

# *(Re)telling to Disrupt: Aboriginal People and Stories of Canadian History*

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We are what we know. We are, however, also what we do not know. If what we know about ourselves—our history, our culture, our national identity—is deformed by absences, denials, and incompleteness then our identity—both as individuals and as Americans—is fragmented.

(Pinar, 1993, p. 61)

## **Introduction**

Not long ago, while I was working as a Special Education support teacher, a student came to see me. Robert showed me his “Reading Comprehension”<sup>1</sup> book and asked for help. The story he had been assigned was titled “Sacagawea.”<sup>2</sup> It was about a strong brave Indian

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<sup>1</sup> Anderson, D., Stone, C., Burton, A., (1978). *New practice readers* (second edition). United States: McGraw-Hill.

<sup>2</sup> Sacagawea is the young Shoshone woman who accompanied Lewis and Clark on their expedition from St. Louis, Missouri, to the Pacific Ocean and back. Her role on the expedition has been both idealized and disregarded. Although she is considered an

woman who helps keep peace between explorers and Indians. Sacagawea hunts, cooks, and translates for the white explorers and, as the story goes, many mountains, rivers and lakes are named after this brave Indian woman.

In the story of Sacagawea, the Aboriginal woman is positioned as material wealth, stolen and traded for as if she were an inhuman object. Her goodness lies in her ability to help the white traders and explorers. Similar to other references to Aboriginal people in schools, this story focuses on the pre-contact and early contact years contributing to the view of Aboriginal people as a people of the past.<sup>3</sup> One of the most frustrating things about the story is that it appears in a series of stories that are about animals and inanimate objects, positioning Aboriginal people as part of the inhuman elements of the 'natural world'. Although some attempts have been made to accomplish change, the discourse that positions Aboriginal people as Romantic Mythical Other has become a "taken for granted" way of knowing that gets reproduced in the day-to-day activities of many Canadian classrooms.

While I was recalling the incident of my student and his story about Sacagawea to my brother Michael, we began to talk about producing our own stories about Aboriginal people. In the Sacagawea story, we recognized the Romanticized Mythical Indian figure that we had confronted in the pages of our own elementary school textbooks. During our discussion, Michael and I made a commitment to write a series of biographical stories that would provide alternative representations of Aboriginal people. We began work on a writing project titled *Braiding Histories: Learning From the Life Stories of First Nations People*. Michael and I are of mixed Aboriginal (Leni Lenape-Potawatami) and non-Aboriginal (Irish-French Canadian) ancestry. We are sharing the stories of our ancestors in response to the need for "tellings" that will disrupt the "taken for granted way of knowing" about First Nations people that we see produced and reproduced in the school curriculum. The stories reflect our (re)membered past and contribute to a discourse that affirms the humanity and agency of Aboriginal people and recognizes our work as active social agents resisting ongoing conditions of injustice. In part, the texts are intended to call Canadians to recognize and act in regard to the alterity of First Nations peoples' experiences.

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"American Heroine," we know very little about her. In their travel journals, Lewis and Clark describe Sacagawea as resourceful and strong, an excellent guide with diplomatic skill.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed description of the representation of Aboriginal people in the school curriculum, see for example, Fletcher, S. Dion. (2000). "Molded images: First Nations people, representation, and the Ontario school curriculum" In T. Goldstein & D. Selby (Eds.), *Weaving connections: Education for peace, social and environmental justice*. Toronto: Sumach Press.

Learning to (re)tell has been an arduous process, a process that took us from producing documentary-like vignettes to what we now conceive of as (re)tellings.<sup>4</sup> In this paper I describe and reflect on the issues and challenges involved in writing the *Braiding Histories*<sup>5</sup> stories as a way of unraveling the pedagogical possibilities and difficulties of presenting testimony that bears on post-contact First Nations-Canadian history. I have arranged my investigation around three thematic areas: understanding Aboriginal conceptions of history and story, understanding the relationship between testimony and witnessing, and questions of representation. Reflecting on my own writing, looking at the work of other Aboriginal writers as well as listening to their reflections on cultural production provide an understanding of the issues and challenges involved in producing texts that are an expression of the historical substance and significance of the events of colonization.

## Difficult Learning

Michael and I began our project with the intension of producing a series of stories about Aboriginal people that would be appropriate for use by teachers and students in grades seven to twelve. At the time, we were aware of the need for resources that would challenge the taken-for-granted ways of knowing about Aboriginal people, but we were unaware of the complexity of the task we were setting for ourselves. It was through the process of writing and sharing initial drafts of our stories with friends and colleagues, that we came to understand the web of issues the content of this history surfaces and the kind of story we needed to tell to initiate the learning we wanted to provoke.

In his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said (1994) commented on the way in which colonizing governments made use of stereotypes and notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric minds as a means of justifying their actions. "They were not like us and for that reason deserved to be ruled" (p.xi). Said argued that cultural forms "... were immensely important in the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences" (p.xii). Non-Aboriginal Canadians continue to rely on misrepresentation as a mechanism to defend against attending to the post-contact experiences of First Nations people in Canada. The failure to listen is sustained through various mechanisms, including:

- challenging the relevance of the narrative for one's life in the present
- locking the events in a history that has no present

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<sup>4</sup> I insert brackets to signify that our process represents more than a simple repetition of the story of someone's life.

