg Tribune article, it states that this place has the worst living conditions in all of Canada!54 I show you this photograph to illustrate the fact that our voice and our story was not considered important or significant enough to include in the article about Churchill. In my search for this photograph, I found other news clippings. The Winnipeg Free Press’ article titled “Churchill Stop ‘Eye-Opener’ for MLAs,” describes my community as:

“A ghetto 600 miles north of Winnipeg for some 300 native people. They live just outside town – The Flats – in filth, ragged clothes and in some instances on quarts of wine…this is not to say that the entire native band is unemployed, live like animals or are near starvation. Many are hard workers with a nearly decent pay cheque. But it is the few that are not that present the visitor with the overwhelming picture of despair.”55

The following year, another Winnipeg Free Press highlights the “Queen Lands in Manitoba.”56 Here it says, again about my community, “According to the planned route, it would not be necessary to see the area called The Flats, a cluster of shed like homes huddled against the Churchill River.” It goes on to quote a townsperson saying, about my home, “they’re just shacks; the people don’t even own the land they’re sitting on, but she (the Queen) might as well

have a look.” His wife adds, “She has no choice in that. But they (the Indians) seem to like it down there. They’re happy.”

Why is it, that we are always huddled? Can houses huddle? I guess shacks huddle, not houses. The words, “they’re happy,” do not sit well with me. Then I have to keep in mind this is a white person who did not live in my community who is assuming that the Indians are “happy.” That is likely because we (Indians) were always smiling at white people. My parents, whenever they went into the grocery store, for instance, would always be pleasant to the store clerks. It’s the dynamic, which plays out whereby the oppressed people do not have the freedom to show their dissatisfaction with their situation in life to the oppressor. Instead, the Indians showed this dissatisfaction to other oppressed people, their family or community members. This is my explanation for why we always looked “happy” to white folks.

This kind of media depiction or misrepresentation of Indians was common back then. There were other depictions of my parents in their worst times, which they felt at liberty to air on national television or release to the public, such as the film called “Some Natives of Churchill.”57

In this film, I recognize both my parents sitting in the pub. There was another time I saw them on television, during the weather forecast on 24 Hours, a CBC news channel. They were drunk and falling in the snow, my father was trying to help my mother up out of the snow bank outside the Churchill Hotel. Across Canada today, media depictions of First Nations communities like Attawapiskat First Nation in Ontario, continue to portray the hopelessness of the people who live

there. Other news clips I have dug out from the past, show a harsh and racist attitude toward the Indigenous people of this region, in the sixties. A more truthful perspective is captured by Alanis Obamsawin, an Indigenous film maker in her film, “People of the Katawiskak River.”58 Obamsawin provides an inside look into the housing conditions of Attawapiskat. They interview someone from the community and talk to people who actually live in the houses. Still, the outsiders look in with their racist attitudes, adding injury to an already traumatized community. The people are trying their best to take care of each other, even fundraising to keep people fed and to provide recreational outlets for the youth. These efforts come under attack from people, who do not really know what is happening, who do not have the right information in front of them. These attacks only perpetuate the misinformation and stereotypes.

If I were to rely on these old news clippings of the Flats and never talk back59 to them, the stories of Nikis would never be known. My parents loved their children; they tried to make a better life for themselves and their children. They were members of a community who helped each other when a family was in distress, if their house burnt down and they needed food and shelter. They worked tirelessly against the forces of racist policies and poverty. They taught me to be resourceful, hardworking, and kind to others.

One amazing event that my father involved us in was the demonstration during the Queen’s Royal Tour of Churchill. It really was remarkable that he, my father, took on the poster making part of it. I was only seven years old and was not aware of his plan to bring his family to town

for this protest. He came in the door with a bunch of paper and crayons and markers. He told me to go get all my friends so we can do some coloring together. This I found to be strange, as he never did these kinds of activities with me, as we never could afford paper, crayons, and such. I was happily surprised and dashed out the door to gather up my cousins to come over. There we all sat at the table or on the floor and created these posters. I still was not aware of the purpose of these posters but I did not really care, I just wanted to color on paper. He had a list of sentences or phrases we were to put on the posters. We all marched to town with our posters and lined up for the Queen to see our demands. There were many people snapping photos, including people from the media, but I never did find any photos of us protesting during the Queen’s royal visit to Churchill.

The only other time I would have to use crayons was at school, or when the van full of white people came down the Flats and taught us about a man named Jesus. They would also have a snack for us and whenever we would see that van, children would all run from every direction to the van. We were so happy to have someone spending time with us and having fun coloring and singing. This was the time I really believed what they told me in a literal sense, and prayed every night for my parents to stop drinking, they never did stop and so I did not take this Jesus person too seriously back then. In fact, I was disappointed in him for many years.

The coloring of poster boards with my father was the most fun we had together. He took all the posters we made and nailed them to these sticks, and with all of us kids in tow, he marched to town with them. It seemed everyone from the Flats was there with their posters as well, and we all met upstairs in the Post Office building. I believe there was an Indian Affairs office or some kind of Indian organization office up there. I remember seeing a photo of my father and I
holding the posters we had made. Maybe it was the Taiga Times, a local newspaper. I did not have much luck finding it when I was last home when searching through their library archives.

This protest may have resulted in the new houses built in town, one of which, we moved into in 1973. We were one of the last families to move in to our new house at 23 Thompson Street. This was a happy time for me. I could not believe it! I really loved the new house, with its three bedrooms upstairs, a bathroom with a bathtub and a shower. The fun part was having two doors, each with a doorbell. I have told this doorbell story in my teaching as well, whereby my father could not distinguish which doorbell rang, front or back.

Meanwhile, for the people who lived here in this house, there is another story that has yet to emerge. It is a story, which has been lost many times in the media, where only the surface problems receive attention, the drunkenness, the crime and the squalor. Very rarely do we hear from an insider, like myself, to explain why it was that my parents became alcoholics and why it was that our windows were always broken. It is because of this misinformation and widespread reliance on stereotypes that I feel I must speak my truth, and attempt to bring a truthful footing, to these issues regarding Indigenous people in Canada.⁶⁰

Whenever I do the Nikis Memory Map presentation with adult learners, I like to tell this story about my father, and I always ask the audience, “what do you think was written on the posters?” The responses vary, but most people say something like, “go home!” I always find this amusing and I will ask them, what would happen if we, Indians from the Flats, yelled at the Queen to go

home? I remind the audience uttering such disloyalty and hatred toward the Queen would result in jail time. Rarely does anyone ever guess, even though I have spent the last hour or so talking about my rundown house and all the house fires, I can remember, that the posters said, “Safe Housing Now!” This was all we had been wanting: an affordable and safe place to live like everyone else, with running water, and electricity.

You will see in the photograph (Figure 5) the National Harbor Board (NHB) grain elevators where ships from around the world would dock and receive grain brought up north by the Canadian National Railway (CNR) boxcars from Manitoba’s fields of wheat. To the right and behind the veil of clothes hanging out to dry is the town of Churchill, where we would move to in 1973. Our house in town, though we had electricity and indoor plumbing there, did not end the abuse and violence for me. That ended when I became a ward of the province at age twelve until my adulthood. For my thesis I chose to only map out my little house which stood in the flats alongside some 300 other mixed heritage people, mainly Cree and Metis.
Before I was born, my father worked for CNR and my family lived along the Hudson Bay line, as did other Native families, whose sole purpose for living at those mileposts was to maintain the railway. This would have been his occupation when all of my siblings were born, before I came along, their seventeenth and last baby. Before I was born in 1963, at the Fort Churchill hospital, my parents moved permanently to the Flats, in a shack with no electricity and no running water, which is where I grew up. My father got a job at the NHB, first as a laborer then as a stevedore until he retired at the age of 65, in 1980. He died two years later as he was drinking his last beer in the Churchill Hotel pub. It is unclear as to what he died of, but he was not in the best of health as he drank a lot and especially after his retirement, he drank even more frequently.

The photograph can be accepted as evidence that this house did exist once. This archival photo provides the empirical evidence of Nikis (my little house) which is there in black and white, but only the stories and memories of my experiences in this house can bring the richness of color and emotions and depth to this evidence. Thus, an Indigenous art-based autoethnographic method of inquiry is needed in order to bring the reader into the house to see how our lives as a Cree family were shaped by Canada’s removal policy. Carolyn Ellis (2014) says a good autoethnographer has to be able to “get in tune with self, then step outside of that, and look back at yourself.”

I can put myself back into this house and remember my interactions with my parents and my siblings. With the memory mapping, I was also able to go back to my five-year-old self and remember the most traumatic event of my life as a child.

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As I read this article, which features a photograph of my house, I look for the words that identify who we are as the Indigenous people of that time. However, names like ‘Indian’ or Cree or Metis, are not one mentioned in this article. The article has no ‘Indians’ in it whatsoever. So why did they use a photo of my house to call attention to the plight of the ‘townspeople?’ Their concerns around infrastructure, water and plumbing along with fire hydrants, overshadow the even more despairing conditions of the Flats. As I recall my older brother telling us about the photograph his teacher showed him at school, he said that was when our windows had only plastic to keep the cold out. He said he could hear the truck outside our house, and went to look out that particular window, the one facing east, where the kitchen cabinet stood, but he could not see through the layers of plastic. By the time he had reached the door and opened it to see who it was idling outside our house, they had zoomed off, he said.

The plastic covered windows (sometimes boarded up windows tell a story of their own) tell a story about the levels of poverty of the Indigenous people whose ancestors had roamed and lived along these same shores of the Churchill River and the Hudson Bay for centuries. Now here we were “huddled” in shacks. We had become squatters. We had become the invisible people, living on the outskirts of town. We were not the townspeople. We were the ‘Indians.’

As I look back at my childhood, I search for what was there, in order to explore and understand how I experienced the residential school policy of Canada. This photograph only confirms my memory of my childhood home, and the article, which features this photograph, speaks only to the “white” townspeople’s situation at the time. This photograph and the article about housing and the lack of infrastructure does not speak for me nor for any of the families who lived in
houses like this one. I had to find another way to explore my childhood and tell my own stories from my own lived experiences and memories.

I tried showing my memory map to one of my cousins back home; she was not ready to look at it, or to go back there to the past. She told me, “You shouldn’t show that to people.” I could see that she was only being concerned for me and did not want anyone to think badly of my family or me. I reassured her I was ready to tell this story about what happened to me and about the rape. I also explained how it was very liberating to say it aloud, to speak out about the violence we went through as girls and women.

Upon returning to Toronto, I then began sharing the memory map and its stories and the stories found their way out to the open hearts of many. It seems it is easier to hear a story that is not yours or that is not directly about you, but this story is about Canada and so it is about you and me. Like the residential school survivor, Russell Copeland Moses wrote in 1965, “I must tell of things as they were and really this is not my story, but yours.”

Ellis (2014) also talks about “opening up the conversation with the audience, and so then the audience becomes important.” Bochner (2014) says the audience has the role of “co-conspirator or collaborator in creating meaning.” Whether you are Native or non-Native, whether you did or did not attend Residential Schools, I can only present you, the reader, with this story, it is then up to you to make sense of this story, and take away what it means to you. I want to share this

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story with the Canadian audience, I want to give you a glimpse into our relationship as settler and Indigenous peoples on this land, and have you take responsibility for your part of our history together.

I want to tell you stories of my life as a Cree girl growing up in this house. I only have this photograph; our family did not have any photos of our lives, I was fortunate to be given one photograph of me as a child by one of my cousins. All I have are my memories and some drawings and poems to create a better understanding of who we were as a Cree family in the sixties during the Residential School era. By creating the memory map of Nikis I hope to better understand how I was impacted by this assimilation and removal policy enforced by Canada. It is hoped that this arts-based methodology will be sufficient enough to make meaning and impart knowledge on to the readers or at the very least, give the reader an inside look of my little house down the flats. As Thomas King (2003) relates, “this is the story that I am chained to:

I tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live.\(^{64}\)

King speaks of stories as if they themselves have power over us and can determine our lives, because they can and they do. In later chapters I add my own explanation as to why I or anyone might be chained to such stories of tragedy and sorrow. Drawing memory maps has opened a wealth of stories, some which keep me chained and those which liberate me from the past.

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Creating the memory map has also opened the door to a time in my life, I had once thought would be best to forget, but now have a deep appreciation and respect for as it is who I am and who I will always be.

The story of Nikis needs me to speak from my experiences as a Cree girl living in this humble dwelling with my parents and my siblings. As the autoethnographer of this story, my personal narrative must be explicit, showing my connection to the community and connections to my observations,” says Bochner. He then poses the questions storytellers should be asking: “What could be and what kind of world do we want to shape, how do these stories help us to interrogate and investigate and to look at what kind of world can be created?”

The kind of world I want to create for my grandson is that which honors his heritages. Where the education system is a safe place to be, with teachers who will be culturally competent enough to embrace his Creeness. Where lessons taught from books written by Indigenous philosophers, activists and survivors are an everyday activity. I hope he will go to school and learn about his Cree grandmothers’ history along with other histories of the peoples here on Turtle Island. Schools need to become places of safety for children and the community, where there is more community involvement and initiatives.

The methods I use to tell this story are art based, which relates to the memory map. I bring a visual experience to this autoethnography providing the reader with a look into the actual house.

An insider’s viewpoint will bring a better understanding of the impacts of the residential school era upon my family. The stories shared in this thesis are not according to any order in time, therefore are not chronological. The stories found in this memory map, are not sequential or linear, they are circular and pivotal to my relationship to this time and space, when this house stood on that spot in the Flats at Churchill, Manitoba. The stories follow a map of thirteen areas and arise from my relationship to each of the structures in those areas, be they furniture, window or door. I have used these to convey important teachings to adult learners, whether they are Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

Jo-Ann Archibald writes about storywork and the many ways a story can teach us or bring healing and laughter.\textsuperscript{66} As an adult educator, I have utilized my lived experience and related many stories as pedagogy in the classroom with adult learners. Being Cree, I have always felt comfortable teaching with my stories or lived experience. These words by Ellis, Adams, & Bochner (2000) explain why autoethnographic inquiry is the best fit for me as a Cree storyteller.

[Scholars…who turned to autoethnography] concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us.\textsuperscript{67}


The memory map opens the windows and doors to my little house as I remember it, inviting the reader in to see what it would have been like to live there during the sixties. The bed and stove and corner cupboard, along with the table, lamp and radio all have a story to tell the readers. If the house was still standing there in its spot, down the Flats, I would have taken many photos of it and have those be the focal point for this study, but all I have are memories, and my drawings from that place of childhood. What is remarkable is that I only found this photograph about a year ago, and yet I had already made the drawings of the house and the clothesline exactly from this viewpoint.

If all you had was the photograph to tell us the story of Nikis you would be limited in learning about the family who lived here. For instance, the black box structure in front of the house between the two windows, which appears buried in the snow, is a coal bin. I would climb into that coal bin and lay in there on the coal until the morning light. This was one of my hiding places where I would seek safety from my family when they were drinking and fighting. If you look closer at the clothes hanging from the line, you will see the ones on the farthest left are smaller than the other clothes: those were mine. This is also evidence that a child lived here. My mother washed all those clothes by hand and let the cold north wind dry them, she would then bring them inside to thaw out by the woodstove, a long arduous process without the luxuries of a washing machine or dryer. Even the whiteness of the snow does not illuminate, but only darkens the windows and doorway of this house. It will be the stories I share with you that will expose the truths of a young Cree girl who survived the residential school era.
Community Map

Figure 8 Memory Map of my Community

Memory mapping is a process of capturing memories about a place of significance to its creator. This memory map of my community reflects what I remember about my community. I use the word capturing because I used a “first thoughts/images” technique. For myself, it was a deep reflective process of gathering the earliest memories about my childhood home. My memory map illustrates my lived experience of my childhood home and what naturally follows is the community I lived in. An individual or a collective, such as a family or members of a community, can create memory maps. In this illustration (Figure 8), I provide a map of the
community where I lived during the sixties. This helps to link the relationships, which existed there between my family and my aunts’ families. It also helps to show where our community was in relation to the railway tracks, the train station and the town.

This memory map of my community (Figure 8) also shows where my community was located in relation to the town site and the railway tracks. I also indicated my two aunt’s homes and the house where seven children burned in a house fire. I show this here in order to situate my family and show where we lived in the Flats. The square near the center with an ‘x’ in it, where it says Nikis, was my house. The ‘x’ above my house, was one of my Aunts’ house; they had two daughters in their home, and the other ‘x’ was where my other Aunt lived and they had four daughters in their home. This also shows there were three sisters all from the same family who lived close together in the same village all those years in the 1960’s. There is another X by the river where we set our fish net and fetched our fish as a family, shared between the three sisters’ families.

There is another box with an ‘x’ in it, further down and to the left of my house, it says, “House fire, 7 children died.” House fires were common down the Flats—mine burned twice—but this was a very tragic loss where the parents lost all their children in one night, including an infant. I remember being very deeply saddened about this because I knew the family and each of the children. Though this happened many years ago, many of these tragedies continue to plague our communities across this land, our Turtle Island. The conditions I grew up in are similar for many First Nations communities still today. It was horrifying then and it is horrific today, when you read about 28 state of emergencies declared across Canada, and all of them are First Nations,
dealing with an ineffective band funding system, inadequate to meet the ever growing needs of growing communities.  

What is interesting about this community map is the writing from Andrea Smith’s “Heteropatriarchy and the three pillars of white supremacy.” Andrea Smith (2006) reveals an underlying truth, which I have also felt growing up. It was this sense of being invisible, the feeling of not being important anywhere in society. Smith says these are the three pillars of white supremacy: (1) Slavery/Capitalism; (2) Genocide/Colonialism; (3) Orientalism/War. I wrote a quote from her on this map, which reads:

A second pillar of white supremacy is the logic of genocide. This logic holds that Indigenous peoples must disappear. In fact, they must always be disappearing in order to allow non-Indigenous peoples rightful claim over this land. Through this logic of genocide, non-Natives peoples then become the rightful inheritors of all that was Indigenous-land, resources, Indigenous spirituality or culture. (p. 68).

I thought of my house as a symbol of the second pillar Genocide/Colonialism because of the state my house was in and because of where we lived, on the outskirts of town and on the “outside” of Canada. We lived as if we were beggars, on our own land, not knowing how wealthy we really were. This is how colonialism breaks you down, and makes you think you are insignificant. I grew up feeling devalued, with a deeper underlying vacant feeling that I too will


disappear. I can remember a moment of coming to this realization. I was standing outside, on my way home from school and almost said aloud to myself, “we have nothing.” I do not know what I had heard that day at school, but it must have left me thinking we had nothing of value or potential. It was a feeling of poverty of the mind and heart that infiltrates one’s very being. To learn this about my people and myself at such a young age gave me very little hope for a future. Thankfully, today our youth are learning more about their cultural history and contributions to the world. What continues, however, is the economic oppression, lack of housing and safe drinking water.

The line that runs across the community map in Figure 8 represents the railway tracks, which divided the Flats from the town to the right. It speaks to the fact that we as Indigenous people find ourselves on the outside of frontier towns. We are not part of the ‘progress,’ and so we are “huddled” against the Churchill River instead. We are the “squatters” and the white people enjoy the luxuries to be made available in the town site like electricity, indoor plumbing, paved roads, and the services provided for the health and education of their children. There existed this divide physically, economically, and racially.
Chapter 3 Arts Based Research

In this chapter, I will describe the methodology and methods I used and I begin to demonstrate how they work through a description of the stories elicited by my memory map. This research is an auto-ethnographic research project, based on arts-based research methods of memory mapping, poetry, drawings and storytelling. What emerges is my heartfelt truth, my lived experiences, and my understanding of how I coped with the residential school era. I am simultaneously using an art form, which allows people to look into my house; it draws the eyes in through the window, to gaze upon a Cree family disrupted by this pattern of removal and assimilation. Art has always been a way of expressing and releasing our emotions and so a way to free ourselves from any heaviness or burdensome loads, whether it be our childhood hurts or a more collective historic trauma. I do agree with the International Institute’s report for Sustainable Development, that we come from a heritage of customs, rituals, and ceremonies, traditions that encourage healing, community, and wellness. Part of these customs include dance, songs, theatre, carving, sculpting, painting, drawing, and all kinds of creative artistry. Where we have been creative, we have taught ourselves about ourselves and about life. We have learned from what we now refer to as art, when it was simply a way of life, a way of being in the world. This is how I know. I know this to be true because I breathe it in to my very soul every day. To create is to know. Knowledge is represented, as much by art as by the words we string


together to bring this knowledge forward for others to attain or recognize and to build our understanding upon.

