

**THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
RECONSTRUCTION PROJECT:
TELLING OUR STORIES**

by

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

September 2009

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Abstract

Early travellers and adventurers in the Northwest Territories in their struggle to deal with the harshness of the land and the strangeness of the inhabitants were often unable to give a verbal shape to the landscape and the people beyond that of the familiar images of their European background. North became synonymous with alien, hostile, cold, barren, and mysterious and its people were identified alternatively as abject, heathen, filthy and sometimes dangerous savages or as paragons of noble manhood who served as examples for future imperializing ventures.

I examine two travel narratives of the Northwest Territories and argue that a discourse of North, that was constructed from an imperialist, Eurocentric perspective failed to take into account the stories, the history and the culture of the indigenous people who lived there. I question the means by which such received history and knowledge becomes validated and empowering, while at the same time, other uncredentialed knowledge and stories which lack authority are lost. Warburton Pike wrote *The Barren Ground of Northern Canada* in 1892 and Agnes Deans Cameron wrote *The New North* in 1910. These works and others, while contributing to early knowledge of the indigenous people, were instrumental in framing an imaginary north that assumed hegemonic status over the geographical and cultural north that already existed. I then examine the works of two recent indigenous writers, George Blondin and Robert Alexie, who write back to Eurocentric constructions of north to validate their own histories and reclaim their land, not just in the physical sense of land claims but in ways which will give credence to their stories and their culture.

I consider the role of stories and their power to preserve or destroy and I conclude with the hope that I can undertake a future work to examine in more detail the wealth of narrative available about the Northwest Territories.

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Acknowledgements

I wish, first of all, to acknowledge the unwavering and always thoughtful support of Lou Covello, my husband, my lifeline and my support. Without him, it would never have happened. Thank you Lou.

I also thank my daughter, Katharine, who, with her ever-candid honesty, kept things interesting and in perspective.

I acknowledge and thank my committee, Dr. Laurie Ricou, Dr. Barbara Dancygier and Dr. Sherrill Grace. Sherrill, as my supervisor, tirelessly read draft after draft and continued to see value in what I was doing. She was a critic, a mentor, a supervisor and a true friend.

I thank the staff in the English Department who were always helpful and friendly.

I gratefully acknowledge the financial assistance I received from the English Department, the University of British Columbia, the SSHRC Foundation and the generous support from the Government of the Northwest Territories.

Dedication

**To all the people who listened and helped, and especially to my
dearest friends, Peter, Bev and Don, who supported me through it
all and made me laugh so much as we skied and sang and told
stories all winter long.**

Chapter 1. Introduction – Rethinking the Northwest Territories

Early explorers to the Northwest Territories of Canada (NWT) depicted it as a cold and lonely land of ice and snow inhabited by dangerous animals such as wolves and polar bears, and populated by Indians and Eskimos who roamed the land living in tents and igloos. It was no place for a European and if one were so unfortunate as to live there he or she would be in constant danger of freezing to death in winter or being driven mad in summer by hordes of mosquitoes and black flies. This is what we know from the historical tales of visitors who have been there and so, of course, it must be true. But is it? Our concept of the Northwest Territories, and indeed of any strange and foreign land that we have not ourselves experienced, is formed by the writings of the people who have witnessed it, and what we understand of the history of foreign lands is shaped by experts who have interpreted it. Post-modern thought teaches us that history is a human construct, that all history is textualized, and we can only know the past through what Linda Hutcheon calls its “textualized remains” (67). If we were not there and did not witness events, we must rely on the testimony of others to explain and interpret them for us and these interpretations are always subject to social, political and cultural bias. Similarly, if we have not actually experienced the physical space of a foreign country we must be guided by the eye-witness reports of others and these too are shaped by personal bias, but we give credence to such reports because the information in them is all we can know until we travel there ourselves. The privileging of a written report over first-hand experience is what Edward Said calls a “textual attitude” to knowledge (*Orientalism* 94). According to Said, textual attitudes begin in narratives such as travel writings in which people, places and experiences are described; the resulting book or text “acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes” (*Orientalism* 93).

The text becomes the authority on the foreign land and its people, and the knowledge it professes enters into the general discourse about that land.

The writings of early explorers, missionaries, travellers, government officials, trappers and traders played an integral part in defining the physical and social space that is now the Northwest Territories of Canada and over time, a “textual attitude” to the north developed. In its most benign form it allowed armchair adventurers opportunities to travel safely through the dangerous arctic wasteland. However, in a more insidious and potentially damaging form such attitudes permitted idealistic, colonizing and ill-informed visionaries to exert their authority to establish policies and programs to change the land and its people in ways that may have seemed reasonable and correct at the time but would have serious, unforeseen consequences in the future. The first part of my thesis will examine the ideology and received history contained in textualized accounts of the Northwest Territories. I will show how travellers’ tales combined to construct a northern discourse of an alien and dangerous land peopled by primitive savages in need of material and spiritual redemption. In the second part, I will show, through analysis of recent indigenous narrative, the consequences of European intervention in the land and the lives of the people, and the strategies that native people have adopted to reclaim their land, their culture and their history.

The Englishman, Samuel Hearne, was the first white man to travel overland across the barrenlands of northern Canada. He left Fort Prince of Wales on Hudson’s Bay in December 1770 and returned in June 1772 after reaching the Arctic Ocean by way of the Coppermine River. An account of his travels, *A Journey from Prince of Wales’s Fort in Hudson’s Bay to the Northern Ocean*, was published in 1795, three years after his death. Hearne was accompanied by Matonabbee, an important Chipewyan chief, and several of his

men. His narrative contains a wealth of information on native hunting and travelling methods and cultural practices. Unlike many other explorers of his day, Hearne adopted the travelling style of his native companions and his adaptability, as well as his instinct for observation, his intellectual curiosity, and his critical sense make his story one of the most astute and interesting of all early northern travel narratives. The purpose of Hearne's travel was dictated by his employer, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), which charged Hearne with investigating reported copper deposits on the Coppermine River and determining the possibility of a passage to the Pacific Ocean by means of a northern river. Later travellers in the north had other agendas such as scientific studies, hunting expeditions, ethnographic studies and adventure and many of them produced detailed narrative accounts of their journeys to inform and entertain their contemporaries at home. Until quite recently these accounts were generally accepted as factual, objective and truthful depictions of the landscape the travellers saw, the indigenous people they encountered and the adventures they experienced. Hearne's famous description, for example, of a massacre of Inuit by Matonabee's men at Bloody Falls on the Coppermine River has always been considered to be a true, eyewitness account. The report details a horrified and uninvolved Hearne witnessing an unprovoked attack by cruel Indians on peaceful Inuit. However, recent critics have cast Hearne's report in a new light. Canadian travel writing theorist, Ian MacLaren, for example, believes that Hearne may have embellished certain aspects of his narrative and that at least some parts of his journals were reconstructed by rewriters and editors to appeal to the taste of Victorian audiences for bloodthirsty adventure stories, while Canadian critic and indigenous specialist, Robin McGrath believes that Hearne was complicit with and a participant in the massacre. As is the case in many "eye-witness" accounts it is not unusual

for the facts to become unstable as the story is told and retold. MacLaren maintains that the narratives of travel “construct every bit as much as they bear witness,” and he cautions against accepting early texts such as Hearne’s, “straightforwardly as eye witnesses’ reports” (41), arguing that in addition to being culturally prejudicial, explorer and traveller texts may have been altered from their original “field note” stage and reconstructed by second or third parties for a market with decidedly judgmental, imperial tastes.¹ The ignorance and bias of Victorian audiences allowed chroniclers of the Canadian north and other distant lands the freedom to create visions of romantic or forbidding landscapes, and of exotic or hostile people that often were only tenuously related to reality. Critical readers of early travel journals now realize that writing, once understood as factual and truthful, should be seen as embodying the expression of the individual explorer/writer’s responses and the demands of the popular reader, both of which were formed by imperial/colonial sensibilities of the day. The Northwest Territories, as we thought we knew it from explorer narratives was, and still is, a land of much greater possibility than visiting Europeans, and even Canadians, could ever realize.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I examine the narratives of two early 20th century travellers to the Northwest Territories, Warburton Pike and Agnes Deans Cameron, and argue that, like the reminiscences of many early travellers, the record of their interactions with indigenous peoples and unfamiliar landscape, which were influenced by their own cultural views of gender, morality, religion and propriety, created a discourse of north that was complicit with acts of imperialism that defined and delimited the land of the NWT and the people who lived on it. Their preconceived ideas about empire, colonialism, race, culture and religion were often in conflict with what they actually experienced, and as a result their narratives may

have failed to fully apprehend the unique identity of the land or the complexity and multiplicity of the people who lived there. However, I also believe that the observations of travellers such as Cameron and Pike contributed a great deal to an understanding of Dene life in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is particularly true in the case of Pike and other male explorers who were able to travel and live intimately with their native companions. Women travellers were less likely to have such opportunities and their narratives reflect a more passive and uninvolved view of the north seen from such vantage points as the deck of a HBC steamer or under the tutelage of a chaperone or guide. Additionally, the narratives of most early women travellers to the north reflect historical and romantic aspects of a northern frontier and do not allow for the travellers' own participation with the people and the culture.

Several factors contribute to my choice of the narratives of Pike and Cameron. Male explorer narratives are more numerous than women's and there are a great many to choose from. One might look at the journals of various missionaries and priests such as Bishop William Bompas or Father Émil Petitot, who came north on missions of Christian evangelizing and civilizing, and note how they interacted with the land and the people they came to convert. Or one could consider the diaries of fur trappers and traders such as Chick Ferguson or Gus D'Aoust who viewed the land as a rich frontier where a man could make a comfortable living. Adventurers such as Caspar Whitney, Fullerton Waldo and Helge Ingstad travelled and lived with the Dene and wrote books about their experiences. Biologists, collectors, scientists, anthropologists, miners and many others added accounts with varying interests but I have chosen Warburton Pike because he came north with no particular agenda except to see "the land of the Musk-ox" and meet the Indians who lived there. "The sole object of my journey," he writes, was "to try to penetrate this unknown land,

to see the Musk-ox, and find out as much as I could about their habits, and the habits of the Indians who go in pursuit of them every year” (*Barren Ground* 1917 vi. All references are to the 1917 edition). He travelled with the Dene, adapting to their ways, and his observations about the land and the people are astute, frank, relatively objective and historically important.

Of course, no travel writing is ever free from bias and subjectivity, but Pike, in contrast to my female traveller, Agnes Deans Cameron, seems to have been better able to view and assess the land without imposing his own cultural prejudices and inclinations. Cameron, on the other hand, makes it clear that her business in the Arctic is to “set the record straight,” to correct misconceptions about the north and to proselytize about the possibilities for imperial expansion and development. As she points out, her “great desire is to call attention to the great unoccupied lands of Canada, to induce people from the crowded centres of the Old World to use the fresh air of the New” (*New North* 1910 15. All references are to this edition). Cameron was not the only female traveller to the north to write a journal, and women adventurers such as Elizabeth R. Taylor, Emma Shaw Colcleugh and Clara Coltin Rogers were there during the same general period.² However, these women seem caught up in a historical idea of a legendary, dangerous, and trackless wilderness, whereas Cameron is more interested in the north’s future development. Her narrative is an attempt to construct what she calls a “New North” based on colonial expansion, economic development and westernization of native peoples.

In different ways, therefore, Pike’s and Cameron’s narratives contributed to what Sherrill Grace calls “the discursive formation of North” (*Canada* xiii). In *Canada and the Idea of North*, Grace looks at the creation of “a northern *mentality*” and explains that North “is not *natural, real*, a geological or meteorological matter of treelines, eskers, permafrost,

snow.” It is, instead, a “human construct” created through “words, sounds, images, signs, and symbols” (*Canada* 15). In my thesis I consider the North created by “words,” specifically those in the narratives of two very different travellers to the NWT, and I argue that these narratives were instrumental in framing and justifying what I define as an imaginary north that assumed hegemonic status over the geographical and cultural north that already existed. This geographical and cultural Northwest Territories was the homeland of the Dene and the Inuit.

For approximately 6,000 years (or 2.6 billion years if one accepts indigenous mythical beliefs), the Northwest Territories has been inhabited by native people who, until European contact, lived in harmony with the land and knew the land intimately as the source of their physical and spiritual existence. Like all indigenous peoples, they considered themselves to be an integral part of their surroundings and found their spirituality in the land and the animals. Indigenous historians Marie Battiste and James Youngblood Henderson explain what the land means to native peoples:

The ecologies in which we live are more to us than settings or places, they are more than homelands. . . . These ecologies do not surround Indigenous peoples; we are an integral part of them and we inherently belong to them. . . .

As Indigenous peoples, we invest the ecologies with deep respect, and from them we unfold our structures of Indigenous life and thought. (11)

The Northwest Territories Dene believe that they too belong to the land. Consider the following quote from Dene leader, Richard Nerysoo:

It is very clear to me that it is an important and special thing to be an Indian.

Being an Indian means being able to understand and live with this world in a very

special way. It means living with the land, with the animals, with the birds and fish, as though they were your sisters and brothers. It means saying the land is an old friend and an old friend your father knew, your grandfather knew, indeed your people have always known. We see our land as such, much more that the whiteman sees it. To the Indian people our land is really our life. Without our land we . . . could no longer exist. (Berger 94)

To recover a sense of that early NWT I turn to the works of two indigenous writers, Dene elder, George Blondin, and Gwich'in leader and writer, Robert Alexie. The field from which to choose indigenous writers is considerably smaller than that for travel writers. It has only been since the 1970s that the words of any Dene have been committed to paper. Blondin is by far the most prolific indigenous writer in the NWT, and is best known for his extensive work in collecting, preserving and retelling the oral stories and legends of the Dene. He recreates the oral history and culture of the Dene and gives credence to the idea of the NWT as a familiar and beloved homeland, rather than an alien, empty space ripe for colonial intervention. Robert Alexie, a Gwich'in Dene and a residential school survivor, has written two novels, both of which are set in a fictional, modern Dene village. He writes back, in anger and outrage, to the injustices of colonialism in the NWT, the loss of Dene culture and the crimes committed against Dene children under the government sponsored residential school system. Alexie is one of only two contemporary Dene novelists, the other being Richard Van Camp. Although Van Camp is better known than Alexie for his work as a story teller and teacher of creative writing at the University of British Columbia, I chose to discuss Alexie's novel, *Porcupines and China Dolls*, because, of all the accounts of the lingering effects of imperial injustices and residential schools, it alone has the power and the courage

to portray graphically the violence and shame suffered by Dene children and their parents that continues to this day. These four writers, Pike, Cameron, Blondin and Alexie, provide me with a framework to show how the discursive construction of the Northwest Territories, which was shaped by early travel writing, was complicit with various disciplines associated with colonial management of the land and its peoples, and how recent indigenous narratives have attempted to reveal and reverse the effects of suppression and negation of the Dene under a colonial regime, thereby creating a new discourse of the NWT that includes indigenous history, mythology and culture.

In her study of marginal positions, Sneja Gunew notes that in the last few decades “certain frames that represent dominant ways of thought have been made visible” (29). “The corollary,” she explains, is that “the same process has exposed those elements hitherto excluded or on the margins, and whose existence makes possible both the dominant and the norm” (29). In the north the frames that have been made visible are those that used the episteme of imperialism, physically and cognitively, to construct and contain a vast and apparently unknowable land within the confines of European cultural knowledge. Using certain metanarratives such as the notion of the universal history of western civilization and European concepts of culture, religion, science, race and class, religious leaders, government officials, scientists, social scientists and politicians framed the NWT in ways that allowed it to be claimed and appropriated according to criteria of economics, politics and empire. Through this process the people and the land itself were “negated” by what Margaret Turner, in *Imagining Culture*, calls “acts of possession” (8). Although Turner is referring to American indigenous populations, the same principles can be applied to the treatment of the NWT Dene. Turner argues that:

in not allowing the possibility of the natives' otherness, in "emptying out" the category of the other, in transforming and then recuperating the other by means of European codes of cultural recognition, the Europeans profoundly negated the existence of the native population. . . . Europeans performed acts of possession to place the new world firmly within the known universe. (8)

I argue that travel writers such as Pike and Cameron contributed to these practices of negation by representing the native people they encountered as savages, either noble or base depending on the circumstances, and that they also attempted to appropriate the land in various ways through mapping, renaming, representation and imposition of their own values and ideals. It was not until the latter part of the 20th century that the Dene of the NWT, awakening to the realization that their land, their culture and their language were disappearing under the "violence of framing" (Gunew 29), began to wage a political counter resistance to reclaim their identity and their land by making visible the frames that had marginalized them and thereby to undo, not only the political constraints on their ways of being, but also the authority of imperial and colonial discourses.

Interestingly enough, in the NWT, political redress came before literary resistance despite the fact that, traditionally, according to Edward Said, cultural reclamation is first identified by "prophets and priests" and "poets and visionaries" ("Yeats" 76). There were visionaries in Dene culture according to George Blondin, and there were, of course, Dene oral story tellers, but why there are so few indigenous writers in the NWT is a matter of speculation. Dene children have been attending residential schools and learning to read and write since the early 20th century. Sherrill Grace argues that the Dene, as well as other Native groups, "may have been reluctant to talk about, re-present, publish, or otherwise reproduce

aspects of their culture, either because it is wrong to represent the sacred, because they have lost the languages and stories as a result of enforced acculturation, or because they fear further damage to their culture if it is made widely accessible” (*Canada* 243). These are certainly all valid assumptions and to them I would add that, as an oral culture, the Dene may have believed that print culture could not preserve their stories in the same social contexts that they were told, and they may also be acutely aware that print culture represents the medium that demonized Native people in Canada. It is, after all, the tool of the colonizers, the medium that gave rise to the stories Dene children learned in school about unfamiliar cultures, and the means by which Euro-Canadian story-tellers, poets and historians depicted and devalued Dene practices and lives. For whatever reason, there are very few written representations by either indigenous or non-indigenous writers of Dene history and culture and even fewer literary works. What there is, with the exception of Blondin, Alexie, Van Camp and native trapper and writer, John Tetso, is filtered through Eurocentric sensibilities that have denied the Dene their own voice and their own history.

In my dissertation I investigate first how the NWT was discursively imagined and constructed through the writings of travellers such as Cameron and Pike, and then examine Blondin’s and Alexie’s narratives to discover the Dene culture and history that has been lost and the strategies that these writers and others are performing to regain political, cultural and social identities. To do this I draw on various theorists who have speculated on the means by which dominant modes of culture and behaviour achieve status and thereby exclude or deny less desirable cultures. In Chapter 2, I outline how the theories of Edward Said, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu help me to understand how aspects of imperialism in the Northwest Territories served to discursively construct the indigenous peoples, the Dene, as

abject subjects of an extreme and harsh environment sorely in need of religious, political and social intervention, and how European interference was able to diminish and negate Dene culture. These same theorists and others, such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Homi Bhabha, are also useful in explaining how marginalized peoples become motivated to conduct counter resistances to recover their culture and their self-determination. I also look at the work of two story analysts, Julie Cruickshank and Edward Chamberlin, who have both written extensively on the power of stories to address political turmoil and social change, and how stories can become tools to construct a viable social and political present and future. I use their theories of story-telling to explore the implications of indigenous narrative and discover how writers such as Blondin and Alexie are able, through writing, to dismantle the stereotypes of imperialism and tell a different story. Finally, at the microlevel of the text, when I am struggling to understand the significance of some of the old legends and myths contained in Blondin's work, I look to tools of narratology and turn to the works of several narratologists, such as Mark Turner, David Herman, Jonathan Culler and others, to help me decipher the content of these stories and how they can be used by both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences, as Herman suggests, to "help us recognize and organize social situations" and allow us "to reconcile constancy and change, stability and flux" (166). He and other narratologists address questions of how story tellers come to grips with these and other problems by employing powerful tools associated with narrative.

By tracing the origins and the practices of imperialism and colonization in the Northwest Territories through the discourse of early explorers and travellers, and then considering how indigenous writers have inserted their own stories into the dominant narrative, I believe one can learn how to listen to and hear the voices that come from the land

and realise that, despite efforts to silence them both in the past and the present, they will not be suppressed and that they have a story to tell that is as important and valid as the one we learned in the narratives of empire.

Notes

- ¹ Hearne recorded his travels in a series of journals which were published twenty years after his last trip as *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean*. The book, which has become one of the best known examples of early Canadian literature, continues to attract readers and controversy, most of which revolves around the description of the massacre at Bloody Falls that Hearne witnessed.
- ² Lisa LaFramboise documents some accounts of women's travel to the Mackenzie River area in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Chapter 2: A Theory of Recovery

Imperialism, after all, is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control (Said, "Yeats" 77).

In his seminal work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said develops his concept of "Orientalism" to describe a subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-Islamic peoples and their culture. He argues that a long tradition of false and romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in western culture had served as a justification for Europe and America's colonial and imperial ambitions in the east. He describes how knowledge about third world cultures was spread throughout the civilized world and analyses the implications of the use of literature of empire for the promotion of European imperialism. Said notes that in texts about colonized countries a number of recurring features and ideologies produced information about Eastern civilization that gradually became part of a discourse of accepted beliefs about "Oriental" culture. Many of these ideas were disseminated by travellers whose aim was to produce information and then incorporate it into a particular ideological framework through their narratives. What Said calls a "textual attitude" is then perpetuated when other travellers form opinions based on information gathered from texts rather than from direct experience. This is most likely to occur, according to Said, when "a human being confronts at close quarters something relatively unknown and threatening and previously distant" (*Orientalism* 93). Not having the experience or knowledge to understand the phenomenon, the startled and uncomprehending traveller resorts to the words and designations he has read in texts. A second situation then emerges that Said calls the "appearance of success." If someone reads a book saying that certain attitudes prevail, or

things occur in a certain area, and then encounters that phenomenon, then one is likely to read more by that author and the author is likely to write more on the subject. The result is “a rather complex dialectic of reinforcement by which the experiences of readers in reality are determined by what they have read, and this in turn influences writers to take up subjects defined in advance by readers’ experiences” (*Orientalism* 94).

To explain how this “dialectic of reinforcement” is transformed into formal and generally accepted knowledge, Said turns to Michel Foucault’s theories of discourse. Said maintains that “texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Foucault calls a *discourse*, whose material presence or weight, not the originality of a given author, is really responsible for the texts produced out of it” (94). Said argues that it was these types of knowledge-making and textual attitudes that were responsible for creating the idea of the Orient and attitudes about the Orient. “The transition from a merely textual apprehension, formulation, or definition of the Orient to the putting of all this into practice in the Orient did take place, and Orientalism had much to do with that . . . *preposterous* transition” (96).

I argue that a similar *preposterous* transition arose with regard to European attitudes toward the Canadian north from the time that early northern explorers such as Samuel Hearne returned home to Europe with journals filled with stories of perilous travels in the north. The images of northern Canada that emerged from early travel narratives resulted in a “textual attitude” that is difficult to dislodge, and even today most people’s knowledge of northern Canada and other far away places is formulated from books or other media that may propagate false or idealized representations. For example, northern writer and traveller

Robert McGhee recalls his early experience with northern writing and how his concepts of northern knowledge turned out to be questionable:

During the 1950s, the little we knew of distant environments came mostly from books and movies, and from the imaginary journeys that they stimulated.

Our ignorance gave travel writers the freedom to create visions of romantic landscapes and exotic peoples that at times were only tenuously related to reality .

. . my imagination was awash with Arctic images that had flowed from books. (8)

In some ways little has changed. Northern magazines such as *Up Here* are filled with stories of adventure and danger that appeal to would-be northern travellers, but at the same time many visitors often find that the “facts” they thought they knew about the north dissolve on closer inspection. For example, two unsuspecting tourists taking part in a Mackenzie River adventure trip write in their travel narrative published in *Up Here*:

We didn’t *expect* [my emphasis] to sweat in 32-degree heat. Neither did we *expect* to shiver in near-freezing temperatures the next morning. We didn’t *expect* the jaw-dropping beauty of Virginia Falls, the glimpse of exotic birds or a star-studded church in Fort Good Hope. And we didn’t *expect* the tapestry of family ties that threaded our trip. (Cardozo and Hirsch 34-41)

Like many travellers who have preconceived notions about the north learned from text books, history classes and travel narratives, Cardozo and Hirsch found that what they had expected was not always there and that what they did see was unexpected. “Textual attitudes” toward arctic landscapes and people and the discourse that has arisen around them often do not survive their encounters with reality.

Travellers' tales were starting points for various discourses that gradually formed to understand and process northern Canada. In themselves, such discourses and knowledge appear benign but, as Foucault argues, all forms of knowledge are definable in terms of power relations. To have knowledge is to have power, and the knowledge and the conceptualization of the north became the means by which it could be defined in terms that allowed agents of imperialism to engage with and appropriate the land and the people for their own ends. In *Orientalism*, Said notes that "the Orient is not an inert fact of nature" but that it is, like the Occident, "man-made. . . . the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" (4,5). He presents the geographical endeavor as a mapping of the other ("the east") by an imperial power ("the west"), and uses the term "imaginative geography" (71) to describe how the west was able to construct discursively what might otherwise be regarded by the west as alien and incomprehensible lands. Said argues that the way in which "the west" sees/reads/imagines "the east" is indicative of the "universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs'" (54). According to Said, such binaries are central to imperialistic practices by which European powers were able to legitimize the appropriation of foreign territories and lands as well as the domestication and westernization of the people. In discussions of various European narratives Said demonstrates how oppositional binaries are introduced through the rhetoric of imperialism and colonialism. I find these observations useful in my own reading of early NWT explorer/traveller narratives that employ similar rhetorical figures and delineate clear distinctions between binaries such as Us/Ours vs.

Them/Theirs, Civilized vs. Savage and, despite the fact that many travellers owed their safety and their lives to their Dene guides, Organized and Provident vs. Unruly and Careless.

Perceiving the colonized as incompetent and primitive savages in need of civilization and salvation, and interpreting the land as unused and underdeveloped has frequently been the justification for imperial and colonial practices which are associated with varying degrees of economic, political, educational and religious control, as well as cultural dominance.

In *Orientalism*, Said provides examples of the interrelationships between the practices of imperialism and colonization and the various political, social and economic domains that develop from them. These arguments are pertinent to my own project of attempting to explain how, based on discourses built up through textual representations, various bureaucratic systems were developed in the NWT to exert control over the social, cultural, political and religious practices of the NWT Dene.

The justification for the development of such systems stems from the knowledge and representations that are available about the people and the land that are being controlled. In his study of how western powers construe and appropriate colonial territories and people, Said argues that *representation* itself is an act of violence, in that it selects and excludes various elements of the object it is describing:

Representation, or more particularly the *act* of representing (and hence reducing) others, almost always involves a violence of some sort to the *subject* of representation, as well as a contrast between the violence of the act of representing something and the calm exterior of the representation itself, the *image* – verbal, visual, or otherwise – of the subject. (94-5)

To explain how the act of representation is damaging to those it identifies, Said again turns to Foucault's position on knowledge, arguing that "the most notable thing about [Foucault's] definition of *knowledge* is that it is a series of denials" (*Beginnings* 35). According to Foucault, truth, morality, and meaning are created through discourse and knowledge. The discourse of the dominant group will ultimately privilege ideas of what is normal and desirable, and by stressing those values, will implicitly marginalize or deny those who do not adhere to the same standards while at the same time attempting to impose normal and desirable standards on the inferior group. Europeans who travelled to or lived in the Northwest Territories, may have tried to be careful and responsible chroniclers of the land and the people, but inevitably they privileged their own values in their observations and by doing so *denied* aspects of the NWT Dene that gave meaning to their existence and then forced them into positions that ignored such entities as culture, language and religious beliefs.

Travel writers such as Warburton Pike and Agnes Deans Cameron represented indigenous people in ways that drew attention to their nomadic and untamed nature thereby denying them positions of cultural normalcy. Missionaries and church representatives denounced and denied their religious practices, and government officials and educators denied their language and their stories, insisting that Dene children abandon their language and their traditions to attend residential schools where another culture and knowledge was forced on them. Ultimately, through consistent practices of denial, the Dene became redefined as a somewhat childish "other" in need of cultural redemption, and their culture and their heritage were lost and denied in Northwest Territories' and Canadian history. Indigenous peoples in the NWT, and indeed, all of Canada, have experienced great difficulty

and frustration in repudiating these early representations of themselves. In Europe, I still hear them referred to as “Red Indians,” as in, “Do you have Red Indians where you live?” and many Canadians, if they think of indigenous people at all, imagine only poverty-stricken reservations or the urban “Downtown Eastsides” of major Canadian cities. Canadian history has not been kind to indigenous peoples, casting them, until very recently, in the role of, at best, temporarily useful but doomed children of the wilderness and, at worst, as dangerous obstacles to colonisation in the past, and obstructions to urban gentrification in the present. In their position as the first inhabitants of Canada with their own social structures and ancient cultural traditions they were, for many years, under-represented in Canadian history.