<sup>5</sup> Three of the *Braiding Histories* stories appear in this volume.

- dehumanizing Aboriginal people
- claiming 'there is nothing I can do, therefore I don't have to listen'
- claiming the stories are too hard to listen to

Ignorance, Felman (1982) writes, «is not a passive state of absence—a simple lack of information: it is an active dynamic of negation, an active refusal of information» (p.30). Canadians «refuse to know» that the racism that fueled colonization was a result of a system which benefits all non-Aboriginal people, not just the European settlers of long ago. The refusal to know is comforting: it supports an understanding of racism as an act of individuals and not a system. It creates a barrier allowing Canadians to resist confronting the country's racist past and the extent to which that past lives inside its present deep in the national psyche. The need to deny racism in Canada's past resurfaces again and again in its present.

There is something repulsive about having to ask why. Why is it so difficult for Canadians to look toward our reality, to hear our stories? When I shared initial drafts of the *Braiding Histories* stories, teachers and students would tell me that the stories were too hard to listen to, and I wanted to respond, "Hard to listen to—try surviving them." Yet as an educator, if I hope to tell the stories in a way that engages the listener in hearing, I have to be willing to interrogate and respond to their resistance to hearing. Michael and I have proceeded with our (re)tellings only after thoughtful consideration of what is at stake for our readers as they are called upon to attend to and learn from the post-contact experiences of First Nations people. We have come to understand that the knowledge that we are offering will "provoke a crisis within the self—it will be felt as interference or as a critique of the self's coherence or view of itself in the world" (Britzman, 1998, p.118).

In his article "Signs of Silence Lines of Listening," History of English Culture professor Ian Chambers (1996) addresses the difficult task of attending to stories of Indigenous Others:

other stories, memories and identities cause [Western] authority to stumble. For they talk back to it, take the language elsewhere, and then return with it to interrupt the nation-narration at its very 'centre.' An earlier imaginary unity is challenged and complicated by other traditions, other voices, other histories, now seeking a home and looking for an accommodation in this state. . . .The emergence and insistence of an elsewhere in the heart of the languages, cultures and cities we presume to be our own forces us to relocate ourselves, and with it our sense of individual and national identity. The links that previously positioned us in our privileges, and located the others elsewhere, are loosened. They become disturbing, even threatening in their fluidity. (p.51)

Recognition of the post-contact experiences of First Nations people requires Canadians to acknowledge not only our place, but their relationship with us in the constitution of their histories and cultures in both national and individual identities. Canadians have told and retold themselves a particular story; hearing our stories disrupts their understanding of themselves and as such requires a process of «learning from.»

Deborah Britzman (1998) delineates the meaning of 'learning from':  
Whereas learning about an event or experience focuses upon the acquisition of qualities, attributes, and facts, so that it presupposes a distance (or, one might even say, a detachment) between the learner and what is to be learned, learning from an event or experience is of a different order, that of insight. . . . But precisely because insight concerns the acknowledgment of discontinuity from the persistence of the status quo, and hence asks something intimate from the learner, learning from requires the learner's attachment to and implication in knowledge. (p.117).  
. . . Learning from demands both a patience with the incommensurability of understanding and an interest in tolerating the ways meaning becomes, for the learner, fractured, broken, and lost, exceeding the affirmations of rationality, consciousness, and consolation. (p.118)

Canadians willingly accept the position of respectful admirer or patronizing helper when learning about Aboriginal people, history and culture but actively resist learning that requires recognition of their own implication in the relationship and a responsible response.

Learning from the events of colonization is "made more fragile" because it involves difficult knowledge. Britzman defines difficult knowledge as "the study of experiences and the traumatic residuals of genocide, ethnic hatred, aggression, and forms of state-sanctioned-and hence legal-social violence. The study of an other's painful encounter with victimization, aggression, and the desire to live on one's own terms" (p.117). The stories in the *Braiding Histories* collection require readers to engage with difficult knowledge and as such comprise difficult learning, that is, learning that will hold open the present to its insufficiency. Understanding the demands of "learning from" further clarifies the need for a careful interrogation of how to tell in ways that will disrupt the resistance to hearing.<sup>6</sup>

## Understanding Our Project of (Re)telling

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<sup>6</sup> Michael and I co-authored the stories, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to work together with him on this project. I also acknowledge his patience with my ongoing need to question, reflect and talk about our process in order to report on our work. The writing of the stories is an ongoing co-operative project; the analysis of the writing process is my own.

As a form of remembrance, storytelling, my (re)telling practice, draws on a discursive tradition that positions history as something more than a chronological telling of events. My practice is premised on an understanding that the study of history is concerned with understanding who we are, our relationships with others, and the kind of world we want to create. Engaging with the stories is intended to provoke my reading audience to rethink their understanding of themselves, of Aboriginal people, and themselves in relationship with Aboriginal people.

I conceptualize our stories in terms of (re)tellings to signal the notion that I am telling again but telling differently a story that has been told before. With the (re)tellings I am marking these stories as significant and this time as significant for their telling. With my testimony I want to convey to others, to elicit in others the desire to listen and (re)member, to listen and acknowledge that which has happened. My practice is sustained by an understanding that “not to remember is to accede to the erasure or distortion of collective experience; to repress memory is to reenact and perpetuate oppression” (Couser, 1996, p.107).