For myself, my creativity comes from within, my spirit or essence brings life and color to the black and white photograph of my house. I recognize the house in the photograph and claim it, embodying its walls and inhabiting its space with my spirit. I lived there. In that statement I am placing myself in that house in order to anchor myself to something physical and solid, so as to not float too far down into the well of memories. I can only go so deep, as deep as the floor and ground of that space will allow. Therefore, I rely on the existence of Nikis, the house and my memory to bring us to a place in time and space, anchored by the little house in the photograph.

When I tell a story, I speak from my experience, which is why this kind of qualitative research is most appealing to me. My lived experience is the basis from which I develop my art for storytelling. In this way, the reader is entranced and does become a participant or contributor to the story, which is typical of autoethnographical research.

Experiencing a situation in a form that allows you to walk in the shoes of another is one way to know one aspect of it. Empathy is a means to understanding, and strong empathic feelings may provide deep insight into what others are experiencing. In that sense, the arts in research promote a form of understanding that is derived or evoked through empathic experience.72

I used a method called memory mapping, an arts based approach, because I felt a connection to the house I lived in for my first ten years of life. This house stood in the Flats which is the community where I also feel a connection to the ground where my house once stood, I feel in tune with my childhood, and comfortable about sharing this part of my life with others.

The Nikis memory map consists of thirteen distinct areas; I will explain and analyze each area. The method of how I used the memory map will become apparent as a conversation of remembering and understanding. This process includes and opens into more drawings, poems, and photographs. This is how I developed a deeper understanding of my history. It is important to remember that this flow of knowledge does not happen on a linear or logical fashion, but more like in a circular pattern. This process of interpretation and construction of meaning builds upon and develops throughout the next chapters.

I do this so that others will know what happened there in the sixties, they will know we were all impacted by the residential school policy. As stated by Shaun McNiff, I am doing art based research because it “grows from a trust in the intelligence of the creative process and a desire for relationships with the images that emerge from it.”73 I chose to do art based research because of the fact that I love art, and because I am a visual and aural learner. I enjoy sketching, painting, and photography. I have also used art as a way to cope with my anger, my sadness or other feelings that sometimes overwhelm me. I keep my mind and heart balanced by writing a poem about some of the heavier issues that come up in my life. I feel at home with the knowledge derived from art, it is true to who I am as a Cree woman, looking back at Canada, who is looking

at me through their Eurocentric lens and I feel I am equal to all other people, when I can express my knowledge through these images. I am reclaiming my voice, a platform from which to speak and shout if I have to about these very important issues. My first published poem, “Down the Flats,” was about growing up in my community, and the softer, happier side of being a kid on summer nights on the windblown tundra. That poem only hints at the fact that my siblings have left me, once again. My next published work, was a children’s story about language or the loss of language. This was a more direct look at what assimilation can feel like or look like. It is a humorous story of a cute granny and her funny looking grandson who goes to university and can barely speak Cree. His granny, on the other hand, can barely speak English. The two of them get along just fine, until they mix up the ingredients needed for her bannock recipe. Granny’s Giant Bannock hits the message home. Teach your children to speak Cree! Not an easy thing to do, teaching your children or grandchildren to speak your language.

Entering the academic world, with all of its wordiness has not been easy for me either. I have been overwhelmed, not only with the task of writing a thesis but also as a single mother and now a grandmother. Nevertheless, I set myself to task, and seriously started looking at art as a way to inform my quest. I have always journaled and doodled. I like to see all the thoughts that are flitting about in my head, and if I am not journaling or sketching, my mind gets too crowded and I feel disorganized. In this way, my writing has always helped me to purge the heavier thoughts


so that I could think more clearly and be more effective in my work as a teacher or mother, or grandmother. So then I took some time and just threw down all of my thoughts on a sheet of paper, with nice fun colors, one for each thought, while turning the paper around and around, until I created this next piece shown here. I called it, “word trains,” as each thought is a long train of words.

What becomes apparent in the trains of words is an image of a mother holding a baby. Yet, I had not purposely tried to create such an image; it was more about letting my energy flow out onto the paper. To me, it showed me what is at the heart of this research, a mother’s embrace. Alternatively, is it about the loss of a mother’s embrace with Canada’s systematic removal of children from their mothers? Either way, it is a strong indication that this kind of unbridled, free flowing creativity comes from somewhere deep within me, from my heart and soul.
The word trains (Figure 9) on this ‘mother’s embrace” reveal my deep connectivity and relationality to this process, what is revealed is my heart which is my family. Every line or sentence is about my relationship to my siblings, parents, daughter, and my obligation to make sense of it so that I can tell the story of what happened to us, or at least what happened to me. If I can come to some understanding about how I experienced the systematic removal of my own siblings, then maybe I can impart this new knowledge to others. This is why autoethnography, is best suited to my research. Especially through storytelling, the audience—listeners or readers—are taken on a journey and experiencing it through my eyes, the autoethnographer. The reader
gets an inside look at the places they travel to, the emotions felt in those places, and the thoughts that flow out of those experiences. This research may provide a window to the ongoing effects in First Nation communities today. Educating myself about my own life may provide a path through the landscape of the past and provide a perspective that will enlighten others who are also on this journey of finding self.

Cole & Knowles say, “Intimacy and authenticity in relationship are foundational to research quality and knowledge production, which is what research is about”\(^{76}\) (p. 27). Relationality encompasses the bond between the researcher and her participants. This is another reason I chose to do arts informed autoethnographic research, it encompasses the bond between my childhood home and me. The relationship to the topic of Residential school impacts is very intimate for my family and me.

My original plan was to interview my siblings, the ones who were sober and living a stable life. I had hopes of letting them create a memory map just as I did or even add to the one I created of our little house down the flats. My intention was to allow them an opportunity to talk about and share with me, their experiences of residential school. This would turn out to be a lot to ask, especially when your family is disconnected and not too high on the trust gauge. Naively I had thought that this would somehow bring our family to a place of reckoning, a place of reconnection and rebuilding. This did not happen as my siblings were not receptive to the idea and it became another awkward moment between us. I could only bring myself to tell one of my

older sisters who seemed most interested in it. However when I went to visit her back home I learned she had much more to cope with the loss of her oldest son. Instead, we spoke about all the homes she lived in as a child and that is as far as we got with the idea.

Even though we are siblings, and I love them dearly, our ‘relationality’ was more of a hindrance than a help. I did not engage my siblings in this particular study. There is much to learn from this inability on my part. There are several issues to bring to light, but one key issue is our lack of closeness, trust, and overall our broken ties as a family. How can a dialogue begin when so many factors stand in the way of my relationship with them, my older siblings? One factor is that I am their youngest sibling and possibly a tendency to not tell them the bad things has to continue in order to protect your younger siblings or each other as family members. Another factor is that lack of trust, which has been established between family members, the “us” and “them” mimetic has been created by the fact that I did not have to go to residential school and they did. Perhaps they too feel responsible for having to leave me at home knowing what I had to cope with. Therefore, I went on my own to create this memory map. I worked from my own memories and did not rely on my siblings’ involvement in this process.

Without a photograph, I tried to recreate an image of my house; this (Figure 10) is my first drawing of it, which looks very flat and dull. It is simply a house. This is only a surface drawing, without the layers and depth of background, community, tundra, nor sky. This is before I did a memory map of the inside of this house. This is before I put myself in this house, and before really going inside the door to see what I would see. At this point one might look at this house and say, it looks quiet and still, so calm. If you look at the second drawing of my little house, after I completed the memory map of Nikis, you will see a remarkable contrast.
In my process of memory mapping and drawing pictures of my little house, I spoke openly with the audiences about what I was finding as I was finding it. For instance, with the drawings of my house I talked about how this shifted from a very flat illustration to a more colorful representation after actually creating the map itself. Initially, I felt at a loss without a photograph of my house. I knew that one existed, I just could not find it, and therefore, I started to draw it from memory.

Sometime after, not immediately after creating my memory map, I did my second drawing of Nikis shown below, it has a sun shining on it, it has people in the doorway, and clothing hanging on the line. What is very interesting in this drawing is the little blue bird to the left. The blue bird has a yellow aura around it as well. People have asked me why the bluebird is there and
after reflecting on the bluebird, I decided he is there so I do not have to go back here alone. So then in my public presentations I talk about how it is important to set up safety and support for oneself when journeying into their past. What is also significant about the image in the doorway, is how it looks twisted, it is unclear if it is a person or a monster of some kind, so maybe that’s why the bluebird is there guarding the onlooker, saying be careful about going into that place.

Figure 11 Eki wikiyan okote ispih awasisiyan (I lived here as a child)

Eki wikiyan okote ispih awasisiyan means “I lived here as a child.” I drew this place (Figure 11) from memory before finding the archival photograph of my house. I am stunned at the remarkable similarity of the drawing to the actual photo of it, right down to the clothes hanging on the line. The view is from the same angle, but a little bit higher, as if I am floating above the area and looking down at it. This represents a spiritual journeying back to the past, where the
bluebird must accompany me to this place of remembrance. In very faint letters to the right of
the house, it says, “this is where I began.” The following lines are:

Learning began here

This is where I was nurtured

So many things happened here

I don’t know where to begin

But it’s because I didn’t know where to begin that I began with this house, and the ground it
stood on, writing from the ground up. In order to find my truth, I had to find the source of my
story. This is where I begin, from my house. When doing arts based research, the learning
process is ongoing, and not always clear, certainly not always logical or linear, as I mentioned
earlier. There is often the ambiguity and the span of years to build an understanding of what one
has created. Somethings become clear while more questions can arise, leaving one feeling even
less certain about other areas of one’s life. Some examples are the contradictions found in the
areas mapped out, the bed being the safest place in the world, while also being the most
vulnerable place for a child. This contradiction left me feeling confused for some time before I
could see how alcoholism intersected by the legacy of sexual abuse in my community played a
key role in my experience as a Cree girl.
I tried to find any Cree cultural references about the bluebird but came up empty. I did find a Native American legend about the Coyote and the Bluebird. This is an interesting story about Coyote wanting to be able to sing like the bluebird. After doing what he is instructed by the Bluebird, he turns blue. He is also told he must never look at his shadow. Because he did look back to see his shadow, Coyote is brown and not blue. I take this to mean, that it is in our nature to always look back at ourselves and to see that our shadow is still there, holding us forever in the spirit realm, positioned by our physical realm. There will always be those among us whose role it is to look back, and keep the memories from being forgotten. We are the ones who carry our story, so that our history, is never to be lost. We do this to teach and inform the future generations. I feel responsible to warn others about what can happen to us if we don’t protect our children, all the children, not just our biological offspring. What we instill in them, is what they will learn, this is how we build our future. It would make sense then to place our children at the very centre of our communities, where they will be the safest.

Maybe that is the Cree story of the bluebird, as I have come to find so many pieces from my past since I began this journey. I did find an animated movie, interestingly titled “The Rescuers,” where they allude to the bluebird:

Faith is a bluebird, we see from afar.

It's for real and as sure as the first evening star,

You can't touch it, or buy it, or wrap it up tight,

---

But it's there just the same, making things turn out right.\textsuperscript{78}

This poem holds more significance to me because it was faith, which kept me alive, and I would often wish upon a star for my parents to come home. I relied on my cousins for safety, and as girls, we relied on each other for emotional support and safety. We often faced the same dilemmas, with our mothers all being sisters and fathers who would go into fits of rage when consuming alcohol. We found places to hide and places to sleep whenever our parents were drinking. We had common experiences of domestic violence and alcoholism and poverty in our homes. We survived everything together, by praying, wishing upon stars, and telling each other funny stories just for a laugh. My cousins and I would wish upon the first star we saw at night when we desperately needed our parents to come home from the bars. Sometimes our wishes came true, but sometimes not, but at least we held that wish in our hearts for the time being.

The next section is the Nikis memory map and all that spills out of it, there are thirteen areas to see on the map, each area explained and analyzed. The method of how I use the memory map becomes apparent as a conversation of remembering and understanding. This process includes and opens into more drawings, poems, and photographs. This is how I develop a deeper understanding of my history. I explain this process of interpretation and construction of meaning as I build my understanding throughout this next section.

As I said in the introduction, I am using this map (Figure 12) to explore my history and to try to understand psychological and emotional impacts I endured from my siblings’ residential school experience. My siblings would come home every summer and each time they came back, they would bring their experiences home with them. This was evident by what they did to our house. It is the house that is showing me, through my memory mapping, what happened to us as a family, more specifically it shows how I experienced the pattern of removal and returning of siblings to our home in Churchill, Manitoba.
What follows is more than a tour of my little house. It is a study, and we will listen to what the house has to say. By going through all of the Areas on the map and getting an inside, look at what was really happening at the time; we see how I was impacted by this assimilation policy instituted by Canada. This is what Canada did to us; this is what I struggle with every day!

Method & Analysis

Autoethnography as methodology appeals to me as a Cree woman who carries these stories of Nikis from the past. Art based research allows me to honor my truth as an Indigenous scholar, writer, and storyteller. Through my arts based autoethnographic journey I carve out a space so that others may add their knowledge and truth from this time and place in our history. Each day as I walked across the campus I saw the words engraved on one of its halls: the Truth shall make you free. Truth is very personal as it can only be lived and experienced for one to know it. Art as method allows me to honor my sense of truth and knowledge; it allows me to bring my lived experience to light. The memory map lets my little house speak (metaphorically) from the past. It is this voice emerging from the map, which I tried to be consistent with in order to bring forward those earliest thoughts, earliest memories and earliest hurts.

The process of mapping out my memories began with looking back at my childhood. I first looked back, thought about my childhood home, and decided to map out its contents to see what it would tell me. I drew the boundary line of my house, and then I drew in the furniture pieces. Without any judgement or expectations, I envisioned each piece of furniture and allowed any

thoughts and images to surface. It was these very first thoughts that I collected and wrote in the
lines of the furniture pieces of my house. Capturing first thoughts is key to delving down and
resurrecting one’s past. What I did find, was my truth, and my families truth.

I showed the map and told the stories from memory to various audiences; they became my
listeners and viewers. From their responses, comments or questions and from my sense of what
they need to hear more about, we created the story together. These arts based dances we do
together where I draw them in and allow them to make sense of the stories themselves, is a
process described by Cole & Knowles.80

Life history inquiry is not, centrally, about developing reductionist notions of lived
experience in order to convey a particular meaning or “truth” (be it truth or Truth).
Rather, it is a representation of human experience that draws in viewers and readers to the
interpretive process and invites them to make meaning and form judgments based on
their own reading of the “text” as is viewed through the lenses of their own realities (page
11).

It is my story, my experiences in my little house down the flats. I tell it from my heart, and it is
authentic in that it comes from the spirit of that place. When I first started writing and gathering
all my thoughts, it certainly was not a linear process; in fact, I kept going around and around as if
sweeping a floor. The floor held many pieces, too many to consider in fact. Some pieces remain

Lives in context, the art of life history research. (pp. 25-44). Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.
back there, but the key pieces have found their way into the dustpan and here to my focus, through me and through my ancestors by way of dreams and creativity.\textsuperscript{81}

The house also serves as a metaphor for life with windows to life, doors to a journey, offering even more metaphorical storying and honoring of the place where I began in life. The house also holds my connection to the children who died in the Flats, in house fires; some died from alcohol poisoning or were killed violently or accidentally. This house serves as a reminder to Canadians that we (Indigenous people) all affected by the residential school era and there are many parents and siblings who are still waiting for their children to return to them. The Nikis memory map tells the story of what happened as told by one sibling, and told from lived experience, which is why arts based methods works for this study. It allows my heart, my emotions, to flow freely to the surface to engage them in conversation and exploration.

Memories come to life; I allow them space and time to emerge fully from their places. Beginning with the outline of the house, I guess its length, width, and angles by memory. I remember a bedroom, the cold room, the front room that served as living room and dining room and kitchen. I remember the doors and the windows as well as the porch. Each window and door have a story, a memory for me, some sad, others happy.

Guided by the principles of \textit{relationality, mutuality, empathy and care},\textsuperscript{82} a process is carefully chosen. In this case, it is memory mapping as the method of study and inquiry. In concrete terms

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
this means relating to the actual map itself. Drawing the walls and furniture is very personal as
each one reveals something about myself. They also reveal so much about my family. The
memory map allows a glimpse into the lives of my parents, myself and my siblings that cannot
be viewed from the exterior of the house. Though journalists photographed our house, they
could not see or explain why our windows were always broken. Therefore, the memory map is
the key to understanding what happened to us as a family from within. Perhaps this inside look
can help to bring about a better understanding of the impacts of the residential school policy. I
would also say it is key to understanding the internal impacts on Indigenous families during this
ongoing “construction” of Canada.

For this study, I focused on the mapping of my childhood house. So first from memory draw out
an outline of the house itself, think about where the door was where the windows were in this
blueprint of the house. Having it measure exactly to scale is not as important as capturing what
you remember about where everything was in relation to each other. For instance, at first I drew
the outside of my house, which was the first image that came to mind. I let that be my focus for
a while as I tried to write what I could remember. Next, I drew the outline of my house, and the
first time I did the outline, I did not include the extra room and the porch. Those memories came
next so then I made a new outline. Slowly and carefully memories surface and are taken into
consideration in newer drawings or mapping of the house. There is no real right way or wrong
way to do it; it is about what helps you to remember and allowing that freedom to do it in a
spontaneous and flexible manner. As far as involving others at this point, it may not be
necessary unless they would be a support to you in helping you to remember, such as a sibling or
cousin. This initial stage is a time of self-reflective capturing of memories and the memories
will surface if one takes a playful and relaxed approach to the memory mapping process. This is
what I think is meant by procedural harmony. It is about following along one path, one exercise to see what will happen, what memories will emerge from moving along this one path of “internal consistency.”

What flows out of this process is also important. After following the mapping of my little house, I began to see or visualize the pieces of furniture, the contents of my house. Even the radio held memories for me. So then the map began to fill up with what was inside my house, which I then added to my outline of the house. It’s as if you are looking down from up above and can see where everything is. Then I wrote memories inside those pieces of furniture: just the first thoughts or images that came to me about the bed, for example, or the stove. I captured memories as they surfaced, without refusing them or trying to qualify whether or not they were real at this point—the most important part of this process is not to interrogate yourself but to simply let the memories arrive into your mind and to jot them down in the outlines of the furniture.

Following the construction of the memory map of Nikis, I drew my house again this time with more memories, for instance the clothesline in front of the house. This time the house drawing was much more colorful with a background and a sun shining in the sky. In addition, there was a blue bird in this newer drawing, which took me some time to understand why it was there. Other images that flowed out of this process were drawings of people in windows, looking in the

windows, my front door, and the house from another direction, and so on. These images are in the Nikis chapters three, four, five, and six—along with the maps and photographs.

The meaning of the map can be found in this next section, where I provide a more informed background and a broader discussion of the findings of this memory mapping process of Indigenous space and place. What shines through is the intimacy and love of my parents for their children, the loss of control they experienced in their parenting interrupted by government policy, and the devastation that fell upon the shoulders of a girl left behind and abandoned by this policy of removal and assimilation. Amazingly, I survived and lived to tell this story, where many children did not live and make it out of the Flats.

Thirteen Areas: How to read the map

In all, there are thirteen distinct Areas on my map. The top of the map says 23 Ft. Read the map, from 1 to 13. Start with (1) Door (left side of the map); (2) Water barrel; (3) West window; (4) Table; (5) Couch; (6) Bed; (7) North window; (8) Roll away cot; (9) Cold room; (10) Stove; (11) East window; (12) Kitchen cabinet, and end with (13) Porch.

This map became my learning model, a process of reviewing my childhood memories and capturing my first thoughts that surfaced. This was my first sitting and capturing of earliest memories of my life in this little house. The hard work begins with trying to make meaning of what I wrote down on the map and then to try to understand what I went through in this house as

the youngest sibling of residential school survivors. I speak as an invisible survivor of the residential school experience, as I stayed home and did not attend residential school.

Throughout this thesis, the actual words found on the map and on the drawings inspired by the map, will be presented in **bold and italics**. The words from the map (Areas) are presented first, then the larger context or background information is provided to explain the Area more fully. This is then followed by other memories that are triggered by this Area from the map. I will refer to these detailed inscriptions as Areas. After each Area you will find a drawing or photograph or poem or any combination of these to serve as the bigger pictures. These bigger pictures will provide more insight as to the impacts of separation and fragmentation of my family. This is the deeper understanding of how this has impacted me and my life to this day. This is where the knowledge construction happens and will be given to the reader at these points in the thesis.

What you will see are trains of thought leading out from each Area. For example, in Area 8, ROLLAWAY COT, I first provide the inscription from the map itself, then some background information about the ROLLAWAY COT. Ultimately, each Area should lead to a deeper understanding of what it means to me. This is where I present my drawing of the “Goodbye Station,” and a story about my earliest memory of the train station and being left behind by my siblings. There are also Memories Triggered in some of the Areas. These are additional memories that are associated with each piece of furniture, window or door. What you end up getting is a train of thoughts and experiences all beginning from the first thought, the ROLLAWAY COT. In this way, I will provide layers of information, beginning from one Area on the map to a larger picture of what it was like to grow up in the sixties as a Cree girl during
the residential school era. I will begin with Area 1, the DOOR, and will continue in a circular pattern around the map until we end up at Area 13, the PORCH.