As a way of addressing why and how certain representations of knowledge or culture are excluded from official representations of history and from central governing bodies, I find it useful to look at Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the reproduction of “cultural capital.” Within the term, “theory of practice,” Bourdieu explains how one type of knowledge reproduces itself as normal and legitimate while, at the same time, excluding what it regards as inferior or marginal. Bourdieu distinguishes between “subjectivism” and “objectivism” as ways of apprehending the social world:

Objectivism constitutes the social world as a spectacle offered to an observer who takes up a ‘point of view’ on the action and who, putting into the object the principles of his relation to the object, proceeds as if it were intended solely for knowledge and as if all the interactions within it were purely symbolic exchanges.

(52)

In other words, an objective approach to the world would tend to manipulate knowledge to give it authority without reflecting on the social and historical conditions that may have

suppressed other ideas and principles. The objective viewpoint is usually taken from “high positions in the social structure, from which the social world is seen as a representation” (52). I think of Agnes Deans Cameron travelling down the Mackenzie River objectively regarding the “spectacle” of the Dene and their land from the high position of her Hudson’s Bay steamer. In time, objective viewpoints produce their own discourses that reconstruct certain events and historical sequences into narratives that are recognized by a particular culture as real or important measures of legitimacy and authenticity. At the same time, undesirable events or practices are excluded, erased or justified under the prevailing hegemonic discourse through what Said calls the “violence of representation” and Foucault calls “acts of denial.”

As a way of correcting the violence of representation or denial, Bourdieu and Said advocate strategies that are quite similar in that they invite contributions from those most affected and marginalized by objectifying representation. It is possible, Bourdieu argues, to “step down from the sovereign viewpoint from which objectivist idealism orders the world,” but to do this “one has to situate oneself within real activity as such” (52). To achieve this it is necessary to escape from the structure which is constructed when objectivism breaks with primary experience and “return to practice” which, as Bourdieu explains, involves considering the social conditions under which knowledge becomes defined, produced and distributed, or repressed and eliminated, in struggles for legitimacy. In order to understand how demographic minorities have been marginalised in the prevailing master narratives of NWT and Canadian history and cultural representation, this would mean considering the social and political structures under which authoritative narratives were written and the historical conditions of imperialistic practices that contributed to the loss of Dene agency. It would also mean paying close attention to current representations of Dene culture and history

to understand how the Dene are attempting to decentre the imperialistic ideologies that devalued their culture and make visible the stories and the history that were repressed.

Recovery of Dene history and culture could be most usefully achieved by examining systems that have been repressive because they did not allow intervention or participation on the part of those represented, nor did they acknowledge existing practices or cultural tradition. In the early years of the imperial and colonial domination of the NWT, local administrators had to keep detailed and precise records of both economic and social activities for their absent employers in the seats of Empire. These official observations and compilations of statistics, although essential to produce the knowledge necessary to administer a colony, were collected at the expense of local knowledge and traditions and, in time, official history superseded local stories. In this kind of system, those being administered become victims of what Bruce Kapferer calls “bureaucratic erasure,” which occurs when people are distanced from their lived experience as a result of practices of categorization imposed by bureaucratic, scientific, technical and military management. In bureaucratic practices, he argues, “the individual is an abstraction. . . . It is disembodied as it were” (84). Kapferer describes the bureaucratic process as a “disembodiment and fragmentation (and reduction) of human beings who otherwise live their worlds as larger and more fluid embodied totalities (84). The victims of imperial and colonial bureaucracy enter a state of dependency, in which, in a Foucauldian paradigm, the group or the people become part of a bureaucratic system that transforms them from being part of a cohesive social group with a rich and complex history, into individuals, “to be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day” (Foucault, *Discipline* 191). With respect to the indigenous people of Canada, the information amassed from the collection of data by colonial officials

became the basis for creating a system to enclose the subjects within a Eurocentric field that reduced them to being wards of the government, no longer responsible for their own lives or destinies. As Arthur Meighen, then minister of the interior, told the Canadian Parliament in 1918: “The Indian is a ward of the Government. . . . The presumption of the law is that he has not the capacity to decide what is for his ultimate benefit in the same degree as his guardian, the Government of Canada” (Francis 202).

In the Northwest Territories the Dene were not consigned to reserves as they were in southern Canada nor were they subject to the same loss of land and interference with their nomadic, hunting lifestyle. On the contrary, they were encouraged to continue to provide for themselves through hunting and trapping. However, these practices, which constituted the single most important cultural determinant of the Dene, were eventually eroded with the introduction of residential schools. The system of residential schools required children to be removed from their parents and sent away to church-sponsored schools for months and years at a time where the goal was to erase their culture, their language and their dependence on the land and assimilate them into the white population. As a result, the Dene lost their ability to survive well on the land and to teach their children the skills that their culture depended on. These government sanctioned strategies, that Dene writer Richard Van Camp has called “a legacy of genocide” (“Review”) resulted in the loss, not only of Dene hunting practices, but also of their language and the stories that contained their history and their traditions.

To interrogate the repressive systems that imposed a white, Christian, Eurocentric ideology on the indigenous peoples of the NWT means searching for alternate representations of Dene history and culture and then examining those texts with a view to uncovering a different discourse that can offer counter resistance to centrist and hegemonic

knowledge and practice. That discourse can be found in part in explorer narratives, which, when not contributing to representations of abject and ignoble savages, often present a clear view of Dene lives and practices. By questioning such documents and texts, the presence of a different story can be revealed, and even though explorers and travellers were adding to a “discursive construct” of the NWT that was based on certain fixed imperialistic ideals, they were also writing localized histories from their first-hand experience. These “textualized remains” of early explorer narratives are the only history that exists for certain periods and certain areas. The Dene did not have a written history until anthropologists and ethnologists pieced together evidence of their culture, and until George Blondin collected and wrote down their stories. Before that the only evidence of social and cultural history that existed was what explorers and travellers such as Samuel Hearne, Agnes Deans Cameron, Warburton Pike and others personally witnessed and recorded. Despite the fact that many explorers were influenced by personal bias and wrote from a Eurocentric world view, they are a valuable source of information about day-to-day activities and certain important events in the post-contact lives of the NWT Dene. I regard early traveller narratives as dual purpose documents in that, even as they contributed to representations of the land and the people of the NWT that justified colonial practices of taming, civilizing and normalizing, so they are a rich source of local indigenous knowledge.

Dene storytellers also have their own tales to tell; however, until recently there was little room for intervention by Dene speakers or writers offering representations of themselves or their land. Their songs and the stories of their history and culture were oral and although some early transcriptions were produced they were not the voices of the Dene themselves. In the late 19th century, Oblate Priest, Father Émil Petitot (1839-1916), listened

to stories in the Dene language and wrote them down in French. They were later translated into English and published as *The Book of Dene*.¹ Undoubtedly Petitot recorded the stories as accurately as he could, and Jean Bristow, who translated them into English at a much later date, transcribed them as carefully as she was able to, but, by their very nature, oral songs and stories resist written preservation. Because they are designed for performative recitation and open to changes with every oral telling, much of their power and subtlety of thought is impaired when they are translated and reduced to a single interpretation in print. The cultural climate of the time, both when they are told and when they are transcribed, the personality and bias of the translator, and his or her skill in language and culture, can also affect the work. *The Book of Dene* has a decidedly Eurocentric perspective. The stories are arranged by chapters and numbered verses reminiscent of the Christian bible, and the Preface indicates that “just as in the bible you will find the histories, tales and traditions of the people of Israel as told by Moses and other storytellers, so in this book you will find the histories, tales and traditions of the Dene as told by Dene a hundred years ago.” In this twice-translated narrative, the facts of the stories may remain intact, but the cultural context has been filtered through a Eurocentric, Christian lens and many of the stories convey a message of Christian values that is frequently at odds with traditional Dene belief.²

Evalyn Gautreau’s *Tale Spinners in a Spruce Tipi* (1981) also contains stories that are transcribed from Dene legends. During the eight summers that she visited the Dogrib village of Rae on Great Slave Lake, Gautreau collected Dene stories and wrote them down in English.³ She states that she has tried to retain “the dignified tone of the original myths” (Gautreau v), but it is difficult to know quite what she means because Dene stories are often violent and brutal and, indeed, when George Blondin retells the old stories in his own

narratives, “dignified” does not seem a particularly apt description of them. Gautreau, no doubt, accurately translated what she heard, but her reinscriptions of the myths reflect her literary background, and her representation of the Dene seems highly influenced by her own cultural preferences. More recently, a number of researchers have collaborated with Dene elders and story tellers to collect and preserve their stories (Andrews and Zoe 1997; Andrews, Zoe and Herter 1998; Hanks 1997; Helm 2000; Helm and Gillespie 1981; Legat 2002; Raffin 1982; J. Ryan 1995). However, it is important to remember that much of this work, despite being done with the best of intentions and scholarship, is still just a *representation* of Dene voices, and that it is only recently that any Dene writer has been able to write his or her own story in his or her own words, or to dispute the story told by European historians.

To make room for the intervention of Dene voices in NWT history it is useful to recruit some of Foucault’s ideas on how the coercive capacity of language and discourse can be redefined or fragmented to allow history to be viewed, not as a unified and linear fixed story, but as a series of mini-histories or discursive events that incorporate the local and the marginalized. What Foucault calls his “archaeological method” enables him to create a logic of “correlation, adjacency, and complementarity” (*Archaeology* 4), that allows analysis of the ways in which discontinuity and chance intervene and collude with established systems. In looking at history in this way, Foucault notes that attention is turned away from “vast unities,” to the “phenomena of rupture, of discontinuity. Beneath the great continuities of thought, beneath the solid, homogeneous manifestations of a single mind or of a collective mentality . . . one is now trying to detect the incidence of interruptions.” Such interruptions or alternate histories

suspend the continuous accumulation of knowledge, interrupt its slow development, and force it to enter a new time, cut it off from its empirical origin and its original motivations, cleanse it of its imaginary complicities; they direct historical analysis . . . towards the search for a new type of rationality and its various effects. (4-5)

What Foucault means is that, according to his archaeological method, the past cannot be represented as a single, overreaching discourse but must be seen as being composed of many small, familiar and “homely” stories which at first remain hidden and repressed by larger interests, but become available when the dominant discourse is called into question. These alternate or mini-stories have the ability to detach the dominant discourse “from the ideology of its past” and to reveal this past as ideological (5).

The discourse or discourses surrounding imperialism were constituted from a great many domains such as trade, travel and exploration, science, and humanitarian and missionary activities, all grouped under the aegis of an ideology that celebrated empire, humanism and Christianity. Together they constituted what Said describes as a practice of “undeterred and unrelenting Eurocentrism” that

accumulated experiences, territories, peoples, histories: it studied them, classified them, verified them; but above all, it subordinated them to the culture and indeed the very idea of white Christian Europe. . . . This Eurocentric culture relentlessly codified and observed everything about the non-European or presumably peripheral world, in so thorough and detailed a manner as to leave no item untouched, no culture unstudied, no people and land unclaimed. All of the subjugated peoples had it in common that they were considered to be naturally

subservient to a superior, advanced developed, and morally mature Europe, whose role in the non-European world was to rule, instruct, legislate, develop, and at the proper times, to discipline, war against, and occasionally exterminate non-Europeans. (“Yeats” 72)

It would be simplistic to believe that this was all there was to imperial thought and action. Obviously there were other considerations, movements, conditions, themes, images and opinions that governed the practices of the makers of empire. However, it is safe to say that certain rigid ways of considering empire and colonised lands prevailed in 19th and early 20th century thought and that in northern Canada these attitudes and their totalizing power continued well into the latter part of the 20th century. Such ways of thinking are difficult to subvert because they deny the existence of adjacent or complementary discourses and continue to perpetuate themselves. However, as Said notes, such a discursive past “lasts only so long as its elements – which make the past possible . . . are of value” (*Beginnings* 302). When other elements intervene to fracture existing practices and question their value, peripheral discourses appear which are then put to use for other ideological or practical purposes. I look first at how the dominant discourses in the NWT were created, and then search for the peripheral discourses that allow certain well-entrenched practices and ideologies to be called into question.

In the Northwest Territories, as in any colonized country or region, discourses of settlement, economic exploitation and development, management of renewable and non-renewable resources and control of land have dominated political and social agendas for the past one hundred years. In addition, the prevailing attitude to indigenous peoples held that they were incapable of governing themselves and could not presume to take on the

responsibilities of Canadian citizens. Clifford Sifton, the Liberal minister responsible for Indian affairs from 1896 to 1905, told Parliament in the late 19th century: "I have no hesitation in saying . . . that the Indian cannot go out from school, making his own way and compete with the white man. He has not the physical, mental or moral get-up to enable him to compete. He cannot do it" (Getty and Lussier 126). Such paternalistic and imperialistic attitudes to indigenous peoples and their place in their land prevailed throughout the first half of the 20th century and remained uncontested in the Northwest Territories until well into the 1960s.

There are many reasons why opposing elements arise to challenge hegemonic discourse, but in the case of anti-imperialist resistance Said believes that the most significant element in awakening peripheral discourses is a desire for recovery of physical and geographical territory. "If there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism it is the primacy of the geographical in it. Imperialism, after all, is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control" ("Yeats" 77). Imperialistic discourse sanctions and approves actions that legitimize notions of appropriation of land and repress another people's claim to it under the aegis of exploration, economic development, financial gain, human improvement and any number of other activities undertaken in the name of empire building and civilization. When the realization finally occurs to the indigenous inhabitants that their land has been usurped and compromised by outside interests, small pockets of resistance may emerge, which then give rise to new discourses such as homeland recovery, land claims and nationalism. The new discourses and their accompanying dialogues have the

potential to undermine dominant and accepted notions of who controls the land and its resources and how the inhabitants will be governed.

In the Northwest Territories the land mass is so huge, so inaccessible and so inhospitable that it could never be physically conquered by European interests. However, from the time when the first treaty, Treaty No. 8, was signed in 1900, the Dene were taking note of increasing numbers of Europeans in their land and were becoming wary of their motives. They were particularly nervous about giving up their land for small amounts of money and vague promises. In 1971, Suzy (Joseph) Abel, a Dogrib elder, was interviewed about his recollection of the treaty process. In 1900, when he was in his early teens, he recalls a Dogrib man, Old Drygeese, acting as spokesman for the people. Drygeese was mistrustful of the treaty promises and wanted the terms clearly written down before anyone signed or received money. When the treaty agent promised there would be no changes to the Dene way of life, Drygeese replied: "If that's the way it is, I want to tell you something. As long as the world don't change, the sun don't change, the river don't change, we will like to have peace – if it is that way, we will take the money and I want you [the agent] to sign that that's the way it's going to be" (Fumoleau *As Long* 91). Some of the Dogrib did sign the treaty but in ensuing years there were troubling reports of inconsistencies, forged signatures (x's), lost documents, broken promises and misunderstandings. In time, the Dene realized that they had given up important rights to their land, a great deal of their independence and most of their culture and their history in exchange for protection and patrimony by the Canadian government. Despite their gradual realization throughout the 20th century that they were living poverty-stricken lives as second-class citizens who were denied such basic freedoms as the right to vote and the right to own property, the Dene at first had no means of resistance.

As a result of residential school education, the influence of the church, and the Canadian government's stated policy to assimilate the native people of Canada into the white population, the Dene had no political will, no cultural solidarity and no public voice to express their concerns. It was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s, motivated by fear of development and the need for land claims, that a few leaders emerged to demand that their heritage and their rights to their lands be reinstated.⁴

The discourses that arose from these demands took the form of land claims documents, political manifestos such as *The Dene Declaration*,⁵ and a small number of narratives that drew attention to Dene history and tradition and Dene treatment at the hands of the colonists. The most important of the narratives are George Blondin's three story-telling works and Robert Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls*. As a way of analysing these works I rely partially on Said and Foucault, both of whom describe methods of questioning the totality of history and the ideologies of universal knowledge. Foucault provides a vocabulary for describing irregularities and variances in texts, and Said notes that a number of features occur frequently in texts repudiating imperial ideologies. Such rhetorical strategies are useful in my attempt to decode traveller narratives that formed the basis of knowledge of indigenous peoples of the NWT.

While Said maintains that the awakening native consciousness begins with the desire for recovery of the land, followed by political action, Homi Bhabha finds that signs of an awareness of a native consciousness can be located first in the heart of the colonial discourses themselves and then in minority literatures. Discussions of colonial discourses traditionally emphasize the *opposition* between first world and third world nations, between colonizer and colonized, white and native, us and them. Bhabha, however, finds it more

productive to look at border situations and thresholds where “the concept of the ‘people’ emerges within a range of discourses as a double narrative movement” (*Location* 145). The “figure of the people” serves as a disruptive influence to fracture certainty and produce what Bhabha calls “interstices” or “faultlines” that create an ambivalence in the totalizing power of the dominant discourse and introduce the “unbearable ordeal of the collapse of certainty” (147). The “collapse of certainty,” according to Bhabha, occurs first in the *physical* contact zone when European travellers first meet the native inhabitants of a distant land and, finding them unrecognizable, are obliged to establish a discourse about them to account for their unknowable and alien condition and to transform them into types that can be manipulated by conquerors and colonizers:

The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction. . . . colonial discourse produces the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible. (70-1)

As Bhabha argues, the colonised subject can become knowable and visible in various Euro-oriented ways that ought to re-establish certainty and stability, but, as he also asserts, the colonized subject will never stand still and is alternately regarded as domesticated, harmless and knowable, but at the same time alien, uncivilized and dangerous. The colonizers and the colonized are seen to co-exist in an uneasy state, which in Bhabha’s terms is characterized by *ambivalence* and *anxious repetition* (86) - ambivalence about the unknowability of the other, and repetition of discourses necessary to affirm colonial dominance and native inferiority. At some point, Bhabha theorizes, the discourses become solidified as the national history, but at

the same time there remain remnants of a “native consciousness” that have the potential to cut into the fabric of the dominant story.

The presence of a native consciousness denies attempts to fix knowledge about colonised subjects because of what Bhabha calls the “ambivalence of the subject,” which becomes a direct threat to the authority of the colonisers through “mimicry.” Mimicry, according to Bhabha, is a condition of colonised people that results when they have been taught the lessons and values of the colonisers and become similar to them or, “almost the same *but not quite*” (86). The “*menace* of mimicry,” Bhabha argues, is “its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.” As an authorized, but inappropriate colonial subject, the mimic man can articulate “those disturbances of cultural, racial and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demands of colonial authority” (88). He can do this by returning the colonial gaze, by revealing the instability of the colonial legacy, and by challenging the authority of dominant historical knowledge and the representations that have attempted to fix and define him. Blondin, Alexie and Pike all make use of the trope of the reversal of the colonial gaze in their depiction of characters who challenge the white and “proper” method of viewing indigenous subjects.

By demonstrating how the discourse of colonialism can be split by ambivalence and mimicry Bhabha moves beyond Said’s model of Orientalism. Although Said traces the history of the construction of otherness in his work, he does not consider questions of how colonial discourses can be the source of their own deconstruction. Bhabha, on the other hand, forces a reading of colonial texts as containing the seeds of the demise of their own assertions, and of minority literatures as “supplementary adjuncts” that introduce “a sense of ‘secondariness’ or belatedness into the structure of the original demand.” The supplementary

strategy suggests, as Bhabha notes, that “adding ‘to’ need not ‘add up’ but may disturb the calculation” (155). I find Bhabha’s theories useful for examining explorer and traveller narratives as examples of colonial texts that slide ambivalently between firm affirmation of imperial attitudes and practices and an uneasy subversion of those positions. Agnes Deans Cameron and Warburton Pike, for example, both arrived in the Northwest Territories with somewhat fixed beliefs, based on the cultural mores of their time, about what they might expect of the land and its people. In different ways, their texts attempt to reiterate discourses of stereotypical patterns of an alien northern landscape and uncivilized indigenous people. However, the texts themselves work against many of the conventions of the traditional traveller narrative and imperialistic discourse, and reveal aspects of indigenous culture and life that make visible the possibility of other stories and other histories. Such stories and histories are also told through indigenous narrative, and again I find Bhabha’s theories of minority literatures as “supplementary adjuncts” useful in my analysis of Blondin’s and Alexie’s narratives. I argue that these works function as narrative inversions that insinuate themselves into the fixed and stable forms of the dominant discourse and work toward creating an alternate discourse that produces a more organic history and ideology. By calling this history organic, I mean that it is not a fixed pedagogical and linear narrative, but one that allows for small, fluid, local narratives, as well as reinterpretations of larger ones. Such narratives provide a people’s history that can be read alongside, and in addition to, political history to offer supplementary and alternate representations of official stories, reconstructing, as it were, the history of the Northwest Territories.

In a discussion of how a nation is produced through narration, Bhabha distinguishes between the “continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious,

recursive strategy of the performative” (145). The pedagogical is the homogenous succession of historical moments captured and fixed in a linear and horizontal movement, while the performative represents the heterogeneous, multi-vocal, pulsating voice of the people that interrupts and erases the totality of the colonial story. Indigenous narrative is particularly suited for this role because of its close affiliation with oral narrative and ancient story-telling. Both Blondin and Alexie incorporate traditional story forms into their narratives through their inclusion of circular stories without beginnings and endings told and retold in different ways, stories and myths that are integrated with the land and the animals, and multivocal stories that tell the history of the Dene through many different voices to reiterate and reaffirm the strength of their culture. These supplementary stories intervene and interact with the colonizers’ story, returning the gaze, redefining the moment and celebrating their difference from authoritative discourses.

As a way of describing how supplementary stories have the potential to oppose totalitarian discourses and hegemonic institutions, I borrow the term, “heteroglossia,” from Mikhail Bakhtin. Using the metaphor of a “centripetal force” which pushes things toward a central point, Bakhtin explains how monologic language (monologia) operates according to centripetal force and attempts to “unify and centralize the verbal-ideological world” (270). A “unitary language,” Bakhtin argues, does not just normalize and centralize verbal thought, but “gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the process of sociopolitical and cultural centralization.” The language and discourses of colonization and imperialism tend to direct all energy toward the creation of a unified and homogenous state and to suppress other local languages and traditions that defy central policies. But, such “unitary language” always

operates, according to Bakhtin, “in the midst of heteroglossia” (271), which is part of the “centrifugal forces of language [that] carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification.” Heteroglossia is the multiplicity of discourse that challenges the “normalizing-centralizing system of a unitary language” (272), and it is the multiple discourses of heteroglossia that work toward a decentring of authoritative systems. I will show how the multiplicity of discourses found both in explorer narratives and in minority narratives such as Blondin’s and Alexie’s work towards challenging official discourse in the NWT, but first I briefly outline the authoritative systems that were established in the NWT in an attempt to eliminate what can be seen as the untidy “heteroglossia” of the Dene culture.

To deal with the apparent random and structureless life of the Dene, various normalizing and disciplinary practices were undertaken by government and religious agencies to contain and enclose the Dene within a system of colonization that was designed to assimilate them into Canadian life and culture. The historical truth of colonialization is always related in terms of necessity, at first, economic necessity and then spiritual necessity. The fur traders, represented primarily by the Hudson’s Bay Company, were the first to modify Dene behaviour by establishing a market place that assumed an economic value for the resources of the land and also by creating a need for European goods. By enticing the Dene to become trappers, and establishing an exchange of furs for goods, the trading companies gathered the Dene into the space of the permanent trading posts thereby dominating and colonizing them through policies of inclusion, domestication and improvement rather than by confrontation. An excerpt from Governor Simpson’s Athabaska

Report emphasizes this practice and establishes an ideological link between commercial exploitation and moral improvement:

The Compys. Traders . . . made them [the Indians] acquainted with the use and value of European Commodities and being naturally of a vagrant disposition, and those articles becoming necessary to their Comforts, they shook off their indolent habits, [and] became expert Beaver hunters. (Rich 355)

The logic of this colonial discourse resides in the principle that colonized people are morally improved through participation in the colonial system. Conversely, those who do not participate are viewed as immoral, indolent and disobedient and therefore in need of further disciplinary practices.

Participation in the system worked well when trapping and trading were secure, but when fur-bearing animals became scarce, the Dene trappers, who had forgotten how to provide for themselves, either starved or became dependent on the Company or the government for physical survival. No longer capable of a nomadic life, the Dene were forced into a slum existence around settlements and trading posts and viewed as a disorderly threat who might “make their way out to the settled parts [of the country] and become the wards of the country” (Canada, Department of the Interior). Using a discourse of restoration of harmonious order, as well as a rhetoric of protection, policy makers were able to justify forcing indigenous people into government-organized settlements and villages, and view themselves in the paternalistic position of protectors of native peoples. René Fumoleau quotes the Lieutenant Governor of the Northwest Territories, the Honourable Alexander Morris, who, in 1875, was concerned about the deterioration of Indian tribes in contact with civilization: “The Canadian Government must consider itself as the father and the *guardian*

of all the Indian tribes. If it considers itself a true protector of these people who are living in a harsh environment it goes without saying that the Government should treat them accordingly” (*As Long* 26).

According to this way of thinking, justification of colonial practices is based on viewing the colonized as primitive savages in need of civilization and salvation. Representatives of the Catholic church provided the necessary justification for conversion and improvement of the Dene. Missionary, Father Roger Buliard, described the Dene as the “poorest of the poor, physically and morally” (Brody, *Living* 7), and Blondin states that: “The priests . . . told us our culture was evil. They preached that we would burn in hell forever if we kept singing with our drums and offering food to the fire. They told us to stay away from ceremonies and not to listen to our medicine people” (*Yamoria* 36). Even in the 1960s, Dene leader, Richard Nerysoo remembers being taught in school that “Indians were savages. We were violent, cruel and uncivilized” (Brody, *Living* 5). However, as Blondin notes, as long as the people remained primarily “on the land” the priests could not control what they did. It was only when the government decreed that all native children were to attend residential schools, under the auspices of the church, that the Dene culture was irrevocably changed.

From the beginning of the 20th century all Dene children in the Northwest Territories were required by law to attend school. The purpose of the residential schools, as determined by the Department of Indian Affairs, to drive a “cultural wedge between younger and older Indians” (Titley 25). Authorities were convinced that “aboriginal economic activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, and food-gathering would have to be abandoned,” and they decreed that: “The Indian should learn how to cultivate the soil or prepare himself for

employment in the industrial or mercantile community” (33). The assimilation of the Dene began with the children who were to be separated “from the deleterious home influences to which [they] would be otherwise subjected” and brought into contact with “all that tends to effect a change in [their] views and habits of life” (Canada, Parliament xi). Canada, through the agency of the Indian Department and the churches, presumed to take over the parenting of aboriginal children so that they “could take their place anywhere among the people of Canada” (Special Joint Committee 1647). This was to be achieved through the residential schools and churches. However, despite attempts to erase the language and culture of the Dene and absorb them into a central system, the exercise could not possibly succeed. The land was too vast, the Dene too widespread and the connection to the land was too strong. As long as the Dene languages survived, and the songs and stories continued to be told, the spirit, or what Blondin calls the “medicine power,” of the people could prevail. However, as Blondin notes, over the years the connection to the land and the knowledge of the stories weakened and the Dene were drawn by the forces of a central government into a life of dependency and uniformity. It was not until the Berger Inquiry of the mid-1970s that Dene voices were allowed to speak about their loss of culture, and more importantly, be listened to.

The two-year long Berger Inquiry was the turning point in the Dene’s progression toward self-determination and cultural recovery. The Inquiry came about in protest to a mega-project in the NWT to construct a pipeline to transport gas from Prudhoe Bay, Alaska across to the Mackenzie Delta and then up the Mackenzie River valley to markets in the south. The areas affected by these plans had been the homelands of the Dene for thousands of years and they protested that such massive development would alter their land and their culture so profoundly that they would never recover. In 1974, the Government of Canada

appointed Mr. Justice Thomas Berger as Commissioner to inquire into, and make recommendations on the social, environmental, and economic impact of the proposed gas pipeline. For two years Justice Berger traveled to settlements up and down the Mackenzie River listening to testimony from any individual or group with an interest in the development of the pipeline. He met with the people of the NWT in hotels, community halls, band offices, houses, bush camps and sometimes on the banks of rivers. He was determined to hear from everyone who might be affected by the pipeline, and the Inquiry became notable for the voice it gave to all Dene who, for the first time, were able to speak freely about their love of the land and what it meant for their cultural survival. Berger's report, *Northern Frontier*, *Northern Homeland*, released in May, 1977, took a wide range of voices into consideration, something that had never before occurred to such a degree in any resource management decision. After carefully considering the testimony of more than 1,000 speakers, Berger recommended a ten-year moratorium to deal with critical issues, such as Aboriginal land claims, setting aside key conservation areas, and planning for social disruption to the Dene before any pipeline could be built.