## (Re)telling and Aboriginal Conceptions of History and Story

In preparation for writing Michael and I made a trip to the Woodland Cultural Centre at the Six Nations community near Brantford, Ontario. The cultural centre has an exhibit called “The First Nations Hall of Fame.” It is a hallway lined with portraits of famous Aboriginal people. A brief description of each individual’s accomplishments and contributions is included with each photograph. The exhibit was good inspiration, and Michael and I began compiling a list of individuals we wanted to write about. We began to think about the impact of significant events on the lives of First Nations people. We talked about the impact of war and automatic weapons, missionaries and the spread of Christianity, disease and increasing European settlement. We decided to write about people whose life stories intersected with key events. Michael and I wanted students to read about the experiences of First Nations people as they dealt with changes brought about by contact with Euro-Canadians.

Within Aboriginal conceptions of history and story, concern is not with a chronological telling of events; history is neither linear nor steeped in notions of social progress and evolution (RCAP). As Vine Deloria, of the Sioux Nation, has written “The nation’s stories reflect what is important to a group of people as a group. Historical events were either of the distant past and regarded as such or vivid memories of the tribe that occupied a prominent important place in the people’s perspective and understanding of their situation” (1973, p.100). History is “intimately connected to the present and the future. There is a sense that there are

many histories, each characterized in part by how a people see themselves, how they define their identity in relation to their environment and how they express their uniqueness as a people" (RCAP,1996). "History is woven in stories and storytelling provides a customary framework for discussing the past" (Cruikshank,1990, p.ix).

I have a faith in the power of stories that comes from my own experience and from my understanding of the use of stories as a teaching and learning tool in First Nations cultures. Sitting around the supper table after the plates were cleared, around the campfire while on family vacations, or waiting for the clothes to dry at the laundromat, my parents told stories. The stories were about fond memories, difficult times, or loved ones. I appreciated listening to the stories as much as my parents enjoyed telling them. The stories were a form of entertainment, but they were much more. The stories provided me with a sense of belonging and purpose, an understanding of my connections. They taught me about who I am and about the importance of respect and responsibility to my ancestors, to myself, my family, and all living things. Stories have always been valued as a means of teaching and learning within First Nations communities. Stories are not just entertainment but power. They reflect the deepest, the most intimate perception, relationship, and attitudes of a people and can be used to bring harmony and balance to all beings that inhabit the nations' universe (Keeshig-Tobias, 1992, Gunn-Allan, 1983).

For Michael and I, the *Braiding Histories* stories are "vivid memories" of events that occupy a prominent place in our perspective and understanding of our situation. The stories both inform and reflect who we are. While the stories have everything to do with us, in contrast, they call Canadians to attend to a story they would rather forget. When writing the stories, we had to ask ourselves how do we engage teachers' and students' attention in stories that tell them who they are when it is a "who they are" that they do not want to be? Our intention is to (re)tell the stories in such a way as to establish a scene of recognition that will invite our readers to attend, to recognize that "this story has something to do with me." On what grounds do we make a claim for the reader's attention? However distant Canadians argue that they are from the instance/site/relationship of violence/oppression/injustice, it is their very recognition of being implicated that motivates their denial. How are they connected/not connected: on what grounds are they being called to attend and on what grounds do they respond?

Within Aboriginal conceptions of story, the telling of stories is considered a social event. Stories are told for a variety of reasons, and it is the responsibility of the listener to find meaning in the stories and the responsibility of the teller to tell an appropriate story. Stories are told to

educate the listener, to communicate aspects of culture, to socialize people into a cultural tradition, or to validate the claims of a particular family to

authority and prestige. There is an assumption that the teller of the story is so much a part of the event being described that it would be arrogant to presume to classify or categorize the event exactly or for all time. Those who hear the oral accounts draw their own conclusions from what they have heard, and they do so in the particular context (time, place and situation) of the telling. Thus the meaning to be drawn from an oral account depends on who is telling it, the circumstances in which the account is told, and the interpretation the listener gives to what has been heard.  
(RCAP, 1996, Vol.1, p. 33)

Within Aboriginal culture, there is an understanding that listeners would know what is expected of them in the storyteller/listener relationship. While these conceptions of history and storytelling inform my practice of (re)telling, I recognize that I am writing stories for an audience that will not necessarily share my «faith» in stories. Additionally, the context of the school provide its own structures of interaction between teachers, students, and texts different from the context of traditional storytelling. «The sense of history conveyed by [our] approaches is not the same thing as the discipline of history, and so our accounts collide, crash into each other» (Smith, 1999, p.28). In some ways this complicates the opportunities for teaching and learning; however it may be that the differences in approach and expectation contribute to establishing an alternative listening position from which teachers and students can hear differently.

In response to these tensions, and drawing on the understanding that within Aboriginal traditions the power of the story resides partly in the “telling,” our approach is to (re)tell the stories in such a way that listeners hear within the story “a compelling invitation” that claims their attention and initiates unsettling questions that require “working through” (Friendlander, 1992). We (re)tell the stories in a way that reflects who we are and why we are telling this particular story. The power of the stories is situated partly in our ‘telling.’ The hope for accomplishing an alternative way of knowing lies partly in our ability to share with our readers what the stories mean to us, and a critical space/moment lies within that potential for engagement between reader and (re)teller.