The first Area, the Door Area, consists of some background information about the door itself and the existence of an outside door or outer door. There is a drawing of the outside door and an explanation of the words: “Enter if you dare.” This is followed by a memory about Friday nights. Also in Area 1, you will see a photograph of a steel door from the Brandon Indian Residential School site with a poem titled, “Opening the Steel Door.” The BIRS at Brandon, Manitoba, opened its doors in May 1895 to June 1972, seventy-seven years of “educating” First Nations children. Its windows once overlooked the Grand Valley road and the city of Brandon to the south. The reason I included the door from the Brandon Residential School here, is

Lastly, in Area 1, is the big picture, the significance of Area 1 in understanding my history of the Indian Residential School impacts. Here is where I bring out the overall theme or issue, which connects my experience to that of other Indigenous people of Turtle Island. These major themes, such as intergenerational trauma and lateral violence, will create a deeper understanding of what my experiences were really about to bring perspective to these tragic events in my life.

Essentially, I reveal what I have come to understand about my history and how my journey back to my little house has helped me to find peace, healing and love for myself as a Cree woman walking with and honoring these memories.

The next chapter, Entering Nikis, consists of Areas 1 Door, 2 Water, 3 West Window, 4 Table, and 5 Couch. These first five areas takes the reader back to the 1960’s down the Flats. One might even feel the warmth from the woodstove if it is wintertime or you may want to drag the chairs outside if it is summer.
Chapter 4 Entering Nikis

Come into my home, and drink from my water barrel as you take in the beautiful sunset through the west window. Now sit and eat at my table and rest yourself on the couch, while I tell you the stories of where you are and who I am and whose home you are in. This chapter consists of Areas (1) Door, (2) Water barrel, (3) West Window, (4) Table and (5) Couch, sections of the map that appear in Figure 12 (Memory Map of Nikis). Because the lettering is small and difficult to read in Figure 12, as I am discussing each section in the pages to come, and when relevant, I reproduce the words from Figure 12 using bold and italic face. I then include some comments on the context for the words or discuss the memories that are most salient as I see these images and hear the voices behind the texts. There are stories and memories that are triggered by these areas and they are shared here. They may not appear in the map itself but they emerge from seeing the images. When the text is bolded or italicized, it is a reproduction of the words that are written in the original memory map (Figure 12).

Area 1: Iskodem (Door)

DOOR: The main entrance, okay the only entrance, although not the only exit.

Context: This was the inside door which led into the house from the porch. It was the only door to our main living area of the house meaning there was not a back door. When I say it was not the only exit, I am referring to the fact that a window could also provide a quick escape from danger. There were actually two doors to this house, the one seen on the map is the inside door. The outside door, on the other side of the porch, I drew and wrote a story about it.
First, I begin with the outside door to my house. If you look at the outside door, you will see some words on the right hand side: *This was our door, the only door. It had a padlock on it.* *This door leads to my house Down the Flats. If you enter, you will see my family and you will see how we lived. You will know what happened to us. This door opens to the porch. In the porch to the right is the inner door. This door goes into the living room/kitchen/bedroom.* *This is where we lived, ate, and slept.*

1.1.1 Beethdikeh (Come in)

At the center of the porch door drawing are the words: *Enter if you dare!* At first I was not sure why I wrote that there; maybe it is a dare for the readers to come in and see what happened down there, down the Flats. Maybe it does take courage for outsiders to want to know what happened to First Nations people back then or even in present day. Maybe once they enter they can never leave; that is, they can never Un-know what is inside this little house.85 Such ominous words when I only want to invite readers in and start a friendly conversation with them about this era. I suppose this is a contrast, invisibility vs. invitation. What I do remember is that very few non-Native people came to my house, maybe only the police and firefighters and emergency or ambulance. There were very few White people in my life, other than teachers, doctors, nurses or store clerks, and they were not really in my life, but more on a professional basis, where they were the professional and I was the patient, for example. I never had a White childhood friend over to my house. That is what I mean by the phrase, ‘enter if you dare!’

85 Thomas King warns about how once you have heard the stories, you can’t say you didn’t know.

The reason I wanted to open this door and go back to the past, and see what happened to me as a child, was to be able to move through all the areas in my life where I am still stuck there, holding on to the pain of the past. Once acknowledged, memories will not have to speak so loudly in your head; they will simply sit and wait there in the wings, while other memories walk across center stage. As if the forefront or the screen of the mind is a community theatre, for example, then each memory comes forward, is seen and heard, and then let go. The seeing and hearing of each memory will be as emotional as it was traumatic. Some memories need a lot of crying or raging to release completely. I will continue to remember these events, but their hold on me will relax as I embody the emotions and release all the feelings I felt during the entire incident. This kind of discharging of emotions\(^\text{86}\) from our early hurts is the first step to self-healing and finding freedom and peace. The idea is to recover our rational and human way of being in the world by letting go of these early hurts through emotional release or discharge.

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At the bottom of the door (Figure 13), on the step, it says: *I remember sitting on this door step many times waiting for mom and dad to come home from the bars in town. One Friday night I sat here and I was crying, wishing they were home and sober. The door creaked open and I looked up to see my dad’s face. They were home and sober; it was like a miracle to me.* This is a memory I have treasured over the years.

Context: The outside door was made of wood, probably plywood and two by fours. My father would lock it with a padlock on the outside. It did have some patch work on it, and yes, it was kicked in or punched in at times, though I’m sure it would not have been too difficult to break
into the house. In Area 3, West Window, I write about how my brother propped up the railway
tie, a log basically, against the outside door to keep out intruders.

1.1.2 Friday Nights

This one particular door memory is a happy story; it has a happy ending to it. It’s about the time
I was growing up down the flats, back home. My parents took to drinking a lot by then; which
usually started on a Friday night. It became so common for me, that I grew to expect their
absence on the weekends. Yet on one surprising Friday night they were home all along, sober
and tucked in for the night. It was still early in the evening, before sunset, which could have
been late. In the north the sun could be up as late as midnight, depending upon the month. Well
there I was an eight-year-old, out with my friends, girls I stuck with, cousins mostly, all going
home to their respective parents, for the night to sleep. I found myself alone. I was very aware
that it was the weekend; a Friday meant my parents would be drunk again, I would be alone
again. I went to my house, looked at its faded and weathered exterior, its empty windows held
little promise of love or comfort within. They looked so forlorn. I sat down on the step and
cried. I cried out loud. I could do that back then, as a child. I let my heart break and sobbed for
all the hurt I carried inside me. Then I heard the door creak open. I look behind to see who it
was. It was my dad looking down at me. He asked me what I was doing crying on the step. I
told him, “I thought you were gone drinking.”

It was as if I received a miracle: I was granted a wish for once. My parents were both home and
sober; it was a moment when everything I could ever hope for came true. Dad took me inside
and told my mother “It’s our baby, she was crying outside.” My mother and he both embraced
me and we shared a moment of closeness. Though this was a happy moment in my life, Friday
nights and sunsets continued to be anxiety producing in my life for many years.

As a young adult, I experienced panic attacks. I would get very panicky as the sun was starting
to set. I could not really understand why until after looking at what it was like to grew up down
the Flats. I would always be so aware that evening was coming and tried to calm myself. I would
go outside or find an open window.
1.1.3 Piopisko Iskodem (Steel Door)

I included a photograph of this residential school door as it relates to my siblings’ experience at residential school. It connects to the story of my childhood home through their experience and emotions or attitudes they brought home with them to our home down the flats. The image of this steel door provides a contrast to my little wooden door. The photograph in Figure 14 helps me to see a much heavier door leading to a heavier experience of loneliness for my siblings and for those who were taken away from their parents.

This photograph (Figure 14) shows the steel door I found at the Brandon Indian Residential School site. Only two of my siblings had told me bits and pieces of what their life was like at residential school. The school officials would not allow my sister to attend my late brother Horace’s funeral. She cried about this once. She said they told her, “You didn’t know him well enough.” They had attended the Mackay School at Dauphin, Manitoba. My brother told me he was the older brother who often felt he had to protect his younger brother. The weight of this responsibility for his baby brother affects him to this day, as our youngest brother lays in a coma in Winnipeg.

Since the school was torn down and left in a heap, there have been many visitors to the site, including myself and my daughter. I have been to these ruins on several occasions, once with a group of students from a course I was teaching at Assiniboine Community College. At that time, I had taken a small piece of concrete and did a sharing circle with them as a way to open up this part of our history as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and to begin voicing our thoughts and feelings about the history of residential schools. At the end of that course, the students and I
returned to the site, where they placed offerings for the spirits of the children buried there: homemade bread, jam, and a wooden plaque engraved with words of love. Each of the students spoke as they presented their gift as a way to “honor” those children left there, whose spirits still linger near that place. We said a prayer together and walked away. One of the students had told me she brought her mother to the site. She was a survivor who attended another residential school. When she told her mother about our sharing circle and the piece of concrete, she felt inspired to go to the site as well and revisit that part of her life.

Once, I found some bathroom tiles with the words, “Made in England” on the back of them. I had seen some of these tiles taken from this site before. They had been hand painted and brought to a Residential School gathering at Troy Lake, north of Thompson, Manitoba. Slowly the artists are coming out again, to try to make sense of this time in our history. For there are not enough words to express the emotions felt when all of your sisters and brothers are survivors of these institutions. There are no words, only bits and pieces of pain.

This time I went back to the ruins with a purpose. In looking back at my history and trying to understand what happened to my family, I walked and climbed and traversed the massive pile of rubble with hopes of finding some answers to my question: How does this connect to my research? This is why I viewed finding the steel door as a gift, an opportunity to open up that part of our history and to look in on my siblings’ experience of residential school.

**Opening the Steel Door**

I think of my brother’s small hand

Trying to open this door

It is heavy, too heavy for a child to open
This door opens to sadness
To loneliness
To cold, hard, concrete spaces
To more vulnerable places
His Cree voice crying, “Ni wii kii wahn! - I want to go home!”
Would not have been heard through this thick steel door
My grandmother self
Wants to reach back in time
And open this steel door for him
Sadly, that is impossible
All I can do is light a candle and say a prayer for his safe journey home
Back to mom and dad

The poem “Opening the Steel Door” is about my brother who has been in a coma for three years. His lifestyle of drinking did not help him to be safe, but it was only when he received the compensation moneys that he became a target and was robbed and beaten and left to die in a back alley. He was the youngest among my siblings at that school in Dauphin. My sister once commented that they rarely saw him but when she did see him out playing in the school yard, he had very light hair, almost blonde, so that’s why they called him Blondie.

Finding the steel door on top of all the fragments of the Brandon Indian Residential School was indeed a gift. There it was laying there, as if offered up by the past, waiting to be found. It called to me, “try opening this door!” I photographed it. I ran my hand against its smooth cold steel. There was a gash in it, like an axe had been swung at it; only it was not a straight gash it
was more like a horse shoe shape. Its two huge hinges and door handle were rusted over. It made me think of the door to my little house down the flats which was only wooden and patched up over the years of kicks and punches.

Lifting the steel door was difficult. My daughter and I tried to lift it, it was too heavy, we only managed to lift one side of it together and flip it over to expose its other side. I had hoped we could stand it up so I could see how tall it was. Would it tower over a child’s head; could a small hand open this steel door? We noticed two peregrine falcons flying overhead; I caught a photo of them together. As we drove back to town I saw one of the falcons flying ahead of me, a frog dangling from its talons, as we stopped at the intersection, there they were both grasping the long legged frog. One of the falcons was narrowly missed by a jeep; luckily the driver took care to let it fly upward toward the sky.

Once back to the house I showed the photos to my niece. I told her about the steel door I found and she immediately showed it to her husband. They both said, “Let’s go get it!” My niece who is an artist wanted to see what she could do with it as an installation piece. The feeling of excitement overtook us; we got into the truck and sped to the old Residential School site. The sky began to darken; clouds started to gather and move in the direction of the steel door. We had to hurry to avoid the storm. As we got closer to the site, the wind gained momentum, as if it too wanted to lift the door for us, and open its hidden secrets. To the rest of Canada, it may be a piece of rubble, a piece of history thrown away and forgotten, but to us, it was a way in; its significance was instantly recognized by all of us.

The road up to the hill was treacherous but the truck was able to traverse its gravel and puddles bringing us safely to the mound of the old Residential School and its steel door. The thought of
whether it would still be there did come to me, but then I wondered, who would take it? Who would be interested in a door which was more than a hundred and twenty years old? Only an artist would want it; an artist who would never forget the suffering of generations of her people.

I climbed back up the heap of history and led my niece and her husband to the door. We all stood around it for a moment, looking at it as if it would start speaking right there on the spot, telling us what so many children have gone to their graves not saying. But no, it would not speak so readily. No. It would need to be studied for many years to come by scholars like me.

We each grabbed a corner trying to lift it from its place; it would not be taken easily. My nephew grabbed the door handle and raised it up a few inches, enough to move it, slide and drag it toward the vehicle. I took a hold of the other side of the door handle. My niece pulled it along, just then I could feel the raindrops hit my face, my hands, very lightly; tears began to roll down from the sky. We got the steel door and all together lifted it into the back of the truck, securing it down for the drive back into town. When doing research and seeking answers one often finds more questions. This was not a door from my house, but which made me ask, “What does this door have to tell me?” Who can speak about this door? Perhaps there will be stories and art utilizing these pieces of history, concrete pieces, doors, windows, bathroom tiles like those that we saw at the gathering at Troy Lake for the survivors of Residential Schools.

Why was this door so important to me? What is the significance of this door? I talk about the finding of this steel door because it illustrates how my family continues to struggle with the past and how we have never come together to talk about this experience ever. It shows how I have tried to grasp their residential school experience so that I could begin to understand what happened to my brothers and sisters. My questions early on in my research was about trying to
understand what happened to my family, and this includes wanting to understand what happened to them.

1.1.4 Removal: Understanding the role of Removal in my history

When I began looking back at this time in my past, I received a dream about a white man sneaking children out of my house. It was just before the 2012 SAGE (Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement) writing retreat north of Toronto. In the dream, I am a child, standing in a darkened room, in a house from long ago. In the darkened room, I can see there are people passed out on the floor. As I try to reach the door to get out, one man on the floor tries to grab my leg. He is still awake and his hand is about to grab me as I try to escape. Quickly I jump back, out of his reach. I try to escape again, and the same thing happens. The drunken man who is lying on the floor tries to grab my leg again, making it impossible to reach the door. I become overwhelmed with fear and feeling vulnerable and unsure how to get around him or how to escape the situation. I imagine the inevitable will happen once again—rape, that is. Then a white man appears and he is holding a small child in one arm. I think she is his daughter. Very quickly, he steps across all the bodies with excellent footing and precise timing that he is able to traverse safely across to the door, without waking anyone. I am aware that the people on the floor are very hurt and would not be there otherwise, so with a sense of compassion, but also a feeling of dread, I try my best again to get across to the door safely but again the drunken man tries to grab me. I see that the white man is back so I ask him to take me on one of his feet, and he does while holding another child. On his foot, I am able to get across to the door and get out of the house. That is how I escaped this situation.
As I often do with dreams I have had, I wonder what message is in this dream. I wonder for the years that follow. Then it finally comes to me; the dream is about the white man stealing the children, from those who have become incapacitated. My parents became incapacitated by alcohol. This became their strategy of escaping an impossible situation. It could have been why they were not at the train station when my siblings were leaving for school; they were in the bar again. I talk about this time of being Left Behind in Area 8, the Rollaway Cot. With Canada’s laws in place to uphold the assimilation policies, parents were powerless to rescue their children.87

This nightmare also eludes to my current situation as an Indigenous scholar at University of Toronto, feeling overwhelmed and trapped. The metaphor that comes to mind is the idiom “having a leg to stand on.” I do often feel like I have no supporting arguments. I do need the support of the more learned or advanced researchers of this vast industrial complex called Education. Absolon88 very cleverly provides this “leg to stand on” in her petals of methodology, she writes, “Enacting re-search that is of Indigenous ways means that Indigenous re-searchers work to advance Indigenous perspectives, world-views and methods in all areas of education, searching and scholarship.” This is why I have chosen to do autoethnography; I want to add my


Indigenous perspective, so that others who may follow can have a “companion”\(^8^9\) as they write their life story.

I like sharing my dreams with people because they also have insights that can help me to understand, and there are many ways to look at the dream. Several themes emerge from the first dream mentioned above, as I listen to various interpretations of this dream. An Elder thought it was about how I had to navigate through trauma. Traversing trauma is about finding a clear path out, placing your feet carefully to not create more damage, but to free oneself from the wreckage.

As a child I did not understand the difficult situation my siblings were placed in. Leaving me behind was not a decision that they could make—they were forced to leave me at that door. That door is another door I came to know too painfully, as I would sit outside the bars waiting for my parents to emerge from their drunkenness. I would ask one of my relatives to tell my mom I’m out here waiting for her.

I think about my siblings and how they had to leave me there in a community devastated by alcoholism and violence. I realize now that it was never their choice to leave me there. As I said before, families were torn apart.\(^9^0\) My brothers and sisters had to leave their baby sister, their parents, their cousins, aunts and uncles. To this day we have not spoken about this time. If I could I would tell them that it was not their fault. They did what they had to do under those


conditions. I do not blame them for what happened to me, nor do I blame my parents. This is something that Canada did to us.

The other insight which was offered by our writing instructor at the retreat is about how the white man could just step anywhere without really looking at who he was stepping on; he didn’t have the same compassion or care that you (meaning me) had. We could apply this to what the Europeans have done to First Nations people overall, the white man has stepped everywhere across this land without seeing the people and how they have been injured or incapacitated by his exploits. They have also taken our children and removed them from their communities for generations until they are no longer connected to their family and community. In the dream I ask him if I can step on only one of his feet. What does this say about me? How have I used the white man’s systems for my own survival? I would have to say I used the systems of education but only on one of his feet. With this foothold I am not completely taken by his ideas of ‘civilization’ or ‘progress’ and have only used education as a tool for my survival as an Indigenous woman, as an Ininu Iskwew. I have freed myself and continue to walk in the path of my ancestors who have survived many hardships. I am walking out of that house of tragic events.

In summing up Area 1 DOOR of the memory map, I bring in this dream of “trying to reach the door” because this is where it all began in our history together. We were supposed to be travelling along in our own canoe and boat, without interfering with each other’s lives. But the White man could not keep to himself, he had to have more: more land, more gold, and fur, more

of everything that existed here on Turtle Island. He learned that by taking and removing our children we could not sustain our future. By attacking the very center and heart of our people, our social fabric would weaken and fray. Our lives shattered by this removal of our purposes in life. We lost our direction. This is what happened to my family. My parents, who loved their children, lost control of them. They were forced into submission by laws enacted by Canada to prevent their cohesion and closeness as a family. With Canada’s interference in their lives as parents, they were left with a ‘wait and see’ approach to parenting. Where would their youngest and last child go to school? They didn’t know, they could only hope they could keep me with them at home. As one of my father’s love letters to his children would reveal, he wanted me to go to school there in town, but did not know yet.

In Area 1, DOOR we see how this one image can be rich with stories and how it can lead to more related stories, such as the steel door shown in Figure 14 earlier in this chapter. The stories of the door to my house takes me on a path to a steel door I found at the Brandon Indian Residential School site. Tying these two door stories together bring about the overall theme of the separation and disconnection, which happened to my family due to the residential school policy. This story of separation and disconnection is at the heart of this dissertation. You will see this theme throughout all the areas of the Nikis memory map. One area where I speak about this separation so poignantly is in Area 8, ROLLAWAY COT at the GOODBYE STATION.

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As you will see in visiting this little house, all thirteen of the Areas are interconnected, and the stories cannot be easily demarcated. In terms of understanding the impacts on myself, I try to bring in more context to shed light on the situation faced by this child left behind. In the discussion following each area I attempt to explain to the readers in the historical relationship of Canadian society and Indigenous experience so that they can get a sense of the complexity of the situation. That is I try to shed light on the situation faced by my family as a whole and in its disjointed fragments, meaning the siblings who went away to residential school, the parents who were displaced by this policy and the child left behind. Ultimately, I come to see how it was not my parents’ fault nor my siblings’ fault that we were torn apart as a family. I come to see how Canada’s governmental policies forced my family apart in its dealings with the Indigenous people.