Justice Berger's Inquiry not only stopped the pipeline, but it gave rise to new discourses that transformed the way the Dene regarded their cultural rights, as well as the way that Canadians thought about and interacted with Aboriginal people. The Berger Inquiry is significant for the fact that it created a forum that allowed Canadian indigenous people to speak, for the first time, on their own behalf. As Sophie McCall points out, Berger's emphasis on consultation and the importance of listening to "the Aboriginal perspective" were important revisions of "Indian policy of the 1950s and 1960s" in which "non-aboriginal experts spoke on behalf of Aboriginal communities." She goes on to note that Berger also

“challenged the notion of the North as a ‘frontier’ to be developed for the benefit of the South, insisting it is also a ‘homeland’ to diverse Northern communities” (112). McCall allows that Berger played an important role in halting the pipeline and in bringing about a shift in First Nations discourse from assimilation to self-determination in the 1970s. However, she has serious reservations about Berger’s lack of attention to the colonial contexts of his Inquiry and maintains that while Berger appears to strongly endorse the Dene right of self-determination, “he is more concerned with Canadian national unity than with Dene self-government. Berger’s version of self-determination offers no clear departure from the colonial past” (118). McCall offers solid arguments in presenting this point of view and on the whole I find her perspective insightful and valuable. However, my endorsement of the Berger Inquiry focuses less on whether the Inquiry was just another example of the Federal government *allowing* its native peoples to speak out about their rights and then *accommodating* their requests within the same imperialist and paternalistic frameworks of the past, and more on the power of the oral testimony and written narratives that emerged from the Inquiry. The written narratives are contained in Berger’s own report, *Northern Frontier, Northern Homeland*, in Hugh Brody’s *Living Arctic*, and most recently, in Patrick Scott’s *Stories Told*. The testimony at the Inquiry was electronically recorded and the oral voices, in English, are transcribed verbatim into the written texts. The testimonies that were recorded in Dene languages were transcribed by Dene translators into English. Some recorded testimony is available online and the Dene voices of more than quarter of a century ago are still compelling in their impassioned insistence that the land is their very life and that they would no longer allow it to be used indiscriminately by outsiders.⁶

Most who spoke at the Inquiry made the connection between the loss of land and the loss of quality of life and culture. All agreed that colonial development in the past had destroyed their traditional way of life and that people had suffered “trying to fit into the change under the white man” (P. Scott 66). They spoke about how they had depended on the land in the past and how they wanted to preserve it in the future for their children and grandchildren. But some, with more perspicacity and vision, realized that it was necessary to map out, or to discover what Said calls a “third nature,” one that is not “pristine and prehistorical but that derives historically and abductively from the deprivations of the present” (“Yeats” 79). The “deprivations” at the time of the Berger Inquiry centred around the lack of worth and power the Dene felt when their land was in jeopardy, and their inability to take responsibility for their social, political and cultural future. Without legal and political title to their land, the Dene knew they would be compromised in the future, and many of the forward thinking elders expressed this view. Joe Naezdo of Fort Franklin, for example, spoke of land claims and his vision for Dene children. “We want 450,000 square miles because it is important to them, it is important for their children. . . . Except for our land the children have no future” (Berger 88). The Dene wanted title to their land, not because they wanted to own the land, but because they believed that a land claim settlement would provide security and protection for the land, and the people would have a voice in how the land was developed and used. Eventually, as a result of the Inquiry and other political developments some land claims were settled and the Dene achieved a measure of self-determination. Political negotiations for more land claims and more self-government are ongoing.

The Berger Inquiry was a political turning point for the Dene of the NWT in that for the first time since the beginning of colonization, they felt they had regained some control

over their land and their lives. No longer would their land be subject to appropriation or development without consultation with the Dene themselves. However, what is often forgotten in the wake of this landmark achievement is that, as Patrick Scott reminds us:

The real success rests in the story telling, not in the man charged with listening to the stories. What is most often forgotten is that the Inquiry became what it was through the many faces, which sat in front of the microphones in community after community and told their own story while Judge Berger listened. (3)

Somewhat like Bakhtin's heteroglossia that swirls as a "centrifugal force" around the "centripetal forces" of large, authoritative texts and histories, the stories had the potential to "wash over a culture's awareness of itself and its language, penetrate to its core, relativize the primary language system underlying its ideology and literature" (Bakhtin 368). The telling of stories represented the beginning of the struggle for the revitalization of Dene culture. The Inquiry was about stories; they were the centre of all forums and all meetings. They swirled about in the long summer nights in town halls, in kitchens and around camp fires. They were reported by the media and distributed across Canada. It was the first time many white people had heard the stories or were aware of their existence, and the first time the stories had been told to so large and diverse an audience. The stories were the main attraction and they travelled with Berger, going about their work of challenging ideas of colonial appropriation of the land, of ownership of the land, of political unity, of cultural erasure and of canonical historical narrative. As Patrick Scott notes, the stories were "more than tales of nostalgia. They were more than folklore or myth. The stories people told were a historical perspective on a culture and a way of life rooted in the land and representative of unique traditions" (138). The stories had the power to infiltrate mainstream historic discourses about

“Indians” and the far north and cause Canadians who paid attention to become aware that there was more to indigenous people and the wilderness of the Northwest Territories than the explorers and the history books had revealed.⁷

The Berger Inquiry was a means for the indigenous peoples of the NWT to develop a discourse to speak for the first time about what it meant to be Dene and the importance of their culture and their land. The recording of the Berger Inquiry stories opened the way for other indigenous narrative representations of the Dene and the North. Blondin wrote his narratives, *When the World was New* (1990), *Yamoria, the Lawmaker* (1997) and *Trail of the Spirit* (2006), to tell the myths and stories of the Dene people, and Dene writers Richard Van Camp and Robert Alexie deal with the difficulties of contemporary Dene life. In Chapters 5 and 6, I examine the narratives of Blondin and Alexie using, as I have outlined them in this chapter, theories advanced by Said, Bourdieu, Foucault, Bhabha and Bakhtin. I attempt to show how Blondin and Alexie use narrative, not only as way of recovering culture but also as a subversive tool to explore Dene representations of history, myth and memory.

The Berger Inquiry transformed the social consciousness of many Canadians and politicians who learned that the Northwest Territories Dene would not tolerate exploitation of their land and were determined to fight for political autonomy and social and economic equality. These sentiments were inherent in the stories they told. Furthermore, the story tellers believed that their words would make a difference and they were proven correct. No pipeline was built in the 1970s, and now, more than thirty years later, it is still not certain if the new Mackenzie Gas Project along the same route will go ahead in the next few years.⁸ This is a testament to the power of indigenous storytelling and remembering. Indigenous storyteller Maria Campbell believes that “all Aboriginal people are storytellers,” and,

according to Jennifer David, who has worked with indigenous writers, the stories they tell all share certain characteristics:

A passionate belief in the power of words to heal, to wound, to create. Lives are shaped by the stories told by parents, grandparents, elders. A reverence for storytelling as a bridge between hearts, eras, and peoples. And most of all, a faith that stories are an indestructible vessel for bringing old wisdom to life in a new time. (David 1)

I would add to this that stories have the power to structure the course of events as they did with the Berger Inquiry and the Mackenzie Gas Pipeline and to change the dynamics of relationships between disparate cultures. To consider how stories work to perform their magic I turn to story analysts, Edward Chamberlin and Julie Cruikshank.

In his book *If This is Your Land, Where are Your Stories?* Chamberlin develops the thesis that stories are vehicles that help us live our lives and that reflect and shape our deepest feelings, and that story-telling can assist in making choices for the future.

The sharing of stories and story-telling can also ease tensions between feuding participants whether they be individuals or nations. In situations of cultural conflict, Chamberlin argues for the importance of understanding not just our own stories but also what others are saying in their stories and myths. Much of the world's conflict is a history of dismissing different beliefs or different behaviour as "unbelief" or "misbehaviour," and of discrediting those who believe or behave differently as "infidels" or "savages" (70). Chamberlin examines the devastating consequences of dismissal or denial as being "the loss of home and everything that makes us human." He contends that the concept of home is closely connected to language and story, and when home and all that it represents is lost, story and song can

provide a “ceremony of consolation and commonality even as they present a litany of suffering” (77). Indigenous writers maintain that their very language and their stories come from the land that is their home, and when they become strangers in their lands, living a different culture with a new language, they turn to their own languages and stories to find ways of recovering ideas of home and land. Chamberlin believes that stories “keep us sane and steady in a world in which we are always having to face loss and unhappiness,” and that “home, the idea as well as the reality,” has the same power (78). The stories told at the Berger Inquiry were about the potential loss of homeland and culture and the effect of this on the Dene. At stake in the Pipeline debate was the future of the Dene, and the more people told their own stories and the more stories they heard, the more they became newly aware of who they were. Similarly, the white people who listened to the stories became aware of who the Dene were and the importance of their land.⁹

As stories are told over and over again they have the ability to infiltrate known and accepted ideologies and cause rifts, or what Bhabha calls “faultlines,” to appear in what people believe. They shake the dominant structures and make people question what were once accepted as indisputable facts. Practices such as colonialism, appropriation of land, assimilation of native peoples, forced attendance at residential schools and unchecked resource development no longer seem appropriate when the people who have suffered from these injustices speak for themselves and tell their own stories. And when it is realized that oppressed and marginalized people *have* a story, and it is not so different from that of the oppressors, the barriers between Them and Us begin to break down. Chamberlin believes that stories are ceremonies of belief as much as they are chronicles of events. “Every story brings the imagination and reality together in moments of what we might as well call faith” (2).

What we share, he argues, is the “practice of believing . . . and it is this practice that generates the power of stories” (3). In the ceremonies at the Berger Inquiry the stories opened up possibilities for believing that the Dene had rights to their land and to their own way of life. Similarly, when the stories are written down as they are in Blondin’s and Alexie’s narratives they contribute to a body of work that has the potential to challenge official views and add local perspectives to discussions on NWT knowledge and policy making. They also have the potential, as the first Dene writer, John Tetso, realizes to transcend borders and ideologies and find common ground between indigenous peoples and whites in the NWT. In his narrative, *Trapping is My Life*, Tetso writes of his life on the land as a trapper:

The bush man and his white brother have lots of things in common, and we have certain things we could learn from each other . . . things that we could put to good use, provided that we apply them right. This and other forces have compelled me to write a few pages when I have the time and I hope you like it also. (68)

Tetso’s gentle approach to narrative as a strategy of communication between different cultures is commensurate with what indigenous story analyst, Julie Cruikshank, finds in her study of Yukon indigenous narrative. Through her collaboration with Elder story tellers she learns that narrative in indigenous culture is important not just for what it *says* but also for what it can *do*. Cruikshank suggests that “oral narrative is better understood as a social activity than as a reified text, that meanings do not inhere in a story but are created in the everyday situations in which they are told” (*Social* xv). This is why stories are told over and over again in different situations and by different story tellers. Oral tradition can broaden our understanding of the past, but when the stories are retold in contemporary situations they have the power to inform and clarify events and decisions. Cruikshank realizes that

indigenous stories are viewed as “part of the equipment for living rather than a set of meanings embedded within texts and waiting to be discovered.” Meaning is never fixed. “It must be studied in practice – in the small interactions of everyday life” (41). I find this way of looking at narrative very useful in my readings of Blondin and Alexie, where the same stories are told and retold. Each time, however, the context is slightly different, the speaker may be different, the location has changed and hundreds of years may have intervened since the story was first told. When considering stories in this way it is possible to see clearly how they might have the power to destabilize official orthodoxies, which, as Bhabha maintains, are based on linear and factual accounts of events fixed in time and space and therefore subject to repudiation with shifting ideologies and discourses. Indigenous narratives, on the other hand, are fluid and flexible, changing over time as required but retaining the same basic motifs, which serve as tools for living and philosophical guidance.

It is clear that narrative can be a valuable tool for de-coding cultural differences, for understanding ways of thinking that may not be part of a reader’s familiar habitus and for reconfiguring events and practices thought to be fixed in traditional and well-established discourses. However, the question still remains as to how to read indigenous narratives and not confine them completely in conventional academic paradigms. Margery Fee, who has concerned herself with questions of how any reading of indigenous literature is problematised by “the understanding that critics and authors, whether indigenous or not, are affected by ideologies concerning the process of reading, writing and speaking,” argues for a different kind of reading that, “interrogates the primacy of Western culture, values respect for Indigenous positions, is open to new ways of viewing the environment, and finds worth in oral tradition” (25). The question I ask is how can I, as a middle-class, Eurocentric academic,

read and learn from the works of indigenous writers and not feel that I am appropriating native culture or sealing the text in a western critical discourse. In the context of this thesis it is impossible to consider the indigenous texts without the help of academic theorists, and I have outlined how I can use the work of Said, Foucault, Bhabha, Bakhtin, and others to explain how analysis of both traveller/explorer narratives and indigenous texts can lead to the discovery of contact zones and border-crossing activities that have the potential to reconfigure imperial and colonial discourses of NWT history and reveal other older and local stories. At the micro-level of the texts, however, I turn to a different set of theoretical strategies as I attempt to decode the indigenous narratives through the process of narratology, which although it is another method of western academic criticism, seems to me to come closer to indigenous ways of thinking than other conventional academic discourses.

Narratology is the theory and study of narrative and narrative structure and the way they affect our perception of both cultural artefacts and the world around us. Hayden White, whose work is concerned with exploring the interaction between narrative and what it purports to represent in both history and literature, explains that: “Far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted” (*Content* 1). In other words, no matter what our habitus, our history or our culture, narrative can be a valuable tool that can transcend individual realities and facilitate universal understanding. Some of the myths and stories contained in indigenous texts are difficult to understand from the perspective of a non-indigenous reader. Therefore, I have turned to the works of several narratologists, such as David Herman and Jonathan Culler, and cognitive linguist, Mark Turner, to help me decipher

the content of these stories and determine how they can be used by both indigenous and non-indigenous audiences to facilitate understanding in difficult situations and to foster intercultural connections. Herman, for example, suggests that stories in general, “help us recognize and organize social situations,” and he notes that they allow us to “reconcile constancy and change, stability and flux” (166). He addresses questions of how story tellers “come to grips with these and other problems by recruiting powerful representational tools associated with narrative” (166). Herman suggests that “stories’ polyfunctional communicative profile, their actual or potential manifestation in multiple discourse environments, is a reflex of their extraordinary serviceability as a tool for thinking” (171). To show how narrative supports core problem-solving abilities, he presents five models – “‘chunking’ experience into workable segments, imputing causal relations between events, managing problems with the ‘typification’ of phenomena, sequencing behaviours, and distributing intelligence across groups,” and he demonstrates how these cognitive activities “reveal ways in which particular narratives can be exploited as a tool for thinking about specific situations, as well as ways in which narrative in general constitutes a primary resource for building, recognizing, and using cognitive artifacts across variable circumstances” (172). I find I can apply models like these to Blondin’s stories and gain a glimpse into how a mythic world can intersect with the present and help people to incorporate unfamiliar events into familiar stories and construct meaningful ways to evaluate contemporary choices. As a non-indigenous reader I realize that I too can find ways to understand and make use of these stories even though they are not part of my cultural background.

Despite the fact that model-building in stories is shaped by our cultural background, narratologists believe that even though readers or listeners may not share cultural experience or habitus they do possess certain strategic abilities to decipher texts. Culler, for example, advances the idea that, through a process he calls *naturalization*, readers or listeners can “try to erase or synthesize textual inconsistencies by establishing overarching interpretative patterns that neutralize the inconsistency and provide an explanation for it” (Fludernik 252). The process of naturalization is related to interpretative frames. “Rather than seeing textual inconsistencies or contradictions as a frame clash, the process of naturalization manages to link both areas within one common frame. . . . In this manner, the contradictions become necessary functional elements within the superadded . . . frame”(251). In other words, when faced with narratives that might otherwise seem incomprehensible, human beings have the capacity to take what Mark Turner calls a “great mental leap” (119) that allows them to connect two stories and construct a framework for understanding differences. This process works both within the story and without, so that story-world characters can discover possibilities for choices within their stories, while outside the narrative, rather than suppressing stories that do not conform to known circumstances, readers can project their own experiences on to unfamiliar stories and create a “blended” model that provides meaning to apparently unrelated threads.

This approach to reading and listening to stories is particularly pertinent to the comprehension of indigenous literature in that it reflects the indigenous idea that active participation is the key to hearing stories. As indigenous writer, Basil Johnston notes: “If you tell a story properly, you don’t have to explain what it means afterwards” (Hoy 65). And similarly, if you listen to a Dene story properly you will not have to be told what it means

afterwards. To explain every detail is to disrespect the listener, who is supposed to be able to figure out the meaning for himself. As Cruikshank observes, with respect to passing on traditions to indigenous children, “the onus was on a child actively to learn what each of the greetings, exchanges, songs, and dances meant rather than on adults to provide elaborate explanations of each component” (*Life Lived* 32). Similarly in story telling, the onus is on the listener to be a participant who is actively engaged with the story and finds his own meaning in the narrative. The result of active listening is, to use Said’s term, the production of a “noncoercive knowledge” that is available for whatever use the listener chooses to make of it. Discourse conventions among Dene story tellers rely on audience interaction and a minimalist style that refrains from making comments, intervening in the story and explaining. Furthermore, in contrast to western critical inclination that aims for precision in exploring for the exact meaning of what people or sources say, and the expectation of a linear account with a beginning and ending, in the tradition of oral story telling, a story teller will never tell exactly what he means, the stories are seldom linear and they lack well-defined endings or closure. Despite the fact that Blondin and Alexie write in English, their stories retain the rambling characteristics of oral narrative and a sense of what legal scholar, Rupert Ross, calls, in a description of indigenous storytelling, a “celebration of the rich diversity of life, thought and feeling, rather than a contest between opposing views about what we ‘ought’ to think or feel” (x). Stories unfold in a random, episodic way with no pedagogical direction, and it is up to the listeners to extract what they need or desire from the content.

This concept brings me back to the theories of Bhabha and Bakhtin who view the texts that insinuate themselves into the grand, linear, historical narratives as *performative* pieces, works that originate from the people and from the margins, and work to subvert and

erode ways of thinking that threatened the lives and cultures of colonised nations. In the next two chapters I consider how the narratives of early explorers and travellers such as Cameron and Pike worked to contribute to Eurocentric representations of the land and the peoples of the Northwest Territories, and then in Chapters 5 and 6, I consider how Blondin and Alexie have managed to insert their own stories into the dominant narrative to subvert the colonial position and reveal an older story that began thousands of years ago and will continue into the future. As the youthful and fiery Frank T'Seleie stated more than thirty years ago at the Berger Inquiry:

We will live out our lives as we must and we will die in peace because we will know that our people and this river will flow on after us. We know that our grandchildren will speak a language that is their heritage. We know they will share their wealth and not hoard it, or keep it to themselves. We know they will look after their old people and respect them for their wisdom. We know they will look after this land and protect it and that five hundred years from now someone with skin my colour and moccasins on his feet will climb up the Ramparts and rest and look over the river and feel that he too has a place in the universe, and he will thank the same spirits that I thank, that his ancestors have looked after his land well and he will be proud to be a Dene. ("My nation." see also P. Scott 119-120)

Notes

- ¹ Jean Bristow told me (August 2008) that in 1975 she had obtained a contract from the NWT Department of Education to translate Petitot's text into English. Jean had no particular qualifications for the job other than that she was fluent in English and French. She had recently arrived in Canada from England and had little knowledge of Dene culture. The translation she produced is fluent and conscientious, but it is impossible to know if there are subtle cultural tones and meanings that might have been difficult for Jean to discern.
- ² The book includes origin myths about creation, the first man and woman, the naming of animals, a great flood and the repopulation of the earth afterward, the multiplication of language, tribal origins, the discovery of copper, the first canoe and sailor, and the first war. Other tales concern wars with the Eskimos and other enemies, the coming of the French, and appropriate social or ritual behaviours.
- ³ The trading post of Rae, later called Rae-Edzo, is now known by its traditional name of Behchokö. It is on the North Arm of Great Slave Lake, 106 km north of Yellowknife. Behchokö means "Big Knife" in the Dogrib language.
- ⁴ It is interesting that these leaders were all products of residential schools. The Dene experience in residential schools was both negative and positive. Most of the leaders who began the counter resistance movement in the 1970s were educated in residential schools and credited the education they received for their ability to negotiate a position for the Dene in the NWT and Canadian political arena.
- ⁵ The Dene Declaration was passed at the Second Joint General Assembly of the Indian Brotherhood of the Northwest Territories, at Fort Simpson on July 19, 1975. The Dene declared in a Statement of Rights that:

We the Dene of the Northwest Territories insist on the right to be regarded by ourselves and the world as a nation.

Our struggle is for the recognition of the Dene Nation by the Government and peoples of Canada and the peoples and governments of the world.

As once Europe was the exclusive homeland of the European peoples, Africa the exclusive homeland of the African peoples, the New World, North and South America, was the exclusive homeland of Aboriginal peoples of the New World, the Amerindian and the Inuit.

The New World like other parts of the world has suffered the experience of colonialism and imperialism. Other peoples have occupied the land – often with force – and foreign governments have imposed themselves on our people. Ancient civilizations and ways of life have been destroyed.

Colonialism and imperialism are now dead or dying. Recent years have witnessed the birth of new nations or rebirth of old nations out of the aches of colonialism.

As Europe is the place where you will find European countries with European governments for European peoples, now also you will find in Africa and Asia the existence of African and Asian countries with African and Asian governments for the African and Asian peoples.

The African and Asian peoples – the peoples of the Third World – have fought for and won the right to self-determination, the right to recognition as distinct peoples and the recognition of themselves as nations.

But in the New World the Native peoples have not fared so well. Even in countries in South America where the Native peoples are the vast majority of the population *there is not one country which has an Amerindian government for the Amerindian peoples.*

Nowhere in the New World have the Native peoples won the right to self-determination and the right to recognition by the world as a distinct people and as Nations.

While the Native people of Canada are a minority in their homeland, the Native people of the Northwest Territories, the Dene and the Inuit, are a majority of the population of the Northwest Territories.

The Dene find themselves as part of a country. That country is Canada. But the Government of Canada is not the Government of the Dene. The Government of the Northwest Territories is not the Government of the Dene. These governments were not the choice of the Dene, they were imposed upon the Dene.

What we the Dene are struggling for is the recognition of the Dene nation by the governments and peoples of the world.

And while there are realities we are forced to submit to, such as the existence of a country called Canada, we insist on the right to self-determination as a distinct people and the recognition of the Dene Nation.

We the Dene are part of the Fourth World. And as the peoples and Nations of the world have come to recognize the existence and rights of those peoples, who make up the Third World the day must come when the nations of the Fourth World will come to be recognized and respected. The challenge to the Dene and the world is to find the way for the recognition of the Dene Nation.

Our plea to the world is to help us in our struggle to find a place in the world community where we can exercise our right to self-determination as a distinct people and as a nation.

What we seek then is independence and self-determination within the country of Canada. This is what we mean when we call for a just land settlement for the Dene nation. (qtd. in Watkins 3-4)

⁶ Chief Frank T'Seleie of Fort Good Hope, for example, gave what came to be regarded as the most poignant speech against the pipeline speaking directly to Foothills Pipelines president, Bob Blair: "You are the 20th century General Custer. . . . You are coming with your troops to slaughter us and steal land that is rightfully ours. You are coming to destroy a people that have a history of thirty thousand years. Why? For twenty years of gas? Are you really that insane?" ("My nation").

⁷ Richard Nerysoo of Fort McPherson spoke of what it means to be an "Indian" in the Northwest Territories:

I am sure it is becoming clear to you, Mr. Berger as it is very clear to me that it is an important and special thing to be an Indian. Being an Indian means being able to understand and live with this world in a very special way. It means living with the land, with the animals, birds and fish as though they were your sisters and brother. It means saying the land is an old friend and an old friend that your father knew, your grandfather knew, indeed your people have always known.

I am sure, Mr. Berger, that as you hear from the Indian people, from all along the Mackenzie Valley talk to you about their land, you are beginning to understand that we see our land as much more than the white man sees it. To the Indian people our land really is our life. Without our land we cannot or we could no longer exist as people. If our land is destroyed, we too are destroyed. If your people ever take our land you will be taking our life.

About the only way that I can explain to you how we people see ourselves is to say that we are a nation. We are the last free Indian nation of North America. We are a nation, we have a language, our own culture, our own economic system and political system and more important we have our own land. (Berger 94).

⁸ The Mackenzie Gas Pipeline Project is currently awaiting the conclusions of the Joint Review Panel which will determine under what conditions the project should proceed. The decision is due in November 2009.

⁹ Scott notes that before the Berger Inquiry the word "Dene" was hardly known. The people were still called Indians, a colonial term imposed by outsiders. In Fort McPherson the word Dene was never heard once during the hearings while the term Indian was used 171 times. However, a month later in Fort Good Hope, the word Dene was spoken 231 times while Indian was used 99 times. "The growing sense of self was expressed through that single word, Dene. . . . Being Dene, not being Indian, symbolized the decolonization that occurred in people as they told their stories to Judge Berger" (P. Scott 50).

Chapter 3: Travels in the Land of the Muskox

My father, you have spoken well; you have told me that Heaven is very beautiful; tell me one thing more. Is it more beautiful than the country of the musk-ox in summer, when sometimes the mist blows over the lakes, and sometimes the water is blue, and the loons cry very often? That is beautiful; and if Heaven is still more beautiful, my heart will be glad, and I shall be content to rest there till I am very old. (Saltatha qtd. in Pike Barren Ground 1917 302)

Warburton Pike was born in England in 1861 to a prominent west country family near Wareham in Dorset. He was educated at Rugby, an upper class public school that stressed Christianity and physical fitness. From there he went on to Brasenose College, Oxford where he spent his time with a group of similar young men of his class (Cockburn 152). However, Pike was restless in England and he left Oxford at nineteen without graduating. He may have studied mining engineering for a short time at Freiberg University in Germany (Hayball 3), but like many young men of his time he was attracted to unknown lands and difficult travel and soon began his life-long quest for adventure by going to Africa to hunt big game. From there he went to the United States where he hunted in Wyoming and Montana. He was a personal friend of Theodore Roosevelt's and hunted from Roosevelt's Montana ranch in 1883 and 1884 (5). In 1884, he moved to British Columbia and purchased a farm on Saturna Island where he was part of a group of young men with independent means who put down roots and spent their time hunting, fishing, farming and travelling. Pike spent the next few years as a wilderness traveller and adventurer in the interior of B.C. and was also involved in a number of business ventures in the Gulf Islands. This part of Pike's life has been extensively documented by Peter Murray in *Home from the Hill* and Gwen Hayball in *Warburton Pike: An Unassuming Gentleman*. Fascinating as this part of his story is, I am,

however, primarily interested in Pike's travels to the Barren Ground of the Northwest Territories which he documents in his book *The Barren Ground of Northern Canada*.¹

Pike's Northwest Territories adventure began in June 1889, when he travelled by train from Vancouver to Calgary. Here, he writes, he loaded his small outfit, including a Paradox 12-bore shotgun and Winchester 50-95 rifle, two large blankets and "a little necessary clothing" on a buckboard cart and journeyed to Edmonton where he added a couple of sacks of flour and 50 pounds of bacon and set out for Athabasca Landing (*Barren Ground* 1917 1-3. All references are to this edition unless otherwise indicated). From here he picked up the Hudson's Bay Company steamer which took him to Fort Resolution, a small settlement on the south shore of Great Slave Lake. From this base he made two trips to the Barren Ground with various groups of "half-breeds" and also with some Dog-Rib and Yellow Knife "Indians" who lived in the area.²

In 1889, the Northwest Territories included most of the central part of Canada. It extended from the high Arctic mainland coastline to the United States border taking in all the area that is now Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba as well as northern Ontario and Quebec. By the time Agnes Deans Cameron began her journey down the Mackenzie River in 1908 the boundaries had changed (Figures 1 & 2). At the time of Pike's journey the Royal Northwest Mounted Police (RNWMP) had small detachments in various settlements and a casual authority over the entire area. The Hudson's Bay Company and other free traders operated trading companies and forts along the Mackenzie River, on the Arctic coast and out of Hudson's Bay. But the area between Hudson's Bay and the Mackenzie River, north of Great Slave Lake, designated the Barren Ground, was virtually unknown (Figure 3).