## Testimony and Witnessing

During long summer afternoons at libraries around Toronto, Michael and I researched and wrote about the lives of our ancestors. We read about their struggles and triumphs and were overwhelmed by pain, sorrow, anger, pride, and joy as we immersed ourselves in their stories. Sitting at desks piled high with books, we would frequently interrupt each other saying, “Listen to this.” Our need to pass on what we were experiencing was immediate. We spoke back and forth about how these stories of injustice and resistance weighted us down and forged our commitment to

our project. We found our desire to (re)tell their stories entwined with our own story. In the moment of (re)telling, we are both witness and testifier, bearing witness to the stories of our ancestors and giving testimony as survivors of the policy of forced assimilation.

Reflecting back on the writing process, I remember the First Nations Hall of Fame and the power that installation has for me. Looking at the pictures and reading the words provides positive feelings about who I am and what I am a part of. The humanity of First Nations people is produced for me as I read about the various contributions that First Nations people have made and continue to make as leaders in community service, medicine, law, politics, and literature. The personal affirmation I find in the Hall of Fame is significant, but something more happens there. The Hall of Fame calls me to acknowledge the contributions of First Nations people. With (re)membering the contributions comes an overwhelming sense of loss. Loss in that so many Indigenous contributions have been lost in the violence of colonization and much of what survived is unrecognized in legitimated histories. In the Hall, that which has been erased is made present. As a witness, I am called upon to listen and remember. As a witness I have an obligation to listen and pass on that which I have heard, seen, and felt, not just as an individual but as an individual connected with others (Simon, 1994).

Like many Aboriginal people in Canada, Michael and I are survivors of the government's policy of forced assimilation. We have been denied our culture and are struggling to understand how it came to be that we were deprived of the experiences of our ancestors and much of their rich traditional knowledge. In our struggle to understand we are reclaiming our past. Gail Guthrie Valaskakis writes about the move to reclaim, explaining:

For Indians, museums like art and literature are sites of re-membering, re-collecting; living locations of the contradictory articulations Indians experience in history and heritage and everyday life. . . .Along with land and treaty rights, Indians are laying claim to native objects and images, to museums and to history; in short, to Aboriginal heritage reconstructed, lived and imagined. In Canada, this move to transform the present by recovering the past has contributed to a new debate reclaiming memory, experience and imagination. (1993, p.164)

The (re)tellings are testimony to that which we have lost. They are an expression of the historical substance and significance of the events of colonization. With our testimony, we want to convey to others, to elicit in others, the desire to listen and (re)member, listen and acknowledge that which has happened. Ultimately we are hoping that our stories will be a form of commemoration that will be made personal. We want our stories to enter into the living memory of our readers to transform how they

understand themselves and their relations with First Nations people (Simon, 1994, p.26).

Michael and I are (re)telling the stories of our ancestors while conscious of our pedagogical and political responsibilities. Rather than thinking only about transmitting information, we want to tell the stories in such a way that the power the stories have for us will become a part of the story. Walter Benjamin (1968) writes, "In every case the storyteller is a man [sic] who has counsel for his readers. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (1968, p.87). In our (re)tellings we are hoping to translate the meanings the stories have for us into a form that our readers will recognize.

While writing the stories, Michael and I kept three critical questions in mind: (1) Can we tell the stories in such a way that our audience will have a sense of what the stories mean to us? (2) In what ways will our stories impact on the story our readers tell themselves about First Nations people? (3) We are looking at our (re)tellings as a means of giving students "that something" that they need to recognize and act in regard to the alterity of First Nations peoples' experiences. Can we give students a sense of what the stories mean to us and in that act of giving, will we be asking/stating a claim/calling upon our readers to bear the position of witness?

## Affirmation and Questions of Representation

Many First Nations writers and artists talk about their work in terms of affirmation and resistance. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, an Indigenous woman writer, recalls that as a child she read everything from the Sears catalogue to Faust but never found herself represented in any of the texts she read. She describes her response to the lack of representation:

Wanting to write comes out of that deprivation, though, for we eventually have to ask, what happens to a reasonably intelligent child who sees himself or herself excluded from a world which is created and recreated with the obvious intent to declare him or her «*persona non grata*»? Silence is the first reaction. Then there comes the development of a mistrust of that world. And, eventually, anger. That anger is what started me writing. Writing for me, then, is an act of defiance born out of the need to survive. I am me. I exist . . . I write. (as cited in Grant,1990, p.124)

This statement brings me back to the question of identification and affirmation. Our (re)tellings are about affirmation. Michael and I had always questioned the legitimacy of our Indigenous identity. While reading about the lives of First Nations people, we came to realize that those feelings were directly related to the government's policy of forced assimilation. It was the government's intention that we feel "not a part

of” our culture. There were other connections for us. We had always felt completely deprived of our Indigenous culture, but in the stories we found traces of our culture that our mother had passed on. As I read about Bill Reid and his desire to produce art that is “well made,” I had visions of my mother sitting bent over her sewing machine ripping out seams in the dress she was making because it was not “just exactly right.” Her sewing is her art, and our mother shares that desire for creating art that is well made.

Finding traces of ourselves in the stories is a source of affirmation and our commitment to the project of (re)telling comes in part from that experience of affirmation. In the process of affirming our connections we are responding as members of the First Nations community: asserting our collective right and our responsibility to accomplish representation. The stories of our ancestors make a claim on us, and in turn, we are called upon to share the stories with others. We have a responsibility both to ourselves and our ancestors to take up the project of (re)telling.