In this next section, (although a short section, nonetheless very relevant to the conditions on many First Nations communities today), is the lack of safe drinking water. The WATER BARREL represented the lack of safety in my home. The image of the water barrel spilling its precious life giving sustenance all over the floor, made it hard to forget, and would otherwise have been left speechless in the corner of the room. But, my siblings knocked it over during their fit of rage one night, after one of their drinking parties. It seems this is the only memory I have of the WATER BARREL. However, I do like to connect this story of my sister becoming
sick with typhoid from our drinking water, to the ongoing “boil-water” advisories, some as long as 20 years.93

Area 2: Nipii (Water)

WATER BARREL: This was filled by the water truck from town. My mother would pay him. One day the water barrel was tipped over and there was water all over the floor. This was during a drinking party.

Context: The water barrel stood in the corner by the west window. It may have been a stainless steel barrel as it was a grayish silver color. It was delivered from town and filled with a hose from the water truck but I am not sure how often. We had a dipper to scoop water out or to drink out of it. I do not remember it having a cover, not like the one my Aunt P had, with a nice hinged halfway opening. Her house was a lot nicer than ours was; she had a raised clothesline with a stairway to a platform for hanging and removing her clothes.

This brings me to a water story, which brings out the deep connection I had to one of my sisters who was ten years older than I was. When I was born in the Fort Churchill Hospital, she was there because she had typhoid from our drinking water down the Flats. I had not known the full story about the typhoid, she used the words “water poisoning,” whenever she related the story to me. Her point was that I was in the hospital with my mother for over a month due to a difficult birth. And I was still in the hospital when my sister was admitted, we were both there together.

I found a news clipping in the Winnipeg Free Press94 about my sister getting typhoid back in 1963, the year I was born. The wording shows the lack of understanding and disdain even the doctors had for my community. It is obvious the doctors and officials were blaming the Native people in the Flats for having bad drinking water, yet the water came from the Town of Churchill. They called us puddle drinkers! The official who “deals with Indians” shows a lack of caring and planning for their safety when he says, “We’ve been waiting for this sort of thing to happen.” Why were they waiting for this to happen? I suppose it was out of their hands, the lack of infrastructure in Churchill at the time.

**Typhoid**

The Winnipeg Free Press reported on typhoid in our community on page 3/44:

Three Others Quarantined at Churchill, Man. (Special) — Typhoid has been identified in the system of a 10-year-old girl here and is "strongly suspected" in two other children. A fourth child is running a temperature of 103 degrees. All four are in quarantine at Fort Churchill military hospital, about five miles from Churchill. The cases were identified Tuesday and preliminary tests indicate the children have typhoid. Mass immunization by public health officials has begun. "The possibility of an epidemic is enormous," said a consulting doctor. One official who deals with Indians here said: "**These people won’t drink from a tap. They drink puddle water instead. We've been waiting for this sort of thing to happen.**" Personnel at Fort Churchill, an army base housing some 3,000 troops, will be immunized if final tests bare out.

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the early diagnosis. Affected to date are 10-year old (name) and (names), 8 and 9. A third child is suspected of having typhoid. In a recent series of articles, the Free Press outlined the Indian problem at Churchill as one of squalor, filth and unsanitary living conditions. One official said Thursday: "Maybe this will knock' the government into doing something." The director of northern health services has flown to Churchill to review the situation.

The 10-year-old girl was my sister; she told me this story about the time she got sick from the water barrel. She told me she was in the hospital when I was born. She talked about how she remembers seeing me through a glass window in the nursery where all the newborns slept. She also remembers the nurse commenting on how big sister was not smiling at all. She told me about this because it connected to another story about her experience at residential school. From what I could gather, her being in the hospital for such a lengthy stay, reminded her of something that happened to her at residential school.

1.1.5 Kischi Notin (Tornado)

Memory Triggered: One time the water barrel had been knocked over by my brother and sister. That morning, I came home to a wreckage, it was as if a tornado had blown through our house. I opened the door to find two of my siblings, who were in a drunken rage, had trashed the house, to the point it was unrecognizable. I had been at another house for the night. By age 7, I knew to stay away until the drinking party was over. When my cousin and I went to my house that morning we found ourselves standing in water. The water barrel had been knocked over, the table flattened, the chairs flattened. The oil lamp was gone, radio smashed, and the windows were mostly busted.
I don’t know who cleaned up the mess or how, but I’m sure it was my mother who would always try to put everything back together. My father would have tried to fix the windows or covered them with plastic or cardboard to keep the wind out. After these kinds of outbreaks and turbulence, my family would wake up the next morning and everyone would be silent. We wouldn’t talk about what happened. The fighting would stop with the morning light, then we would resume as a family once again, doing all the regular things a family does together, sharing meals and daily chores and all would be forgotten. This cycle of my siblings coming home, leaving home created a pattern of embracing, closeness, drinking, happiness, euphoria, then the raging and fighting. This would be followed by silence the next morning and back to embracing and closeness. Only the closeness between us became less and less with each passing year. Though I continued to love my siblings, I lost the ability to trust them, as I had lost the ability to rely on my own parents for safety and my sense of security faded all around me as a child. My siblings increasingly became strangers to me. I would often wonder what was happening to them, which made them so angry. Though my siblings never directed their anger at me, nor harmed me directly, they were frightening to say the least. I could not understand their rage. It scared me and I had to learn to stay away from them when they were drinking.

1.1.6 Lateral Violence

The violence I experienced in my home as a child came in from the distresses accumulated by my siblings while they were away at school. They returned with the hurts from their school experiences and these hurts erupted into fits of violence and destruction on our house usually whenever they drank alcohol. Too powerless to attack the powers that be, they attacked the furniture or the windows or the door, or each other or other community members. That is what is meant by lateral, the target is often the people beside us, with us, in the trenches of
powerlessness. We cannot identify the real culprit, the real enemy, so we take it out on each other for that instant relief of our inner pain. Then the cycle of oppression is complete. We then internalize those hurts and feel badly about ourselves for having been injured in the first place. We tend to blame ourselves for being the target of the attacks. We develop a learned helplessness or an external locus of control, whereby we rely on the forces around us to make our decisions and so we lose any sense of responsibility for our lives and our future. This process of taking it in, internalizing the oppression, is how we carry those hurts forward and into the next generations; this is what is meant by the term intergenerational trauma.

Whenever I talk about lateral violence to students, I try to explain the difference and relationship or process of oppression and internalized oppression. How else can I illustrate how lateral violence set in on my community, for instance? But even before that, I do the drawing of the turtle, with its thirteen tiles on its back. And then I ask students “what was here or what did the Indigenous people have, or how did they live, before the arrival of Europeans? They have to think for a few minutes until someone usually dares to answer with something like “land” or “ceremonies.” And these are usually second year students, so it’s a good chance for them to review the history they have just learned in a previous introductory course. With a few hints from me, their teacher, the lesson usually ends with them coming up with enough words, to fill


the tiles, of ‘what Turtle Island looked like before colonization.’ The Turtle’s back is filled with words like ‘governance, health care, education, art, music, dance, and it goes on with the many ideas they have come up with over the years I have done this teaching. I wish I had taken a picture of it each time. And I have to say, they have taught me to think more openly about my own people. I didn’t always see being Indigenous in as good a light or as powerful as this teaching shows me every time.

So I provide a very short and succinct history lesson about what happened to the ways of life here on Turtle Island. I explain the term ‘oppression’ by the arrows coming in at the turtle on the chalk board, from all directions. The drawing is not meant to represent in any detail what all happened with European contact across this land, it’s only to get them to see what I want them to know. And that is, that oppression came in from outside, and spread by contagion across the land. Of course, this did not happen overnight, nor were the Indigenous people waiting like sitting ducks, as the expression goes, for the invaders to invade their lands.

Myself, I did not learn the real history of who we were as Indigenous people, at school. Nor did I learn about my history in my home. My parents did not explain to me what happened to our people. I only began to learn about my own history starting in high school—that is, the history of what was here before the white man. Maybe I had some ideas of our history, but it was never made so clear to me until I saw the images in a picture book in my high school library. One of the teachers showed me this book, and the whole section on the Indians of the Past. It struck me in such an undeniable way, that I had to confront the fact of our history being about loss and reclamation. It was the first time I saw a book about Indians in school. I really had no awareness of Indians having a history, having been on this land before the white man, or even
having any land of their own. But there it was in black and white, photograph after photograph of our existence here on Turtle Island at the time of the arrival of the white man.

So for all of my childhood I believed everything the teachers told us about who I was. I was the Indian child, the poor child, the child who couldn’t pronounce her words properly. I was the child who was laughed at when her parents kept showing up drunk for the Christmas concerts. I was the one who needed to be made “better” somehow, to be made right or white? When I saw the images of such beautiful and proud faces, with that light of love in their eyes, in those books, I felt like I found out who I was. I’m one of them! As a young person, in school, this was an important turning point in my education. I wanted to learn more and see what more I could find about us. It was the kind of validation I had always needed and finally found in a book.

Area 2 WATER BARREL has offered a glimpse into the lateral violence and reveals a pattern of coming and going of siblings, which leads to a pattern of closeness and distance in our family. It also hints at the social and political climate of the sixties, where even the health care professional—one who is supposed to be ‘helpful’ to people—offers only crass words of blame for three little girls with typhoid. We now move on the WEST WINDOW, Area 3.

In Area 3, the window facing west is captured in a drawing, but through the east window. The east window is presented later in the thesis.
Area 3: Nekapewanook Bussbahboon (West Window)

Figure 15 West Window

WEST WINDOW: In the image above, we see the west window (Figure 15) through the shattered east window. The west window offers a serene façade of flowers and a pretty sunset. The house appears to be empty with only the blue water barrel, a chair and the table in view. Perhaps the west window holds a promise of a safe and happy community except that its view is marred by the shattered pieces of glass in the east window. I would have likely looked through this east window to see who was home and to check if it was safe to go inside. However, one only needs to see a broken window to know to approach with caution.
Window panes were unaffordable at times, especially during the summer months when the
drinking parties were more frequent. More parties meant more broken windows. Sometimes the
window was covered only with plastic or with card board or a wooden plank until father could
pay for new windowpanes. I don’t know how often this happened, but I do remember going with
my mother to the lumber store in town. She would have a string with knots in it wrapped around
her four fingers. It turned out the knots were the measurements of the windowpanes. I also
remember the smell of the putty she would use to place the panes back into place.

1.1.7 Nistess (My Brother)

Memory Triggered: I have a happy memory about the west window, when my brother rescued
us little ones from potential danger. Again, it was on a Friday night, no adults around. I
remember being very little and crying from house to house, looking for one sober adult. This
was the beginning of knowing where to find them on Friday nights. But before I knew it my
brother, who was maybe only twelve at the time, found me wandering around alone. He said,
“Come here, what’s wrong?” I could not stop crying so he took my hand and led me back to our
house. There were other little girls-my Cousins-also without parents that evening. My brother
took us all inside and managed to prop up the big railway tie (which was a big log my father got
from the railway yard) against the door. This was our lock, most likely to keep polar bears out,
but it sure worked to keep the drunks out too. Sometime later, a man came and was trying to get
in. My brother told him to come around to the window; he did not let him in the door. With the
window open a little, the man asked my brother for a cigarette. I could see that he was
intoxicated. He was probably looking for a party too. I remember feeling very worried that he
would come in somehow either by force or by intimidating my brother. Finally, after some small
talk, the man left and my brother closed the window. The feeling of relief was evident among all
our faces. That night we were safe. None of the drunks got in to our little house that night. My brother was able to keep us safe because he was sober and he was home with us that night.

My father would break out into a rage when he was drunk. This is when he would beat my mother. I think I only witnessed this kind of violence upon her when I was still a toddler. I intervened that time. I woke up hearing my mother screaming in Cree, “kill me, kill me!” I could feel my legs slide off the bed and my feet touch the floor. I was still in diapers then. My eyes could not believe what I saw next. My father was on top of my mother, punching her face, her blood spurting upwards and onto the floor. I was horrified! I screamed so loud, it pierced the night. He stopped, and looked up at me, his daughter standing there in a diaper. I do not know what happened after that, but I remember another time holding my mother’s swollen face; her eyes were slits, she could not open them. Her tears streamed down her face. McGillivray discusses this “intimate” violence extensively in “Black eyes all of the time.”

As a child, I grew up to believe women like my mother, Native women were to be beaten. I identified with her as a Native woman, and so I thought my life would be much the same. It seemed there was no way out of rape as girls and black eyes later in life as women. I did not know that at the time my life would follow this same cycle of violence, I learned to feel hopeless and helpless as a girl, because I was a girl.

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1.1.8 Biikobunnit Bussbahboon (Busted Window)

Having busted windows was a common problem for marginalized peoples like us, those who lived in the Flats. Jayewardene (1972) in her thesis titled, “Crime and Society in Churchill,” wrote about this problem, the broken windows. She was writing about Dene village, which was a few miles further out and south of town. She talked about how she had a window replacement program there and actually tried to keep up with fixing everyone’s windows one summer. She said she could not understand why the Native men beat their wives, and she noted that this only happened when they were drinking alcohol. The broken windows were only the surface problem of something deeper and not as easy to fix. In my home, the violence that is commonly referred to as “wife beating” occurred only with the consumption of alcohol.

**Window Pains**

As a child, I peered into the windows of my house

To see who was there and who was absent

siblings home, siblings gone

Looking for my mom or dad

To see if who was there was sober or drunk

To see if it was safe to enter my house

How do you know if it is safe to enter your own house?

There is daylight, the night of drinking is over

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The table is upright, with all of the chairs

The radio is playing, the lamp in its place on the wall

The water barrel is upright and the floor is dry

The smell of food cooking, mom is home

The stove is filled with fire and the house is warm

But when looking through a busted window

Through shattered glass

What does it mean?

Pain glass windows

Windowpane pain

One could see from a distance our broken pieces

A broken family has shattered windows

Missing pieces of glass

Fragments which may never be found again

Windowpane pain

That day, when the water was all over the floor, all the windows were shattered. That was a day when the windows were shattered by angry siblings. Angry siblings who were also intoxicate from a night of drinking. Their rage had reached the size of a tornado.

Now if the people around this house, the community members, or the townspeople or the media had some knowledge about why the windows were broken, they may not be so judgmental or
afraid of the dwellers of this house. They would not be so quick to blame the family who lived in this house for being poor, and not able to buy new windows each time they were shattered.

I am so thankful there were those few families down the Flats who saw a little girl who only needed somewhere safe to be, some food to eat and a safe place to sleep, and opened their door letting me sleep where they had a space, eat with them, stay and play at their house, until I could go home again. We need more of these families in our society today.

1.1.9 Alcoholism & Violence

Not all fathers in my community beat their wives, and not all of them drank alcohol. The ones who did fight their wives only did so when they were drinking alcohol. Alcohol became their escape from the poverty and powerlessness in their lives. Historically, alcohol was used as a weapon on our people. Alcohol was brought in by the Europeans who used it to barter, trade and buy Indian land, furs and food. Drinking in the pubs also offered a social outlet, but then opened up one’s innermost feelings. Alcohol intoxication provided a temporary escape from the harshness of life, the feelings of loneliness and helplessness. It seemed that the drinking of alcohol released very strong emotions. Anger was one of them, though it was an appropriate response to losing one’s children to Canada’s removal policy. Misplaced anger resulted in devastating blows to the loved ones, wives, children, and friends. I know of a few young men

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who killed their own brothers in a drunken rage. This pairing of drunkenness and violence became a well-known pattern in many First Nation communities, mine included. Amazingly, my father never did strike me or direct his rage at me.

1.1.10 Broken windows are like broken treaties

The thing about a shattered window is that it is there for everyone to see. Even if you replace the fragments of glass with plastic or cardboard or board them up with plywood, it is shouting to everyone, “I am broken!” Broken windows are like broken treaties. Only the people inside the houses who feel the cold wind blowing in. They shiver and huddle around the stove together. They know each other’s pain. The people on the outside, whose windows are rarely ever broken, blame the poverty-stricken families.

The work of truth telling should inform everyone what has happened to this family, and enable everyone to take action to help this family. Instead of reporting the family to the authorities, which might be child and family services or the police they might be able to lend an ear and just listen sometimes. We must rebuild our communities and offer an open heart to each other. By listening without judgment to one another, we might be able to prevent the window from being shattered in the first place.

The area next to the window has a table as a central item of focus.
Area 4: Meechisoonathtik (Table)

Along the outline of the table: *This table had chrome legs which were tied back to the table if they were broken in a fight, usually with string.*

In Area 4, TABLE has a lot to tell us, and brings out more of the good things about being Cree and female. This Area holds stories of my mother, who was my hero. She could do anything and make anything. She was very creative. Included in this Area are two photographs, one of her beads, she loved to do beadwork, and she was highly skilled at it. The second photograph shows the handmade moccasins she made for my doll. I drew a portrait of my mother from a photograph of her in her last year of life. She was seventy years old.

Context: This was our dining table; it had three chairs. With only three chairs, we fit nicely around this little table, mom, dad, and I. I’m not sure what happened to the fourth chair, but I do wonder how that story goes. Maybe it was given to the new family who moved into the vacated house across the road from us. I remember how that house burned down, three people died in it, including a small boy, who I think was their grandson.

Below, I will present each detail in separate pieces. I will provide a context for each piece or a combination of the pieces from the Table. This will be followed by a memory, story or drawing or photograph. The bigger picture will be provided at the end of this Area.

We were very poor, and couldn’t just go out and buy a new table every time it got broken, so with my parents’ unending resourcefulness, they would just repair what they could with whatever they had on hand. Too bad there wasn’t duct tape back then; I’m sure they could have used that and would have loved it. I think my father had enough tools around that he could put the table legs back into place. In my memory it seems like there was constant chaos and fighting
and the table getting wrecked, but that would only happen when they were drinking which would only be when they had money. The people who broke the table, were likely my siblings and their friends in a brawl so that would only happen in the summer. So maybe the table was only broken two or three times at the most, which means it was not a constant occurrence, but once is enough if you are a child living in that house.

If everyone was passed out and there was nowhere to sleep, sometimes we would make a bed with the three chairs. One of us children, myself or one of my cousins, could sleep on the three chairs. Other times we would search for a safe house to sleep, where the drinking party had left or had stopped for the night, with adults passed out or asleep and we would make a bed on the floor with extra jackets or blankets.

Sleep deprivation began for me at this age, where I felt I had to keep an eye on the adults. I would always try to sense how they were feeling and what behaviors to expect from them. I learned the wave of emotions that the alcohol consumption would take them on. First they would be in a good mood, sociable, laughing and just having fun sharing stories together. Then they would become less inhibited and some music would start, either on the radio where they would turn up a song they liked, or someone would bring their guitar, or fiddle or an accordion and the dancing would start at this point. I knew this was the kind of spirit they would want to feel all the time. It was intoxicating even for me, where they would get us kids to do some jigging as well. Then the singing! My father would lead with a few tunes like “My Bonny” or “It’s a long way to Tipperary.”

The dangerous part came when all inhibitions were down and the real raw emotions would find their way to the surface, anger, one of them. This would be mixed with sadness and some crying
about love and loss. But anger would win over by someone erupting with insults and fists would begin to fly and depending upon who was there, it would either die down or turn into an all-out brawl, chairs flying, and everyone scattering for safety. I learned early on to leave before this part, before the insults, as I knew it would be unsafe to stay, though it may have been highly entertaining at the same time. This was more likely to happen when my siblings and their friends were drinking at my house. The point is, I tried my best to avoid the crazy behaviors of the adults, and would sometimes lead other children to a safer place. One time, this was out in the bushes where we just slept on the ground. At other times, I would climb into the coal bin to sleep. The drinking would end with the adults passing out, everywhere, even on the floor. I would tiptoe around them and just try to find somewhere to sleep and hope for a better day.

Top right hand corner of the table: *My mother did her beadwork on here and made moccasins, mukluks, gauntlets, hats. She let me sew with her and make necklaces with beads.*

Our table had a grey vinyl top and silver legs. There were at least three chairs to sit on, though they would wear quite thin and close to the nails when they lost their padding.
Ni Mama (my mother)

My mother and other women in my community sewed and did beadwork. It was how they supported their families.\textsuperscript{102} My mother supported us by selling her beadwork to the Hudson Bay store. This is how she kept us fed.\textsuperscript{103} The Bay store in turn sold them at a higher price to the

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tourists. She also made me a pair of “mukluks,” boots which were fully beaded vamps with trim around the calves. I remember her floral pattern with the red and white beads and white rabbit fur with pom-poms. My favorite color of beads were the pink ones; they were the cut-glass beads. Several women from the Flats made these products, mainly moccasins with beadwork, to sustain their families. Though my mother worked in the home, she contributed as much to our wealth as my father could provide from working at the Harbour Board.