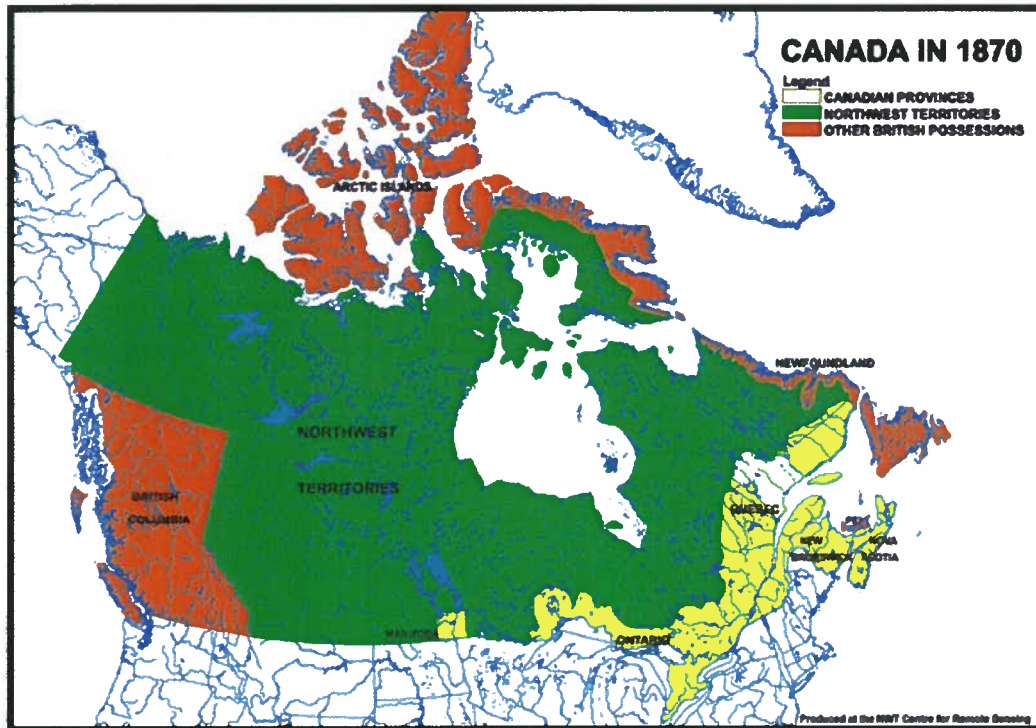


Figure 1. Canada in 1870

Source: NWT Centre for Remote Sensing

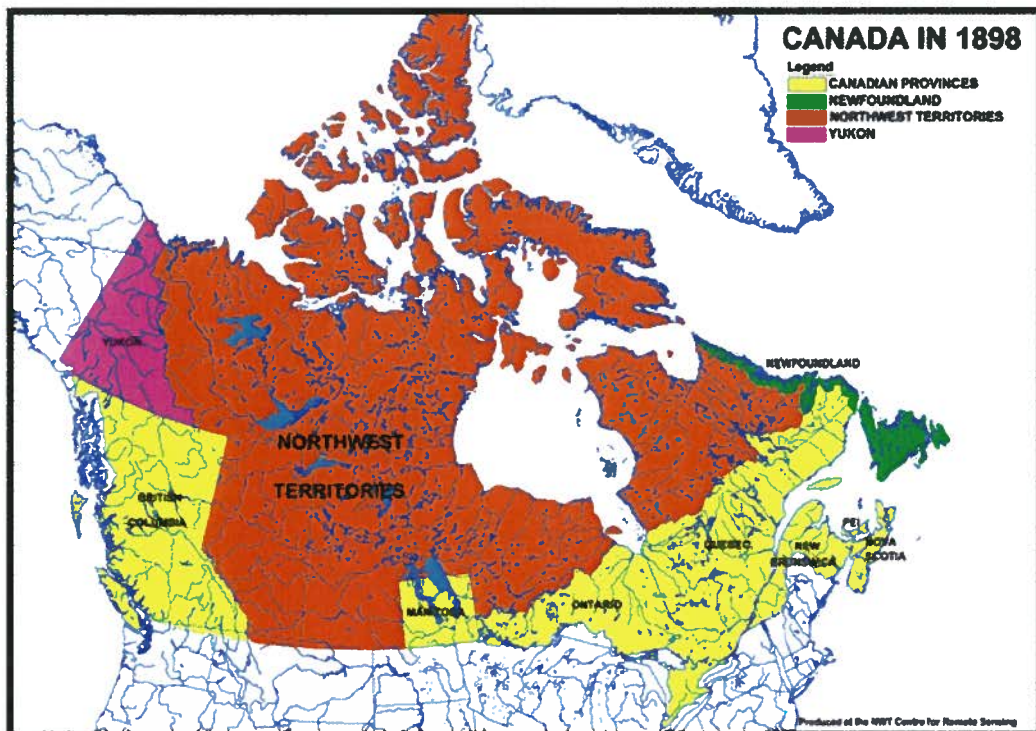


Figure 2. Canada in 1898

Source: NWT Centre for Remote Sensing

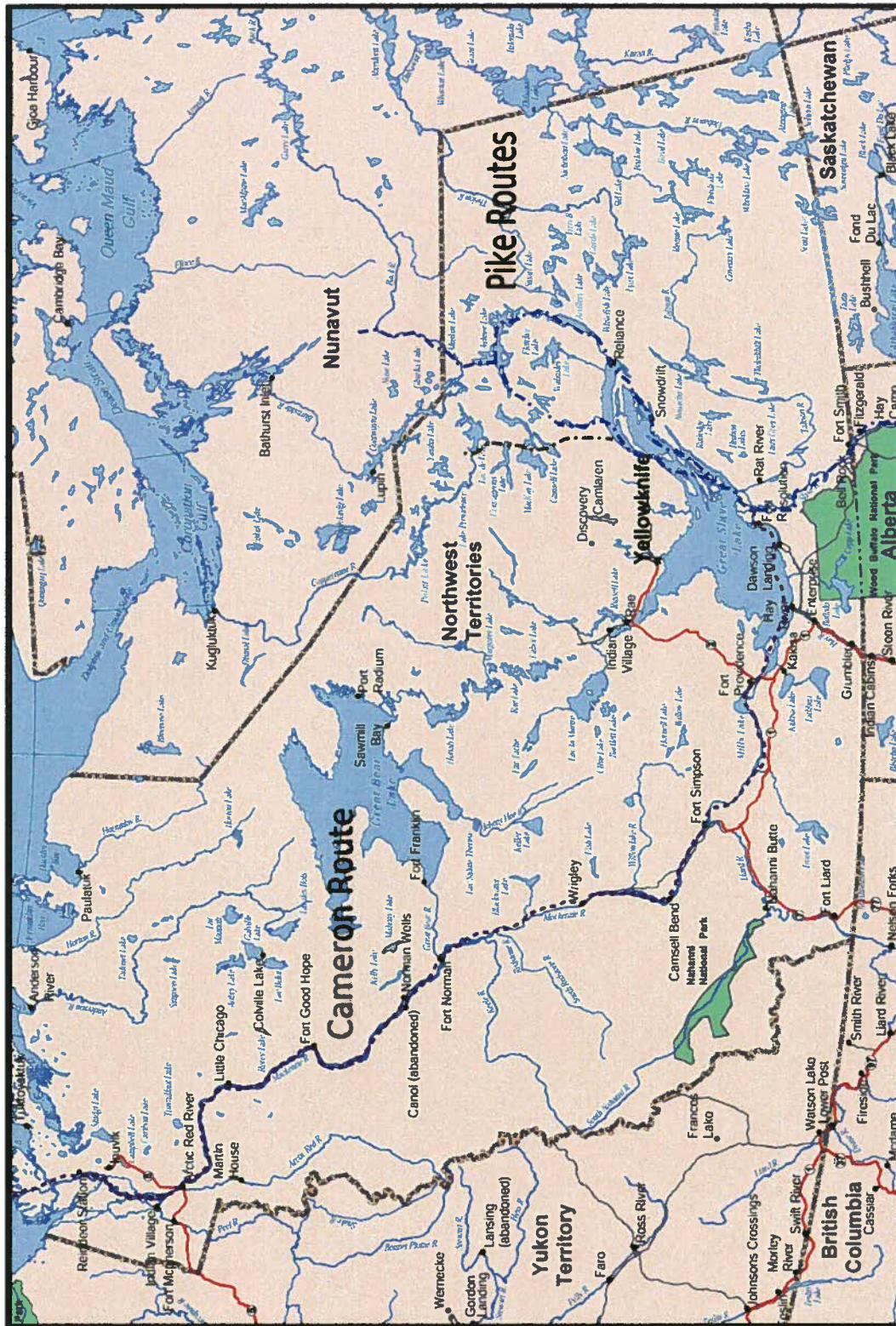


Figure 3. Area Travelled by Pike and Cameron

Source: Government of the Northwest Territories.

The only white men who had travelled through the Barren Ground were Samuel Hearne between 1769 and 1771, Sir John Franklin's party from 1819-1822, and Captain George Back's expedition in 1834. No native people made their homes on the Barren Ground but travelled there seasonally to hunt caribou and, occasionally, muskox.

Pike wrote two books about his northern travels. *The Barren Ground of Northern Canada* documents his journey to the land north of Great Slave Lake to search for muskox, and *Through the Subarctic Forest* tells of an epic journey to northeastern British Columbia, the Yukon and the Bering Sea. These works are not well known today and are rarely read except by people with an interest in northern history and northern travel. Both were republished in 1967 by Arno Press, New York. At the time of their first publication, when adventure narratives were popular, both were well received. Peter Murray documents some critical perspectives on Pike's narrative: In the *Fortnightly Review*, Basil Worsfold reviewed *Barren Ground*, writing that the practical results of Pike's expedition "appear wholly disproportionate to the efforts required," but noting that he was a sportsman rather than an explorer and endured hardships for the "pure love of adventure." His narrative reached a "level of poetic composition – by a simplicity of diction and a directness of aim" (Murray 20-1). An anonymous critic in the *Westminster Review* said the book was "full of rare information and gossipy sketches of a land which is outside the purview of ordinary civilized humanity" (Murray 21). In Canada, reviewer Paul L. Haworth, himself a northern traveller, said Pike's work was "a classic of adventure and exploration in the Canadian wilderness, and is to me the most fascinating book of all the many that have been published on this subject" (Murray 21). In the United States, *The Critic*, a literary journal, notes that the book was "rather dismally entitled" and the maps "perplexing rather than helpful." The review

describes Pike as “an English gentleman and sportsman, possessing the hardihood, high spirits and indomitable perseverance of his class” (Murray 21). I have to concur with the latter reviewer that the maps are perplexing but with the help of a modern map, Google Earth, and a close reading of the text I was able to follow Pike’s route.

It is noteworthy that in all of these critical assessments of Pike’s work, there is no mention of his views of indigenous people, their way of life, or Pike’s relationships with his indigenous travelling companions. The reviews concentrate on his heroic achievements, his abilities as a sportsman, his love of adventure and his upper class background. Richard Davis argues that 20th century exploration narratives evolved through three stages. At the beginning of the century they were characterized by a “desire to dominate the wilderness, to assert the unquestioned supremacy of the human will over undomesticated nature” (85). Barry Lopez suggests that Pike’s work belongs in this category by writing: “In Pike’s journal the tundra is a wild place that sagacious and incessantly tough men are meant to subdue, to survive in” (373). I argue, however, that although survival was an ever-present concern for Pike, his primary motive was not to subdue the Barren Ground, nor to claim or domesticate the area, but to try “to penetrate this unknown land, to see the Musk-ox, and find out as much as [he] could about their habits, and the habits of the Indians who go in pursuit of them every year” (vi). In terms of Davis’ categorization of three stages of exploration narratives, Pike appears to have been ahead of his time. Travellers in the second stage, according to Davis, “sought a relatively simple enjoyment of the natural world, a realm offering both unlimited freedom and adventure and an escape from social confinement.” In the third stage, the present, “the explorer seeks out unspoiled regions for what he can learn from them” (85). Pike’s Barren Ground journey embraced the second two stages. He was passionately attracted to untracked

wilderness spaces and restless during the time he had to spend in civilization. “There is an indescribable charm in this winter hunting in the great northern woods,” Pike wrote, “After a couple of days’ of comfort and high living in a house, some feeling of restlessness is sure to drive you out into the snow and its attendant discomforts” (Murray 25). Pike’s life was a craving to explore wild places and a quest for knowledge; his great desire during his Barren Ground journey was to learn about the animals, the people, and the country.

Pike was an interesting contradiction in terms. Despite his reputation in the bush as a rough and dirty traveller (his nickname was “Dirty Pike” or “One-Shirt Pike”), he always maintained his social connections and counted members of the gentry and upper classes among his closest friends. He was particularly close to Osborne Beauclerk, later Lord Beauclerk, Duke of St. Albans, and a partner in his coal mine in the Cassiar district of British Columbia. A third partner was Alvo von Alvensleben, the Prussian son of Baron von Alvensleben (Bond 128). Beauclerk was a great admirer of Pike and writes passionately about his character and his abilities: “No one had a higher admiration of Warburton Pike than I had. He really *was* a hero and the best traveler I ever knew” (138). Pike seems to have been similarly regarded by most who met him. Marshall Bond Sr., Pike’s friend and business partner, recommended his work in a November 5, 1897 letter to his son: “If you want to read a really good book which will give you an idea of life in a cold climate, get *The Barren Ground of Northern Canada* by Warburton Pike” (42). Pike was also known as a generous man. Gwen Hayball quotes from a friend of his, J.G. Millais, who wrote, “No one ever appealed to Warburton Pike in vain, for on the rare occasion when he had a little money he invariably gave it away to his less fortunate friends. Every wastrel and miner on the Pacific Slope knew ‘Pikey’ and asked his advice and help, which was ever forthcoming” (Hayball

11). Pike's generosity also extended to his native companions, although his motives may have been driven by his desire to avoid the quarrelling and trouble that ensued when he tried to ration his provisions. He found it was easier to give away all his tobacco, tea and flour at the beginning of a trip rather than endure the constant scheming and begging that his companions engaged in. He may also have been motivated by the natives themselves who saved nothing and always offered what they had. At any rate, Pike seems to have been a generous and principled man well regarded by everyone who met him.

Pike was very much a man of the Victorian age. He is described by R.H. Cockburn as the type of man who now seems

as extinct as the British empire itself. His unquestioning self confidence, his paternalistic fondness for native peoples, his passion for blank spaces on maps, his code of self-effacing, stoical masculinity, and his inviolable principles of perseverance, *noblesse oblige*, and duty bespeak an ethos which, though susceptible to derision now, was honoured in its time. ("Warburton Pike" 152)

It is tempting to view Pike as the stereotypical adventurer of his time and his work as a typical Victorian adventure narrative framed within imperialist ideologies. Adventure narratives were at their height at the end of the nineteenth century and, as well as celebrating gripping stories of the perils of foreign travel, these narratives have been tied to discourses of imperialism. Martin Green, for example, argues that to "celebrate adventure was to celebrate empire" (37), and he describes the way the myth of adventure is structured:

Adventure seems to mean a series of events, partly but not wholly accidental, in settings remote from the domestic and probably from the civilized . . . which constitute a challenge to the central character. In meeting this challenge, he

performs a series of exploits which make him a hero, eminent in virtues such as courage, fortitude, cunning, strength, leadership and persistence. (77)

Certainly Pike found himself in many difficult and dangerous situations far away from civilization and his travels could be seen as a series of challenging adventures from which he emerges as a fine example of British manhood. However, although his narrative appeared to early readers to align itself with imperialism and masculinity, the text also undermines each alignment because Pike refuses to present himself in any kind of heroic position or attitude of superiority.

In Chapter 2, I argue that with the advent of Said's *Orientalism*, it became fashionable to discuss travel narratives in terms of how they constructed an Orientalist style discourse that performed a type of powerful "Othering" on the country and the inhabitants visited by the traveller. In the late 19th, and early 20th century, travellers' tales played an important part in defining the physical and social spaces of the Orient and other foreign lands, and the imperialistic spirit of the day led to readings of explorer narratives that interpreted them as celebrations of the ideology of empire. Agnes Deans Cameron's *The New North*, which I discuss in Chapter 4, enthusiastically promotes the economic and social development of the Northwest Territories and the Europeanization of its people. Travel narratives such as Cameron's were often evaluated through an Orientalist perspective. Barbara Kelcey, for example, in her dissertation on "White Women and Empire on Canada's Arctic Frontier" notes that accounts of women travellers such as Cameron's can be useful in discovering how imperialistic ideas were spread, and Denise Heaps argues that *The New North* belongs to a genre "that postcolonial theory has interpreted as an agent and accomplice to the crimes perpetuated by Euroimperialism" (15). While it is certainly reasonable to view

traveller narratives as disseminators and perpetrators of imperialistic ideologies, other critics have addressed the possibilities of counter-hegemonic writings by Victorian travellers and the use of theories that allow for multivocal discourses of colonial texts.

Sara Mills, in her analysis of women's travel narratives, argues for heterogeneity in discourse structures within the colonial period, noting that "conventional models of imperialism cannot accommodate the variety of activity that took place within the imperial context" ("Knowledge" 30). Her interpretation applies primarily to the role of gender in the construction of travel narratives but her theories can be expanded to include the analysis of many types of discourses within the narratives of the stereotypical adventuring hero. Peter Hulme also questions monologic readings of travel narratives, arguing, in his work on colonial encounters in the Caribbean, for ways of looking at an inversion of the colonial power relationship and the possibility of more diverse interpretations of native/explorer relationships. (12). He and McDougall argue that extra-academic and extra-disciplinary texts such as journals, official reports and travel narratives can be used by professional ethnologists and anthropologists to look outside the margins of their disciplines to recover material that might reveal "what goes on at the edge" (2). I suggest that literary critics can benefit from the same approach and that it is useful to examine traveller narratives for material that illuminates more complex readings of indigenous peoples in place of the usual binary representations that view them in relation to the culture of the traveller himself. Germaine Warkentin advocates a course similar to Hulme's when she suggests that "in poring over the narratives of the people who were living at a time and place it is we who become the explorers" (xi). She believes that explorer texts should be approached not simply as objective descriptions of people and places by one adventuring voice, but as documents

that, through skilled reading, may reveal subtexts that the explorer himself may not have recognized. Warkentin argues that “one of the deepest ironies of exploration is that the native discursive world . . . can only be known through the voices of explorers who exploited it without understanding” (xix), and she urges contemporary readers to be aware of the “silences” in explorer narratives that are chiefly those of the native population.

Mary Louise Pratt holds a similar position, arguing that explorer narratives should not be interpreted simply as the traveller’s or explorer’s view of the land and its inhabitants, nor should they be regarded as an affirmation of colonial norms or imperial power. Instead, she is more concerned with the way that knowledge flows both from the centre to the periphery and the periphery to the centre. She views traveller narratives as two-way discourses that take place in what she calls “contact zones” between travellers and indigenous inhabitants. Pratt describes contact zones as “social spaces where cultures, meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism” (“Arts” 519). Contact zones are places or moments in time when two cultures are forced to interact with each for the first time. When this occurs in explorer narratives such as Pike’s, the interpretation of the meeting is traditionally recorded from the point of view of the explorer, and the indigene is always represented from the explorer perspective. Until recently, it was impossible to know what the indigenous person thought or perceived, nor was that position considered to be of any great consequence to early visitors except in terms of the usefulness of the indigenous person or his potential for civilizing. However, modern, northern researchers such as René Fumoleau have been able to reconstruct, through interviews with their children and grandchildren, the voices of Dene who interacted with early travellers or who witnessed historic events such as the signing of Treaty 11 (*As Long as*

This Land Shall Last). George Blondin does much the same thing through his interviews with Dene story tellers, and at the Berger Inquiry Dene voices of more than a century ago were heard through the stories of their descendents. These stories have been helpful in filling in the gaps in the historical record, but equally valuable are the narratives of explorers, trappers, traders and others who lived with and travelled with the Dene and wrote first hand accounts of their experiences.

From Samuel Hearne onwards, many of these men, and some women, upon arriving in northern Canada, threw in their lot with the native people of the land and shared a life that was so alien and so harsh that there were scarcely words to describe it. Those who survived, and there were many who did not, frequently felt compelled to write about their experiences, not so much with the idea of affirming imperialistic ideologies or contributing to colonial discourse, but because they were so profoundly moved by the difficult process of learning to stay alive in a land that was, as Cornelius Osgood described it, “so unknown that there were no maps, so desolate one was a law unto oneself, and so far away one could not think of returning in the year one went” (xv). Osgood was a young anthropologist who spent a year in an Athapaskan settlement on Great Bear Lake in 1928. As he recounts, “I came to know loneliness as some few men know it, the lovely loneliness of limitless land and sky, of snow and trees. And even more I came upon the truth about a country at a peculiar time – some truth about animals and men” (xv). Osgood’s sentiments are reflected in much of the early literature of the Northwest Territories. Most travellers and settlers were awestruck by the harshness and loneliness of the land, while at the same time, they came to understand profound truths about people and behaviour in a world where all previously known categories broke down.

In this unfamiliar setting, the white man could not be a heroic figure; he could not assume a role of racial or cultural superiority; he could not assert himself as a leader, nor could he assume that the native people he lived or travelled with would, in any way, capitulate to his needs or requests. If he pushed too hard or made too many demands, his native companions might desert or, in extreme cases, kill him.³ The travellers or settlers who survived in the north learned to adapt to native ways and codes of behaviour that required a certain shedding of European custom and propriety. Those who could not learn to eat raw meat and sleep outside wrapped in a blanket at sub-zero temperatures, or inside a teepee or igloo crowded with several families, were ill-suited for the north and returned home, bitter and angry about a land that refused to give an inch in consideration of civilized ways. However, those who could adapt and were able to embrace the land and the people they travelled with came to love the life and the land with a passion that was hard to explain.

It is unfortunate that Pike has been vilified by some recent critics for such tendencies as “his distasteful attitude of macho bravado and blatant racism” (Kafarowski 101). Although a superficial reading of Pike’s rhetoric and diction might suggest such an attitude, one that Kafarowski notes was “typical of this period” (101), it is obvious to me that were this all there was to the man, he would never have survived his Barren Ground journeys. Pike’s sometimes disrespectful masculine rhetoric, like Agnes Deans Cameron’s romantic, poetic and valorizing prose, stems from the Victorian age they both lived in. Both writers demonstrate what could be called racist attitudes toward the indigenous people they met and both evaluate the natives on the basis of their own cultural values. Pike, for example, praises his companion, Saltatha, for qualities such as reliability and a readiness to work (*Barren Ground* 116), while Indians who do not have these qualities and will not follow Pike’s orders

are deemed lazy and unmanageable. However, as I will show, Pike was not bound by his cultural values and proved himself flexible and adaptable enough to travel and live with his native companions on their terms, and this is where the value of his narrative lies. It is a surprisingly frank and straightforward perspective on the indigenous way of life that Pike was able to appreciate because of his realization that he was in a position of dependency, and that the success of his expedition and his survival was beyond his control. Pike's narrative frequently inverts the power relationship between native and explorer by his acknowledgement that he is reliant on his guides whom he knew were quite capable of abandoning him at any time: "Refuse them anything when you are dependent upon their services on a journey," he writes, "and they will leave you in the woods" (132). The inversion of power allows the possibility, as Hulme notes, "of more diverse interpretations of native/explorer relationships" (12). Pike's narrative offers alternate points of view in many situations such as when his guide, Paul "King" Beaulieu (pronounced Bo-lee-o), argues against the white man's peculiar habit of eating by the clock, and also when Beaulieu entertains Pike with native stories and legends, and demonstrates native hunting and travelling methods. On a number of occasions Beaulieu is able to find a way out of a tricky situation, such as hauling the canoe on a raft of poles and paddles across the early winter ice. "I now saw an example," Pike says, "of the readiness of idea which King possessed in devising shifts and expedients to get out of difficulties. Of course, he had had fifty years' experience in northern travel" (73). In such instances it is Beaulieu, the local man, who has the knowledge and the power and Pike who must defer to him. By allowing the voices of those he travelled with to enter the narrative, Pike dispels the idea of a single adventuring

voice and introduces a variety of opinions, knowledge and subtexts that reveal a great deal about the indigenous people of the NWT.

In the end, of course, it is Pike's voice that is controlling the narrative and we can never know how much he has embellished or altered his stories. Ian MacLaren reminds us that the narratives of travel "construct every bit as much as they bear witness" and notes that explorer and traveller texts were often considerably altered from the field note stage by the authors themselves as well as by various editors and sponsors thereby reconstructing their own version of the "facts." He cautions against accepting travellers' texts "straightforwardly as eye witnesses' reports" (41). I will discuss how Pike's recollections of his travels may have altered between writing his field notes and the work he later produced in his comfortable garret in London, but first I will point out the obvious editorial intervention in the two early editions of Pike's narratives.

The first edition of *Barren Ground* was published in 1892 in England. This edition contains two maps and no photographs, whereas the 1917 American text, published after Pike's death, contains one map, and many illustrations, both photographs and drawings, of native people and life in the NWT. There is no indication of who took the photographs or when they were taken, but we can be certain they are not Pike's because he states in the 1892 edition that he did not have a camera. "I am sorry that I have no reliable means of illustration, as I had no camera with me, and a few very rough sketches that I made were lost" (ix). The photographs in the 1917 edition are of scenes around Fort Resolution where Pike was based, and they depict activities such as "Dog-rib Powwow at Fort Resolution," "Group of Dog-rib Indians," and "Taking the Post Dogs for Exercise." An illustration called "The Indians Driving Caribou" depicts a stylized painting or drawing of a group of Indians with sticks

pursuing a herd of caribou. The Indians Pike travelled with hunted with rifles so it is unlikely that this illustration contributes to a truthful representation of anything he might have witnessed. One photograph titled, "Ready for Tracking," shows someone, who could be Pike, wearing caribou skins, with snowshoes on his feet, and carrying a rifle. One can only speculate on the source of these photographs and surmise that they might have been taken by someone based at Fort Resolution who sent or gave them to Pike, or they may be from another time entirely. The U.S. edition was published after Pike's death so we cannot know if he would have approved the use of the photographs. From a historical point of view, the photographs have value but they add little to Pike's narrative, except to illustrate scenes or people that he might have seen. There is one, for example, of King Beaulieu with whom Pike had an intense and volatile relationship. The photograph is angled to show a tall, tough-looking, formidable figure in typical Métis garb of three-quarter-length coat and head-scarf who seems quite capable of the trouble-making that Pike accused him of (Figure 4). I mention the photographs only to show that texts were changed and manipulated for the benefit of Victorian audiences who would be interested in pictorial views of the north and might not have been concerned if the photographs were accurate portrayals of what Pike saw, or simply generic images of the north. The photographs reinforce MacLaren's warning that not everything in the text can be taken at face value and that what is described in the narrative may not always be exactly what the author saw or experienced.

Sometimes the author himself alters or embellishes his field notes or his first impressions. Pike states at the end of his narrative: "I am writing these concluding lines in a fashionable garret off St. James Street [in London]. Close at hand are all the luxuries that

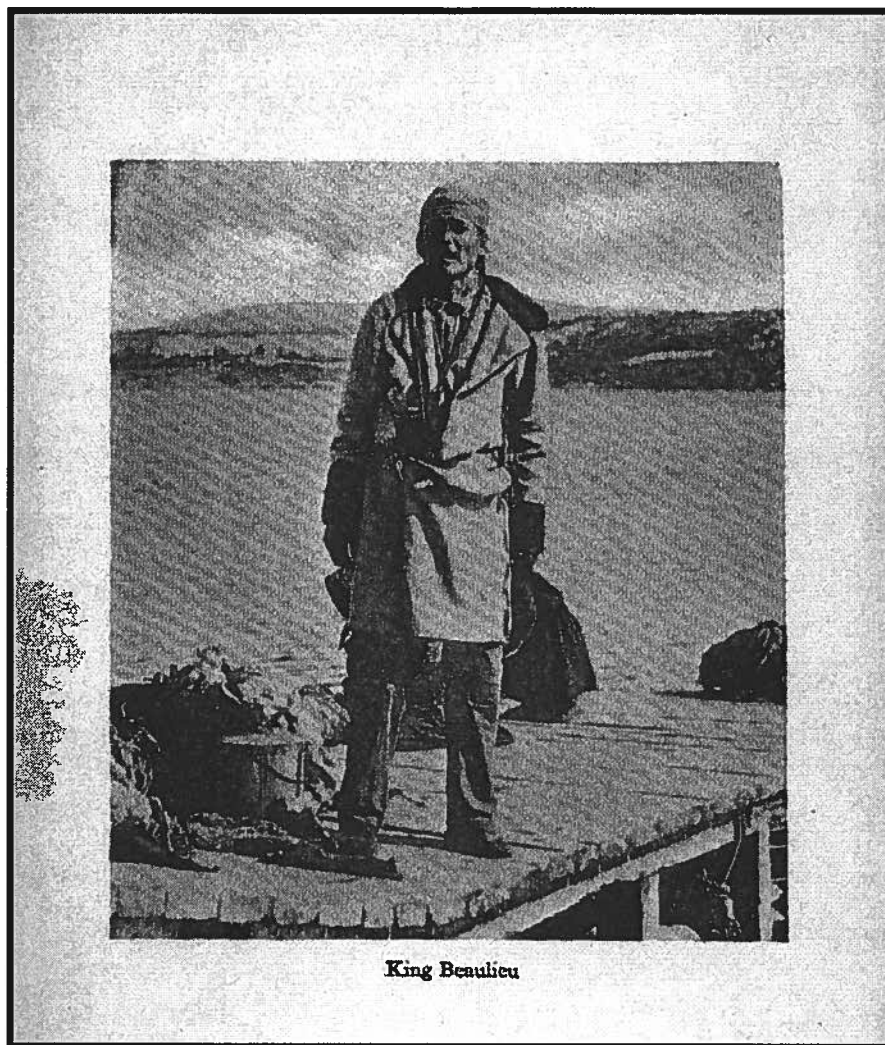


Figure 4. King Beaulieu

Source: Warburton Pike, *The Barren Ground of Northern Canada* (New York: Dutton, 1917) facing p. 32.

only ultra-civilization can give” (299). He has received his journals, which have been sent from Canada, and he says that he will use them to put together a “rough record” of his northern travels, but in the luxury of his room his memories begin to fade:

On looking back one remembers only the good times, when meat was plentiful and a huge fire lit up the snow on the spruce trees; misery and starvation are forgotten as soon as they are over, and even now, in the midst of the luxury of

civilization, at times I have a longing to pitch my lodge once more at the edge of the Barren Ground, to see the musk-ox standing on the snow drift and the fat caribou falling to the crack of the rifle, to hear the ptarmigan crowing among the little pines as the sun goes down over a frozen lake and the glory of an Arctic night commences. (301)

A year has passed since Pike completed his journey and as he starts to write he is caught up in nostalgic memories of a beautiful and alluring north that contrasts sharply with the life and death grittiness of travel that he describes earlier in the narrative. From the perspective of distance and time Pike's writing demonstrates the strong, emotional attachment that he has developed for the land. His unadorned but vivid prose captures the intensity of life on the trail with its comparison between the "good times" of plentiful meat and a warm fire, and the harshness of starvation. The contrast between the "luxury of civilization" and pitching his lodge reflects Pike's belief that "we carry this civilization too far," and that, as city dwellers, we are in danger of "warping our natural instincts" (299). The simple details of "musk-ox standing on the snow drift," the "crack of the rifle" and "ptarmigan crowing among the little pines" evoke the sights and sounds of the Barren Ground and dispel any notion that it is a desolate and cheerless place. This description contrasts sharply with an earlier description of the Barren Ground. "There is nothing striking or grand in the scenery, no big mountains or waterfalls, but a monotonous snow-covered waste, without tree or scrub. . . . A deathly stillness hangs over all, and the oppressive loneliness weighs upon the spectator till he is glad to shout aloud to break the awful spell of solitude" (117). Pike may have romanticized the north in his mind as he sat by the fire in his London lodgings, but he writes with the authority of one who has participated in both the good times and the bad and the contrast between the

very different moods of these descriptions lends authenticity and credibility to Pike's narrative.