When examining the political struggle over representation, it is important to (re)member that Aboriginal people have always been involved with cultural production, representing ourselves and our world views in various texts including stories, art, and ceremony. It was and continues to be the violence of colonization that created conditions wherein Aboriginal people lost the power to control the ways in which dominant society constructs and interprets images of Aboriginal people. How do we represent ourselves in a way that will allow non-Aboriginal people to hear (or not allow them not to hear, since their own deafness is often voluntary)? Can we (re)tell our stories in a way that non-Aboriginal people will hear while maintaining the integrity of our story?

Work in the reconception of ethnography (Clifford, 1986; Geertz, 1973) has contributed to my understanding of three critical considerations in our approach to the (re)tellings. The first concerns the limits of representation. Clifford writes, “The critique of colonialism in the postwar period—an undermining of ‘the West’s ability to represent other societies—has been reinforced by an important process of theorizing about the limits of representation itself” (p.10). As we (re)tell the stories of our ancestors, we will in some way need to acknowledge the impossibility of representation.

Second is the understanding that as the tellers of a story, Michael and I must include ourselves in the story.

Ethnographers are more and more like the Cree hunter who (the story goes) came to Montreal to testify in court concerning the fate of his hunting land in the new James Bay hydroelectric scheme. He would describe his way of life. But when administered the oath, he hesitated: ‘I’m not sure I can tell the truth. . . I can only tell what I know.’

(Clifford, 1986, p.8)

This story that Clifford (re)tells has helped us understand that the stories are our representations, our truth and our honesty—and so how do we write in a way that reflects our understanding that we are writing what we know?

Our third concern is with recognizing the singularity of our subjects. Clifford writes, “Insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding” (1986, p.9). Michael and I are asking how we (re)tell our stories, cognizant of our position not as ethnographers, but as implicated in the process of representing the alter.<sup>7</sup> We share a connection with our subjects, yet we acknowledge the need to recognize their singularity.

## Gesturing Toward The Messianic Horizon

With our (re)tellings, Michael and I are marking these stories as worthy of being re-told and marking this time as an appropriate time for the (re)telling. We understand our efforts in terms of pursuing the hope for justice. We consider the need for these (re)tellings within a situation where ongoing conditions of injustice mean that First Nations people are continuing to experience pain and loss. As Maracle explains, “Racism is for us, not an ideology in the abstract, but a very real and practical part of our lives—the pain, the effect, the shame are all real” (Maracle as cited in Grant, 1990, p.129).

Our stories are offered as part of a healing process. Janice Acoose (1993) and Marie Annharte Baker (1994) both comment on the healing power of stories and the need to affirm the beauty and strength of First Nations people. Baker writes, “The story is a helper, a guide, and becomes also a personal friend. I think of the stories as healing because they help us connect to some part of the earth” (1993, p.114). Felman echoes this understanding of the healing nature of narration in her discussion of Albert Camus’ *The Plague*. Felman considers that Camus’ positioning of the physician as privileged narrator “might suggest that the capacity to witness and the act of bearing witness in themselves embody some remedial quality and belong already, in obscure ways, to the healing process” (1992, p.4). She goes on to say that what necessitates the testimony may be “the scandal of an illness” (p.5). This understanding of the healing potential of stories and acts of injustice as an illness are referenced by Rupert Ross (1992) in his discussion of Indigenous philosophy. “Wrongdoings are viewed as misbehavior that requires

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<sup>7</sup> Alter is used here as opposed to Other in order to signal a concept which references incommensurability. The use of Other is based on some concept of measuring that which is being called 'different' or 'other' as a deviation from some normative standard of reference.

teaching or an illness that requires healing” (p.168). The stories are certainly a source of healing for Michael and I personally. We also consider them to serve healing in the public sphere of the classroom.

We are writing the stories for both First Nations and non-First Nations people, hoping to make a contribution to healing by accomplishing change in the relationship between First Nations and non-First Nations people. The stories are intended to be a way of acknowledging the pain of the past and a hope for things to be different today and in the future.

Indigenous artists in all fields across the Americas are seizing this opportunity to reflect upon the past, depict contemporary realities and present a vision for the future. (p.18) . . . Recognition of the truths of recent history and contemporary life is essential in providing a clarity and vision for the future. (p.20) . . . The indigenous nations of North America were once considered «vanishing». Indeed several indigenous nations were obliterated by ethnocide and genocide. Yet we endure. That is worth celebrating. Our struggles against programs of enforced assimilation are testimony to our powers of cultural tenacity. That is worth celebrating. (McMaster, 1992, p.21)

Recognizing injustice and celebrating resistance is a first step toward accomplishing justice. The purpose of our stories is not to assign blame or guilt. The stories are about healing and recovery.

The understanding of story as a source of harmony and balance are recurring themes within Aboriginal conceptions of storytelling and history. Responding to testimony about the Wounded Knee Massacre, Marie, a Lakota woman, replied, “I think it is important for history to be brought out” (Marie Not Help Him as cited in Josephy, 1994, p.6). Her statement resonates with a sense I have that our history is a part of our being and that we have a need and a purpose to speak it. To maintain, or more accurately, to re-establish harmony and balance, it must be spoken. In her book *Writing As Witness*, Beth Brant (1994) explains that the imbalance that exists within Aboriginal people and in the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people comes from the imbalance that racism and poverty create.