Just on the other side of the tracks, in town, there was a craft store established for the Native women to show their beadwork and to sell them directly to the tourists. I can’t remember the name of it; I think it was Indian Crafts Store. My childhood photo, in the introductory chapter, shows my mother’s cousin, Aunt Jemima, doing her beadwork, as three of us children from the Flats look on.
These are my mother’s beads, and her fabric leftover from one of her dresses she made for herself. She often wore floral print dresses and a scarf on her head, most of the older ladies wore the same kind of style. I loved spending time with my mother, watching her do her beadwork. She would let me make a necklace or just string a bunch of beads together only to take them apart, and start all over again. She was very patient with me that way, where she would allow me to follow my own creative flow with her beads.

The next sentence on the table says: *My mother sewed her own clothes and made dresses for my doll, including moccasins.*
Muskissinuk (Shoes)

These are the moccasins my mother made for my doll. She made them from her leftover cowhide and rabbit fur. In this photo, they are resting on top of her beads, which were tied up with the fabric seen here. They’re all I have left from the little house down the flats. One time when we were travelling to visit one of my oldest siblings and his family in Split Lake, we lost my small suitcase which had all the doll clothes she had made. This was all I could find of the doll clothes she made for me.
To the left of those words, it says: *This was a coal oil lamp and the center of all our conversations and stories together. There was also a radio, many radios that would also be replaced along with a new lamp after the violence that would erupt with the drinking.*

The lamp was mounted on the wall above the table, it did not rest on the table. The lamp was our only source of light at night and my mother would often be working by lamplight to have finished products for sale the next morning. Those were the nights my father would be working late at the harbor. With the shipping season being so short and only a few months long, the work was very demanding. He would come home late, having walked almost a mile from work while covered in grain dust and wash his face and arms in the little metal basin by the door. My mother would have some fried fish, potatoes, and bannock and tea waiting for him. He would tell her everything that happened at work, sometimes with such emotion and melody in his voice. Sometimes they had something to laugh about together, but mostly he would chew down his meal, sip his jar of tea, and get his things ready for work the next day. In the morning, he would be gone, leaving only mother and me to spend the days together.

In looking back at my childhood and the life we lived in this little house, I noticed that the radio with its music playing was always a sign of newness; a new path set by my parents who were now trying to pick up their lives and put all the broken pieces back together. Having no radio meant it had been broken once again in a drinking party.

Upside down words: *This was our table where we shared meals, usually my parents and I, but sometimes with cousins and Aunts & Uncles from down the line.*

“Down the line” refers to the railway or the Hudson Bay line, which stretches from Churchill all the way south to Winnipeg. This 1700 kilometer or 1000 mile journey took over two nights.
This railway was maintained by the Cree families who lived along this stretch called the Bay line.

**Hard Working**

Both my parents worked hard. My father never missed a day of work. I remember that about him. Sometimes my mother worked late into the night with her sewing, if we needed food the next day. She paid for her own fabric and sewing materials. My father would often have to wait a few weeks for his unemployment insurance checks. That is what they used to call it back then. Now they call it employment insurance. He would be very frustrated with having to fill out the cards only to say his work at the NHB, National Harbor’s Board, was seasonal. He would usually get the card back in the mail with some kind of error, resulting in a longer wait for his first check of the winter. This was the only time I saw him angry. Other than when he was drunk, he never got angry about anything, and was often quite jovial.

The point is my parents were hard workers and equally contributed to our economic wealth. My mother was very independent in that respect; she continued the customary work of the women before her, whose labor was essential in the history of the fur trade.\(^{105}\) I learned to work hard from them. I got my first summer job when I was fourteen, at the day care in town, as I loved working with children. Many people worked very hard to support their families down the Flats. We were not “lazy” like they would say about us everywhere. Those stereotypes do a lot of

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damage to the minds of children. It is important to refute those beliefs. Area 4, Meechisoo Nath tik (Table) offers a real look at the hard working, industriousness of my parents. I think about how the Hudson Bay store exploited the women’s artistry. They became an empire off the backs of women like her. I think of all the families who lived along the Bay line to keep the railways together. I think of all the men whose labor was essential in the building of that railway.

Area 4, the table, is about my connection and closeness to my mother. I spent many hours with my mother before starting school at age six. She gave me my language, my culture and my way to be in the world. She taught me how to do everything for myself. She showed me by doing these things. I watched her and then would try it and she would help me to sew, cook, clean, wash clothes, chop wood, saw wood, make a fire in the woodstove and many other skills for survival on the tundra. The next section is Area 5 COUCH. The only Cree word I could find for it actually means chair, which is something you sit on.

Area 5: Deth dih boon (couch)

Couch: This was a pull-out sofa. This is where my sisters slept when they were home from school. As I got older I slept here, my cousins and I would have laughing fits. My father would threaten us with his belt but he never did use it on me – he never struck me, he was very gentle with me. We took this couch with us when we moved to town. Upside down words: Up to five of us could sleep in this fold-out bed. We all had to roll over at the same time. This was probably the warmest spot, by the stove.
Context: We had an orange and gold sofa along this partition wall. It was a pull-out sofa. In the summers my sisters did sleep on the sofa with my sisters, and in winters, as I got too big to fit beside my mother in their bed. I had many sleepovers. My cousins, who were my age mostly, would sleep over with me and we would have many laughing fits. My mother was happy to have more children over; my father, on the other hand, would attempt to be the disciplinarian, though his threats of bringing his belt over were never carried out.

Over the years, my cousins replaced my sisters, as I grew up with them all year round. I refer to them as my sister-cousins. We survived everything together: school, home, violence, poverty, everything. My sisters, who I saw only in the summers, became strangers to me over the years. This was the most painful part of this constant separation from my siblings: the disconnection that would gradually leave us feeling estranged from one another. Inevitably, we became strangers and sisters and brothers.

The couch was also where we would sit for my father’s homemade sermons. He was often grumpy and would say the word “may-oo” or “may,” meaning excrement. He would try his best to sit us kids—my cousins and I—down and read from his bible, the Cree version. This was where the giggles would start with one of us, and then it was only a matter of minutes before another kid would get giggly. Father would get mad at us and swear or say “May!” The translation of this word is “excrement.” This is why I had a tough time using some English words. For example, the word “May” posed much discomfort when I tried to speak to ask for permission to go the washroom.
Grade One

When I was in Grade One, in my first year of school at the Duke of Marlborough Elementary school in town, I learned about the English word, May. My first grade teacher was scary and demanded we speak proper English when asking or answering any questions in class. First you had to raise your hand and wait for her permission to speak. My friend Harriet helped me through the English language for that first year. One very vivid memory was when I needed to use the washroom. She told me what to say to the teacher.

“May I please go to the washroom?” Harriet pronounced these words very precisely to me so that I would be granted my wish.

I asked her if I should say ‘May’ as we both knew what it meant in our language. She insisted, “Yes, that’s how you have to say it!”

I raised my hand, and was granted permission to speak. In my best pronunciation I said the words, “May I please go to the washroom?”

A few chuckles could be heard, most likely from the Cree kids. I held my breath and waited for the all-powerful teacher to respond.

“Are you sure you need to go?” She was questioning the validity of my request.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Are you positive?!?” she glared back at me, elongating all the vowels.
I looked at Harriet for help, I didn’t know what the word ‘positive’ meant. She seemed to be just as stumped as I was.

So I said, “No!”

“Then get back in your seat and wait ‘til recess!!” She commanded with her hairy mole above her lip twitching to her every word.

I really thought it was a bad thing, and I didn’t want to be known as having something called ‘positive’!

Well that day, I learned two new words: May and Positive. Both were good words to use in English. This is especially true if you need to pee really badly.

**Language: Understanding the role of language in my history**

I understand there were severe efforts made to dissuade children from speaking their language at residential schools. There were also efforts made by teachers in my school, a public day school, to encourage the proper use of English, by way of humiliation or special lessons in front of the class. I remember my Grade Four teacher made me stand up and try to pronounce the words, “sure” and “sir.” Then he had me use them together in a sentence, which made it even more difficult and embarrassing as all the children watched and laughed at me. That was one time that I remember most clearly. I also remember the other Native children would tease each

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other for saying words with our Cree accents. For example, I would always confuse the s’s and
the sh’s. My cousins spoke English more fluently than I did. By the time we were in Grade 1,
they had learned it even earlier than I had, through their father who spoke it fluently. Therefore,
there was definitely the pressure to conform to the social order, which was to speak English and
to become assimilated into white society. We had to stand up every morning and sing Oh
Canada, and say the Lords’ Prayer. At the end of the day, we had to sing God Save the Queen.

My parents both spoke Cree at home, I learned Cree, but from about Grade 1 and on I learned
more and more English. I guessed my way through the English language, and learned by each
mistake like this one, what each word could mean for me in terms of the result or consequence.
In this Grade 1 situation, I peed my pants, had to stay inside for recess, and learned what
‘positive’ meant in that specific context. Learning to speak English was for me very intimidating
and humiliating at times.

Residential schools were established to teach the children English, and to discourage the
speaking of a child’s mother tongue. I was never punished if I spoke Cree in school, unlike the
children at residential school who received brutal punishments in many residential schools. 107
However, I don’t ever remember trying to speak Cree in school. It was expected that I would
speak English and that is what I would try to do at all times in school. I never tried to speak Cree
at school, because I could speak Cree at home.

I also enjoyed the workbooks and mastering the spelling of English words and learning to read them. It was a skill my parents did not really encourage nor discourage; they just left me to do what I wanted. I don’t ever remember having homework, nor books to read at home. I learned to master English at school and at home I continued to hear and speak Cree.

Though I didn’t experience anything like my siblings would have at residential school in trying to speak or express themselves in their language, it was still an issue for me in that I felt ashamed of my language and really tried to take on the English language as was expected of me in school. I felt I had to give up my language, because it was not seen as a good thing to know in my school. I tried to speak perfect English, and began to lose more of my Cree words as I got older. I can remember by age twelve, not understanding my father’s story at our kitchen table. I could only understand a few of his words, and so this was due not to physical punishment from an external force, but more from an internal rejection or ‘forgetting’ of my language. I had become convinced throughout my ‘education’ up to that point, that my Cree language was dying and we would no longer need it in this new order of Canada.

Area 5, the sofa, is about my gradual disconnection from my sisters, and my increasing reliance on my cousins and my transition from Cree to English. As I tried to survive an education system which has no place for a Cree speaker I left my language and opted for English. So learning to speak English well became a strategy of survival and endurance.

Now that you have come in and heard some of the stories, you might come to know us as more than just puddle drinkers or squatters. You are ready to learn on a deeper level who we are as Cree people of the Muskeg. The next chapter brings out Areas 6, 7, 8 and 9. These are the Bed, North Window, Rollaway Cot and the Cold Room.
Chapter 5 the Heart of Nikis

Now you have reached the heart of my home: Areas (6) Bed, (7) North Window, (8) Rollaway Cot, (9) Cold Room. Be warned there are some sad stories in this part and there are joyful and tender moments.

Area 6: Nibewin (Bed)

Once again, I will provide the context, some background of the text found on the map within these lines of the bed. Then I will draw out some of the meaning and understanding from it in a broader context. This is how I will continue throughout the memory map of Nikis until we reach the thirteenth area.
On very cold nights, the nails would crack with a bang. It would scare me awake. This was when the dreams of death began, after the rape. And the train dreams started. I am laying on the tracks and can’t move. The train eventually runs over me.

Context: The winter temperatures in Churchill could go as low as 50 below zero with the wind chill, but we would be cozy warm in our bed with the fire going in the woodstove. Before the rape, I never noticed any sounds at night; I slept like a baby, as they say. After the rape, everything for me, even the affection from my parents felt different. Sleeping became a struggle, troubled too often by nightmares of feeling powerless and doomed. The train featured heavily in the nightmares; I would be laying across the tracks unable to move out of the way, as it barreled toward me. I always felt like the rapist could rape me anytime, especially if my parents were off drinking and left me alone. Every time I saw the rapist in the community he would tease me, he would say, “there’s my girlfriend.” I would be speechless and freeze in his presence. My mother did not seem to know what he did to me, nor could I find the words to say what he did to me. As a child of five, I had not learned that word yet, if it even exists in my language. It was not yet in my vocabulary of Cree words nor in English. I had no way to say, “I was raped” until at least age seven. By the time, I was age seven I felt powerless to speak out about it as I became a witness of other rapes whereby the victims were also powerless to speak out. I grew up seeing the many slash marks on their arms and feeling the heaviness of the stifling silence of secrecy around me. I would have to wait until I was age thirteen before disclosing the rape to anyone.

Remarkably at age seven, as I was thinking of the rape and calculating how old I was when it happened, I remember deciding to survive. I speak about this to adult learners, that I made a
conscious decision to grow up and get big and strong and go around and look into everyone’s’ windows to make sure no one was being raped. I told this story about “deciding to live” when I was teaching at FNAC. I also said to the students at FNAC, who were taking this counselling program that the looking into windows is a metaphor, “here I am now, looking into your eyes which are the windows to your soul.” This seemed to be a touching story to bring out to them as they were beginning their program as Indigenous Counsellors.

Below this paragraph, three sentences: My mother’s love and patience helped me to be kind to people. As a baby my hammock hung over this bed. Mom also made our pillows; sometimes a feather would poke you.

Context: I do remember a hammock over the bed, I may have slept in it as an infant and then with my parents until around eight years old. We had a double sized bed, in the corner of the room, with a window facing north beside the bed. My spot was between my mother and the wall; I knew this to be the safest place in the world, next to her. My mother made our blankets and pillows with goose down, like her mother before her, her hands were skillful and provided her family with a warm bed to sleep in.

Along the right edge of the bed: I slept with my parents between this wall and her until I was 8 yrs. old. Next to my mother, this was the safest and warmest place to be. My father slept here keeping the fire going during the colder nights. My mother made these blankets that covered us on winter nights. She made them with goose down and flour sacks sewn together. My

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108 Brandon University housed the (FNAC) First Nations & Aboriginal Counselling degree program from 2000 to 2009.
father prayed with me at bedtime, “God, Jees, luff, amen.” I used to wonder what Jees was, but I knew he was saying “love.”

Upside down words: My closeness to my parents prepared me to be close and affectionate with my child. She slept with me until she was 9 or 10 years old.

At bedtime, my father would take my hands and hold them together and he would pray with me. He would have me repeat each word after him, so the prayer was shortened, for my benefit, to these four words: God, Jesus, love, Amen. Yes, my parents were Christianized by the Anglican missionaries at York Factory, though they were not devoted Church goers. In fact, my parent’s Church going was reserved for those special events in our community: weddings, funerals or baptisms.

Closeness and Affection

My parents were both equally affectionate toward me, and they never hit me. As a mother, I followed my parents’ example of providing closeness and affection for my child and never using physical punishment. What is most notable in this Area is the phenomenon of closeness and affection from my parents.

Their alcoholism did take them away from me, but when they were sober, which was actually more often than not, they were very loving and attentive parents. I did feel unsafe whenever they were drinking, which means I felt safest when they were sober, which was most of the time. My siblings were likely missing their parents’ closeness and affection, as I do remember the youngest one would often try to get rid of me so he could have some special time with our
mother. Even back then, I understood his need for her attention and love, as he would be without her while he was away at school.

I left my parents when I was around twelve or thirteen. We were living in town by then, but I was only a few blocks away from them and I was able to visit them whenever I wanted. My father was very hurt that I left, but my mother was always so accepting of me and gave me her blessing. She sat me on her lap, and said, “You’re becoming a woman. You are not a baby anymore. Go and make a good life for yourself.”

It is important to talk about the closeness and affection from my parents. As a youth, when I was living in the Receiving Home, I remember one of the white Social Workers telling this story with so much laughter to a staff member. She said she went to a Cree family’s home and was shocked to find almost the entire family cuddling together in the parents’ bed, with their grown children! She was not just laughing; she was also expressing disbelief at what she saw. I could not forget her response to this image of a family having physical closeness together. I think the Western Mental Health system would refer to this kind of behavior as being “enmeshed.” It makes me think of one Metis friend I had, who tried very hard to reach her son, who was in the Child & Adolescent Centre for his depression. The more she got closer to him and made a connection to him, where he was able to respond and return her hugs and smiles; the more the workers would warn her not to become “enmeshed.” She would then pull away, trying to ward off the dangers of being too close to her son. There are a few issues to shed light on around the idea of closeness. There seems to be a fear of closeness in those systems, where they are supposed to be bringing help and support to young people.
Vulnerable Places

Along the left edge of bed: A tragic event happened on this spot. A man sexually assaulted me when I was 5 yrs. old. It was when my parents were drunk and left me with him. He had a chain and threatened me with it. I left my body and floated above the house until my parents were coming home. I could hear myself crying in the house.

Context: The young man had come into our house while my parents were drinking, and warmed himself by the stove. He wore a black leather jacket with some chains dangling from it. He smelled like Brute cologne; I hate that smell to this day. In fact, I can barely tolerate any kind of colognes or perfumes. My parents had already been drinking for the evening and were quite drunk by that time. One of my uncles was falling asleep in his chair. The young man told my parents, they should go and he would stay to watch their daughter. I think he had given me candy around that time as well, attempting to gain my trust. My parents left the house and then the young man’s mood changed from friendly and cheery to flat, and distant. This is when it happened, after he made me go to my parent’s bed. My crying must have woken my uncle who was asleep on a chair at the table. My uncle came rushing towards the bed, the young man beat him to the floor, knocking him out. The young man returned and continued to rape me. He stopped. I could hear my parents’ voices coming from the direction of one of my aunts’ houses; they were loud enough that the young man heard them too. He propped me up and tried to dress himself and me at the same time. Then he told me in English to “get dressed! Hurry up!” I tried to hurry and I remember putting on my brown buckle boots. My parents entered the house. I knew it was over, and I was safe for the time being. Nevertheless, for every day after, and every
time my parents drank and got drunk I feared the young man would come to our house to rape me again. My parents were oblivious to what had just happened to me.

Looking back at this memory of the rape, I do not believe I had left my body then, but I had a nightmare later around that time where I was floating above the house. I was hovering over my house facing downwards, and the snow was falling slowly and softly down. It was very peaceful and so quiet, only the sound of my mother breathing beside me. I awoke in the next instant with the blanket in my mouth, nearly suffocating from chewing on the blanket. I had developed a habit of chewing the blanket at night, along with other fears, like needing to pee in the night. My mother would escort me without complaint to the pail in the porch. There were other symptoms that arose after this “tragic event.” I became very aware of this man as a child; it seemed I developed a sixth sense or a sensor to keep track of where he was at all times. In fact, I became aware of all the adults and whether or not they were drunk or sober. Sunsets became a worrisome time for me, as I would be panicked that darkness was coming. And all the way into my adulthood, I would become very anxious when the sun was setting, and would need an open window or be outside, so I could breathe easier. Other more prolonged and deeper symptoms emerged throughout my life as a girl and into womanhood. When I look back at this time at how the rape changed my life, I can say the most profound change was my fear of men. It seemed I lost all trust for men, including my own father and my brothers. It was not until I was age twelve or thirteen that I could tell someone what happened. No one had asked until then. I told the public health nurse about the rape, because she asked me about my life and then I was hospitalized for a month. After that, I was placed into a group home—the Receiving Home it was called then—in Churchill.
Sexual Abuse: Understanding the role of sexual abuse in my history

This is the part where I use the word ‘rape.’ I had an uneasiness about using the word in the classroom with my peers, in my anticipation of presenting my memory map. In my public presentations of Nikis, I spoke about the bed as being the ‘safest’ place in the world. And then I explained how my parents’ alcoholism made this safest place, the bed, the most vulnerable place in the world as it was where I was raped at around age five. From what I have learned about my reserve, York Landing, there was a predator who lived there and across northern Manitoba and Ontario victimizing young boys in our communities. “Survivors Rowe,” illustrates how one man abused as many as 500 boys while he was an Anglican priest and a Boy Scout leader, during the 1970’s and 80’s. He served less than five years in jail for his sex crimes against these 500 Indigenous children. This legacy of sexual abuse in my community comes from the missionaries.

In my power point slides, I included a picture of more vulnerable places which could be found at a residential school, cots for the children to sleep in. This is where I spoke about the experience of residential school survivors—those who were made vulnerable by this system of removal from the safeguards of parents or loved ones.

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110 Survivors Rowe, directed by Daniel Roher (2015; Toronto: Loud Roar Productions), Video.
In my journey of seeking the listeners, I went to see a counsellor at the Family Resource Centre in Brandon, Manitoba. I had moved to Brandon to complete my high school, and then to go to university. It was during my undergrad that I decided to seek counselling as I found my overwhelming fear of men to be most debilitating when it came to doing presentations in class. Finally, I was able to tell someone in more detail what happened to me and about all the other times I had been sexually abused or witnessed abuse upon others. After a year of receiving individual counselling, I was invited to join the support group my counsellor was facilitating at the same Centre. Speaking out in a group was even more healing for myself as I could then see that I was not alone in my experience of sexual abuse. I also learned that boys can also be victims of abuse and that they can be abused by female perpetrators.