If more of the narrative were like the first passage one might well argue that hindsight has affected Pike's perceptions and that he is idealizing the north in much the same way as we will see that Cameron does. However, most of his narrative reflects a journey that was difficult, dangerous and uncertain and his early assessments of the people and the land seem too derogatory and harsh to be anything but reasonably accurate statements of his feelings at the time of his first note taking. At the beginning of his journey Pike finds the travelling difficult and depressing. He makes many disparaging remarks about the desolate landscape, the unfavourable weather, the disgusting habits of his fellow travellers, the diet of raw caribou parts, including intestines and eyeballs, the lack of fires where there were no trees and the general discomfort of life with little equipment and food. But, as he says: "The whole of life is said to go by comparison" (76), and indeed, the whole of his journey and his narrative is ordered by comparisons. After a long stretch of difficult travelling he says: "Although a few pine-trees in a wilderness of snow might seem the height of desolation to a man lately used to the luxuries of the civilized world, it appeared to us like a glimpse of heaven" (75). And when Pike is invited into a lodge for a meal, he notes: "Of course the lodge was dirty and infested with the vermin from which these people are never free; but there was an air of warmth and plenty about it very agreeable after the hand-to-mouth existence we had been leading" (77). Pike's prose, with its contrasts, contradictions and changing attitudes, reflects the fluid and fluctuating life of the nomadic Dene and the ever-shifting nature of the land they travel over. The Barren Ground is a land of extreme contrasts. At one moment, it is desolate and empty and then suddenly the low hills will be alive with

the movement, noise and smell of tens of thousands of caribou. In early June, the ice may be fast to the shore on one day and on the next, after 24 hours of sun and wind, it is floating free between patches of blue water where noisy flocks of migrating geese and swans have landed and are already engaged in courtship. At the end of June the hills are brown and bare; by the first of July they are green and covered with small arctic flowers. Nothing in the north is static and everything is unexpected. Like the caribou, that may or may not come, nothing is ever certain. On one occasion, when Pike and his party are facing extreme danger while walking across a lake in a blinding snowstorm, the wind suddenly stops and landmarks reveal themselves. "There was no apparent reason why the snowstorm should have stopped," says Pike, "and a continuation of it must have brought us serious trouble" (124). Many explorers in foreign countries attempt to naturalize their unfamiliar environments, and find assurance in green hills that remind them of England, or mountain peaks that make them think of Switzerland. However, the north that Pike travels through defies the trope of naturalization and the urgency of travelling in a land that offers no familiarity creates an edginess to the narrative that is relieved from time to time by small pleasures such as a fire, some tobacco or the warmth of a native lodge. The tension created by the contrast between good times and bad and the ever-present unpredictability of events and the reliance on fate lends a note of authenticity and reliability to Pike's recollections of his travels.

Pike's attitude to his companions changes as quickly as his impression of the landscape. Despite his usual detached and resilient attitude to problems encountered in his journey, Pike frequently found his travelling companions irritating and unpleasant. In the early stages, King Beaulieu and his sons seem to have been at the root of most of the

antagonism, quarrelling and problems. Pike did not like them and describes them in derogatory terms:

In character a Beaulieu is a mixture of a very simple child and a German Jew; all the lack of reason of the one combined with the greed of the other, and a sort of low cunning more like that of an animal than a human being. He is not a nice man to travel with, as he always keeps a longing eye on his master's possessions, even though he is fully as well-equipped himself, and is untrustworthy if you leave anything in his charge. . . . The only way to treat him is as you would treat a dog; if you are kind to him he takes it as a sign that you are afraid of him, and acts accordingly. . . . The whole time I was with them the camp was the scene of one continuous wrangle; sometimes they would quarrel with me and sometimes among themselves but we never did anything without having a row. (23-4)

Pike constructs a representation of his travelling companions that debases and demeans them. His description of the Beaulieus illustrates a common coping strategy when one is confronted with a number of indistinguishable, unfamiliar and unpleasant characters, and that is to classify them into a single type. Pike has already commented in his usual wry tone on the large number of Beaulieus, so many in fact that "it makes one tremble for the future of the Great Slave Lake country when the next generation has grown up" (22). Classification has the effect of erasing specifics of large groups and allowing individuals to be envisioned and dealt with as a single familiar entity. Pike reduces all Beaulieus to one type and his extraordinarily unpleasant assessment of them seals their collective fate in history as greedy, untrustworthy, and quarrelsome. One might agree with Kafarowski (101) and Grace (Hubbard liv) that Pike has a racist attitude towards Indians but his racism and

prejudice is not limited to indigenous people. He classes Beaulieus with “simple children” for their lack of reason and with “German Jews” for their greed, and all are more like animals than humans in their attitude of “low cunning.” Continuing the animal imagery, Pike finds that it is best to treat them like dogs because they will respond badly if they sense fear. The use of a rhetoric of debasement and classification in colonial texts can be attributed to motives such as “the need for positive self-definition in times of sociocultural stress” (White, “The Content” 162), or “a projection of anxiety onto the racial and cultural Other” (Spurr 77). Pike, however, does not appear to be troubled by either of these attitudes. He demonstrates no particular fear of the Beaulieus: “With the exception of King there is no fear of violence” (42) and he does not seem concerned about his own cultural position in relation to theirs. The prime motivation for Pike’s derogatory prose could be a racist attitude reflective of his own time and his privileged background, and it could also be an attempt at humour stemming from his semi-amused irritation at the Beaulieu’s capacity for disruption and chaos and the amount of “bother” he had “with these people” (24). Whatever the case, his description led to a legacy of Beaulieus as troublemakers that has followed them to this day; an example perhaps of a “textual attitude” that, once established in a colonial text, reproduces itself and becomes increasingly difficult to dispute.⁴

The analysis of the Beaulieus occurs early in Pike’s narrative, but because we do not know if he wrote it from notes taken at the time or entirely from later recollections we cannot know if his opinion of all Beaulieus was the same at the end of his journey as at the beginning. However, something in his attitude must have changed. His initial choice of words reflects the attitude of a European who believes that he is superior and somehow in control of the expedition. Pike refers to “a Beaulieu” keeping “a longing eye on *his master’s*

[my italics] possessions” (23). Later on he must have become aware that such designations as master and servant were meaningless among the men he travelled with and that if he hoped to achieve his goals and return alive he would have to adjust his thinking to that of his companions and become an equal participant on the journey. Pike appears to have learned to temper his criticism and any feelings of superiority he might have had because as the journey continues he seems to develop admiration and affection for King Beaulieu.

Pike hired Beaulieu to lead his first expedition into the Barren Ground and found him to be experienced and competent, “far above the average of the many other half-breeds and Indians” (73), but at the same time, bad tempered, argumentative and unpredictable. However, despite what Pike describes as his “ill-temper” and his offensive language, Pike respected Beaulieu and spent many hours as they travelled together listening to stories and learning about life on the land. Much of Pike’s success on his journeys was due to Beaulieu, and when he finally deserted from the first expedition, Pike was sorry to see him go:

King maintained his ill-temper till the hour of departure, saying that he did not want so many men and dogs in his lodge eating up the provisions that he had worked so hard to earn, and the sooner we started the better he would be pleased. He used some particularly offensive language to me, but relented at the last moment and gave me his own hair-coat and a new pair of snow-shoes, of which I was badly in want. He also promised to do his best in the way of leaving meat *caches* along the course that we should follow on our return from the musk-ox country. I was rather sorry to leave the old fellow after all, as on the whole we had been pretty good friends while we lived together, and he certainly had great

influence over the Indians which might have been useful during our difficult journey. (98)

This unadorned and understated prose is typical of Pike's writing style and reflects his pragmatic and matter-of-fact approach to his travels. He had been relying on Beaulieu to continue the journey, both for his abilities as an interpreter and his skill on the land. With true British understatement, Pike writes that he was "rather annoyed at his refusal to go" (97), but by this time he has realized that there is little point in trying to persuade his companions to do anything they do not want to do and that the best approach to travelling in the north is to adopt the *laissez-faire* attitude of the natives and travel as they did taking each event as it came. The passage also demonstrates the sharing nature of Pike's travelling companions and undercuts his less charitable assessments of them as "thoroughly untrustworthy, and possessed with an insatiable greed" (132). He frequently criticizes the indigenous people, using his own British cultural standards of honesty, fair play and decency and invariably they are found wanting. But in the harsh reality of travel, although Pike complains of their truculence, bad temper and scheming nature, he represents them, for the most part, as strong, capable and useful when help is required.

It is almost impossible today to imagine the conditions under which Pike travelled. In March 2009, I participated in a three-day ski race near Great Slave Lake in terrain similar to that over which Pike travelled. We skied 50 km per day and camped out in the bush at night. Temperatures ranged from -15°C during the day to -38°C at night, with a white-out blizzard blowing during most of one day. We had warm clothes, sleeping bags, tents, and plenty of food and water. Nevertheless, it was a difficult challenge and I was happy to see the finish line on the third day. Pike had none of the luxuries we had. He was a minimalist, travelling

with much the same outfit as his native companions, and relying on the land as they did for his food. He wore the same caribou skin garments as those worn by the native people, and food on the trail was whatever they managed to shoot, supplemented by some flour, tea and bacon. If no game was available they suffered from “*les misères*” until something turned up (35). Unlike Agnes Deans Cameron, who was a passive and pampered traveller on an HBC steamer, Pike was completely reliant on and integrated with the land, the wildlife and his native guides. At the end of his travels he knew intimately the habits and foibles of his companions and was able to write with realism and understanding about their ways of being. He could not have fully understood their culture because he did not completely master their language, but his observations of their physical practices and his renditions of the stories he heard from King Beaulieu offer valuable, historical, first-hand information about a way of life that has almost disappeared.⁵

Pike’s base was Fort Resolution on the south shore of Great Slave Lake. From there he made two journeys into the Barren Ground, the first beginning in late summer and lasting five months, during which he travelled by canoe until freeze-up and then on foot as far as the Coppermine country north of Lac de Gras.⁶ It was on this journey that Pike claimed to have shot his first muskox, thereby fulfilling the purpose of his travels.⁷ He returned from that expedition in December and spent the winter at Fort Resolution. On May 7, he set out again, this time bound for the Great Fish River, now called the Back River, that he hoped to descend with the first open water. He had, he writes, “no special object in reaching the sea-coast, as a birch-bark canoe is not the right sort of craft for work among salt-water ice; and it was more to see what the Barren Ground was like in summer, and to notice the habits of the birds and animals, than for the sake of geographical discovery, that I wished to make

the expedition” (151). He was, however, interested in previous journeys in the area, carried out by Captain George Back in 1834, and Chief HBC factor, James Anderson in 1855, and from the notations on his map, that I will discuss further on, it seems clear that exploration and more accurate mapping of this river and chain of lakes was important to him. Pike was accompanied on his second journey by James Mackinlay, the HBC factor at Fort Resolution, and two HBC servants, Murdo Mackay from the Hebrides, and Moise Mandeville, a “half-breed.” An assorted group of Indians and “half-breeds” made up the rest of the party at various stages. After reaching Aylmer Lake by dog team and on foot they made their way down the Great Fish River, and into Beechey Lake. Here they turned south again, returning by way of the Lockhart River and the long overland trek, which is now called Pike’s Portage, back to Great Slave Lake, reaching Fort Resolution on August 24.

Even today, with the most modern equipment and various types of aircraft support, this would be an extraordinarily difficult journey. The terrain is rough and treacherous; the rivers are swift, cold and dangerous, and the game, if one were depending on it, is always uncertain.⁸ Yet Pike accomplished both these expeditions, in what seems to have been a very short period of time, with minimal equipment and food, accompanied by quarrelsome and difficult guides, into an unknown and unmapped country. Pike and his party endured falling through the spring ice, capsizing in freezing rivers, the notorious northern black flies and mosquitoes, starvation, long portages, native truculence and all the trials of northern travel, yet he never seems to have lost his laconic and philosophical response toward the journey.

The following excerpt from the second journey describes a fairly typical day in the expedition:

On Thursday, July 17, at two o'clock in the afternoon, we struck camp and started on a four mile portage to the next lake down stream, as the river-bed was too full of large boulders to navigate the strong current with safety. It was hard work carrying the cargo and canoe through the mosquito-stricken ironstone country, and we did not camp till midnight. Here another bad omen was observed. Mackinlay and I had gone ahead, after carrying over a load, to try and kill something for supper; we found a musk-ox, but made rather a clumsy mess of killing it, and the animal was badly heated before we finished it off. The meat was consequently discoloured, and Saltatha declared this to be an unfailing sign of some great misfortune at hand. The women had made us a few pair of moccasins each, but not nearly enough for the tracking-work that we should have to do when we turned up stream; and our stock of provisions, instead of the bales of dried meat that we had expected to enable us to travel without waste of time in hunting, consisted of ten dried deers'-ribs, so full of maggots, from having been imperfectly cured, that we threw them away on the second day out. Our flour and pemmican had of course been finished long ago, and we drank the last kettleful of tea before leaving Musk-ox Lake, but as the Labrador tea grows all over this country in profusion, this did not much matter; tobacco too was nearly at an end.

(193-4)

Such minute description of travel and events gone wrong pervades much of Pike's writing and, while some readers might find that there is a lot of "tedious detail" (Grace, Hubbard liv) in the text, I believe that the description of small details is essential for understanding the harshness of the land and the type of travelling that the native people regularly engaged in.

Grace also notes that there is “very little autobiographical sensibility, depth or complexity” in Pike’s work and that explorers such as Pike have an inflated “sense of themselves as self-reliant, superior beings” (Hubbard liv). However, what I perceive in the descriptive and detailed passages of his journey is that, rather than feeling superior to his fellow travellers, Pike is a full and humble participant, travelling as light and low to the ground as the others, in the effort to survive and complete the journey. Pike acknowledges all the mistakes and hardships of travel including his poor hunting practices, unfortunate planning with cached meat and inadequate footwear. He takes responsibility for mistakes in judgment, readily admits his own faults and credits the men with the same stoical attitude as his own. He is never “self-reliant” but depends completely on his companions for their help. He carries his share of the load and is humble about the prospect of trying to kill something for supper. He acknowledges the usual presence of fate in Saltatha’s prophesy thereby undermining self-reliance. He recognizes the women for their work in making moccasins and assigns no blame about the maggoty deers’-ribs, suggesting that the responsibility is shared by all and that self-reliance and superiority is scarcely possible on a journey such as this.

Of a particularly bad section of the journey, Pike has this to say:

A heavy unceasing downpour of rain, and sometimes sleet, continued day after day, accompanied by strong winds. The men all worked well and without much grumbling, although we were never dry and in many places the tracking had to be done waist-deep in water; at night we slept in our wet clothes, on the wet ground, rolled up in our sopping blankets. . . . Saltatha, who had hurt himself by a nasty fall while carrying a heavy load over a portage, broke down completely at this time, and was unable to work during the rest of the trip. We could do nothing for

him, as there was no medicine of any kind in the outfit, and he had to take his chance with the rest. (211-2).

As with all his descriptions, Pike employs a simple, detached prose style that reflects his steady determination to complete his journey. Not, of course, that he had any choice, for the journey, once started, had to continue. There was no more guarantee of food on the back track than there was on the route forward, and Pike's position on these journeys was no different from that of the centuries-old traditions of the people he travelled with. For these nomadic Indians, who depended on the migratory caribou, life was travel and the only way to live in their land was to keep moving through the doubts and the difficulties. Pike's relentless layers of detail upon detail replicate the determined progress of the expedition and the ever-present obstacles that must be overcome. Pike demonstrates his very real understanding of the egalitarian nature of the Dene and their travelling life when he says of Saltatha, "He had to take his chance with the rest" (212). A man's survival depended on his ability to keep up and move on. There were no special circumstances for anyone.

These were trying times for Pike as they were for all the men, and it is hard to imagine the misery of travelling wet and sleeping wet, and also being unable to assist an injured man. Yet, these events were just daily occurrences in the travelling life of the Dene and Pike's narrative reflects the lives of the people in its fluctuations between stoic resistance and joy at being on the land. It is important to remember that Pike's work is not just a narrative of a traveller to a foreign land – it is *about* travelling and if as, Pike claims, he wants to learn about the habits of the muskox and the "habits of the Indians who go in pursuit of them every year" (vi), then he has to experience and learn about travel. If Pike writes in great detail about the mechanics and the hardships of travel it is because it was impossible

to disassociate the people from their travelling lives and impossible to know them without travelling with them. Pike soon learns that the native people are almost entirely reliant on the land. Although they make sporadic visits to the trading-post, “the caribou supplies the Indian with nearly all the necessities of life; it gives him food, clothing, house, and the equivalent of money to spend at the fort” (52). Pike is fully aware that if he is going to succeed in his mission to hunt musk-oxen in the Barren Ground he must travel in the same manner as his guides and hope to meet up with the caribou along the route. But finding the caribou is by no means a certainty as travellers like John Hornby found to their grief,⁹ and it is the uncertainty of survival and the knowledge of the presence of fate that I believe contributes to the flatness and one-dimensional aspect of northern explorers’ narrative voices.

I suggest that the apparent omission of personal development or self-evaluation in Pike’s journey is the result of the difficulty of his travelling conditions and his awareness that his survival depends on his ability to adapt to the customs of his companions and to the difficulties of the terrain. The journey takes place in an alien world where none of Pike’s notions of civility, manners, behaviour or morals has any validity. He carries nothing with him that offers the comfort of a home; no tent, no shelter, not even a sleeping bag, and sometimes, when there are no trees, not even a fire, that most important symbol of civilization, is possible. The absence of a fire to sit by at night, he recalls, was the most “unpleasant feature in travelling the Barren Ground” (78). To further exacerbate his isolation, Pike’s understanding of the language spoken by his guides was rudimentary and it was several weeks before he was able to communicate in a small way in the native dialect. Pike is, essentially, on his own, travelling through a land in which nothing has familiar proportions and everything is indefinite, unknown and foreign. In this “land of feast and

famine” as the NWT came to be known by early explorers and settlers (Helge Ingstad *The Land of Feast and Famine*), Pike realizes that there is little he or anyone else can do to control events. The caribou would come or they would not come, the muskox would be there or they would not be there, the people would starve or they would eat well; nothing could be relied upon. As old Sousi, a Dogrib elder, explained to explorer Guy Blanchet: “Like ghosts we do not know where they [the caribou] come from nor where they go. If we find them we feast; if not many starve” (Blanchet *Search* 180). The native people accepted the presence of fate in their lives and, as we will see in Chapter 5 in Blondin’s narratives, it all made sense to them because they knew that their lives were governed by “medicine power,” which, as Blondin explains, is a powerful force that could work for or against a person depending on who had it and how it was used (*Yamoria* vi).

Most natives were, and are still, reluctant to discuss medicine power or practice it in the presence of white men. However, on at least one occasion, Pike relates that he spent some time in the company of a Medicine Man, Syene, who was able to foretell the result of his second expedition into the Barren Ground through Beechey Lake. It was “not a very cheerful prophecy,” he recalls, “and it was hard to make out how far the Indians believed in the Medicine Man” (192). In any event, there were the usual problems on this journey such as lack of meat, desertion by some crew members, the loss of a canoe, dangerous water, bad weather and various accidents. But these events were all random. There was nothing Pike or anyone else could do to prevent them, and in many situations Pike says, “it was no use moving, as we should never be able to find our way,” or “we could do nothing till the weather improved” (122-3). Or, in the case of Saltatha’s accident, Pike says “We could do nothing for him, as there was no medicine of any kind in the outfit, and he had to take his

chance with the rest” (211-2). I do not wish to suggest that Pike was in any way completely passive in the way that he travelled. Obviously, he made decisions about when to go, how to travel and what to shoot. But in the uncertainty of the north, plans have a way of dissolving, and by adopting the kind of philosophical *laissez faire* attitude that the native people held with respect to their lives and their presence in the land, Pike becomes part of the continuum of a travelling life in which goals, ambitions and personal development are secondary to survival.

If there is some degree of self-discovery and autobiographical sensibility to be found in this narrative it comes from the realization that the further one ventures into northern unknown lands the more one becomes the victim of circumstances and fate, and the more one begins to acknowledge the frailty and insignificance of the human self. In an article on travel writing by Victorian women, Eva-Marie Kröller argues for a suspension, in discussions of travel writing, of the tyranny of “the pattern of an idealized circumnavigation” and the “archetypal plot structure of developing consciousness” (89). She notes that this tyranny may be exerted by genres such as the *bildungsroman* or the picaresque novel, which many explorers may have believed they were romantically re-enacting in their travels. She finds that these genres are in need of revision to accommodate the life stories of women. I use the same argument with respect to northern explorer narratives which refuse to accommodate themselves to images of typical Victorian explorers forcing their way through rugged and dangerous terrain to reach their goals by “willpower, guns, and money” (Kröller 87), and then re-evaluating themselves in terms of higher consciousness. These symbols of imperialist conquest have limited validity in journeys such as Pike’s, and like all explorers who have survived northern journeys he resorts to the important expedient of “going native.”

Going native was, ironically, one of the greatest fears of travellers, colonizers and administrators in distant lands. Many felt that a key to “managing” natives was to preserve appearances and uphold standards at all costs and this, of course, in the arctic, led to many amusing, absurd and sometimes tragic circumstances. Picture, for example, Alexander MacKenzie, in his top hat, writing in his journal, as he is conveyed down the Deh Cho¹⁰ by his reluctant and recalcitrant paddlers who, from later reports, appear to have regarded him as an insignificant fool (Dene Cultural Institute, *Mom, We’ve Been Discovered!*). Or one might also recall the more tragic story of Sir John Franklin and his party dragging sleds containing silver plate and utensils, and tinned food from Fortnum and Mason, across the arctic ice in a desperate bid for survival. Unlike these explorers and others who frequently paid with their lives, Pike was never reluctant to “go native” in order to survive and fulfill his hunting and travelling goals and, as a result, his narrative voice reflects an intimate and personal relationship with the natives he travelled with.

Pike’s frequent use of the plurals “we” or “our” when describing his experiences on the trail indicates his perceived integration with the group. For example, at the end of a long trek when “*we* were badly scattered along the track” and “*we* were all pretty well used up,” he reflects on the “glorious camp *we* had that night” (*italics mine*).

It was pleasant to lie once again on the yielding pine-brush instead of the hard snow, and to stretch our legs at full length as we could never stretch them in the lodge; pleasant, too, to look back at the long struggle we had gone through, and to contrast our present condition with that of the last month. Our experiences had been hard and not without their share of danger, and we could now congratulate ourselves on having brought our hunt to a most satisfactory conclusion. (126)

The feeling of camaraderie and shared experience in this passage is evoked through the use of plural pronouns and the collective reflection of the contrast between the good times and the bad. At this point of the journey Pike has become part of a travelling group and sharing a life in contrast to the earlier stages of arguing, wrangling and fighting for control that he experienced with the Beaulieus. The journey is still difficult, starvation is ever-present, but Pike is in tune with his companions and sharing their lives. In early December, as they approach Zinto's (chief of the Yellowknife Indians) camp, Pike describes the homecoming:

At the end of a long portage over a thickly wooded hill, we dropped into an encampment of a dozen lodges. It turned out to be Zinto's camp, and all my Indians found their wives and families awaiting them here. There were great rejoicings over our arrival, as we had been so long on the hunt that a good deal of anxiety was felt for the safety of husbands and brothers. Zinto invited me into his lodge, gave me a feast of pounded meat and grease, a cup of tea, and better still, a small plug of black tobacco; this seemed too good to leave. (129)

Pike refers to "my Indians," not in the possessive or paternalistic sense of "my bearers" or "my natives" that one might find in traditional big-game hunter narratives, but with a feeling of brotherliness and friendship. He includes himself as a recipient of the "great rejoicings" and is immediately accepted into the fold as Zinto's guest. The passage also illustrates the importance of family life and the concern for family members who have been anxiously awaited. However, as in all Pike's memories, there is an alternate view, and in another description of family life we learn that the women are "accustomed to being treated more as slaves than wives in the civilized interpretation of the word. They do all the hard work of the camp, besides carrying the heaviest loads on the march; and in too many cases are rewarded

with the worst of the meat and the blows of an over-exacting husband” (132-3). The second description undercuts the idealization of the first and provides possibilities for viewing native families in all their moods and permutations, thus lending credibility, variation and objectivity to the narrative.

Pike’s descriptions of natives and native life could never, of course, be completely objective and we cannot always take him at his word or assume that what he says is “true” or “correct.” All travellers and writers carry with them their own cultural values and these will affect, to some extent, their expectations and observations. Pike was an educated young man from an upper middle class family who might be described as one of the “young bourgeois fleeing the dull repetition and the stifling mundanity of the bourgeois world” (Duncan and Gregory 6). There were a number of young men like this who roamed about the subarctic areas of Canada in the early part of the 20th century. Pike was one of the first, but later arrivals included John Hornby, P.G. Downes, Helge Ingstad, Philip Godsell, Cornelius Osgood, and a group who collected around the Snowdrift area of Great Slave Lake (Figure 3) and hunted and trapped into the Barren Ground. Some were engaged in scientific studies and others were travellers, adventurers and entrepreneurs. Although most of their narratives portray a tolerant acceptance of the natives they travelled and worked with, all incorporate elements of comparison with their own culture, status and consciousness. Pike, Hearne, Osgood and others accepted and adapted of necessity to the indigenous lifestyle, but it was impossible for them to write without a note of intolerance and a tendency toward “othering” in descriptions of their companions, particularly when they themselves felt most vulnerable and dependent.

There is no doubt that Pike engages in racial stereotyping and displays irritation with his companions if events do not proceed according to plan. However, unlike many other travellers who attempted to “manage” the natives and order them about, Pike presents himself as one who participated in every aspect of the hunting and travelling and viewed himself as part of the group. For example, he frequently comments on the difficulty of securing agreement on any course of action and the arguments that ensued, but he always includes himself in any of this bickering. On considering how to find the muskox he notes that “we held a consultation as to the best way of carrying on our hunt of the musk-ox. . . . The same old wrangling and *abuse of each other* (italics mine) ensued, and finally the following decision was arrived at” (79). If there is argument and verbal abuse, Pike makes it clear that the blame is to be shared equally, as are any decisions as to the best course of action for the hunt. Similarly he participates in the hunt and the cutting up of the meat, and unlike some travellers who refused to take women and children on expeditions, he appreciates the necessity for family travel: “I now saw what an advantage it is to take women on a hunting-trip of this kind, and certainly King’s wife and daughter were both well up in the household duties of the country. If we killed anything, we only had to cut up and *cache* the meat, and the women and small boys would carry it in” (81). Women were responsible for a great many duties and if Pike had any preconceived notions of “macho bravado” (Kafarowski 101) before this trip they were certainly tempered by the realization that travelling and hunting in the barren lands was a shared effort and that everyone, men, women, children and dogs, performed their assigned tasks, and feasted and starved together.