The understanding and appreciation of harmony and balance that many Aboriginal people share may come in part from their relationship with land and their environment. Josephy explains, “But there was a symbiosis between the land and the people. Because of their spiritual attachment, one gave life to the other, and it behooved humans to keep that attachment in balance and harmony by proper conduct and thoughts, lest it harm the people’s well being” (1994, p.11). The demand for balance and harmony exists not only between people and the earth but, as Gunn-Allen states, involves all beings that inhabit the tribes’ universe. (1986, p.55)

How can our (re)tellings contribute to establishing balance and harmony between peoples? Creating balance for Aboriginal people and in their relationship with non-Aboriginal people necessarily requires that I consider how and from what position non-Aboriginal people will interpret our stories. So I am asking, will our stories be traumatic for our readers? Will our stories wound? Is it possible to (re)tell these stories with a concern for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people?

## Intimacy

In his book *Our Chiefs and Elders*, David Neel (1992) of the Kwagiutl Nation bears witness to and shares testimony of leaders from west coast First Nations. His book is an extraordinary collection of photographs presented with statements from the chiefs and elders. Neel describes his approach to the photography session: "When I photograph people I set up my equipment, we talk, I take pictures, and it is a relaxed, shared experience" (12). His effort has resulted in photographs that reflect the humanity of each of his subjects. For me, Neel's photographs call forth positive feelings of existence. I see the photographs not only as demonstrations but celebrations of our existence, our power, our strength and our wisdom. In reference to his work, Neel states, "The photographs are my interpretation, my vision, of these human beings" (1992, p.11).

The stories that Michael and I are writing are our interpretations of the lives of specific First Nations people. Writing about translation, Gayatri Spivak (1993) states "Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text" (p.183). When completing research for our (re)tellings, in most instances we had to rely on sources that were for the most part written by non-First Nations people. Writing our stories based on research from these texts was dangerous work. "Writing can be dangerous because, by building on previous texts written about indigenous peoples, we might continue to legitimate views about ourselves which are hostile to us" (Smith, p.36). We had to step back from the source and imagine our subject. We worked at establishing an intimacy with the person whose life stories we are (re)telling. It is through this practice that we could get beyond the research texts and (re)tell from our own perspective. At times, through the (re)telling process, we feel the voices of our ancestors very clearly. Spivak goes on to say, "If you want to make the translated text accessible, try doing it for the person who wrote it" (p.191). First and foremost, Michael and I are writing for the individuals whose life stories we are (re)telling.

## Relationship

In an effort to more fully understand the process of storytelling, we looked to Aboriginal writers for insight and guidance. In her discussion of the important role of relationship in the storytelling experience, Joanne Archibald (1997) of the Sto:lo First Nation writes:

the oral tradition implicates the 'listener'[reader] into becoming an active participant in the experience of the story. An inter-relationship between the story/storyteller/listener is a critical principle of storytelling. (p.40)

Through the process of establishing relationship we saw the possibility to reflect the power the stories have for us. Archibald goes on to say, "The power of the storyteller to make the listeners/readers visualize and feel like they are part of the story is a part of...the mystery, magic and truth/respect/trust relationship between the speaker/storyteller and listener/reader" (Archibald, p.42). It was through our relationship with each other that Michael and I were able to build a relationship with our subjects, and we began to see the importance of relationship to our process. "Inter-relating between story/listener and the text/reader invites the reader to interact with his many stories to provide a framework for thinking critically about one's own historical, cultural, and current context in relation to the story being told" (p.42). As we worked, we became conscious of the relationship we hoped to establish among and between ourselves, our subjects, and our readers. And this consciousness became a central principle in how we came to (re)tell our stories. We recognize that in the act of (re)telling much of who we are gets integrated with the story and we wanted to make our presence felt. In addition to the implicit, we attempted to make our presence explicit. We begin each of our (re)tellings with a mixture of statements and questions through which we address our readers directly. As Paula Gunn Allen (1989) of the Laguna Pueblo and Sioux Nations writes, "To hear our stories as we tell them, a non-Indian reader needs to know where they come from, how we compose them, and something of their meaning for us" (p.1).

We make use of a variety of narrative techniques for establishing relationship. Our opening statements are a direct 'speaking to' and as such serve as a form of address, but also provide the reader with information about why we are passing on this story, and what in particular we are requesting that the reader attend to. For example, in our story "Her Solitary Place," concerning Shanawdithit of the Beothuk Nation, we begin with the following:

For five of the last years of her life Shanawdithit lived with a family. Was it her family? Shanawdithit wore clothes. Were they her clothes? Shanawdithit learned a new language. Whose language was it? Shanawdithit was buried. Was her body painted with red ochre; was she wrapped in birch bark? (Dion, S. & Dion, M. 2004, this volume)

These comments and questions through which we address our reader directly contribute to establishing a relationship between ourselves and our reader. It is our way of 'speaking across the table' with our request to 'listen to this.' Through the questions we want to pass on to the reader a sense of why we are telling this particular story. The questions are followed by a short introduction that further contextualizes our relationship with the story subject and begins to establish relationship between ourselves—the subject of the story and our readers. Wherever possible we quote our subjects directly and include details of our subject's thoughts and feelings. This contributes to a sense of intimacy within the stories. I believe that the ability to establish 'relationship' between ourselves—the story subjects and our readers—offers an opportunity to confront denial. Through the process of establishing a 'bond' with the story subjects, the readers' need to deny is replaced with a need to know and understand what happened and why things happened the way that they did.