A few years later my counsellor asked me if I would be interested in facilitating a support group at AMAC, Adults Molested as Children. This was my opportunity to give back to others, what I had been so generously given, a listening ear and an understanding heart. The support I received from my group helped me to feel good about myself. It gave me the confidence to try to facilitate a group of my own.

It was then I decided to become a counsellor. I worked in a few First Nation communities in Manitoba, for a few years. The most challenging time for me as a First Nations counsellor was how the people’s lives and conditions triggered me and my memories of my past. I think this is where we need to concentrate our efforts in creating a force of First Nations counsellors, by providing self-care tools and strategies. If we want to be good counsellors we must look at our own trauma first so that we can work with other survivors of sexual abuse more effectively. As Hill writes, “One of the hardest steps in recovery is to tell one’s secrets, to look into the past and
to explore all the painful memories, and circumstances and bring them into the open. But recovery must also be emotional healing. It is not enough to just talk about painful memories. We need to look at the memories, deal with the emotions attached to those memories, and release the pain”111 (p. 97). Salter talks about these recalling episodes, the similar sights, sounds, and smells as triggers112 of the traumatic event.

The picture of the Bed area captures so many memories, which contrast one another. The fact that it felt like it was the safest place in the world to becoming in fact the most vulnerable place really encompasses the reality of the sixties for a Cree girl. The rape I experienced as a child left me feeling unsafe in the world, losing the trust of men and always fearing that he could rape me again. I walked around with a heightened awareness of the man’s presence in my community. It would be many years before I could feel free to be myself again.

The next section looks in and out through the north window with more memories and stories of Nikis.

**Area 7 Keewatinook Buss bah boon (north window)**

*I used to watch out this window for my father to return home from work at the harbor. Also from this window a witness to the rape.*

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My father would walk home from his job at the seaport (NHB) covered in grain dust. Mother would place me in front of the north window to watch for him. These were exciting moments. I would watch his figure appear on the gravel road and watch him walk all the way to our door. Sometimes he brought me a candy from work. He wore a hard hat and a mosquito net to work, along with coveralls and steel-toed boots. This north window brings memories of my father at a time when he was most attentive which indicates a very early memory. He was most affectionate toward me when I was an infant and toddler age. As I grew up, he became more distant and less careful with his words or actions around me. I came to fear him, as his rage would escape him when he was drunk.

The last time I saw my father I was a teenager, still living at the Receiving Home. He was walking towards me from the post office; I was walking toward the post office. We were like two strangers crossing paths. I could not say anything to him, not even a “hello, how are you?” He uttered something in my direction, his face without emotion, sober in his late sixties. That was the last time I saw him before he died. This part is the saddest part for me. I felt like I lost my father to alcohol. It makes me think of all the men I tried to replace him with and ended up with alcoholics. Though I vowed to escape this kind of brutality, it seemed it was all I knew about having a relationship. I did not grow up with very many good examples of relationships, other than the fairy tales we saw in films. This explains why I gravitated towards abusive men; they felt as badly about themselves as I did about myself. This might also explain why I put myself into such vulnerable situations as a young adult.
My cousin shared with me that there might have been a witness to the rape. Someone told her she saw in this window the same man who raped me, raping someone, but she was not able to see whom. She said she was out looking for her mother one night.

Figure 20 Witnessing

Witnessing

One night, long ago,

I wrapped my hands around my face and peered into the window

The darkness of shadow and the oil lamp burning

Cast enough light to see

It revealed to me a horrific image

A man was raping someone, but I could not see who
My breath covered the window before me in the frozen air of February

I closed my eyes to what I saw

I found my footing in the snow

Through my tears welling up in my fourteen-year-old eyes

I could not tell another soul for many years

Until finally I was tired of feeling alone

And haunted by what I saw in that window

That fateful day I went out looking for my mother

Witnessing: Understanding the role of witnessing violence in my history

I chose not to confront this woman who came forward as a witness, who is an adult now. Instead I will let her speak to me if she wants. The reason I would not approach her is because I would not want to cause further injury by triggering her traumatic memories from our childhoods. I have also been a witness to violence, in my own family. I saw my father beating my mother, my uncles beating their wives. I saw the women’s faces the next morning, bruised, busted, and their hearts broken once again. It was very difficult to feel proud as a girl when growing up as a victim of violence and seeing it happen to most of the women around me.
I wrote the poem “Witnessing” to honor the children, any child who has had to look for their mother, by looking into windows, where entering a house is not safe for them. The danger of looking into windows is that you cannot unsee those images; they stay with you and haunt you forever. The child who saw such a horrific image of someone being raped ought to forget those images and move on with her life. I hope she will be able to make peace with these shadows of the past. I pray that it will not stop her from having a good and fulfilling life.

Area 8: Rollaway Cot

This place held a cot, a roll away cot, my brothers slept here when they were home from school.

Context: Area 8 shows the spot where my brothers, the two youngest boys, slept when they were home from school. It was a small cot, only a twin size really, but that was what they slept on one summer. The cot had wheels and could be folded in half and rolled into the corner until bedtime. I remember playing in this cot and my cousins and I would take turns folding each other up into it, such fun!

A rollaway cot, as its name implies, is not a permanent place to sleep—it is temporary. Every fall, the train would roll away with my siblings on it, leaving me alone to cope with life in the Flats.
Goodbye Station

This drawing, The Goodbye Station, (Figure 21) seemed to be a favorite of many of the audience members, when I was in Graz, Austria, to talk about my memory mapping. There were many photographs taken of this drawing. It seemed to catch people’s attention the most out of all of my drawings. For instance, when I presented my memory map at the Urban Education conference in Toronto (March 6, 2014), one woman, who is non-Indigenous said, “The drawing
with the train really got to me, because it reminds me of the Jewish experience with the trains.” I suspect the train in this drawing has some significance or emotional connections for people whose families experienced the Jewish holocaust. I say this because I immediately felt an emotional connection to their suffering, when I saw the motion picture, “Schindler’s List” where the train pulls in to the Auschwitz concentration camp. I connect to this image and the plight of these people because of my own history with the train taking my siblings away from me. As I have mentioned before, I had many nightmares, growing up, about the train. There is something ominous about the train. It was unstoppable. The train tracks in the drawing are also the only road out of Churchill. The people who lived along the Bay line relied on the train to take them to the closest grocery store or medical center. The train that came to Churchill came in on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Ironically, the train became my only means of departure, escaping the hell of the Flats was only possible by getting on the train.

The “Goodbye Station” drawing represents the removal of not only my brothers and sisters, but before them, aunts and uncles of the older generations. This drawing of the train station is viewed from the back of the train, as it is pulling away. The train tracks are deeply rooted, imbedded into the landscape of Canada’s history. At the very top of the picture, it says, “Understanding my history,” Absolon & Willett, 2004. The image also reveals words of how I felt every time my siblings left us to go to school: Loose Foundation, Abandoned, Lonely,


Alone again, Left behind. The sign post is pointing south, it says: Residential School 600 miles. Next to the sign: A distant place. On the train itself, it says: Brothers, Cousins, Sisters, Aunts, Uncles, Parents, and Elders. Along the train tracks: Leaving the Flats. Along the right side of the drawing are the most telling words: I stayed at home with all the alcoholism, violence, poverty of the flats, I stayed here. Below these words I included a map of my little house and an X marking the spot on the bed.

Context: It was likely that one of my relatives laid each of those railway ties there. They lived and worked along the bay line to maintain the tracks. The ground on the tundra was soft and shifty offering no solid place for a railroad track. For this reason, the railway company needed people to live beside and to take care of it at all times. This next poem, “Trains,” is about my history and my family’s history with the trains. My connection to the train is evident.

**Trains**

The trains rumble by under our feet

Under layers of concrete

As we students sit in a classroom on the second floor

We resist the sound of clicking and clacking each time it passes

We strain to listen to her words

Hope to hear the wisdom

Hope to be inspired
We struggle to find our place

But the trains will not go away

Their rumble is steady, persistent, and undeniable

Their rumbles and squeals will not be ignored

It is the train from my past that has arrived

The train haunts me as I look ahead

It calls me to look back

A child’s face on a child’s body

Stands on the station platform

Slowly disappears as the train

Pulls

Away

Her heart is breaking

Who is that child?

Why is she being left behind?

Trains take people away
Train of Tears

In the TRC’s final report about the history of *What We Have Learned*, the commissioners tell the story of Larry Beardy:

> “Larry Beardy travelled by train from Churchill, Manitoba, to the Anglican residential school in Dauphin, Manitoba—a journey of 1,200 kilometres. As soon as they realized that they were leaving their parents behind, the younger children started crying. At every stop, the train took on more children and they would start to cry as well. “That train I want to call that train of tears”.”^116

I have had many nightmares of this train as a child, mostly of being under it and not able to move out of the way as it is barreling toward me. One very early nightmare was about being with my siblings on the train and then it starts to pull away from the station and I find myself standing alone on the tracks, watching the train disappear into the distance. It seems the train has represented more historically, the colonization and assimilation policies that came with it. The railway itself has represented the fracturing of land and people, and my family. The memory

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map triggered a very early memory related to the train station. I wrote about it and titled it “Left behind.”

**Left Behind**

Memory: One of my earliest memories is of the train station, when my siblings took me to the side door of the Churchill Hotel. I was age four or five in our little house down the flats with all my brothers and sisters there that day. It was late summer in the ‘60s and they were getting ready to catch the train back to school down south.

They were all speaking in English, “is she ready?” “Get her shoes,” and I knew they were referring to me. I was the baby, and they were getting me dressed, pulling up my tights. One slipped on my dress and the other tied my shoes. My sister washed my face with a wet towel. Another buttoned my knitted jacket.

Then as they got all their things together and me included I thought “we are going somewhere together!” I had this sense that my sister’s hand would be holding mine for a very long time and she would never leave me again. Well I was happy and excited as we all left the little house down the flats and walked together towards the train station. By then I was thinking “they’re taking me with them.” They all walked very briskly though, so there was a sense of purpose and urgency to their steps. As we neared the train station, I expected we would be boarding it together, that we would travel away together. But no, we kept walking. That is, they walked right passed the train station with me in tow and headed directly for town. At this point they grew silent, the mood shifted to a more somber tone.
We arrived at the side door of the Churchill Hotel. I know this because I came to know this door very well. I would continue to wait at this door for most of my childhood. The other door to the beer parlor was inside the lobby and across from the restaurant. I would wait at this door for my mother to come out of the beer parlor. But back to the story, the next thing I saw was this door opening and there were all these chrome chair and table legs, it smelled like alcohol and cigarette smoke. I remember Cree voices calling out my mother’s name, telling her “it’s your baby; she’s here at the door!”

My hand couldn’t feel my sister’s hand at that point, so I looked around to see where she was. It was at this moment that I realized they had all gone; they left me there for my mother to find me. In this very moment of realization, I felt completely abandoned and unprepared for what was to come.

**Disconnection: Understanding the roll of separation in my history**

Separation from my siblings was very painful for me as I did enjoy their company when they were home. I loved my sisters and they showed their love to me by holding me and taking me for walks to the town playground, laying on the merry-go-round and just spending time with me. Losing my siblings was traumatic in a very devastating way. Without them I had no one to keep me out of harm’s way. This separation of family enforced by the government policies and laws has left us to this day estranged. The only time we have ever been together as a family, with all of my siblings in one place, was when there was a funeral. We have yet to gather, simply for the sake of gathering together as a family.
The train station is prominent in my memories of childhood. The drawing of the “Goodbye Station” brings out what is at the heart of this story, the feelings of abandonment and separation from siblings. This very powerful image of the abandoned child is haunting because it shows the reality of how vulnerable I felt without the presence and protection of my older siblings. Their youngest sibling, I stayed behind with the poverty, alcoholism, and violence in my home, violence in my community. I was alone when my parents went drinking. I was a prime target for the rapist. It seemed inevitable that I would be raped at some point in my childhood, as I was often alone, fending for myself.

The Rollaway Cot area brings out the moment of disconnection between my siblings and me. In the drawing of the Goodbye Station, mirrored by the Train of Tears story we get the full weight of this systematic ripping away of children from their families. This is only a glimpse into what I had to cope with down the flats without big brothers and sisters to protect me. In Area 9, the Cold Room shows how life went on without my siblings.

**Area 9 Cold Room**

*This led into the cold room. There was a big blue dresser where my cats had their kittens.*

*There was a Singer sewing machine here. I never saw my mother use it. It was a foot pedal thing.*

Context: The room off the bedroom, was never warm enough for habitation in the winters, therefore it was referred to as the cold room. To maximize the warmth for our main living space this cold room would be closed off with a heavy wool blanket, like the CNR blankets.
Memory: I remember being awakened by a bunch of teenagers (siblings and their friends) that came running out of the cold room. They were screaming and laughing at the same time.

Someone must have come to get me off the bed and passed me over to my brother who was lounging by the fire on the sofa. I remember his voice was comforting me and letting me know it was okay.

I later learned about the séance games my siblings and cousins would play in the cold room. It involved something scary and I know it frightened them but was fun enough to do it over and over again. My cousin told me about the time one of my brothers convinced her to hide in a box before the game started. She was instructed to make a noise or grab someone’s leg at the appropriate time during one of their séances. This is what terrified everyone to leap out of the room and trample anyone that got in the way.

She recalled this with fondness of the good times they had together as cousins. This brings to mind other games we would play outdoors, with my siblings and cousins as I got older: red rover, dodgeball, and a game called Anti-anti-over where a ball would be thrown over our little house. It seemed our house was the place to be for fun and socializing, especially when my brothers and sisters were home. Maybe it was due to my parent’s high tolerance for the funny antics of children or just the fact that they loved us so much.

The big blue dresser I remember because my mom would bring a kitten to the bed to wake me up in the mornings. We always had cats and they always had kittens. My parents indulged me with a new kitten from each new litter, so we always had cats. My first cat’s name was Rhubarb; she was a long hair tabby cat who lived until I was nine years old. Mother told me we got her as a kitten from her cousin who lived south of us a few houses over. I do remember Rhubarb getting
sick and my mother taking her behind the house to put her down. By then I knew that all life comes to an end and her time had come that day. I was also relieved that she would no longer suffer.

Context: There was a Singer sewing machine tucked back in the cold room, but I never saw my mother use it. As I had said before in Area 4 TABLE, my mother always sewed by hand so that might be why I never saw her use her sewing machine. She made her own dresses, but she also made a lot of beaded mukluks and moccasins which she would sell to the Hudson Bay store. Sometimes people came to her for specific orders and paid her directly, but not very often. I remember some men who would come back from hunting would drop off a bunch of geese for plucking and cleaning. Also maybe the Singer sewing machine was something that required electricity. When we moved to town she didn’t bring it with her. I’m not sure what ever became of it.

The cold room had two windows on each side of it, one faced north and the other had a southern view. Toward the south one could see the road to what was referred to as ‘Eskimo Point’ or the “whaling plant.” The north window was where my brother pushed us out of harm’s way.

Kotuk Nistess (my other brother)

Memory: The cold room was where my brother saved us from a woman who was coming after us with an axe. She was in a drunken rage when she entered our house. Her eyes looked wild and her scream was bone chilling. In an instant, my brother pushed us girls, my cousin and I, out the window in the cold room. He, however, did not make it out with us, and so took the brunt of
the woman’s rage. I think the woman hit him in the stomach with the axe, but he was not severely injured by it. Maybe he was able to fight her off as he seemed to be okay afterwards.

**Mental Health: Understanding mental health issues in my history**

It seemed as though everyone around me was going crazy. It was a very frightening time to be a child down the Flats. The summers seemed to bring out more drinking, drunkenness and violent behavior. I learned to expect this kind of behavior from the men in our community, so it seemed even crazier to see the women behave so violently.

I became very depressed as a youth. Even after leaving the Flats, moving into a new house in town, I became suicidal. The alcoholism, the violence, and the sexual abuse followed me to my new house. With little hope in sight, I tried to think of ways to end my suffering. Alcohol provided only temporary relief, but the idea of ending my life offered a more permanent solution to my feelings of sadness and shame. I did start to write at that age, at school I would use my spare time to find relief in writing poems. But my headaches worsened as my body began its transformation into womanhood. What should have been a joyful and sacred time of my life, posed an even greater threat to my safety. I feared men even more, even my brothers were scary to me, because I could no longer hide the fact that I was a girl. In my mind, only girls were raped, though I did learn later in life that this was a false assumption. As my body grew and changed, I became more afraid for my safety. I hardly slept at night, especially when there was a drinking party in the house. I learned to sleep with one eye open, and I would take safety measures, by putting a butter knife in the bedroom door. If it didn’t keep the molesters out, at least it gave me enough of a warning to wake up and get ready to escape somehow.
In town, we had a storage room at the top of the stairs. My brother fixed the door knob so that it could only be opened from the inside. He showed it to me one time, as if to say, “If you need to hide, you can run in here.” After, we dragged home an old spring bed from an abandoned building, and placed it in the storage room, I could sleep in there if I needed to. I still don’t know where he got the idea from or how he knew to fix the door knob like that. Maybe this was how he survived his childhood away from home.

On some occasions I would try to find help from the nurses or doctors. One time I told the doctor a lie, so that I could be sent down south to have my tonsils removed. It gave me a two week break from the madness in my home. That was how crazy I felt at home, with the constant drinking, and molesters who frequented our house during these drinking parties. My headaches were bad enough to be sent to see the public health nurse. This would usually result in being sent back to school with some medication. But one time, the public health nurse was Native. She spent the entire afternoon with me asking me about my life at home. She was the first person I told about the rape as she was the first person to ask me if I was ever abused. This began my road to healing, as I would then continue to search for the listeners. Those are the people who care about what happens to the youth and are able to listen to their tears and sobs. People just need to talk about what is happening to them. There are not enough listeners. There are far too many advice givers.

As an adult, I even joined a women’s community theatre group to find support and healing. This is the first time I could speak out publicly about the childhood sexual abuse I experienced. I
wrote this poem for my part in the play, and performed with them for two years. This was the most empowering experience, voicing my pain aloud to the crowd of people who were there to watch and listen.

**My Voice**

Once a whisper for help
That could not be heard
A cry in the dark
Silenced by fear

My voice was not mine
It had no name
Not strong enough
Not loud enough
Hidden in the cloak of shame

My voice seeped out one day
It cried, it screamed
It laughed, it played
My voice, I gave it my name

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Now the message is spreading
Carried for miles on the wind
Many voices sing out
Shattering the killing silence

My voice, it echoes the pain
Many survivors endured
My voice, it sings the triumph
Today, many voices procured\textsuperscript{118}

After coming out as a victim of rape and sexual abuse, I felt a freedom and a sense of pride in myself. I no longer carried a deep dark secret, I no longer felt ashamed, but really felt I was placing that shame back to where it belonged. This is an important step in freeing oneself from the cloak of shame.\textsuperscript{119}

In the heart of Nikis, I face this part of me, and embrace it fully. I acknowledge what happened to me as a child and come to the realization that it was not my fault. I see I was the victim of a legacy of rape, this legacy of rape is so artfully described by Edmund Metatawabin in his story of victimization at residential school.\textsuperscript{120} The heart of Nikis brings out the tragedy of childhood rape


and it also shows the possibility of healing and recovery. We have it within us and within our own families and communities to heal this part of our history, more importantly it shows we can heal ourselves.
Chapter 6 Leaving Nikis

Chapter 6, Leaving Nikis consists of Areas (10) Woodstove, (11) East Window, (12) Kitchen Cabinet, and (13) Porch. Before you leave my home, you may want to have a bowl of soup for your journey. Mother always has something frying, baking or boiling on the stove. Or you could take something from the kitchen cabinet to eat along the way. Check out the east window to make sure the train is still there at the Goodbye Station. As you exit the porch and go back out into the community say hello to everyone you meet down the Flats. There is no word for Goodbye in Cree; you have to say Kawapmatin (I will see you).