Even as Pike finds fault with the people and realizes that he will never understand them, he is interested in their stories and their lives. However, he frequently and ironically

undermines his own analysis of the difficulty of ever understanding the “workings of the native brain” (99) by quoting Beaulieu’s opinions on the equally incomprehensible white man. On the subject of improvidence, for example, Pike tries to take Beaulieu and the Indians to task for never saving anything for the next meal or the next day:

A happy indolent life the Yellow Knives lead when the caribou are thick on their pleasant hunting-ground and most of the hard times that they have to put up with are due to their own improvidence. This is their great failing; they will not look ahead or make preparation for the time when the caribou are scare [sic], preferring to live from hand to mouth, and too lazy to bother their heads about the future.
(131)

Beaulieu, however, had different ideas:

He criticized severely the habit of eating three regular meals a day, which he described as eating by the clock instead of by the stomach, as a much more greedy habit than that of gorging when meat is plentiful and starving at other times. . . .
“When we have meat why should we not eat *plein ventre* to make up for the time when we are sure to starve again?” (84)

Pike inverts the traveller/native relationship so that we have Beaulieu’s point of view, thereby allowing a glimpse of the reality of life in the north and the insignificance of European values in a feast or famine world. It is apparent, however, that this philosophy of eating upsets Pike because, as he notes: “on several occasions during our travels together I had reason to expostulate with him on the carelessness he displayed with provisions, but without making the least impression” (80). Pike eventually discovers that there is no point in trying to conserve his own food or tobacco because his travelling companions simply refuse

to move until all is shared and used up. Although Pike came to admire the generosity and perpetual optimism of the men he travelled with, he still censured their improvidence and their wanton killing and waste as failings. He describes the Yellow Knives as “rather a fine race of men, above the average of the Canadian Indian” (131), but rather spoils the compliment by confirming certain colonial attitudes about the “average Canadian Indian,” whoever he may be.

The way that Pike presents the Native people is frequently contradictory, aligning himself with colonial prejudices while at the same time aligning with the people themselves. When judged by Eurocentric standards of honesty, providence, dependability, manners and so forth, the people clearly come up short. But, seeing them in their own environment, travelling on the land, Pike finds that he has to adjust his cultural attitudes and permit the presence of native sensibilities and voices. By allowing voices such as Beaulieu’s to comment on various failings of white men, such as their greediness in insisting on three meals a day, Pike reframes the colonial gaze to give us the native point of view. We also hear the voice of Zinto, the chief of the Yellow Knives, who welcomes Pike to the Barren Lands and shares his opinion of white men. The interpreter for Zinto tells Pike that Zinto “liked the Whites; all that he valued came from their country, and he had always been well treated by the Company” (94). Beaulieu’s impressions of the Queen and the Company are also recorded:

[Beaulieu] was much interested in stories of the Queen, although he could never believe that Her Majesty held such a high rank as the Governor of the Company, and quite refused to acknowledge her as his sovereign. “No,” he said; “she may be your Queen, as she gives you everything you want, good rifles and plenty of

ammunition, and you say that you eat flour at every meal in your own country.

If she were my Queen, surely she would send me sometimes half a sack of flour, a little tea, or perhaps a little sugar, and then I should say she was indeed my Queen.” (83)

These transcribed fragments of conversation are a window into the little-known world of NWT indigenous people of a century ago and they offer a multi-vocal aspect to the narrative that provides access to what Warkentin calls the “silences” of the native population that can only be known through the voices of explorers (xix). It is difficult now to realize how completely isolated the NWT people were, and that their entire conception of European culture and ideas came from “the Company.” Men like Pike must have been a mystery to them, yet they accepted him, travelled with him and helped him achieve his goals for no other reason than that he asked them to accompany him and repaid them with supplies and gifts.

The voices of the people are also heard in the stories and beliefs that Pike hears from his companions. Pike takes the time to listen to these stories and legends however outlandish they may seem to him. On hearing of the terrible Evil Spirit said to haunt the Barren Ground for example, Pike notes that it is “hard to get a full description of the Enemy, as although many people have seen it, they are at once afflicted with insanity, and are incapable of giving an accurate account of their experience; but one must not dare to express unbelief in the existence of the Enemy any more than in that of the Giant Musk-Ox” (81). Pike may be amused or skeptical about the truth of these stories but he does not express his skepticism among the people, nor even within the pages of his narrative, possibly showing his belief that certain beliefs and behaviours, although questionable in a “civilized” setting, have strong

validity in the context of wilderness living and travel. Therefore, he listens carefully to the stories that Beaulieu tells him as they lie around the fire at night:

These stories were usually some tradition handed down from the time when all the animals and birds could converse together; what the wolf said to the wolverine when they went on a hunting-trip in company, and how the ptarmigan invited the loon to dine with him in a clump of willows in the Barren Ground, while there was a big stock of giant stories, with heroes much resembling those of the favourite nursery tales of one's childhood. (85)

While there is a slight tone of dry amusement and condescension as Pike ascribes human qualities to the animals and equates the native myths with childhood nursery stories, he is nevertheless, sufficiently interested in the stories to write one down at length. This is one of Beaulieu's stories of the "Deluge," which was a "curious mixture of old tradition with some details from the Biblical version as taught to the Northern Indians on the arrival of the first priests in the country" (85). Pike makes no comment on the story except to note that he "copied it down," giving credence to the fact that he must have carried some writing materials with him and kept some kind of daily journal. Although Pike was sometimes brutally blunt in his personal assessment of his native companions, he respected their stories, their history and, most importantly, the way they lived on their land. He complains about their childishness, their filthy living conditions and their careless hunting methods, but he makes no attempt to influence them or convert them, except on the issue of food, nor does he imagine them, as Agnes Deans Cameron does, in any improved future role. Instead, he himself took on the colouration of his companions and lived as they did in unison with the land.

Pike, like other explorers who lived and travelled with native people accepted them and adapted of necessity to their lifestyle even if certain practices were abhorrent to them. All northern explorers speculate on the feast or famine attitude and all discuss careless and wasteful hunting methods. Osgood and Pike are critical of the native's treatment of dogs, Hearne is aghast at his companions' compulsion to kill the Inuit they encounter at Bloody Falls, and all comment on the natives' seeming indifference to human life. These types of behaviour are always framed in terms of the writers' own cultural attitudes, and comparisons are inevitable, yet the explorers themselves are drawn into the same behaviours through their own need to survive. Hearne, for example, was forced to be present at the Bloody Falls massacre because he feared for his own life if his guides abandoned him or turned on him. Pike worries about two of his party who fail to return to camp but must share the others' indifference to their fate because his survival depends on staying with the group. Osgood abhors the native habit of beating their dogs, yet finds he has to resort to the same practice or risk his own life. Pike has deeply entrenched British attitudes about hunting big game and sportsmanship (Pike, "Musk Ox") and he finds the Yellow Knives' habits of indiscriminate killing abhorrent, yet he is drawn into it by being part of the hunting party. Like all visitors to the north, Pike is appalled by the "disgusting vermin that always infest the natives" (*Barren Ground* 133), but was once overheard to say that no man can live in the north "without harboring greybacks [lice]" (Murray 70). No explorer, when travelling in the far north could ever be above participating in practices that to his compatriots back in Europe might seem uncivilized, savage or disgusting.

Travelling with the natives is always framed in terms of contradictions depending on the conditions encountered and Pike knows full well the thin line between civilized

behaviour and savagery. On his journey home from the Barren Ground he travelled through northern British Columbia where he and his companions narrowly escaped starvation and death. In later reflection he writes:

Our situation seemed utterly hopeless as we crouched over the fire that was with difficulty maintained, and apparently the end had come. There was none of the kindly sympathy for companions in misfortune which men who share a common danger should have; a mutual distrust was prevalent; hatred and the wolfish madness of hunger ruled the camp; and to this day I cannot understand how it was that the fatal spark was never struck, and no tragedy of murder and cannibalism enacted on the banks of that ice-bound river. (286)

With his upper-class, public school upbringing Pike would certainly have been aware of how men *should* behave in such situations yet he presents a contradiction to civilized and heroic behaviour by revealing a different type of man that emerges in desperate circumstances. Pike's prose in this passage is anti-heroic and reflects his usual stoic acceptance of fate with passive constructions such as "the fire that was with difficulty maintained," together with his reversal of personal agency – "the end had come." The animated abstraction of the camp ruled by the "wolfish madness of hunger" and the metaphor of a single "fatal spark" that failed to ignite emphasize his awareness of the narrow line between rational behaviour and survival instinct. This discourse of fatalistic desperation rejects any sense of self-affirming heroism on Pike's part and firmly aligns him with the native people whose entire life was defined by alternating seasons of feasting and starvation and the narrow margin between life and death.

Descriptions of desperation, hardship, violence, cruelty and indifference to life that appear frequently in the narratives of Pike and other northern writers, account for the images of northern peoples that made their way back to British and European audiences and became embedded in tales and the mythology of the savagery of life in the wilds of Canada.

In *Canada and the Idea of North*, Grace discusses “a northern *mentality*,” created through “words, sounds, images, signs, and symbols,” and observes that “North is a discursive formation and . . . it has accumulated a wide range of fascinating, contradictory associations, a set of familiar, compelling stories, a particular rhetoric and . . . a constellation of stubborn stereotypes and seemingly intransigent exclusions” (15). The narratives of explorers such as Pike were partially responsible for the creation of this discourse. They told the usual and expected tales of escapes from certain disaster, tales of appalling weather, dreadful travelling conditions and recalcitrant natives. But the contradictions in their stories are even more revealing.

Natives were represented as responsible conservators of their land and wildlife or they were careless, wasteful and cruel hunters; they were hospitable, generous and kind or they were rude, selfish and greedy; they treated their dogs with great care because they relied on them, or they whipped them cruelly and starved them to death; they were peaceful, gentle people or they were warlike savages; you could depend on them entirely or you could not depend on them at all. In Pike’s day, these depictions accounted for certain “truths” and discourses that developed around life in the north and became the basis for systems of knowledge that were developed later to organize and regulate social structures in the Northwest Territories. Some of the early “truths” about native people and the north have been surprisingly hard to dislodge, and even today generalizations and contradictions based

on early narratives continue to circulate. Native people are still viewed as either natural conservators of the land or they are wanton and wasteful killers. Native people have an innate sense of honesty or they will steal everything you own given the chance.¹¹ The north is a barren, empty and dangerous land, or it is a land of stark, intense beauty alive with great herds of caribou and flocks of migrating birds. The people who live there are, as Father Buliard observed, are “the poorest of the poor, physically and morally” (Brody *Living* 7), or they are proud hunters, part of close, loving families whose ancestors have lived on the land for thousands of years. Contradictions like these are evident throughout all northern explorer narratives, but instead of arguing for one representation or another as the one true and defining picture of the north, it is more useful to seek out the many conflicting voices that reveal a varied and detailed picture of northern indigenous life in the late nineteenth century.

Many missionaries, priests, and some travel writers such as Agnes Deans Cameron, with more sensitive constitutions than Pike’s, were deeply disturbed by some aspects of the Indian way of life and saw the NWT Dene as abject and primitive savages living in conditions unfit for human life. The colonizers used images of the poor, starving savage as justification for engaging in ordering and civilizing missions, or imagining, as Cameron does, possibilities for the future development of the land and the people. Pike does not participate in discourses of improvement and modification. He is highly outspoken about their filthy living conditions, their disgusting habits, their appearance, their improvident hunting habits and what he regards as their generally “indolent” nature, but he prefers to accept and record the people as they were. The result, as I have attempted to show, is a surprisingly unbiased and vivid portrayal of native travelling life as it was at the turn of the century. Pike, the adventurer, on many occasions, melts into the background and allows the people and the

travelling life to speak for themselves. The male adventurer/ hero model is absent for the most part in Pike's narrative as is the judgmental colonizer intent on salvation and order.

However, much as Pike was content to leave the Indians to "live the wild life that they were intended to live" (133), he was not unaware of the possibilities for economic development in the north, and in the last part of this chapter I show that, despite his downplaying of the heroic adventurer and conquering traveller model, Pike can, nonetheless, be associated with certain imperialistic positions, particularly with respect to the future development of the country. Pike notes at the beginning of his narrative that he carries very little equipment with him to record his travels, and it is evident that he does not intend to attempt a professional mapping of the country he journeys through. Although he says that he passed through "a great deal of new country," he makes claims only to European primacy, noting, ironically, that he "discovered, as we white men say when we are pointed out some geographical feature by an Indian who has been familiar since childhood, many lakes and small streams never before visited except by the red man." The purpose of his travels, he insists, is only an "ordinary shooting expedition," and his "only excuse for publishing this account of my travels is that the subject is a reasonably new one, and deals with a branch of sport that has never been described." His cartographic skills, he explains, are minimal and although he attempts a rough map to mark the chain of lakes on his route to the Barren Lands, he emphasizes that "their position is only approximate, and perhaps not even that, as [he] had no instruments with which to make correct observations" (vii-viii).

The first edition (1892) of Pike's narrative includes two maps. One is his own rough sketch map of his journeys (Figure 5), and the other is entitled *Dominion of Canada – Outline Map Shewing the Larger Unexplored areas, 1890*, whose purpose is to "illustrate

paper by George M. Dawson” (1892 facing p 277). The sketch map, according to Pike, is for the edification of the sportsman who might want to follow in his footsteps and hunt muskox in the Barren Grounds. On this map he attempts to delineate as accurately as possible the chain of lakes he followed into the Barren Ground, an area that was virtually unknown to Europeans.

In his act of mapping the land Pike can be implicated, however unwillingly, in an imperialistic venture. Even though the map is only for sportsmen, it contains far more than outlines of lakes and rivers. It could be assumed that maps are simply meant to be accurate pictures of the land they purport to represent and their purpose is to assist travellers in arriving at their destination without getting lost. However, since the 1980s some geographers and cartographers have begun to view map-making as a more complicated exercise and now present evidence of their discipline’s complicity with imperialism. Cartographer/historian, J.B. Harley, argues that maps, rather than being neutral records of exploration, are never free of ideology and power structures. Instead of interpreting maps as representations of specific geographic spaces, he shifts attention to the idea of maps as scientific, empirical documents situated within discourses of power-knowledge. “Our task,” Harley writes, “is to search for the social forces that have structured cartography and to locate the presence of power – and its effects – in all map knowledge” (Harley and Laxton 152). Harley is skeptical of the belief that maps offer value-free images and advocates an approach that would reveal the ideology encoded by them. He challenges historical cartographers to “read between the lines of the

map – ‘in the margins of the text’ – and to discover the silences and contradictions that challenge the apparent honesty of the image” (153).

If we look closely at Pike’s map it becomes obvious that a great deal more is embedded in this sketch than the outlines of lakes and rivers. This is clearly a map for a hunter or a traveller intent on making his way into new territory. Portages between lakes are shown and demarcated in miles; many sets of rapids are marked, and other visual features such as the “conical bluffs” that signal the way out of the confusing Clinton Colden Lakes are indicated. Passages that may have been used before, such as “Stewart and Anderson’s route,” are sketched in dotted lines, and possible routes, such as a “reported chain of lakes used as summer route by Yellow Knives,” are also indicated. An area of “well grown pines reported” could offer a welcome haven to a traveller in the treeless barrens, and at the very top of the map, where all features disappear, north of an ill-defined river identified as the “supposed course of Coppermine,” is the, perhaps optimistic, designation, “Musk ox numerous.” Finally, outside of the map itself and not within its scale, is the elusive Bathurst Inlet, which Pike had estimated (quite correctly it turns out¹²) was only about sixty miles from where he turned back. The large lakes have only the roughest outlines and it is obvious, as Pike himself admits, that this map is not an accurate representation of the area. It is, however, a blueprint for exploring the country and a contribution to knowledge that would allow future travellers to make their way to what were perceived as unoccupied spaces. For many early adventurer/travellers, however, Pike’s map might be a mixed blessing. Some, such as Helge Ingstad, who journeyed to the Barren Ground some thirty years after Pike, might have wished for fewer details on Pike’s map believing that, “The blank spaces on the maps, thank the Lord, show many a region where no surveyors had gone tramping around

before us” (5). Ironically, it is the quest for blank spaces that leads to the mapping of them and the mapping leads, whether intentionally or not, to the possession and development of the blank space. Thus, a detailed map of previously unknown ground routes into an area inhabited only by indigenous peoples is the first step toward conquest and occupation of the area.

Pike may not have intended that his narrative should open up the Barren Ground to exploration and development, but the inclusion of Appendix I and a second map in the first edition clearly indicate his complicity with imperialist ideologies. Appendix I is a paper entitled: “On Some of the Larger Unexplored Regions of Canada” by G.M. Dawson of the Dominion Geological Survey Department. Pike includes Dawson’s paper because, as he explains, it “shows more plainly than any words of mine could tell how much yet remains to be done before this great portion of the British Empire is known as it ought to be” (303). Dawson refutes the popular belief that “all parts of the Dominion are now so well known that exploration, in the true sense of the term, may be considered a thing of the past” (*Barren Ground* 304), and appeals to “the public or to the Government for the further extension of explorations” in order to “properly ascertain and make known the natural resources of the great tracts lying beyond the borders of civilization” (319). The map accompanying Dawson’s paper is an outline map of Canada showing the larger unexplored areas in 1890. Most of Canada, with the exception of the established towns and settlements along the main railway line, appears to be unmapped. Dawson’s paper concludes with an exhortation that this area must become known because it currently stands “as a certain reproach to our want of enterprise,” and the mapping must be carried out in the correct way. The explorer or surveyor must not simply engage in the “perfunctory measuring of lines and the delineation

of rivers, lakes and mountains.” He must “map with a purpose or an ideology” and possess knowledge of various scientific fields, and should he “be obliged to report that some particular district possesses no economic value. . . . his notes should contain scientific observations on geology, botany, climatology, and similar subjects” (319). It is interesting that Dawson exhorts cartographers to map with a “purpose or an ideology” nearly a century before Harley expressed the “new” theory that maps, in fact, do precisely that.

Dawson was a vocal and prolific proponent of economic exploration and development in Canada, and Pike’s inclusion of Dawson’s paper and map indicates that he too is concerned about the lack of interest in the economic potential of northern Canada. Earlier in his narrative he asks the question:

Why has all exploration in the Barren Ground ceased? No more is known of the country than was discovered by Franklin and Back sixty years ago. . . . The Canadian Government has an efficient body of surveyors and geologists at its command, and it is curious that no attention is paid to one of the most interesting fields for exploration. (185)

Although Pike had no time, inclination or resources to conduct any economic exploration on his Barren Ground journeys, his interest in these lands seems to have been as much in their development potential as in their sporting possibilities. He was as desirous of filling in the blanks as any imperialist adventurer and his second northern trip was undertaken for the purpose of discovering the mineral potential of British Columbia and the Yukon.

On this second trip, recounted in *Through the Subarctic Forest* published in 1896, Pike describes his 2,000 mile canoe trip through Alaska, northeastern British Columbia and the Yukon territory. The journey was inspired by Dawson’s expeditions in the same areas

and the reports from his 1887 surveys. Although Dawson had pointed out the mineral potential in the area, few had taken any notice. "With their usual apathy," Pike writes, "the British Columbians took not the slightest interest in the matter" (Murray 32). To Pike however, the opportunities seemed unlimited. "Of all the unexplored regions left on the earth's surface," he observes, "there is none which offers a more enticing field for exploration, or more promise of practical reward to an enterprising traveller" (33). Pike's description of his travels in British Columbia, however, failed to stimulate interest in the areas and he himself received no "practical reward." Although he travelled thousands of miles, staked many claims and operated gold and coal holdings for a number of years with several partners, none of the enterprises yielded long-term monetary rewards. Finally, when the economic boom of the first years of the century collapsed and the first world war loomed, all his ventures folded leaving Pike penniless.

In 1914, Pike indicated in a letter to Marshall Bond that he had "written home to see if I can get a job (in the war effort) as age prevents me from joining any Canadian outfit. . . . I feel I can still fire a rifle fairly straight & probably walk as well as many of the younger men" (Bond 135). Later reports show that he did return to England and received an offer from the Admiralty to command a small motor cruiser. However, he was then confined to a sanatorium with what was diagnosed as a brain disease. On December 21, 1915, his friend, Osborne Beauclerk wrote to another friend, Count C. Karl Coudenhove, that Pike had escaped from the sanatorium and his body was later found in the sea: "He had filled his pockets with stones, walked into the sea and stabbed himself. He was the most unselfish and modest man I've ever known" (136).

Pike's suicide at 54 greatly saddened his friends, and Beauclerk and two other friends, Charles Sheldon of the Smithsonian Museum, and Marshall Bond, later erected a concrete and brass cairn at Porter Landing at the north end of Dease Lake in B.C. The monument reads: "In Memory of Warburton Pike. Author – Sportsman – Explorer. Born September 25th 1861 – Died October 20th 1915." If the name Warburton Pike means anything to people today, it is likely for Mount Warburton Pike on Saturna Island in B.C.'s Gulf Islands.¹³ There is also a "Warburton Pike Rock" at the southern entrance of Active Pass in the Gulf Islands. This monument was requested by some acquaintances of Pike in 1917.¹⁴ In the Northwest Territories, modern explorers in the Barren Grounds remember Pike when they camp at Warburton Bay on McKay Lake, or when they contemplate crossing the infamous Pike's Portage, a 30-km-long chain of eight lakes with intervening portages leading from the east end of Great Slave Lake to Artillery Lake. Starting at 513 feet above sea level and ending at an elevation of 1178 feet, it is a gateway to the Arctic plateau and the tundra, and has been used by native people for thousands of years as a passage to the barrens to hunt caribou.¹⁵

There are a number of ways to look at travel writing, in addition to viewing it as the imperial minded traveller's culturally biased representation of the people and the lands he encountered. Travellers, as Mills reminds us, had a "range of discursive frameworks to draw on and were not constrained simply to produce representations of 'otherness'" ("Knowledge" 33). Pike's particular discursive frameworks include hunting and travelling methods, the ever present concern for survival, the intimate living arrangements that he shared with his fellow travellers and the often tempestuous relationships he experienced in his dealings with them. Within these contexts and contact zones he produces knowledge of the people and the land

that reveal the complexity and diversity of life in northern Canada in the late 19th century. My reading of Pike's narrative represents a way of evaluating a travel narrative, not just, as Said argues, as literature that celebrated the ideology of empire, or as a classic tale of adventure, but as a text containing material that allows modern readers to have the opportunity to catch a glimpse of an indigenous world of a century ago from the perspective of one who experienced it. In my next chapter I discuss a very different kind of traveller to the Northwest Territories. Unlike Pike, who came to know the land and the people in all their seasons and moods, Agnes Deans Cameron interacted with the north in a much less active way. As a woman she was constrained in the way she could move about the north and most of her observations are made from the deck of her Hudson's Bay Steamer as she travelled up and down the Mackenzie River. Whereas Pike was content to record the north as it was, Cameron is more concerned with constructing a "new north" based on the dreams of the great men she calls the "Pathfinders of Empire" (*New North* 1910 378). Her vision of north reflects an imperialist ideology of economic development, progress and assimilation of indigenous people.

Notes

- ¹ The Barren Ground is the area north of the treeline in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. It is called the Barren Ground, the Barren Grounds, the Barren Land, the Barrenlands or simply the Barrens. I will use Pike's term, The Barren Ground.
- ² Pike uses terms such as half-breed, Indian, Eskimo, and squaw that are now considered offensive. These terms were commonly used in his time but some, such as Indian and Eskimo, have now been replaced with Dene and Inuit, both of which mean "the people." A "Half-breed," were he French and Indian, might have been called a Métis at one time, but Métis now has a political connotation and can be anyone of mixed Aboriginal and European ancestry who self-identifies as a Métis. I will use Pike's terms, Indians, Eskimos and half-breeds to avoid confusion.
- ³ Explorers H.V. Radford and George Street were murdered by Inuit hunters in 1912. The following year Oblate priests Fathers Rouvière and Le Roux were killed by two Inuit, Sinnisak and Uluksuk (Coates 159).
- ⁴ P.G. Downes, a later explorer in the area, mentions the Beaulieus in his Journal. He cites Ernest Thompson Seton, who travelled with two of King Beaulieu's son, Francois and Sousi, in 1907 and was moved to exclaim, "Oh, why did I not heed Pike's warning to shun all Beaulieus; they rarely fail to breed trouble" (Downes' *Journal* qtd. in Cockburn, "To Great Slave" 169). Later when Sousi was an old man he accompanied Guy Blanchet on a survey of the headwaters of the Coppermine and Back rivers in 1923. Blanchet wrote that he detected "a certain truculence" in his behaviour (Blanchet qtd. in Cockburn, "To Great Slave" 169). Downes, himself, met King Beaulieu in 1938 during his own journey to Fort Resolution. He describes Beaulieu as a broken old man of 84. "The old man is most remarkable considering the misadventures he must have had. One finger on his right hand is twisted almost in reverse from being caught in a flywheel. One wrist has been broken and is badly misshapen. He was shot through the groin, yet he gets about in good shape with the aid of cane" (qtd. in Cockburn, "To Great Slave" 169). George Douglas, who travelled in Pike's footsteps a few years later, also confirms Pike's assessment of the Beaulieus: "From what I know of the Beaulieu tribe Pike must have been pretty masterful to have held them together and to their agreement. He pictures them as they were, strong and capable, but quarrelsome and insatiable" (George M. Douglas, Letter to Vilhjalmur Stefansson, Feb. 16, 1950, qtd. in Murray 12).
- ⁵ I say "almost disappeared" because there are Dene and Métis in the NWT who still know and practice some of the old ways of travelling and hunting. The difference now is that they likely have snow machines for travelling and high powered rifles for hunting, but they are "on the land" as their ancestors were and they pride themselves on their knowledge of the old ways and strive to pass them on to their children.
- ⁶ Lac de Gras lies approximately 300 km north of Yellowknife. Originally called Ekati by aboriginal peoples it is the site where diamonds were discovered in the 1990s. There are now two working diamond mines in the area, Ekati Diamond Mine and Diavik Diamond Mine.
- ⁷ P.G. Downes heard a different story about the muskox hunt. Beaulieu remembered Pike as "a bad one – a liar." Beaulieu apparently told Downes that Pike claimed he shot the five musk-oxen when actually it was the Indians who did (qtd. in Cockburn, "To Great Slave" 169). Beaulieu's dislike of Pike may, however, have been motivated by Pike's own treatment of him.
- ⁸ In July 2009, my husband spent a week mapping in the Aylmer Lake area where Pike travelled. He saw a few ptarmigan, one wolf, one barren land grizzly and some ground squirrels. Fortunately he had his own food supplies.
- ⁹ John Hornby starved to death with his two young companions in his winter camp on the banks of the Thelon River in 1925 as they waited for the caribou that failed to arrive.

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- ¹⁰ Deh Cho means Big River in the Dogrib language. It is the Dene name for the MacKenzie River.
- ¹¹ During the Yellowknife summer, people who travel on Great Slave Lake in their boats frequently leave gas caches in secret places. Almost as frequently, when they return for their gas, it has disappeared. Invariably discussion turns to the "Snowdrifters," the people from Snowdrift, or Lutselk'e, as it is now called, a small settlement on the south shore of Great Slave Lake established in 1925, where the Beaulieu live to this day.
- ¹² With the help of a modern map, my geologist husband, Lou Covello, estimated the distance to be about 80 km.
- ¹³ Pike came to Saturna Island in 1886 and purchased properties that included this peak, which was named Mount Warburton Pike in 1969.
- ¹⁴ On January 29, 1917 G.E.W. Robertson of the Department of Marine and Fisheries, B.C. wrote to the B.C. Geographical Names Office: "I am taking the liberty of advising you that numerous Naval Officers and friends of the late Warburton Pike are anxious to perpetuate to his memory some rock, with the ultimate hope that in time a beacon may be placed on it. In talking the matter over with Captain Musgrave, Mr. [Fleet] Robertson of the Provincial Government, and one of the Geographical Board, it has been suggested that the rock shown at the southern entrance of Active Pass be called Warburton Pike Rock. I am of the opinion that you know Warburton Pike as he was an exceptionally noted Character in British Columbia, he having explored the barren lands and written a book on it, and anything that could perpetuate his name would seem to me only just dues. You are possibly not aware that the circumstances in connection with his death were tragic, he having left for the Old Country with the intention of offering his services for the war, and being over age he was refused. This lead him to take his own life. The two suggestions offered are in the vicinity of his own home at Saturna Island, he having a large ranch there, and any rock in this vicinity which could be given his name..." (29 January 1917 letter from G.E.W. Robertson, Dept of Marine & Fisheries, Victoria; BC file 1917).
- ¹⁵ The following are excerpts from early travellers on Pike's Portage collected by David C. Whyte in his book *The Hummingbird From Resolute: Memoirs of a Journey to the Polar Sea*.
- This is by far the prettiest part of the country that I saw in the north, and was looking its best under bright sunshine.... Scattering timber, spruce and birch clothed the sloping banks down to the sandy shores of the lakes; berries of many kinds grew in profusion... A perfect northern fairyland it was... (Pike, 1890).
- ...we thankfully beached our York boat at the famous lobsterstick (i.e. a tree with the lower branches removed) that marks the landing of Pike's Portage. Carved on the lobsterstick were many names famous in the annals of this region, Pike, Mattern, Mckinley, Munn, Tyrrel among them. All about were evidences of an ancient and modern camp; lodge poles ready for the covers, relics and wrecks of all sorts, fragments of canoes and sleds, and the inevitable stray Indian dog (Seaton, 1907).
- Pike's Portage starts with a steep 3½ mile climb to the first lake. I had my instruments and gear and the survey to make. Sousi carried a light pack... Basile carried the canoe. When we reached the first lake, we had to wait some time for Basile. When he arrived, his dark face was such a peculiar muddy colour that I laughed. After some discussion with Basile, Sousi said, "You shouldn't laugh. Basile say, maybe die" (Blanchet, 1924).
- Such travelers as go beyond Reliance must take Pike's Portage, a route of alternating ponds, streams, rocks, hills and muskeg. It is a man's route... The second day on the portages was torture. A steady drizzle soaked the muskeg to a mud-like consistency and made the rock slimy. A swarm of black flies completed the misery (Waldron, 1931).
- (The) last place where Hornby and party were seen alive (Whalley, 1980).