By cultivating relationship between ourselves, our readers and the story subject we draw the readers into the story where they are confronted with the human repercussions of colonization on all of us. Their attachment to and implication in the stories both as individuals and as Canadians is an integral part of the reading/listening experience. Our readers find themselves engaged with stories that demand both (re)membering and thoughtful response.

## Attention To Details

It would be impossible to (re)tell our stories without reflecting the intimate connection between First Nations people and the land; however, Michael and I have been careful to describe that relationship in such a way that human existence is affirmed. Our stories reflect Aboriginal knowledge of, relationship with, and respect for the land in a way that does not deny the human existence of First Nations people. We take similar care in our portrayal of Aboriginal spirituality and have made a determined effort to reflect the nuances and critical role of spirituality in the lives of Aboriginal people without creating an image of the "mythical" Other. We capture our readers' attention and request an attention to detail that will support the recognition of difference and the significance of that difference. In our story about the Cree leader Mistahimaskwa, we recognized that our readers could not appreciate the extent of the impact of the loss of the buffalo without an appreciation of

the spiritual relationship between the Cree, the buffalo, and the land. In response to this challenge, we balance detailed descriptions of spiritual practices with details of practical day-to-day life experiences.

In and of themselves, details are not enough to point up and expose difference. They can be viewed as filler in a story that is familiar, glossed over on the basis of a “yes, yes I know that already” response. It is only when a story is approached as being unfamiliar that details have the potential to surprise, unsettle, and astonish and thus to work as disruption calling what I know and how I know into question (Simon, Eppert, Clamen, Beres, 2000). The opening questions in our (re)telling of Shanawdithit’s story draw the readers’ attention to the specificity of Shanawdithit’s experience. The questions serve as a way of passing on to our readers the priority of attending to the details. In our stories, we are asking our readers to see what they have not seen before, what they have not been called upon to see before. If we can (re)tell in such a way that our readers recognize the story as ‘unfamiliar,’ the attention to detail will be effective. Rather than developing a false sense of knowing how it is, we want to activate the attention to detail as a way of disrupting the way Canadians hear and respond to stories of First Nations-Canadian relations.

We want our readers to attend to what they find astonishing or surprising about the stories—surprise as being those things in the story that were not known before. As a starting point for discussing the stories, teachers might ask both their students and themselves, “What did I not know before? Why didn’t I know? What is the significance of not knowing?” Astonishment is that which I know to be true but, in which I find a certain unbelievability. Many of our readers will come to the stories knowing that the near extinction of the buffalo caused death and starvation to First Nations people. However, our detailed description of the impact on the day-to-day lives of communities of people evokes astonishment and offers a way of looking at one’s own psychic numbness and how that can be broken.

This attention to detail is a way of speaking plainly to the ugly realities concealed in romanticized mythical versions of post-contact history. Adrian Piper (1993) refers to this strategy as naming. She explains that a willed unconsciousness can be permeated by concepts and symbols that speak plainly to the ugly realities concealed in euphemisms.

An art object that draws the viewer’s attention to these realities, and leaves no room for ambiguity in their identification, can be an assaultive and disturbing experience. It blocks escape into abstract speculation concerning the denotations and connotations of the terms or symbols deployed as referents, and may reinforce the vividness and objectivity of the realities brought forward through confrontation, with the legitimating imprimatur of linguistic or representational acknowledgment. At the same time, through repetition and repeated viewing, it can help accustom the higher-

order political discriminator to the existence of these realities, and conceptually defuse them to psychologically manageable proportions.  
(p. 68)

When completed, the *Braiding Histories* collection will include a series of ten (re)tellings. Each of the stories focuses on a different individual, from a variety of locations across Canada. The stories take place during different time periods and address specific aspects of the colonization process. The series of stories allows for repeated encounters with the ongoing and insidious impact of colonization, resulting in an inescapable encounter with the realities of the relationship. The series includes stories about contemporary political activists who have contributed to accomplishing change in the relationship between the First Nations and Canada. These stories are particularly useful in preventing a sense of hopelessness and encouraging engagement.

## Attending To The Suffering of Others

As previously noted, we began our writing project firmly committed to representing the humanity of First Nations people. As we continued, the issue of how to address the pain, suffering, and tragic loss that surfaced again and again in each of our subject's lives became a critical concern. In their article titled, "Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi," Brownlie and Kelm (1996) describe the way in which writers, in their attempt to represent the agency and power of First Nations people, actually "use evidence of Native resilience and strength to soften, and at times to deny, the impact of colonialism and thus implicitly to absolve its perpetrators" (p.211). We were writing conscious of this concern yet were also aware that a story which focused detailed attention on suffering and loss would be taken up as the all-too-familiar story of the 'poor pitiful Indian.' We had to interrogate ourselves as to our purpose in asking our readers to look toward the suffering of others. Out of respect for both our subjects and ourselves we had to seriously consider the extent to which and the way in which we would tell about the suffering of First Nations people. Was it possible to describe details of suffering while guarding the dignity of the subject?