Area 10: Iskotewin (Woodstove)

_Sometimes mother melted snow in her washtub on the stove to make bathwater or laundry water. I don’t think we drank it. Woodstove, but we usually only had coal to stay warm._

_Soup.  Rabbit stew here.  Bannock baking here.  This was the oven side, or was it the other side?_ Along the wall: _Wood cost money, it was shipped up on the train or purchased at the lumber store._ In front of the stove there are three xs: _Frozen rabbits thawed out here. Fur pulled off rabbits here. Rabbit’s feet removed here._
Figure 22 Iskotewin (Wood Stove)

Because we lived on the tundra, just above the tree line, we did not always have firewood on hand, but I do not think my parents had money to buy wood. I think they would have travelled out by foot maybe down river to get their fire wood. My cousin says, that is what her dad did, or he would get a ride out towards the trees, Goose Creek, and they would bring wood back from there. The stove had two halves with the words Stove and Oven on either side. There are four circles representing the burners or the lids to open for more or less heat from the fire within. Two of them say Stew and Soup. Below that, it says Bannock baking here. This was the oven side or was it the other side? I wrote this because I could not remember for sure which side the oven was on, and which side the wood and coal went into. The upside down letters read: Woodstove: but we usually only had coal to stay warm. Behind the stove along the wall, it says Wood cost money. It was shipped up on the train or purchased at the lumber store. There were few trees in Churchill. We lived above the tree line. I am sure though that the lumber store
must have driven south a ways and cut trees for sale. I know we did not have a vehicle but perhaps my father travelled out to saw some trees himself. He did have a dog sled at one time, with a dog team. By the time I was around seven years old, they were put down due to starvation. I remember my oldest brother came to visit us then and did the sad job of putting them out of their misery.

Area 10 around the woodstove (Figure 22) is the story of dad bringing home rabbits, frozen from his snares on the river. There are three X’s just around the stove: X marks the spot where the frozen rabbits thawed out here; another X marks the spot where fur pulled off rabbits here; and the last X marks the spot where the rabbit’s feet removed here. This tells the story of my mother skinning the rabbits for our dinner that night. I was very young then and actually thought the rabbits would hop around once they thawed out. I remember I had fallen asleep and when I woke up, I went to check on the rabbits and at that very moment my mother was pulling their fur off their bodies, to my horror their skinned bodies placed in the big stewing pot. I did not want to eat them after that. Maybe that is why my dad started calling me Mistikoossee Skwessis which translates to “Little white girl.”

Area 11: Wapanook Bussbahboon (East Window)

This illustration (Figure 23) shows that I had cousins in my life to play outside or indoors with every day. Playing was a most essential activity in our lives and my parents seemed to tolerate us even if we were noisy and turned chairs upside down to make forts. I talk about the fact that my siblings may not have had the same tolerance from their school officials and certainly did not have their community and cousins on a daily basis at residential school.
There is one story of the east window I may have not shared, involving my brother who heard a vehicle idling outside and some muffled voices. He went to look out this window to see who it was, but because it was covered with plastic, he could not see out of it. By the time he got to the
door and opened it, the vehicle was speeding away. Somehow, he knew it was a photographer and his hunch was confirmed once he returned to school that fall. The principal showed him the Winnipeg Tribune front-page photograph of our house. I had known for a long time that the photo existed, but could not find it. I was searching the Winnipeg Free Press for the longest time. I saw the photograph on Facebook, and tracked it back to its source. Finally, I had the photograph of my little house from down the flats. I tracked down the article, which featured my house, and it had not mentioned our family, not even our community. It was an article about the lack of infrastructure in the town of Churchill. Not the Flats where all the Indians lived.

One reality that came to me during this memory mapping process was the fact that I had cousins to play with, as I mentioned when talking about the couch in Area 5. My cousins were great playmates; they would come get me each day to go play outside or go on adventures or walk to school with them. In my community, kids had a habit of peering into windows, especially the kids who were looking for other kids to play with. There was no hiding from them. If you did not open the door, they would find you all the while calling you out to play. “Brenda, come and play, we know you’re home!”

This is how I survived the Flats; I had my cousins, other girls to share the journey. Playing together, running through bushes, hiking up the rock shield, swimming in the river, chasing the tide out on the Bay shoreline were like breathing to me. We were unstoppable, always on an adventure to find a place to build our imaginary houses, and to re-enact our lives in the ways children do. We played to escape our lives, we played to engage our minds more fully and we played to test our wings and our voices. We played to imagine a better place for ourselves and
for all of humankind. We played, saying with our hearts and minds, “this is how to love; this is how to be a human being!”

**Area 12: Kitchen Cabinet**

Cabinet where food was kept when we had food. Mostly my dad brought home rabbits, ptarmigan, ducks and geese. We ate fish all summer from our fish net which was set in the Churchill River. We had no refrigerator so it didn’t matter how long you held the door open. flour, potatoes, sugar, jello. rice, oats, cans of sardines, soup, beans, and sometimes cookies, no not cookies.
The jello makes me think of when my mother set the bowl of jello on the coal bin outside the window. She had the window open and then placed the bowl outside to gel. This was the year my two brothers were home with us and went to school with me in town. I cannot remember why my brothers were home that year, but I was happy to have them in my life that winter. Once again, the older one came to my rescue. I was being bullied by a girl in Grade Two, so I was about 7 or 8 years old, and could not stand up to her. One day, at breakfast, I sat at our table with mom, dad, my two brothers. My father had given me a handful of change to spend on candy. Immediately my face grew unhappy at the thought of this girl taking my money from me, as she had been in the habit of taking my lunches as well. Once my brother saw my sad face, he asked me what was wrong, until I told him about the girl at school. I told him that she would be taking my money away. He said he would intervene if she did, but not in these words. I felt like my cousin must feel, with three older sisters to stand up for her. With a renewed sense of confidence, I walked into my classroom, my pockets clinking with loose change. Sure enough, the girl approached me and demanded I give it over to her. The word that came out of my mouth next surprised us both! “No!” Her face revealed shock and sadness. I felt bad for her, but I also felt relieved at her defeat. She never bullied me again after that.

Hudson Bay Store

Sometimes our food came from behind the Hudson Bay store. On train days the Bay store would throw out stale bread, pastries, over ripened fruit (bananas were my favorite), dented cans of wax beans, and other items like broken toys, clothes, shoes, boots; the list was endless. Every poor person was out there waiting for that back door to open at 9am. The crowd of women and their
children would freeze into position, ready to see what they could grab out of the boxes of food. My most memorable find was a pair of winter boots, one size bigger than the other was. I loved those brown leather boots, which zipped up to my knees. I wore them proudly until one of the heels came off after kicking at the icy snowdrifts too many times. One time I tried to grab some toys, but my mom told me to put them down and grab the bag of grapes instead. Mom and I would carry our winnings back down to the flats where they would be shared with siblings and cousins who were often joined at the hip with one of my brothers or sisters. One day we found the food caged and locked up. There must have been too many people not shopping at the bay but out back waiting for the free stuff. What had once been a gathering place for moms and kids was now inaccessible, by a locked cage. That was a sad sight to see.

Uncle worked as a janitor at the Hudson Bay store. He would come across some nice things to bring home making his house very visually appealing for children like me. I would sit in this little one room house and stare at this one painting on his wall. It was a painting of a cityscape in the olden days, a Christmas scene to be exact. There was a horse and buggy parked outside a shop. What I remember most about this painting is the little girl who is walking hand in hand with her parents as they go into a shop. I would stare at this painting and wish I could be her. Christmas was a hard time for a child in the Flats, with not too much money for presents. My present would come in the mail from one of my older brothers and his wife, which was always a joy to receive. In my house, Christmas meant a box of apples and some satin pillow candies. At the Bay store, Santa would wait in this chair for the children to sit on his lap. I was always too scared or too shy for that, so my mother would smile at him and take the bag of candy for me.
The town would sometimes organize a gift-giving event for the poor people. I was embarrassed to be a poor kid, so I would never accept their gifts. I remember trying to hide myself at one of these events in the Community Centre. They were on the stage handing out wrapped presents to the children who were there to see Santa and get a gift. They had reached, on their list, the nine year olds and at that time: I was nine. Santa was holding the gift up in the air asking the crowd if there was a nine-year-old girl in the crowd. I was hiding, as I did not want to have to be on a stage accepting a present from Santa. I felt ashamed of myself by then. Then one of the older girls saw me and pointed me out, yelling to the crowd, “she is nine years old.” Brenda go up there and get your present! I refused to take part, so they passed the gift on to me as I stood in the crowd. It was a plush toy, a dog. As children, we became resourceful and without toys we played with nature. Nature also provided for us.

Other ways to find food, was to roam along the shores of the river and the bay. We would look for wild berries, and once found a small patch of wild strawberries behind the harbor. The most delicious and rarest were the cloudberries. They were glowing orange berries that grew along the pipeline; my mother called them oostikonima, heads. They taste like orange and milk, very delicious! My mother was my navigator, she showed me the land and all that grew on it, her words were my introduction to Turtle Island. I relied on her for everything, and for most of the time she made life a wonderful experience. The colors of berries and beads are how I remember her to this day.
Area 13: Porch

This was a porch where the fish net was kept along with saw, axe, washtub, trunk, and a slop pail. If you did need to go you would have to run out to the outhouse to pee.

Context: the porch was a vestibule between our main living quarters and the outside world. It was not insulated, therefore, it was very cold in the winter times, with frost finding its way in through the cracks between the two by fours. It had no windows, and no lamp, so it was quite dark, with only the lamplight filtering in from inside doorway or the light of day coming in from the outside doorway. The porch was also a storage space where the fishnet hung from nails along the south wall and the axe, saw, and washtub also hung from a nail. There was a blue trunk, with a padlock on it, to keep the most treasured items safe. Some of these items were photographs, a football, and a bible.

There was a wedding picture of my older brother and his lovely bride. I would look at this photo at times and dream of finding them, somewhere down those miles and miles of railway tracks. The football belonged to my late brother Horace. The bible was his also, with his name written on the line that said: This Bible belongs to—and then a line where he had spelled his name. He died of leukemia as a youth in a Winnipeg hospital when I was only a toddler. I do remember seeing his feet resting on pillows, as my mother and father stood by his bed. I didn’t know at the time he was dying or that I would not see him again. I don’t think I really understood that he was my brother. I guess that was the time he died, and we had travelled to Winnipeg to see him. I think this was also the same trip where we stopped at Dauphin and visited my siblings’ school. I only remember a stairwell, and being happy to see them. I have no memory of a funeral for Horace but apparently he was buried in Churchill.
The fishing net is what I remember the most and it holds the most wonderful memories for me. The fishnet meant families and community. There were several families who also set their nets in the river. Ours was just across the river road from my Aunt’s place. I don’t think she or my other Aunt had a net in the river. We likely shared our catch with both of their families. Setting and repairing the net and fetching the fish was a family activity, kids went along and helped with taking the fish off the net. It never felt like work to me, it was more like fun and adventure. The best surprises were the fish my mother would throw away, the big headed fish, called sculpin fish. We would capture them and play with them in a tub of our own. Eventually we would let them go back into the river.

My parents would be up sometimes before sunrise with the lowest tides, and again in the evenings to fetch their fish. My mother would drag her wash tub down there and talk about how many fish she could see as we neared the river. My favorite part was the togetherness of all the other families and other children, all by the river, checking their nets. Their Cree voices, mothers and fathers, could be heard and the laughter of children as they played on the muddy river bed. Their voices seemed to bounce off the calm water and echo up to the sky and back down again. I think I learned to count in Cree from my mother counting her fish. “Bayuk, neesoo, nistoo, nayoo, nee yanin.” She would sometimes clean and fillet the fish down there on the low tide floor of mud. Flies and mosquitoes did not deter her from her work. She would share her catch with her two sisters’ families if we caught a lot of fish. Fried fish from the river was my favorite food in the summers. My mother would bread them, and fry them in her cast iron frying pan on our wood stove. On hotter days, they would have a fish fry across a barrel outside the house. My siblings and I and a few of our cousins, would sit outside on logs or stumps to eat our plates of fish.
My cousins and I would use the axe and saw, to make kindling or saw the longer logs down. My
dad would pay us with whatever change he had in his pocket, sometimes a whole dollar bill or
just a bit of change. Even a dime back then was enough to buy a handful of candy in town.

Back in the sixties, a dollar could get you a bag of chips, a candy bar and a soda drink, with a
few cents left over for some bubble gum. The porch really brings out my sense of belonging to a
larger community. I felt happiest at those times, when my parents were sober and involved with
other families in a good way. Berry picking was another favorite activity, when we would go as
a family, along with other families. My mother would bring herself a jar of tea and let me drink
it if I got thirsty. Hearing their Cree voices and laughter gave me a sense of wellbeing and
belonging. The women’s voices especially were most nurturing to my ears.

Community or the role of community emerges from this part of the Nikis map, more so than all
the other areas. I suppose it is most fitting, as the porch is where one exits to go out and join
community events and activities. When our house burned down the first time, I remember we
had to stay with relatives for a few weeks, while my father gathered enough money together to
buy the lumber and materials to rebuild our house. I remember the smell of burned wood, it was
on whatever clothing we could salvage from the fire.

It was wonderful to see everyone come to help him—other fathers in our community—to rebuild
the house. They all placed a hand somewhere in the raising of the walls and the placing of
windows and doors. I wish I could have been there to watch that, but this is how I imagine it
would have happened. It would have been good to hear all their Cree voices, and their laughter.
Community: Understanding the role of community in my history

The porch area leads out to the world, a Cree world, a White world. The two communities existed on either side of the railway tracks. These lines were drawn and made it clear where I belonged. I never had a white school friend and I never went into the home of a white family until I was older, fourteen or so. I always knew where I belonged and whom I belonged with, the Indians of the Flats. We were known as squatters to the townspeople, we were not owners of anything we were more like borrowing a space to live on, borrowing the right to be housed at all, borrowing the food we stole from behind the Bay store, while they looked down their noses at us. But, I would not have wanted to be anyone else. I loved my parents and cherished my mother so much, and I would always love being Cree.

I was provided a home and a community throughout my childhood. Albeit there were many issues and problems, poverty being the biggest culprit, but I do believe I couldn’t have fared better without my parents in my life. Belonging and having a sense of home are essential foundations for life. My idea of home is always going to be the Flats, and the little house I grew up in. Ekoteh nikihk! That’s my home, up there in northern Manitoba. E-ki-wikiyan ekoteh ispíh awasisiyan: That was my childhood home.

Today, we are at a crisis with a growing number of Indigenous young people committing or attempting to commit suicide. They are the forgotten children who cannot see they are valued or feel they are loved. We must bring the focus back to them, we must place them back into the center of our communities, and invest all resources available to us to help them see that they are the heart of our communities. Our children are our purpose in life and we must not lose sight of that. We are where we are for a number of reasons, which have been explained with immensity,
but we now need to focus on the solutions. We do have these resources; we have an army of helpers hired to protect children and work with families so that they can be reconnected to their children. We have our traditional knowledge keepers and many educators who can bring their energy and caring to these young people. There are many native children in care of Child and Family Service Agencies across Canada. It is essential that these services work with the communities they serve if they are to see real First Nations control of child welfare as it may have existed long ago. It is possible to replace this western system of child welfare with a more traditional Indigenous style of child centered programming. One community, Nelson House, has been doing just that for the last ten years. They turned the tables back to how it would have been done long ago if faced with parents who are addicted and unavailable to be parents. There, the parents are removed from the home until they go through a treatment and cultural reclamation process, while the children get to stay in their home. This has proven to be more effective for the family as a whole. Now, they have graduates of the program, recovered parents who are teaching newer parents the steps through the program and providing support to them once they return home again to their children.

A community must be viewed as an equal partner in the work of child protection or as a victim as Walmsley (2004) points out, “Child protection practitioners view First Nations communities as victim, adversary, participant, partner, and protector of children. These

representations of communities are derived from interview data with 19 First Nations and non-First Nations child protection social workers in British Columbia, Canada” (p. 63).

Some communities are more intact and are continuing on with their cultural ways. It is this very knowledge of Traditional Parenting that I believe is the key to returning parents to their rightful place as nurturers to their children. Walmsley’s (2004) study captures the words of one First Nations participant who explains how communities can be viewed as protector with community support and with the help of the extended family,

“Long ago our community was always community oriented. We were always, you know, I guess a community. Our connections are there. We know everyone, we’re related. We help out...We always knew how to look after our children, our extended family would come in, the grandparents would come in. It always happened, I mean the community got together and said, ‘Hey, we have a problem here. Our aunt over here needs a break from her children. Can someone in the family take over?’ That happened. We didn’t need a child welfare act and all that stuff...”122 (p. 69).

The last and thirteenth area of the Nikis map, the Porch area, shows my connections to community and my identity which I gained from living down the flats. As I have gone around the entire map and told the stories of Nikis, it is now time to leave this place. It will always be with me in my heart and I will be this house metaphorically for all my life. All that has happened to me here so long ago makes me who I am today. Because of the traumas I have

suffered, I went looking for help in many different places. However far I have travelled away from here, I have always spoken from this place; my experiences from the Flats have shaped my life profoundly. This is what I have learned and come to understand most deeply is who I am as an Innu Iskwew by going through this memory mapping process. I am a survivor who brings her wisdom to everywhere she goes. I am a storyteller who speaks her truth from this place. I teach from this place.

My memories of the Flats live on to inhabit the landscape of my mind. A part of me still lives back there in a small Native village on the tundra, just beside the Churchill River. The houses are one story homes, small, weather worn and faded in color. There are no trees, making the houses the tallest structures on the grassy landscape. Beside some of the houses, you might see a line of clothes hanging to dry as they sway and flap in the breeze. Behind each house, you will notice an outhouse as there is no indoor plumbing down the flats. Some of the houses had a scattering of doghouses, each one accompanied by a husky dog. Our dogs were mutts, with little resemblance at all to the husky breed. The people living this far north used the husky dogs to pull their sleds in the winter. My father would hitch up one of our bigger dogs to pull me around when I was still a baby. I remember him being a very devoted and affectionate father. In the summers however, dogs rested in the summers, they sat or laid beside their houses, chained up and left to bark at passersby or polar bears. At this point, I can hear the mosquitoes in my ears and smell the mud from the river and if I keep imagining, the next smells to reach my mind are the fish frying and the wood smoke from my mother’s outdoor stove.

Figure 25 shows my parents Harold and Maria Wastasecoot. I placed their photos on the flags here and surrounded them with my drum, my eagle feather and the grandfather rock and the
concrete piece of history. When the time is right, I will hang these flags in four directions to honor their memory and to let them know that I am okay. Though they have never done anything wrong to me, I forgive them their incapacity, and love them with my whole heart. I look forward to joining them in the spirit world one day.

Figure 25 Harold and Maria Wastasecoot

123 I took this photo of the only two photos I own of my parents as part of my Asking the Ancestors ceremony.
Chapter 7 Kipaha Iskodem (Close the Door)

As I close the doors of my childhood home from long ago, I leave with a good heart and a hopeful outlook toward the future. I share these stories with others so that they may be aware of the challenges which face our communities today. Arts based research and autoethnography have given me a way to tell this story with authenticity. Thankfully, by using these methods, I could come from the heart and find my own truth by way of arts based autoethnography. This amazing journey began one day in an Arts Informed Research course at OISE, for Dr. Ardra Cole’s “show and tell” assignment. The fact that it was only to be a work in progress the pressure was off. To me this meant it would not have to be perfect nor complete, it could simply be an idea. I began searching for ideas of how I can use art to tell a story. It was exciting because I felt at ease and I could just play and be creative.

Finally, I had found a way to tell the story of Nikis, which is more than just a little house, but is the home of a Cree family. It has allowed me to show the many struggles and strengths in the everyday life of my family from my perspective as the youngest sibling. Ultimately, this research has allowed me to add my voice to the legacy of the residential school era and to bring many audiences along with me as I took them back to that place and showed them what happened there. People from around the world generously shared their stories with me, for which I am so thankful. Many tears fell and this to me meant they could connect and relate to the story instantly by seeing the map and the drawings and hearing me explain and interpret the meaning behind them.

Here I want to sum up all that I have found throughout this research journey. Starting with the first group which was the class itself, back in 2009, where their response was very welcoming
and supportive. Secondly, I took this memory mapping exercise to the students in the Community Health Worker training program at Anishnawbe Health Toronto. Next, was the American Indian workshop at Uni Gratz in Gratz, Austria, there they were taking photographs of my artwork. There were a scattering of public presentations, and conferences, including the four teacher candidate classes at OISE. It was important to explain to teachers who they may encounter in their classrooms. I wanted them to know the history of Indigenous people and felt happy to speak to them about myself as an example. From all the presentations, I was able to learn more about who I was at the same time by their questions and comments and how they interacted with this new information.

The most memorable interactions with the audience was in the “Speech Acts & Joyous Utterances” Language Conference here at the University of Toronto. One woman from China, a newcomer to Canada, mapped out her childhood home. She spoke through tears when she presented it to the large group as she said about her parents, “I never knew how much they loved me, and how much my parents have come through so that I could be here today.” Her experience of using the memory map stays with me as it gives me reason to carry it forward into more storytelling workshops such as the one I did there. Her words really sum up how I feel about my own parents. They really did love me and they loved their children. They did try their best to provide a home for me and to keep me safe. They faced wave after wave of insurmountable displacement as parents. Even through these assaults, they continued to love us and keep us close to their hearts. This took its toll on their health and wellbeing.