Chapter 4: Constructing the “New North”

We still deal with the Aboriginal people through the eyes of the explorers who first met them, and we establish policies based on that first contact, so that we can turn them into us; never mind their history. (John B. Zoe, qtd. in Wallace 123)

Agnes Deans Cameron was born in 1863 in Victoria, B.C. She began teaching school in her teenage years and in 1894 was appointed to the position of high school principal, the first female in that position in B.C. However, she had a number of clashes with the School Board regarding her controversial views on education practices and in 1905 she was finally dismissed over a seemingly trivial matter that involved allowing her students to use rulers in a drawing examination (Forster 56). It was upsetting to her that a male teacher who allowed the same practice retained his position. Following her dismissal Cameron moved to Chicago where she worked with the Western Canadian Immigration Association and she also concentrated on her writing career. *The New North*, which she wrote after her journey to the Northwest Territories in 1908, is her only book but she made numerous contributions to magazines and newspapers and had a successful career as a lecturer and speaker. After her Arctic trip, she spent two years in England promoting Canadian immigration during which she gave over two hundred presentations at Oxford and Cambridge, and to the Royal Geographic Society and other organizations. Cameron returned to Victoria in 1911, where she was considered a local hero for her writing, as well as for her advocacy of women's rights and her promotion of western and northern Canadian development (57). She died in 1912 of complications from appendicitis and pneumonia. Throughout her life Cameron was an unwavering supporter of equal rights for all, including women and minorities, and she has been identified with the first generation of Canadian feminists who have been called “equal rights feminists.” (Pazdro 101). Cameron's belief in equal rights for all human beings

affected many of her observations of the indigenous people she met in the north, particularly with respect to Inuit women whom she saw as living an ideal and successful lifestyle despite the fact that many of its features contravened notions of western propriety.

There is a scattering of literature on Cameron and her work, but like most women who journeyed in the north she has remained relatively anonymous to academic critics including historians who have recorded accounts of exploration in the region, critics of Canadian literature, and even comparative literature scholars who study the narratives of women travellers. Merna Forster profiles Cameron in *100 Canadian Heroines*, and discusses her contribution to movements such as equal rights for women, animal rights, children's aid and other social causes. Roberta Pazdro acknowledges Cameron's contributions to "equal rights feminism" in Latham and Kess's *In Her Own Right*, which documents the lives of prominent British Columbia women. Lisa LaFramboise, in her 1997 PhD dissertation, "Travellers in Skirts," includes Cameron in a chapter on several women who travelled north on Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) supply steamers between 1820 and 1926. LaFramboise investigates some of the physical and ideological conditions that governed women's travel to the arctic during this period and the contribution the resulting travel writing made to a specifically feminine travel voice. Denise Heaps also cites Cameron in her 2000 PhD dissertation, "Gendered Discourse and Subjectivity in Travel Writing by Canadian Women." Her contention is that travel writing by Canadian women was marginalized on the level of genre, gender, and nation. Barbara Kelcey mentions Cameron in a chapter on women travellers to the north in her PhD dissertation, "Jingo Belles, Jingo Belles, Dashing through the Snow," and argues that accounts of women travellers can be useful in discovering how imperialistic ideas were spread. Wendy Roy's article, entitled

“Primacy, Technology, and Nationalism in Agnes Deans Cameron’s *The New North*,” provides a discussion of Cameron’s use of cameras, typewriter and a map and argues that Cameron made use of new technology to challenge attitudes about women travellers in the early 20th century and revise conventional descriptions of indigenous peoples. To date, no critic has analysed Cameron’s representation of northern indigenous peoples. I investigate Cameron’s interactions and interpretations of indigenous people and show how her romantic prose as well as her Eurocentric views might have contributed to representations of the NWT Dene that identified and normalized them as subjects to be ordered, disciplined and governed in colonial contexts.

Cameron’s stated goals were to have “fun” along the way and also to observe and promote northern development (*The New North* 1910 26).¹ Unlike other women travellers who travelled in the area at approximately the same time, such as Elizabeth Taylor and Emma Shaw Colcleugh, Cameron was an academic and interested in education, agricultural potential, government issues and treaty entitlements, in fact, everything in the “New North” that caught her eye. She was intensely interested in nation building and represents the “New North” as an area that can be developed and industrialized. She writes about the fur trade and praises the longevity of Hudson’s Bay Company, whose initials some believe stand for “Here Before Christ.” She devotes an entire chapter to the success of the whaling industry on Herschel Island and is enthusiastic about wheat farming in the Peace River area. She also, somewhat naively, considers the possibilities of a flax harvest in the far north. She is an astute observer and a voracious recorder of details but I argue that her observations, although highly detailed and informative, are written in a style and interpretive manner that performs an injustice to the people and the land. She seems unable to establish an identity for the

people and the land beyond the words and associations of her own cultural background.

In fact, the language she uses to promote settlement and agriculture negates the existence of the native people altogether. Cameron writes that the land in the Peace River area, “though it echo now only the quiet foot of the Cree, is so unmistakably a White Man’s Country” (332), and she refers to Canada as the “last unstaked Empire under a white man’s sky” (385).

Cameron is a visionary and her vision of the “New North” is one of European settlement and resource development where the indigenous people will either be assimilated or, in the case of the Inuit, “will have passed utterly off the map” (249). Cameron’s arctic journey begins in Chicago in May 1908. She consulted Thos. Cook & Son, the famous travel agency known for its ability to expedite travel to most places in the world, and learns, not surprisingly, that there was no “schedule to the Arctic” by way of the Mackenzie River (4). However, Cameron notes that: “what Cook & Son failed to supply, the Hudson’s Bay Company in Winnipeg furnished,” and she learned that “no man or woman can travel with any degree of comfort throughout Northwest America except under the kindly aegis of the Old Company” (7). The Hudson’s Bay Company, which had been trading in the Mackenzie Valley of the Northwest Territories for over a century, had also started a small tourist service, and travellers, both men and women, were conveyed down the Mackenzie River in summer on HBC steamers and supplied with a complete outfit including letters of introduction, food, equipment and guides. Cameron and her niece, Jessie Brown, who travelled with her as a companion/secretary, secured berths on an HBC river boat and in the spring of 1908 they set out from Edmonton by stage coach to Athabasca Landing, the beginning of the water route to Great Slave Lake. From there they embarked on a 2500-mile journey, along what Cameron describes as “the longest water route on the continent, down which floats each year the food,

clothing, and frugal supplies of a country as big as Europe” (54). The route north took them through various rapids, portages, small settlements and camps to Great Slave Lake and then on to the Mackenzie River where they journeyed 1500 miles to its mouth. Another 80-mile journey through the Arctic Ocean brought them to the whaling community of Herschel Island where they turned around and retraced their steps south, up the Mackenzie and back to Alberta (see Figure 5 and 6). During the entire journey, Cameron and Jessie left the boat only for short excursions during the day, and they spent their nights on board.

Cameron boasts that she is travelling in the “footprints of Back and Samuel Hearne, Alexander Mackenzie and Sir John Franklin . . . tracing the silent places” (377), but in fact, she never travels by foot and follows only the water routes of Empire already deeply inscribed by the HBC. Although there were a considerable number of women living in the north at that time,² there were few women travellers and those that did travel as tourists were severely limited in their movements, relying on the assistance of the HBC and the informal protection of the RNWMP. Even up until the 1930s, as Kelcey observes, there were restrictions on female travellers (“Jingo Belles” 114). Male explorers in the north had many more options available to them. They could travel independently, in winter, by dog team and snowshoe; in summer by canoe, sleeping in the open and living off the food of the land, accompanied by native guides if they could obtain them and journeying alone if they

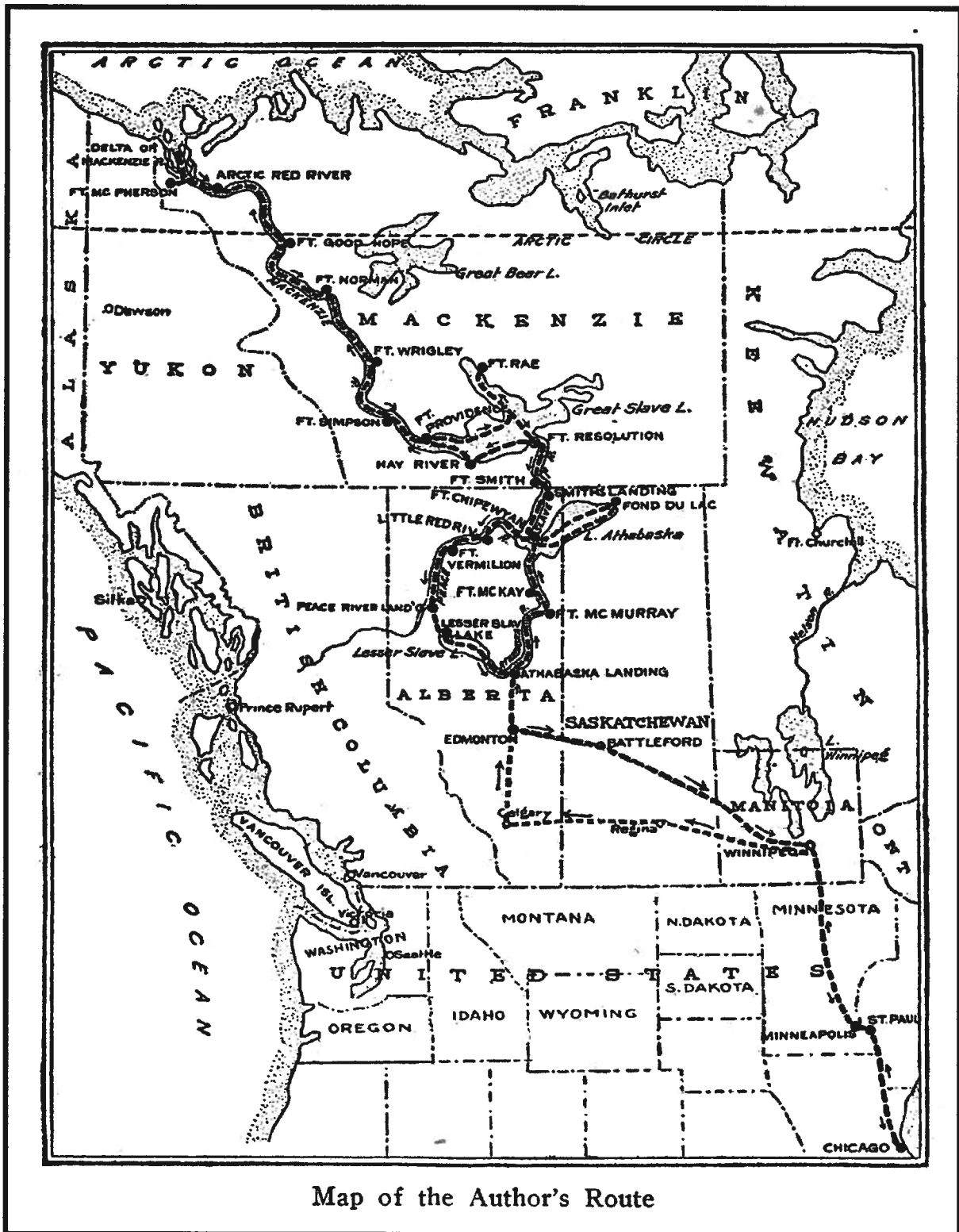


Figure 6. Agnes Deans Cameron's Route from Chicago to the Arctic Ocean

Source: Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North*. (New York: Appleton, 1910) facing p. 1.

could not. Cameron, however, although physically present in the North, is delimited by her femininity from participating in what are deemed to be masculine activities, and although her narrative describes masculine themes of colonization, empire and empire building, and she herself makes various attempts to assert a masculine presence, she remains, of necessity, a bystander and passive observer of the land and its people. Her information is obtained primarily from her shipboard companions and the administrators, churchmen, Northwest Mounted Policemen and HBC officials whom she meets on shore. The information she receives from native sources is translated by interpreters. Although it may be assumed that the events she describes are actual events, the text is ideologically marked and Cameron's knowledge and preconceived ideas are imposed on a reality that does not correspond to western norms.

By the time Cameron arrived in 1908, the concept of north was changing from that of a barren wilderness suitable only for indigenous people and rugged northern adventurers to a place where settlement and economic opportunities, other than fur trading, were possible. It was also becoming, in the popular mind, domesticated. As H. Murray notes, it was no longer "the place which is far enough away to leave women behind" (LaFramboise 133). The only north that is available to Cameron, as a traveller along the river, is one that has been heavily modified by the European presence. Cameron may imagine that she is venturing into uncharted territory and penetrating the wilderness in the way that masculine explorers might fashion their activities but in fact she remains distanced both physically and cognitively from what she describes. Cameron rarely has an opportunity to obtain even a glimpse of the old north, and the "New North" that she imagines is constructed from superficial observations that lack a depth of comprehension and are unable to provide a shape to the land and its

people beyond the familiar images of her Eurocentric background. Another deterrent to authenticity is her prose, which while representative of her time and her education, lacks substance and authority. Obviously, one cannot fault Cameron for writing in a style appropriate to her era and her literary knowledge, but her vision for the developing north, which is delivered in a mixture of sentimentality, literary and classical allusions and nationalistic proselytizing, creates a jarring sense of unreality, and sometimes triviality, that undermines and neutralizes the north and its people. However, although Cameron's style, her rhetoric and her perspective may be one-sided, her narrative and her photographic evidence are valuable for the representations that she offers of the settlements and the life along the Mackenzie River in the early part of the century. I approach *The New North*, therefore, as an important historical document, while at the same time I argue that, as a travel narrative, it belongs to a genre that postcolonial theory has interpreted, according to Heaps, "as an agent and accomplice to the crimes perpetuated by Euroimperialism" (15).

Travel writing, as Heaps argues, is not "an innocuous written record of inter-cultural contact but a producer of colonial and neocolonial discourses" (15). She observes that from Said's *Orientalism*, onwards, many postcolonial critics

have viewed representations of others in travel writing as neither veridical nor objective, but as projections of the author's own fears and desires.

Autobiographical subject positions, such as an author's gender, nationality, political affiliation, imperialist agenda, and historical moment are seen as determining factors in how others are perceived and represented. (14-15)

As a female traveller Cameron pays closer attention to the domestic matters and day-to-day events of the indigenous people she observes than might be the case with male travellers, as a

teacher she is interested in residential schools and their curriculum, and her equal rights stance allows her to project her ideology of equality and women's rights onto the indigenous women she encounters. As a Canadian citizen she is intensely nationalistic and her "imperialist agenda" is represented by what she states is her "great desire to call attention to the great unoccupied lands of Canada, to induce people from the crowded centres of the Old World to use the fresh air of the New" (*New North* 15). Additionally, she is, of course, caught up in the historical moment of her time which has been characterised as an age of expansion: Victorian, progressive, nationalistic and imperialistic. Her discourse reflects and promotes the values of her age, while, at the same time, it contributes to the phenomenon that I refer to in my introduction, described by Said as a "textual attitude" (*Orientalism* 94) that allows knowledge about distant and foreign places to be disseminated and acquire authority through narrative. By applying her own Victorian values, standards and future projections to the land and the people she encounters, Cameron represents the north as a magnificent, empty land waiting for settlement and development, and its people, either, the Inuit, as superb specimens of manhood, but doomed by encroaching civilization, or, the Dene, as examples of partially successfully colonised subjects. The result of her forward-reaching narrative with its idealistic rhetoric and romantic images is a text that frequently seems to negate the north that exists and promote an imaginary one of the future.

This attitude is, of course, the fundamental basis of imperialist and colonialist ideologies and practices which are always progressive and forward-looking. In Canada, empire building, imperialism and development were closely associated with nationalism and patriotism and these themes were reflected in the literature that was produced during the late 1800s and early 1900s. The prevalent idea of nationalism at the turn of the century was

a fundamental belief in cultural uniformity, and in Canada, as William New observes: “Nationalist sentiment was anglocentric, male-dominated, and justified by appeals to God and Natural Law” (*A History* 81). The literature of the period was patriotic and sentimental, appealing to an idealized concept of Canadian experience that was strongly influenced by British Protestant values and aesthetics. Anthologies of the time contain works whose primary task was to celebrate a sense of nationhood and direct Canadians toward an appreciation of their huge and sometimes terrifying new country (See for example, Dewart, Lighthall, Logan and French, MacMechan, MacMurchy, Marquis, and Watson and Pierce).

Much early Canadian writing celebrates themes of wilderness and applauds the adventurous and pioneer spirit of those who attempt to explore and tame the country. However, one of the difficulties of this writing, that some early Canadian writers such as Thomas D’Arcy McGee recognized, was the inadequacy of trying to conceptualize the Canadian experience within the knowledge and language that was available. McGee observes that trying to write about the new country from a Eurocentric perspective was problematic, and he notes that books and words from another culture are “not always the best fitted for us . . . they do not take us up at the by-stages of cultivation at which we have arrived, and where we are emptied forth as on a barren, pathless, habitationless heath” (65). New, a contemporary critic, echoes this sentiment when he argues that the young country of Canada, with its vast distances and dangerous wilderness, was often, “beyond the limits of European standards both of propriety and design” (*A History* 143). Explorers, travellers and settlers felt alienated from the environment and the indigenous population and described what they saw, or thought they saw, based on their cultural norms and literary patterns of the day. Constrained by their European culture and education, they seemed unable to cross

certain boundaries and in their effort to authorize their presence in the new world, Canadian writers turned to familiar literary expressions and ideology that would secure their sense of place in the strange new land that they could not easily comprehend. But, as New argues, “if a language (together with the values it encodes) has been brought from somewhere else, and is being used to describe a new environment and to voice another culture’s inevitably changing values, the old terms might no longer apply.” Under these conditions, he explains, “the language is at once an impediment to communication and the very means of communication, a site of paradox, a ground at once of exhaustion and creativity” (*Land Sliding* 11). New refers to a gap between an “imported language and a lived environment” (10) that occurs when the language of representation imposes imported social and cultural values on the land or place it describes. The articulation of this conditioned sensibility, sustained, as New observes, “over many decades, . . . shaped how people perceived Canadian landforms and Canadian realities” (11). Although New is referring primarily to representations of landscape, the same criteria can be applied to descriptions and evaluations of people. In Cameron’s narrative, the language and metaphors that she employs to describe the land and the people of the Northwest Territories normalize and justify certain colonial practices and attitudes that delimit and devalue the culture of the indigenous people, and domesticate and diminish their land. Unfortunately, many of the “textual attitudes” that are found in Cameron’s narrative have sustained themselves throughout the 20th century and remain intact up to the present.

Cameron was very much a product of an articulate and literary society and her narrative reflects her educated, cultivated middleclass background and ideology. She prides herself on her ability to be an objective and astute observer; however, the only words and

attitudes available to her are the ones born in the imperial language and values of Britain, the language of the colonizers, and these words fail to recognize or negotiate the richness, diversity and difference of the northern landscape and the culture that was already there. She came to the NWT with the expectation that she would “set the record straight,” and reconstruct a north that was already well known, as she believes, from previous explorer narratives as “a forbidding place, a frozen silence where human beings seldom penetrate” (*New North* 207). But the difficulty is that, in her reconstruction, she creates, not the north of the indigenous peoples who were already there living an integrated and unchallenged life in what to them was a friendly and familiar homeland, but a “new north” populated by European settlers working hard towards progressive economic development.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, in her work, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, which looks for alternative methods for colonized people to represent themselves, makes the point that what counts as western research “draws from an ‘archive’ of knowledge and systems, rules and values” (43). She cites Stuart Hall, who argues that the West is an idea or concept, a language for imagining a set of complex stories, ideas, historical events and social relationships. Hall suggests that the concept of the West functions in ways which:

(1) allow ‘us’ to characterize and *classify* societies into categories, (2) condense complex images of other societies through a *system of representation*, (3) provide a standard *model of comparison*, and (4) provide *criteria of evaluation* against which other societies can be ranked. (L.T. Smith 43)

I will show that Cameron draws her inspiration from a western set of values and makes use of the types of rhetorical devices that Hall describes to represent indigenous people and their land in roles that she and her readers will understand and find acceptable.

Cameron, who prides herself on her open-minded approach to thorny cultural matters, struggles to comprehend and find words to explain indigenous culture and practices. Her representations of the land and the people she observes are detailed and accurate within the range of her focus. She is somewhat aware of the past and current culture of the Dene and she finds value in those whom she describes as “unspoiled of civilization” (*New North* 124), but her narrative frequently performs a violence of representation on the subjects of her gaze through its insistence on extolling colonial values and practices and comparing what she sees with “standard models” (L.T. Smith 43). On a visit to the Roman Catholic mission in Fort Resolution, for example, Cameron observes the behaviour and demeanour of native schoolchildren, whom she admires for their resemblance to “civilized” school children:

The good nuns are trying to make reputable citizens of the young scions of the Dog-Rib and Yellow-Knife and are succeeding admirably as far as surface indications. We approach a group of smiling boys arrayed in their Sunday clothes, awaiting a visit of the bishop. With one accord come off their Glengarry bonnets, smoking caps, and Christie stiffs, and a row of brown hands is extended to greet us. Very trim the laddies look in their convent-made cadet-uniforms, as, standing at “Shun!” they answered our every question with, “Yes, missus,” “No, missus.” When we ask their names, without tittering or looking silly they render up the whole list of saintly cognomens. (162)

Cameron applauds the dignity and nobility of children who can stand up proudly and state their Christian names, while at the same time removing their hats and shaking hands according to standards of European good manners. However, she fails to acknowledge that the good nuns have already performed an act of violence and negation against the young

Dene by replacing their native names with “saintly cognomens” to which the children are encouraged to answer with pride. Furthermore, Cameron notes, the children are dressed in European “cadet-uniforms” and standing at military attention. They are on their way to becoming what she recognizes as “reputable citizens,” implying that, in a former state, they were not reputable or acceptable and are benefiting from the correction now being provided by representatives of the Church and the government. Cameron praises the scene for being “Old Worldish,” and endorses the transformation of young Dene from “waifs of the woods” (169) to respectable citizens. Cameron’s prose, with its formal constructions and language, such as “render up the whole list of saintly cognomens” creates a barrier between Cameron herself and the scene before her. At the same time Cameron’s prose distances the children from their Dene roots and reconstructs them as militarily precise, polite Canadian subjects who are somehow better than their “white brothers.” She notes that in answering politely to their names they “once more have their white brothers ‘skinned;’ no civilised man, woman, or child ever stood up in public and announced his full baptismal name in an audible tone without feeling a fool” (162). Cameron’s rhetoric of idealization, which occurs frequently throughout her narrative, negates the existence of indigenous people by reconceptualizing them in images that embody early 20th century colonial ideals of democracy, enterprise and discipline. Further on, at the Hay River Mission, she notes that:

Red girls and boys of every tribe in the North are housed in this Mission, *learning how to play the white man’s game* (italics mine) – jolly and clean little bodies they are. . . . The impression we carry away is of earnest and sweet-hearted women bringing mother-love to the waifs of the wilderness, letting their light shine where few there are to see it. (169)

Here Cameron endorses white values and cleanliness, and notes with approval that the children are engaged in wrapping up “cakes of pink scented soap” that the missionaries will send to their parents in bush camps. Soap, as Anne McClintock argues in *Imperial Leather*, her book on forces that shaped colonialism, is an instrument or tool of civilization. She quotes an 1899 advertisement that features Pears’ Soap: “The first step towards lightening THE WHITE MAN’S BURDEN is through teaching the virtues of cleanliness. PEARS SOAP is a potent factor in brightening the dark corners of the earth as civilization advances” (32). While the soap that is being sent to the native parents in the NWT may not be Pears Soap, nonetheless it is apparent that the missionaries believe that soap of some kind is needed and the implications of its cleansing and domesticating properties are clear. McClintock identifies soap as an item that forms part of what she calls “commodity racism” (33) which, among other things, involved the domestication of colonized peoples through the marketing of products that endorsed western values and standards such as cleanliness and orderliness. Missionaries sending soap to Indians via their children in residential schools was obviously a minor event in the pattern of daily life in the Northwest Territories, but the gift of soap can always be misconstrued by its recipient or by an uninformed reader. Cameron’s recording of this small act of gift giving contributes to the textual message that the Indians of the woods were dirty and uncivilized. It is obvious that indigenous people were unclean by the standards of the white travellers who observed them. Pike mentions their dirty way of life but accepts it as a natural part of who they are. Catherine Hoare who worked with the Inuit at Herschel Island in the 1920s believed that they lived practical Christian lives but comments on their unclean habits. They were a joy to work with because they were sincere, kindly, and truthful, and “so honest, one cannot help liking them. But oh! They are dirty! Dirty in every

way” (Catharine Hoare to Bishop Lucas, 15 Jan 1921, qtd. in Kelcey, “Jingo Belles” 259). The dirt is hardly surprising considering the nomadic lifestyle of the indigenous people in a sub-arctic climate. What is significant is not cleanliness itself, but the racist assumptions of white Europeans that the Dene needed to be upgraded to a more organized and civilized standard, and that the Christian duty of white missionaries was to reach far out to the bush in an effort to cleanse and purify the indigenous people living there in apparent squalor.

It is not my intention to vilify Cameron for observing and applauding such seemingly insignificant events as a gift of soap. She is, after all, only the visitor and the recorder, and can hardly be held responsible for the education and domestication of the NWT Dene. However, as John Zoe, chief negotiator for the Dogrib Treaty 11 hearings, pointed out at a conference in Yellowknife in 2000, “We still deal with the Aboriginal people through the eyes of the explorers who first met them, and we establish policies based on that first contact, so that we can turn them into us; never mind their history” (Wallace 123). Zoe’s remark obviously covers matters larger than soap but it speaks to the important matter of the longevity of representation and the difficulty of dislodging certain roles and characterizations that were assigned to the Dene by early explorers and disseminated through their narratives. As an early traveller, and more significantly as a woman, Cameron was in a position to identify and articulate small domestic details, such as the gift of soap, that were invisible to male explorers and these details contributed to constructions of indigenous people that persist to this day. As Robert Alexie points out in his descriptions of Mission schools, “Dirty fuckin’ Indian” was not an uncommon term.³ Elsewhere, he describes nuns attempting to scrub the children’s brown bodies clean (*Porcupines* 283). This observation touches the core of many early Europeans’ attitudes to aboriginal people. There was a deep-seated desire to transform

the Dene and Inuit into facsimiles of white people and an optimistic belief that underneath the dirt and the uncivilized practices there was, in fact, a European. Cameron herself seems to have been under the impression that if the Inuit “were to wash themselves daily (which they do not do yearly) they would be as white as we are” (*New North* 256). Her remark refers not only to their skin tone but also to their practices and beliefs as I demonstrate later on in a discussion of her encounters with the Inuit.