The salience of this issue became clear during a moment of reciprocal witnessing. One of the first (re)tellings we completed is the story of our mother, Audrey Angela Dion. Michael and I interviewed our mother and worked collaboratively on the writing of her story. Our mother was born and raised in the reserve community at Moraviantown. Hers is a story of strength and determination. It is also the story of forced assimilation, poverty and discrimination. Sitting at her dining room table with my own three children as witness, I read aloud our (re)telling. As I spoke, I became overwhelmed with concern. Would our story that

reflected the treatment Mom received by white society be humiliating for her? I had made a commitment and could not stop reading but carried on cognizant of this concern. I finished reading, looked immediately toward Mom and asked, "Is it okay to tell?" Clearly it had been a difficult listening experience for her, but Mom's immediate response was, "That tells how bad it was and people will finally know what it was like for me."

I (re)tell the details of this incident now to explicate my understanding of the propriety of our telling and the reasons for our request to readers that they attend to the detailed suffering of others. Our mother's response echoed the words of Dori Laub (1992) who wrote, "Testimonies are not monologues; they can not take place in solitude. The witnesses are telling to somebody; to somebody they have been waiting for for a long time" (p.71). Michael and I were surprised by the force of our mother's response. We felt that we had been intimately connected with the testimony-witnessing relationship but had been operating unaware of and without understanding the 'waiting to tell' element of testimony.

Telling about the suffering that was, and in many ways continues, to be a part of the life experiences of First Nations people cannot efface the loss. Yet "the testimony in its commitment to truth is a passage through, and an exploration of, differences" (Laub, 1992, p.91). Through her response I understood our mother to be saying that we were able to capture, at least for her or rather most important for her, a telling that reflected the singularity of her experiences. This was personally affirming but more importantly it signaled for me the possibility that our (re)tellings as testimony did reflect the alterity of First Nations people's experiences and could potentially initiate a consideration of that alterity in the minds of our readers. Telling our mother's story and excluding the details of suffering would be an incomplete telling, erasing the significance and reproducing the oppression. Laub writes, "Testimony is inherently a process of facing loss--of going through the pain of the act of witnessing" (p.91). The one who testifies is waiting to tell--and our listening is a reciprocal act through which we accept our responsibility to attend to that which someone else has lived and is now asking us to hear.

Yet, I was right to be concerned. Exposing the wounds of Others is not something to be done without serious consideration. In our role as (re)tellors, Michael and I are faced with the double responsibility of witnessing: to hear and then to pass on that which we have heard in a way that will invoke a respectful listening. Keeping in mind our understanding of the ease with which our intended audience would look away or look inappropriately as spectator or voyeur, we spent a considerable amount of time working out how to deal with this challenge. How would we accomplish a renewed attentiveness to a story of which the readers were quite possibly extremely weary? Michael and I

understand that, if in our (re)telling we allow the suffering to dominate the story, the singularity of our subjects will be lost. We approach each (re)telling cognizant of the need to establish a scene of recognition for our readers. The space in which our readers can recognize our subjects as individuals is different for each story and carefully woven from the various threads of the story we have uncovered.

### Conclusions: Responding to the Call to Witness

As we wrote the stories, we were confronted with critical issues that challenged our thinking and guided our (re)telling process. Establishing relationship, attending to details and working through how to tell about the suffering of others emerged as challenges in each (re)telling. Britzman (1998) notes, the study of traumatic historical events “requires educators to think carefully about their own theories of learning and how the stuff of such difficult knowledge becomes pedagogical” (p.117). (Re)telling the *Braiding Histories* stories, Michael and I have taken our responsibilities seriously. The voices, actions, and experiences of First Nations people have claimed our attention, and we are committed to the project. Through the act of (re)telling, we are claiming a space within which Canadians are called upon to begin the work required to face a shared history that requires responsible attention. Our project is sustained by an understanding that a new and better relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadians requires that we attend differently to our shared history.

Exploring ways to provoke within teachers and students an awareness of their involvement in, and desire to maintain, an understanding of history that supports the ‘forgetting’ of conditions of injustice (both past and continuing) is an ongoing struggle. The need to deny history in an attempt to maintain an honourable sense of self is powerful, and the methods are deeply embedded in the dominant stories of Canadian historiography. Relying on a series of mechanisms including confrontation and naming, and working through and with relationship, the *Braiding Histories* stories engage readers in difficult learning. Our stories invoke a commitment to, and participation in, a practice that binds remembrance and learning. These bonds are intended to enable our readers to not only recognize the limits of their knowledge, but to recognize what of themselves is tied up with their understanding of the history and contemporary substance of Canadian-First Nations relationships.

Sometimes when I go to speak with groups of teachers and students about the relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadians, I am overwhelmed by a respectful silence—but it is a silence that pre-empts the possibility of listeners ‘working through’ the difficult learning they are called upon to participate in. I recognize and share my listeners’ concerns. Talking about traumatic events and one’s relationship to the suffering of

others is 'dangerous' work. However we can not use our fear of saying something wrong as an excuse for not doing the work. The *Braiding Histories* stories are intended to encourage dialogue and the asking of questions in a move toward initiating the work that is required to establish new and better relations between people of the First Nations and Canadians.

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