It is important to close the door to the trauma and sadness so that it will not spill out into the present day. It is equally important to go back, revisit the times of turmoil, and try to bring a
clear understanding of what happened to us as children. Not only has it been deeply healing for me, but it also prepares me for the future. Most important is our next steps forward and how this new understanding can provide direction to the teachers of Indigenous children and non-Indigenous children who will continue building a new nation together. Traditional ways of life were about our relationships, the Kaswentha\textsuperscript{124} (Two Row Wampum) was meant to stand for our co-existence on Turtle Island. We must rekindle this fire and walk as equal nations together.

The Nikis memory map shows my life as a Cree girl during the 1960’s at the edge of the northern frontier town of Churchill, Manitoba. The thirteen areas on the map give the reader an inside look into my family’s everyday life while my siblings were away at Residential School and more poignantly, when they were home during the summer months. The ethnography is the Cree life of the Flats and how we lived back then in the sixties along the Churchill River. Our interactions as a Cree family are most evident in the piece about “Closeness and Togetherness” in Area 6. My parents had always loved their children, and waited all winter for them to come home every year. Though the summers could turn violent at times, it was also a time of reconnecting and finding mothers’ embrace and fathers’ Cree stories.

Conveyance

Seeing the Flats through my eyes

Hearing the pain through my words

Feeling all the emotions from my storytelling

I convey to you

The experience of a child left behind so many years ago
Lost in the many legs of moms and dads first walking then running
As the train pulls away
To wave one last wave to the faces pushed against windows
Leaving steadily
Drifting further and further away
Tears run down my face
I come to know the times for goodbye
And the times for greeting them again

As I walk along the path of life, I see there are many people walking with me. There are many people walking ahead and many more walking behind me. I take my place somewhere near the middle, my role being that of caregiver, mother, grandmother, teacher, and storyteller. The people who are walking ahead of me on the path are the leaders; they plan the direction and action we will take as a community. The ones walking behind me on this sacred path of life are the ones who will cover our tracks and commit to memory all the places we have been and all the events that happened in those places.

Though I am in the middle right now, I have moved and could move to the front or back as our roles as women are fluid and multiple. As a single parent for most of my daughter’s life, I have had to be everything. The one who leads the way and the one who tells her the stories of our history as well as her caregiver.
Teaching adults places me in a leadership role as I try to choose the best directions to take in building an understanding of Indigenous knowledge. For the most part, I have relied on my own narrative to map out our direction to take through this heavily mired and at times confusing and contradicting landscape. I hope that I can impart this new knowledge about my life in a way that informs and inspires their creativity.

Railroaded

The drawing of the “Goodbye Station” (Figure 19) in Area 8 is the most striking of all the drawings emerging from this study. It says so much about the deep sense of abandonment and loss felt by one child, but so many of us have yet to tell this story of losing one’s sibling to this system of nation building. The drawing also tells a collective story of how the railroad cut through our lands, cut through our lives, and brought with it an era of fracturing and disconnection for many Indigenous communities. Canada railroaded Indigenous people who were forced into this new ‘civilization’ at the cost of so many lives.

I come back to this drawing in my final analysis as it portrays the fracturing of family so well. If you look at it, you can see how the railway tracks, which stand out on the page, appear most threatening and most deeply imbedded, as if to affect their permanence upon the land. The child sitting in the corner appears faint in comparison to the firmly established railway tracks. She is almost invisible and without a voice, she carries the hurt felt by so many other siblings left behind.

This child is sad to see her siblings leave for school, which is why the train station is depicted
here as the ‘Goodbye’ station. The train itself is depicted as ‘leaving the station.’ We see the back of the train as it is leaving. It’s the train that leaves and takes siblings away which is also highlighted. The train is carrying away, not only her siblings, but also indicates the previous removal of entire families and generations of relatives. This drawing represents the family fracturing and disconnecting, which had devastating effects in our family.

Bonita Lawrence\textsuperscript{125} talks about the voice of Native people denied a voice in political discourse. I offer the Nikis memory map as that voice from the siblings left behind to witness the unraveling and heartache of parents. Let this map be a start to the documentation of families fractured by Canada’s residential school policy. Though my little house no longer exists as I had explained in chapter one it was bulldozed to the ground in 1973 and only exists in my memory, it is also a collective memory. We must all speak out, those of us who are the invisible survivors of this racist policy.

**Implications & Recommendations**

As I look back on how I have used these arts based methods to complete this autoethnography, I can see it being useful in other ways. One, it is a storytelling tool for sure; secondly it can provide alternative education to more diverse learners, including those who do not feel like they are writers, and are more resistant to writing about themselves. Thirdly, this has been my way of reconciling my own experiences of colonization and the residential school era. In this last sense, it has been very healing for me, and could potentially be used as a self-healing or self-awareness

process by others. It does not have to be something you would share with the world. You could use the process only to find yourself and your truth.

This process could serve as simply a storytelling art form where stories can be uncovered by mapping out one’s childhood home. These stories could be used to educate others about the “way it was,” the history of the residential school era and its impacts upon Indigenous ways of life. Personal healing work or self-healing can also be developed by way of workshops where the sharing of memory maps and stories can provide a healing tool. Giving voice to my experiences has been very a freeing exercise which has also led to emotional release and a deeper understanding of the complexities I would have faced as a child. Memory mapping can also be utilized to address community issues, by allowing community members to work together and develop their own solutions most suited to their needs and goals. When I did the memory mapping workshop with groups of Indigenous adults they would be very surprised to see that their experiences were very similar. It allowed them to trust one another with their life stories. This is a highly emotional process, when working with Indigenous groups on these issues, it is recommended that the facilitators be trained counsellors or therapists with extra listeners on hand to add support to the participants.

Fourth, education, whereby educators could use their memory map, first, to provide theory and second, to bring a process to their teaching style. In all the presentations I have given over these last seven years, showing and telling the Nikis map, I did it to educate others on the issues faced by Indigenous peoples here in Canada. As an educator I felt comfortable telling these stories, which were very personal stories, because this is my teaching style. I have always used my life
as curriculum or pedagogy. This may not be the style for other educators, and only recommended for those who already have a similar style of teaching through story.\textsuperscript{126}

**Storytelling**

As a storyteller, I immediately recognized the powerful transformative element in the memory map, how it could invite and engage others in a conversation about these heavier issues. The mapping exercise can enrich the story you want to tell. In my case, my story is about my relationship with my family as a whole. As an educator of adults in postsecondary educations, I often use my lived experience to inform students about historic and contemporary issues facing Indigenous communities. I use my Nikis memory map to show the students what happened to me and Indigenous storytelling is a powerful teaching tool, whereby one’s life story becomes the new knowledge. It also allows others to come in the door to be open about their own lives, whether they are Indigenous or not, and so the sharing of stories creates a space for being human beings together. I have used my memory map of Nikis to tell the stories of my childhood to diverse audiences and have received strongly favorable responses to my use of narrative.

One must share their experiences, their wisdom, and their emotional intelligences in order to convey most effectively to others. In this study, storytelling becomes an empowering process when you show your map to your audience and point out all the places where you were injured.

or hid from danger, or felt loved. You can take them on a “tour” explaining all that is displayed there.

**Storytelling as Self-Healing Work**

My experience of creating a memory map of my childhood home is central to the thesis and provides a pathway for others who may want to try this process for themselves, be they survivors or siblings of survivors of the Residential School experience. McCormick states that First Nations people are seen to act as agents of their own healing. They have been doing this before contact with Europeans. They know what they need or do not need, and they know what trauma they need to heal from. This personal journey of healing is respected and this respect is reciprocal within the circle of healing. Inner harmony and balance will return to the individual if they are encouraged to let go of their pain, confusion, embarrassment, shame or anger.127

The term reflexive-self accounting is about being able to explain to readers what is happening not only on the surface, but internally as well, with the tracking of emotions and thoughts throughout the journey of memory mapping one’s childhood home.

For me this began with the use of journals as I travelled back to Manitoba in 2011. I recorded my observations, conversations with my sisters and brothers and relatives, then reflected on my internal thoughts and emotions throughout. The actual use of the memory map stems from the fact that it is my house and home where my points of reference still reside if only in my mind.

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and heart. I always go back to that part of the world that part of the land, the place where I began and my education began. This connection and relationship to the land, my land, is essential to understanding who I am. N. Scott Momaday wrote about Ko-Sahn and her “racial memory” equating it to her individual memory.

Her roots ran deep into the earth, and from those depths she drew strength enough to hold still against the forces of chance and disorder. And she drew strength enough to hold still against the forces of change and disorder. And she drew therefrom the sustenance of meaning and of mystery as well (Momaday, 1975).

After reading the article “Provoked by Art” (Cole, 2004) I feel I am provoked to speak my truth, however ugly, sad, and horrific it was. That is I am drawn in to the rich flow of visualization, her simple recording of what she witnessed there, and her report back to us, the readers. I felt I was taken on a journey, and saw precisely what she would have seen, but even more than that, given access to her reactions to what she saw, enriched the experience; it told me so much about her, the researcher. I feel this kind of witnessing resonates deeply within my sense of what is true and what is real. It opens a door into many possibilities for me, a Cree woman, to tell what I saw and lived through in my autoethnography. I want to do this, I tell myself. I can do this, I believe for once. I am doing this, I say with confidence. This flicker of a flame is ignited after reading Cole’s article. In fact, as I read this article I imagined my house, as I often go back there in my mind, but the idea of its contents being put on display for everyone to see was something I would never have considered. Sbrocchi’s (2008) article “Sketchy Lines” talks about her memory map accompanied by pictures showing the change and generation of the neighborhood where she
was a child. Except in my case there are no photographs, all I have is my memory and my connection to a place, a location, and a little house which once stood there.

**My Self-Healing**

Self-healing is a huge area to consider as a potential use for the memory mapping method. I can only speak for myself, about how I used the memory map of Nikis and what that did for me.

Before doing this mapping exercise, I had already worked on my early childhood trauma for close to twenty years, in a large circle of support, from co-counselling to receiving one way counselling and therapy. I had become fairly grounded and stable in my personal life, having left an abusive relationship of nine years and finding a new, healthy and stable relationship now of ten years. I would also say I had made peace with my past. I have learned to find healing in many places, and in a variety of ways, such as keeping a journal, writing poems, reciting these poems, and more recently drawing and painting. My self-healing is ongoing, and continues throughout my life. Part of self-healing is to help others; to become available to others, as a listener and supporter is key to my wellbeing in the world.

There is a lot to say about the possibility of memory mapping as a healing tool, but I cannot predict for anyone or even suggest to anyone, if this will be healing for him or her. This is what self-healing is; you become the expert on yourself. What you know about yourself, will help you decide whether or not this will be beneficial to your or not. If you decide to try this memory mapping exercise for the purposes of self-healing or self-awareness, I recommend that you first try it in a counselling setting, or with a network of support, even if you have already begun your healing journey and you feel grounded in your present reality. There were some surprising turns in my use of the memory mapping; I cried a lot, it was very emotionally draining for me, even
though I have done a lot of crying already for years prior to this exercise. I cried for my siblings’ experience and for my parents’ suffering. I was revisiting my childhood and this made me re-experience the old feelings of loneliness for my siblings. At times, I felt like I was a little girl again, and I had to find ways to bring myself back into the present, almost daily. This is the hardest part of going back; it felt just as painful as if it were happening back then. That is why it is very important to have people around you to listen to you cry sometimes, and to remind you that you are okay.

I can say self-healing starts with a decision to love and accept yourself completely without judgement. Self-healing is about loving yourself and freeing yourself from the past, from those early hurts and traumas. If you are a counsellor and want to try to use this process with your clients or participants in a workshop setting, I recommend you try it on yourself first and then try it with others, coworkers and colleagues, before taking others on this journey.

Finally, I have to say that it is only a study of a potentially healing process for individual self-healing. To suggest it as a community healing process would mean having to test it in a community healing practice or program, which provides such services. This may be another direction I will take; maybe someone will want to do this kind of work with me.

The wounds go deep and I am not even sure how much healing the actual survivors of the residential schools need. For my family all I know is what happened in my home, as I said before, I did not go to the residential school. The love that my mother was able to give me, did not reach all of my siblings due to this system of removal. I was writing about how my family suffered, fractured by the Residential School policy. How my mother was able to survive the repetition of her children being taken to the white man’s school and being returned each summer
for her to love up, I don’t know. I was the only child she had to raise in her own home, her youngest child. All her other relationships with her children were dictated by the government’s policy on Indian children. I have looked at a very complex time in our lives as a family impacted by the Residential School policy of assimilation. Broadly defined, it really is about the removal of children from their families, and the destruction of these familial bonds.

Minowechewitowin (Closeness Togetherness)

In teaching about the Indigenous worldviews, I painted this image titled “Two Rows, Two Paradigms” in Figure 26. It provides a comparison of worldviews, Western and Indigenous, for students to reflect on as we discuss the western mental health system and its policies. It helps to focus our attention on this very difficult paradox of the helping profession. We discuss the barriers it poses when attempting to help Indigenous people. There are a few issues to get clear around the concept of trust and working together. We have a long history of colonization to
unpack and make meaning of as teachers and learners. I quote from John Ralston Saul’s *Reconciliation: Four Barriers to Paradigm Shifting*\(^{128}\) “The third barrier brings us back to language. Reconciliation is neither romantic nor easy. It can only happen if people share a language that they feel to be true. What I mean by language is a way to evoke and share an understanding. This is where the greatest difficulty lies.”

Lateral violence within Indigenous communities created many a rift at the community level. We have hurt each other, we have hurt our children, and our children have hurt each other. So how do we regain a sense of community, how do we rebuild a level of trust so that we can work together? The Iroquois Peacemaker,\(^{129}\) Dekanawidah, went from community to community, asking people to put down their arms and to make a pact of nonviolence.

In one of my conversations with Dorothy Peters, Program Coordinator at Anishnawbe Health Toronto, she spoke about the memory mapping activity I did with the students there as a process of decolonizing. She said,

> When people take the time to do the memory map, the process itself, gives the participants time to reflect about where they’ve been, where they are and where they are going. It gives them a clearer vision of the impact of colonization, how the assimilation policies that affected generations of our families and the Anishnawbe people. If they have some understanding of Canada’s history and its

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treatment of Anishnawbe people, they have an understanding of what it will take to begin their personal healing journey. They might need to do more than one as they reflect on their experiences; the more open they are to their emotions and their material; the better they are to deal with the traumas they survived. This insight can lead to seeking resources and supports to assist them on their healing journey. It assists them with a better understanding and gives them a different perspective of why they and other family members are the way they are. It is like shining a flashlight around the room, you shine on one spot and then another; eventually you know what is in the room.”

I was thinking about a few things here, around community organizing and rebuilding or establishing alliances, peace building. After reading from Lawrence’s “Rewriting Histories…” I could see how creating my own memory map is a way of voicing my experience, my place in the history of colonization here on this continent. I have always felt voiceless and I am sure I am not the only First Nations woman who feels voiceless in Canada.

As I was drawing the walls, windows, doors and furniture I am locating myself and showing the world who I am, and by inserting the words into each piece of furniture I am telling my story of my experiences as a Cree woman who has indirectly survived the Residential school era of the sixties. When I show my map to other people as in the presentations I have given for conferences, including the one at Uni-Gratz two years ago, people are incredibly receptive. They

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are moved by what they see and the story I tell them. I could see the usefulness of showing this map and its story in terms of educating the public as to the plight of First Nations people. It brings a truth to the Nation to Nation relationship we are in together.

**Two Rows, Two Paradigms**

The image above (Figure 26) shows a stark contrast of paradigms. I have used this illustration in my teaching to talk about the differences between Indigenous and western ways of viewing the world in terms of their treatment approaches for mental health.

In the foreground, is a circular structure, based on a circular worldview, representative of Indigenous paradigms. It is Indigenous to Turtle Island, or North America as it now known. This traditional Indigenous purification lodge, more commonly known as a Sweatlodge\(^{131}\), has provided the original humans of this land a place for spirit travel and more recently, a place for healing and reclamation of cultural identity. In the operations of this structure, power is lateral, shared among the people who are equals, and so it is a “power with” paradigm. The people inside the lodge could be from the same community, family, or workplace. The people are also sitting closely together, which does not mean to say they have no boundaries or no personal space; it just means they are in very close proximity to one another. The small structure brings them close together, all are equally on the same level, on the ground, and all are sharing the same space. Even the conductor of the lodge, the one who is leading and facilitating a ceremony for the participants, does not have power over them.

If you look at this image long enough, the looming structure in the background, which is intended to be a mental health centre. It could easily be a hospital, a prison, or a school. It could be any of the four institutions, based and founded upon a western worldview or paradigm of hierarchical power. In the mental health system, the people with the most amount of power are the psychiatrists and psychiatric nurses, and orderlies: anyone with the keys. In contrast, the patients have the least amount of power. In the prison system, the warden and the guards have the power. They are given orders by the Justice system, Judges mainly, and the law. The prisoner has no power in this western system of “justice.” In the education system, the schools work in very much the same order, where power rests in the hands of the teachers and principals and the pupil is powerless.

The structure in the background could also be a residential school, being a European invention, with the exact same order of power moving vertically from priests, nuns, and children. From an Indigenous point of view, a Cree eye, this is what I can see. The large square industrial complex can be any of these three systems of western archetypes.

**Creating Safety in the Classroom**

At the beginning of each course I teach, I talk to the students about safety and creating a safe space. I start off the term with my life story in a short talk to give them an idea of what my classes might be like and I think it’s only fair to tell them about my teaching style. Most of the students will stay in my class after this talk. This is a good way to let them know what to expect from me as their professor and it also allows me to get a sense of where they are in terms of safety and awareness of issues facing Indigenous communities. The last thing I want to do is put any of them at risk, though I do explain the risks of “speaking from the heart.” We talk about the
university as an academic institute where emotional sharing is not really seen as being ‘academic.’ The main course is the theory and the terminology used to explain the theory is the real knowledge to be taught in the course, the emotional experience is thought to be more of a side plate.

There is plenty written about the educational use of art, artifacts, including memory mapping as arts based research. I have reflected on how memory maps can educate or inform the rest of Canada about First Nations experience and in particular our experience of the residential school policy. The importance of telling this story is that it informs all of those people who will be teaching children of all ages, of all colors and economic backgrounds. They will need to be the most informed in order to educate the generations to come. They have a responsibility to provide the most accurate information to all ages who come before them. By telling this story, I have added another piece of history to the stories told by survivors of residential school. This true history of Canada can no longer be hidden from their eyes and ears if their hearts and minds are to take a new path in building a better Canada, one that is inclusive and respectful of all its citizens.

Last Words

I feel like memory mapping was a way to connect to people especially the more I went to present the idea of memory mapping with adult learners. When I did the memory mapping workshops

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with groups in the First Nations community I learned more about how to apply it and make it relevant to issues faced by First Nations people. This was most exciting; to find a tool which others could use for their own self-healing processes.

From the memory mapping itself or from my own map, I did learn a few key things. I cried a lot. I cried for the child who lost her siblings, and left alone to cope with two heartbroken adults who would only be consoled by alcohol. I cried for the little girl raped on her parents’ bed and left to fight off or hide from her perpetrators. It was in the “showing” of the map that gave me healing. It was in the showing and telling my story of survival to so many different audiences that enriched me the most. I feel a sense of freedom that I did not have before and a feeling of pride in what I have come through and survived. I was a child who survived rape, witnessed rape, but I survived it all. I want to do more with these maps. I want to continue to take this process of memory mapping and offer it as a self-healing and storytelling (writing) process to other people who have faced the same difficulties in their lives and work with them on an individual basis or as groups.

This arts based autoethnography illuminates what it was like to be a Cree girl in the Flats during the sixties. Through its windows, shattered or whole, an outsider can peer in and see who we were as a Cree family. A mother and a father of seventeen children; six they lost to infant diseases, another who died of leukemia, and nine taken away to residential schools. Those peering in are seeing through my childhood eyes and hearing it from my adult self. I have offered four ways to use the memory map exercise: Storytelling, personal healing work, as alternative mental health practice and as a decolonizing education process.
Arts based research holds much promise for capacity building; it allows us to embrace diversity of cultures and knowledges. Using arts based methods to deliver this autoethnography has allowed me to connect to many different communities, people of all colors, languages, and worldviews. The reason I used arts based methods, was to tell a story and to reach a wider audience. As an educator, I see the value of its accessibility and flexibility. Not everyone could speak my language but could see from the drawings what the story held; they could connect to the story without having to read about it. Arts based research is flexible in that it is applicable in many settings, whether with teacher candidates who are looking for ways to teach social studies and history or Indigenous students who are at the beginning stages of finding their identity.
Copyright Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Winnipeg Tribune and University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections, Winnipeg Tribune Fonds, for the photograph of the little house where I lived in the Churchill River Flats community. PC 18 (A81-12).