Cameron’s descriptions of the Dene mission schools and the children who attend them are interesting historical observations, and she herself cannot be dismissed for describing and applying her own cultural values and her training as a teacher to what she sees. The education and Europeanization of indigenous children is what the colonizing project was all about as stated by the Canadian government of the time. Indian children were to be assimilated into mainstream Canadian culture through education and separation from their parents, and Cameron’s narrative is an endorsement of the progress of that project. What Said calls the “violence of representation” (“Yeats” 94-5) is always present in Cameron’s unquestioning approval of what can now be seen as the mistakes and injustices of colonisation in the NWT. Cameron valorises and reinforces attitudes that became part of the accepted discourse of colonisation. She is clearly aware that the Mission schools have been forced on the Dene, and she acknowledges that: “These Indian schools, assisted by the Canadian government, *catch* the little Indians in the camps and *hold their prey* (italics mine) on school-benches from the age of four to fourteen” (*New North* 100). However, instead of seeing native children separated for years from grieving parents and communities, subjected to physical and mental abuse and loss of culture, Cameron expresses admiration for the

school system and the nuns, whom she calls “these good step-mothers of savages,” who are “trying to graft a new civilisation on an old stock” (102).

The disturbing element of this discourse inheres in Cameron’s designation of indigenous children as savages and “wilderness waifs”(169). “Waifs,” by definition, are individuals who have no home or friends, and are strays, lost and unclaimed. Waifishness suggests a state of abjection that is unacceptable by western standards and therefore must be rectified. By describing the native children as stray, “savage,” and as “prey” to be captured and held, Cameron dehumanizes them and denies their existence as important and cherished members of a close-knit and loving Dene society. It can, of course, be argued that the words that Cameron uses, such as “wilderness waifs,” “children of the woods” and so forth, in addition to her somewhat mocking tone, are simply manifestations of the accepted rhetoric of the day. However, such writing, as New argues, endorses particular political and social attitudes and “appears to ratify them as natural” (*Land Sliding* 16). Narratives such as Cameron’s produced powerful textual representations of the north that privileged ideas of what was normal and correct according to European standards and consequently denied aspects of indigenous people that were deemed unacceptable.

Cameron’s position with respect to indigenous people is conflicted. On the one hand, she admires their strength and fortitude as boatmen, scouts, hunters and trappers, but when not magnificent they are objects of pity or amusement. For example, when her boat stops somewhere north of Athabasca Landing, Cameron comments on an old Indian dying in his cabin, inserting her description of him as one of a number of interesting sights along the shore:

The Doctor has found a patient in a cabin on the high bank, and rejoices. The Indian has consumption. The only things the Doctor could get at were rhubarb pills and cod-liver oil, but these, with faith, go a long way. They may have eased the mind of poor Lo, around whose dying bunk we hear the relatives scrapping over his residuary estate of rusty rifle, much-mended fishing-net, and three gaunt dogs. (*New North* 59)

Cameron shows no particular interest or compassion except to note that the “rejoicing” doctor is apparently pleased at being able to practise his skills on a dying patient, and the “Indian” himself is a subject for Cameron to demonstrate her own literary cleverness in invoking Pope’s famous *double entendre*.⁴ The relatives, “scrapping” over the “estate” further reinforces Cameron’s whimsical amusement at the incident as well as her propensity to frame what she sees in familiar western terms. Her use of the grandiose term “estate” followed by the description of its paltry contents is an insult to the dying Indian and a comment on the poverty of indigenous people when judged by European standards. The greedy relatives “scrapping” over the meagre remains further dehumanizes the scene. Cameron’s tone of ironic detachment, while meant to be amusing, reinforces her position, both cognitive, as the voice of culture, education and reason, and physical, as a detached and passive observer removed from the subjects of her gaze. To use Bourdieu’s terms, Cameron’s viewpoint is taken from a “high position[s] in the social structure from which the social world is seen as a representation” (52). In time, Bourdieu believes, such objective viewpoints produce their own discourses that reconstruct images and events into narratives that are recognized as real or important measures of authenticity. Cameron’s description of the dying Indian, in a shack on the bank of a river, surrounded by what she sees as his bits of junk and

his starving dogs is an image of abjection that denies cultural value to indigenous people. By representing the dying Indian in terms of European poverty Cameron negates the validity of an indigenous culture that required few possessions. In a nomadic culture, a man with a rifle, a fishnet and three dogs would be wealthy indeed; in Cameron's eyes he is a derelict.

Cameron's description of the dying Indian is a sort of sidebar amidst observations of landscape and wildlife made as she floats downstream. This viewpoint of a detached bystander taking up a position from the safety and comfort of a HBC steamer is common for women travellers of her era in the north. As Laframboise, points out, most northern women travellers of the time do not "challenge the bounds of their femininity" (139). They do not leave the boat by themselves; they do not encounter the indigenous people without an interpreter or guide, and their narratives tend to reinforce romantic and historical constructions of the north. As a passenger on the boat, Cameron is part of this group of passive observers, but at the same time she seeks a different role for herself in the new north that she envisions. Although she is physically constrained by her femininity, her rhetoric is that of empire building and forward-looking positions for both men and women, and in her attempts to articulate this ideology she challenges her role as a woman in complicated ways.

Exploration and travel in difficult areas was generally thought of as a masculine enterprise, and although Cameron cannot physically partake in difficult work she participates by writing herself into masculine activity. In various recognizable scenes of northern adventure, such as running dangerous rapids and shooting wildlife, Cameron imagines herself a participant. As their scow approaches the Grand Rapids of the Athabasca River she inserts herself into the process: "The problem before us," she observes, "is to run the rough water at the near end of the island, tie up there, unload, transfer the pieces by hand-car over

the island to its other end, let the empty scows down carefully through the channel by ropes, and reload at the other end” (62). However, despite her first-person analysis of the scene, her desire to play a part in the business and the work of empire building is limited by her feminine persona and she “sits tight” in the boat while the voyageurs tackle the rapids and organize the loading. But on other occasions she insists on playing an equal part and with the help of the voyageurs and boatmen she shoots what she calls her “premier” moose. However, even here, her role as a hunter is symbolic. She does not go ashore to track the moose, but shoots it from the boat with a borrowed rifle handed to her by the men. Although she is, in theory, participating in the male experience of hunting for food, and although the photograph (likely taken by one of the party on the boat) of her standing, like a trophy hunter, over the moose, rifle in hand and what looks like an RNWMP hat on her head suggests a masculine persona (Figure 6), Cameron is still limited by her feminine outlook that she demonstrates through her domestic rhetoric. She describes the moose as a “grasshopper on stilts,” or an “animal we make for the baby by sticking four matches into a sweet biscuit” (347), thereby diminishing the moose and domesticating the hunting experience. Even after shooting the moose she finds it necessary to justify the killing and counters accusations of cruelty that might be levelled by her readers. “‘Cruel!’ you say. Well, just you live from mid-May to mid-September without fresh meat . . . as we have done, and then find out if you would fly in the face of Providence when the Red Gods send you a young moose!” (348).

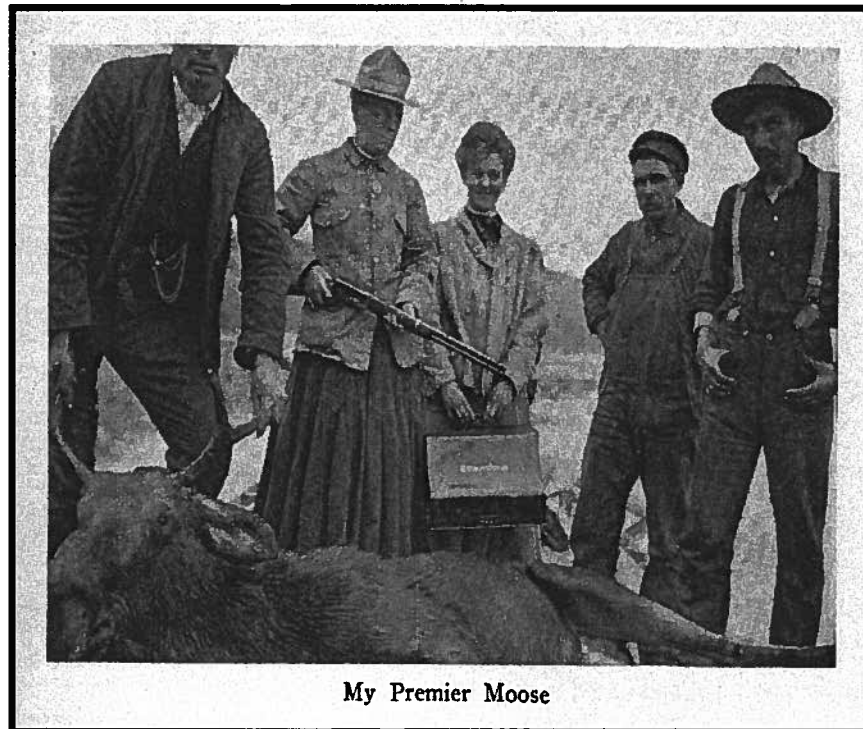


Figure 7. Agnes Deans Cameron with her Premier Moose

Source: Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North* (New York: Appleton, 1910) p 347.

The need to justify and qualify is, to me, the most salient and the most problematic feature of Cameron's rhetoric because she always tries to frame her experiences within her own cultural terms. One feels the need to say to Cameron, "Just shoot the moose like everyone else and eat it without making it into a baby's toy or a gift from the gods." In the north, for indigenous people, shooting a moose, or any other animal for that matter, is not a question of cruelty or trophy hunting but a normal and necessary part of a life and a culture that is closely tied to the land. Most male explorers understood that hunting was an important part of their survival and practiced it in their own travels. Cameron, however, is well provided for by the Hudson's Bay Company and her moose hunting is a tourist activity performed from the safety of the steamer. Cameron is *in* the north, but she does not *touch* the

north, taking up instead a judgemental shipboard gaze that imposes a kind of visual stamp of approval on all she sees.

The gaze of the colonial traveller has been extensively analyzed and as David Spurr shows, in *The Rhetoric of Empire*, the gaze has an overpowering and potentially destructive effect on the subjects it surveys. As well as being an “instrument of construction, order, and arrangement” (15), the gaze, at the same time, provides a position for the writer that is “either above or at the centre of things, yet apart from them, so that the organization and classification of things takes place according to the writer’s own system of value” (16). I have referred to Bourdieu’s theory of practice in which he distinguishes between “subjectivism” and “objectivism” as ways of apprehending the social world:

[Objectivism] constitutes the social world as a spectacle offered to an observer who takes up a ‘point of view’ on the action and who, putting into the object the principles of his relation to the object, proceeds as if it were intended solely for knowledge and as if all the interactions within it were purely symbolic exchanges.

(52)

Taking up an objective stance has the effect of decontextualizing objects from their surveillance position, seeing them at a fixed spatial and temporal location and failing to engage with their historic or cultural circumstances. Representative scenes such as Cameron describes from the deck of her steamer, although accurate at the moment of observation, fail to tell a complete story, yet such descriptions become part of the accepted discourse of the northern story and acquire authority through textual representation that becomes widely circulated and believed.

One of the difficulties faced by the objects of the gaze and of imperialist writing is that ultimately they must fit into recognizable categories determined by western discourses. Cameron, as she freely admits, struggles to find a recognizable and acceptable pattern in the society and personalities of the indigenous residents. However, her observations are problematic, not only because of her “objectivism,” but also because of her tendency to see everything in a positive light. Male travellers such as Pike are frequently exasperated, angry and judgemental about their native guides and companions, but Cameron, because of her great desire to find a new north where everything is somehow bigger and better, is always optimistic. Pike constantly castigates and criticizes his native travelling companions for their errant and unruly ways while Cameron, in contrast, always maintains her equilibrium and looks for a redeeming feature in the people she encounters. While Pike and others complain about deceitful and lying natives, Cameron finds the Eskimo propensity to stretch the truth a “delightful trait” that is a sign of “Eskimo etiquette” (*New North* 262). For example, she explains, “If you say to Roxi, ‘Wasn’t that a grey goose we heard overhead?’ Roxi will readily assent, though he well knows it to have been a mallard duck” (261). On the one hand, one might argue that Cameron’s viewpoint indicates a more sensitive approach to cultural differences, but it is more likely that because of her bystander position she is simply not involved enough for Roxi’s or anyone else’s answers to have any consequences for her. She is not, like Pike or other male explorers, dependent on the facts. Nor does it appear that she understands everything she is told.

Although Cameron does not mention it in her narrative, she encountered the arctic explorer, Vilhjalmur Stefansson, during her visit to Fort McPherson on the Mackenzie River. Stefansson offered to act as an interpreter for Cameron but she declined his services. He was

not impressed with Cameron's ability to elicit truth in her interviews, particularly since she had no knowledge of Inuktitut, the Eskimo language. He later wrote in *My Life with the Eskimos* that she "listened eagerly to all the stories she heard about the North. Most of these were picturesque, but judging from the ones which I personally heard related to Miss Cameron I should say that a considerable portion of them were scarcely gospel truth." He also observed that: "She went into a considerable number of Eskimo tents for the purpose of securing information and local color. I have since heard what it was that the Eskimo thought she asked them, but I have not yet learned what it was that she thought they told her in reply" (33). We have no way of knowing if Stefansson's account is accurate, but he was not the only one to comment on the veracity of Cameron's stories. Kelcey quotes Anglican missionary, Reverend Whittaker, who wrote that Cameron was a "vigorous romanticist, gathering data for a vivid volume, an intricate compound of fact and fiction, a most interesting and readable romance of travel to be sure, but hardly a reliable book for reference." ("Jingo Belles" 132). From these two reports it seems reasonable to assume that Cameron was not always in full possession of the "facts" of a story. On the other hand, it could be that Stefansson and Whittaker were, like many long-time northerners, taking a proprietary and macho stance on their north, and regarded Cameron as a one-time northern tourist.

Cameron is a self-acknowledged "nosy-parker" who talks to everyone she encounters. She listens to the stories of Northwest Mounted Police officers, missionaries and priests, HBC employees and various "half-breed" trappers or boatmen who speak English. Cameron, like most travellers, knows no native language and almost without exception, the natives she meets, speak no English. However, she does ascribe direct quotation to many of her sources

and it is sometimes difficult to determine where the direct quotation ends and where Cameron's voice begins. For example on several occasions she quotes Roxi, a "courteous Eskimo gentleman," on matters of Eskimo life, but it becomes apparent that Roxi himself does not speak directly to her because she notes that she "heard the story of his last winter's larder, but not from his lips" (*New North* 269). Other instances of discourse in quotation marks are clearly Cameron's own thoughts attributed to her native subjects. She "quotes" a "debonair Eskimo," who seems to her to be a

re-incarnation of the bastard brother of Aragon's Prince, and, leaning his furry back against the North Pole, says with him, "I smile at no man's jests, eat when I have stomach and wait for no man's pleasure, sleep when I am drowsy and tend on no man's business, laugh when I am merry and claw no man in his humour."
(259-60)

Even the most "debonair Eskimo" could not possibly speak in such terms and this "mock-heroic" style, with what LaFramboise describes as its "levity and jaunty tone" (139), potentially destabilizes ethnographic authority in its obviously romanticised interpretation of a Canadian Eskimo of the early 20th century. Such rhetoric reinforces Cameron's own predisposition to valorize the Eskimo as a paragon of noble manhood who serves, in several of her anecdotes, as an example of the type of man needed for future Canadian imperializing ventures. Cameron suggests a multivoiced discourse and a certain veracity throughout her text by means of direct quotation, but in fact the "quoted" speech of her subjects is most often the voice of an interpreter that is then filtered through her own literate background to enhance her project of describing a new north that is larger, better, stronger and more progressive than anywhere else.

Cameron's relentless enthusiasm and endorsement of the north is seen in her descriptions both of the people she encounters and the small settlements that she visits along the Mackenzie. She describes Fort Norman:

Seldom have we seen a more beautiful vista than the up-climbing path leading from the shore to the Roman chapel at the head of the hill. It is bordered by flaming fireweed and lined with the eager faces of children dressed in their Sunday best, ready for morning mass and awaiting the blessing of their Bishop.
(204)

And at Fort Good Hope, Cameron finds friendly, welcoming natives and kindly, happy settlers:

Reaching the top, we find the air heavy with the perfume of wild roses, and we can scarcely make our way through the sea of welcoming Indians. Old people grasp our hands as if we were life-time friends just back from a far journey. Young men greet us as long-lost chums, the women call to the children, and there seems to be a reception committee to rout out the old beldames, little children, and the bed-ridden: it is hand-shaking gone mad. We shake hands with every soul on the voting-list of Good Hope, to say nothing of minors, suffragettes, and the unfranchised proletariat, before at last we are rescued by smiling Miss Gaudet and dragged in to one of the sweetest homes in all the wide world. (208)

This idealization, of landscape, and of both native and white society in the north, is as misleading and potentially damaging as any derogatory representation, for in its valorization of European values and progressive ideas, it fails to recognize or confront the process of the production of this new and splendid north. At settlements such as Fort Norman and Fort

Good Hope the predominant structures are those of the church and the Hudson's Bay Company around which the business of the settlement is conducted. At every settlement Cameron encounters smiling and happy Indian children attending church or school and white people living in spotless and cosy little houses administering the affairs of the north. She glosses over the conditions of adult native people who, when they are not out on the land, live on the outskirts of the settlements in slum conditions and, as various officials observed, are "always in a more or less starving condition" (Police Inspector George Fletcher, qtd. in Fumoleau 125). It is not that Cameron fails to recount the less desirable stories she hears from others or even some events she witnesses. She tells of an Indian who murdered his wife and baby; she recounts the tragedy of a woman called "Cannibal Louise," and in Fort Simpson, she spots "an Indian lunatic" who may cause trouble as a result of an illicit still in the woods (188-9). However, the characters in these stories, like "Lo" the dying Indian on the river bank, appear to Cameron as oddities or exceptions rather than part of the fabric of the north. Her ironic, thumbnail sketches allow Cameron to distance herself from people or events that do not meet her criteria for an idealized north and as a result, she is excluded from what Spurr calls the "human reality constituted as the object of observation" (14).

Those whom Cameron admires most are the Eskimos whom she first meets at Arctic Red River. For five chapters in the middle of the text she describes, organizes, classifies and idealizes the members of the Kogmollyc band. However, in her very objectivity and her professed aim to understand and describe her subjects she forces them into idealized models that are acceptable by European standards. For example, she finds it difficult, at first, to accept the conditions of a family consisting of a husband, two wives and children, admitting that she tries hard "for the viewpoint of each member of the Farthest North family of fellow-

Canadians" (*New North* 216). The issue of the two wives, Cameron notes, was "a puzzle to the on-lookers who sought in vain for some one of the three contracting parties to pity" (218). Eventually, however, Cameron concedes that, in these unusual northern circumstances, necessity and happiness supersede the Christian laws of man and God and she finds herself not only able to justify a pagan practice that she is clearly uneasy about but also to find virtue in it. "Ethically," she says, "it works out beautifully, for each partner to the hymeneal bargain is fat and full of content, happiness fairly oozing out of every oily pore. And is not happiness the goal of human endeavour?" (220). Not only happiness, but expedience also allows Cameron to accept these polygamous customs and insert her own project of equal rights for women into the discourse. The work-sharing strategy practiced by the wives not only satisfies Cameron's need for moral justification, it also exceeds feminist expectations:

No suffragette need break a lance for [the young wife], demanding a ballot, dower-rights, and the rest of it. She is happy and busy. All day long she sings and laughs as she prepares the family fish and feast of fat things, she pays deference to her co-wife, romps with the children, and expands like an anemone under the ardent smile of her lord. (217)

It is hard to know what to make of this idealistic and somewhat condescending prose. The Inuit woman is portrayed as content and happy in her wifely role, but Cameron recognizes that the lot of women in the north is difficult:

[The] birth of a girl baby is not attended with joy or thankfulness. . . . The boy babies, even the dogs, have the choicer bed at night, and to them are given the best pieces of the meat. The little girl is made to feel that she has come into

a world that has no welcome for her and her whole life seems to be an apology (308).

The state of inequality apparently continues throughout a woman's life, but somehow Cameron manages to turn the Inuit attitude to marriage and wife sharing into a positive experience and by doing so she demonstrates a liberal-minded understanding of Inuit culture. She explains that in a land where the choices are to hunt or starve it is better for a woman to have part of a man than no man at all. "The fact that the women prefer a vulgar-fraction of a man, an Eskimo equity in connubial bliss, to spearing walrus on their own account is a significant factor in the problem." Wife sharing is apparently still a "problem" but Cameron does seem to understand both sides of this cultural issue and concedes that "we must adjust our judgment to the latitude north of 68° North" (219).

Cameron's stated purpose is to challenge conventional wisdom about northern indigenous culture which she feels has been misrepresented and in some instances, such as her attitude toward wife sharing, she demonstrates an understanding and empathy that could potentially change readers' attitudes toward the Inuit. Much colonial writing of Cameron's era reduces indigenous people to a sub-human or childlike species and she notes that her own knowledge of the "Eskimo" has been formed from her school curriculum. She quotes her school texts: "The Eskimo is a short, squat, dirty man who lives on blubber, said the text-books we had been weaned on, and this was the man we looked for. We didn't find him." What she does find "is a man who commands your respect the moment you look at him, and yet he is withal the frankest of mortals, affable, joyous, fairly effervescing with good-humour" (212-3). Cameron represents the "new" Eskimo as a paragon of noble manhood and a "splendid moral of integrity, manliness, and intrepid courage" (223). She bases her

judgement of Eskimos in general on the Oovaiioak family whom she admires for their “almost-white complexions” and their “simple dignity” within which “one recognizes . . . an ancestry harking back to Old World culture and distinction” (217). Here, again Cameron’s analysis seems flawed. Having cheerfully and optimistically made the effort to understand and justify the pagan and unEuropean customs of the Inuit, she now reverses the effect and does more violence to them than the discourse that originally stereotyped them as savage and uncivilized.

Her descriptions of “almost-white complexions” and “Old World” ancestry, together with her generalisations about nobility and other valorized statements, fixes her Inuit subjects in an impossible position. When a unfamiliar and exotic subject is apprehended, domesticated, assimilated and described as already familiar, little variation or individualization of the society is permitted and such representations lead to different kinds of discourses that prove equally damaging to the subjects in question. The “noble savage,” which is generally a designation assigned to an indigenous figure possessing all the qualities considered most ideal in a European, is a common enough trope in Canadian imperial writing, but it is a precarious position for the indigenous person because all such figures in Canadian literature, from Duncan Campbell Scott’s “Onondaga Madonna,” the representative of “a weird and waning race” (D.C. Scott 149), to Rudy Wiebe’s modern characterization of Big Bear, a figure of dignity, honesty and vision, have been doomed to death and extinction because there is no place for their kind of primitive perfection in an imperfect western world that imposes its values on them. “What we have done for Eskimo is a minus quantity,” says Cameron. “What he has done for us is to point a splendid moral of integrity, manliness, and intrepid courage” (*New North* 223). Unlike native Indians whom she portrays as well on their

way to “learning how to play the white man’s game” (169), Cameron prefers the more noble Eskimos who represent a Romantic ideal untouched by the progress of imperial expansion. She praises their physical size (to the extent of measuring them with a ruler), their family relations, their mechanical abilities and their system of justice.

We respect the Eskimo for many things for his physical courage as he approaches the bear in single combat, for his uncomplaining endurance of hardships, for his unceasing industry, the cleverness of his handicraft, his unsullied integrity, sunny good-humour, and simple dignity. (228)

However, despite their superior nature and extraordinary abilities there is no future for Cameron’s idealized Eskimo because, as she predicts, “within a decade or two he will have passed utterly off the map” (240). With this ethnocentric rhetoric Cameron performs a great injustice to Eskimo culture by writing it out of the Canadian future.

The tradition of idealizing the savage, as Spurr points out, signifies a conflict within the writer with respect to his or her own culture (125). Cameron, as we have seen, is travelling to the north to “call attention to the great unoccupied lands of Canada,” and to induce people to immigrate from “the crowded centres of the Old World” (15). She is looking for an ideal world of equality, dignity and natural liberty for all men and women that is apparently lacking in her own culture. Everywhere she turns in the north she finds examples of courage, sound morals, freedom, happiness and equality that somehow surpass western civilization, and her observations of the Eskimos lead her, as Wendy Roy points out, “to critique the twin ideals of civilization and Christianity upon which Canadian nation-building was based” (59). Cameron asks herself, “Are these Eskimo, Christians? Are they *civilized?*” and concludes that if being heathen means, as defined by her Century Dictionary,

“any irreligious, rude, barbarous or unthinking class or person” (251), then the Eskimo does not fit the criteria. She also argues: “If ‘Christianity’ with the Eskimo means taking him into the white man’s church, and ‘civilising’ means bringing him into close contact with white man’s lives, then he has not attained the first, and has but little to thank the second for” (252). Cameron concludes that “civilisation” and Christianity have nothing to teach the Eskimo about living in his own environment of the far north and in fact, as Roy argues, “the development that she anticipates and promotes in the ‘New North’ may result in the extinction of the people who live there” (60). Cameron is not always able to explain or justify what she finds in the new north and experiences many moments of self-reflection when her idealizing mission comes face to face with the northern reality. She questions the “intrusion of the whites” that has “changed the whole horizon” in the north, and she astutely realizes that “we can scarcely call it the coming of civilisation, but call it rather the coming of commerce” (225-6). With her somewhat conflicted attitude she is not so different from any other traveller who wants to be first in an area, to experience the “unspoilt” destination, but realizes that their own presence has already contaminated the pristine conditions they long to see. Despite her irritating idealistic and bombastic prose Cameron represents herself as a realistic traveller and one who is fully aware that the glimpses she obtains of the old north cannot survive the “coming of commerce.” However, as I have attempted to show, it is through these kinds of representations of doomed Inuit and partially civilized Indians attempting to adjust to a life of “commerce” and civilization that the damage to indigenous culture is performed.

One of the most vivid ways that Cameron represents her subjects is through photography. She is very proud of her new technological equipment, which includes her

typewriter, the “first Type-writer on Great Slave Lake” (309), and two cameras that she uses to document images of the north. Cameron’s photographic representations of indigenous people and their culture are immensely important as historical documents. For example, under “Samples of Woman’s Work of the Far North” (106), she shows thirteen Dene objects, from velvet embroidered leggings to a tobacco pouch made from two black bear claws, and under “Useful Articles Made by the Eskimo” (247), she has photographed soapstone lamps, various knives and needles. Pictorial evidence of these items has, no doubt, great interest for anthropologists and archaeologists and it is commendable that these images have been preserved. However, as McClintock notes, photography can be a two-edged sword. “Photography,” she argues, “was both a technology of representation and a technology of power” (126). She reasons that the camera, which was invented in 1839, quickly came to embody the “panoptic power of collection, display and discipline” (123), and shows that the objectification of photographic subjects, both animate and inanimate, renders them as “spectacle, stage or performance” (122) to be viewed by a disinterested observer who has no stake in their original being. The untethering of artifacts or people from their source and arranging them for public display has the effect of eradicating their cultural context and commodifying them as somehow free-standing objects of knowledge available for perusal and study. In photographic displays such as Cameron’s, indigenous peoples, their land and their possessions, become part of a constructed discourse that drains the life from their story and reconstitutes them within European codes of cultural representation.

James Ryan also analyses the insidious power of photographs. In his study of imperial photography, he asserts that “photographic images do not simply ‘speak for themselves’ or show us the world through an innocent historical eye. Rather, they are invested with

meanings framed by and produced within specific cultural conditions and historical circumstances.” He notes further that “Victorian photographs reveal as much about the ‘imaginative landscapes’ of imperial culture as they do about the physical spaces or people pictured within their frame. In this respect they are themselves expressions of the knowledge and power that shaped the reality of Empire” (19-20). What Ryan means is that photographs are often taken not just to represent a landscape or a person but to make a political or cultural statement. They are creations of the photographer who can arrange his picture in any way he pleases to satisfy his own predisposition. Cameron, for example, in the photograph of her moose (Figure 6), has arranged the picture to place herself in the centre. She is now off the ship, from where she shot the moose, and on the shore. She looks very masculine posed as a big-game hunter, holding a rifle, and wearing a kind of safari costume, standing over her moose, surrounded by three natives, who are reminiscent of safari bearers, with Jessie in the background, holding the typewriter, in the role of reporter. Cameron is the dominant person in the photograph; the dead moose is the trophy she has collected, and the impression is that of a Victorian-era big game hunter claiming the resources of an undeveloped land for his own use. The only difference is that Cameron is a woman, perhaps suggesting that in the New North a woman’s place will be equal to that of a man in organizing, developing and harvesting the resources of the land.

Photography in the Victorian era was also used in the survey and classification of “racial types.” As Hight and Sampson explain, after the camera was developed in the mid-19th century, it became a tool to create “type” or specimen photography in the newly developing science of biological or physical anthropology (3). In such photographs, “a non-European person under colonial scrutiny was posed partially or even totally unclothed against

a plain or calibrated backdrop to create a profile, frontal, or posterior view” (2), which would demonstrate his particular racial type. Cameron does not seem particularly interested in the sciences of biological or physical anthropology (apart from measuring some Eskimos with a ruler), but she does use carefully posed positioning to construct cultural differences in her subjects while at the same time normalizing them for a European audience. She photographs a Native woman in a classic profile pose, describing her as a “Slavi Type from Fort Simpson” (Figure 8) and also shows the same woman as part of “A Slavi Family at Fort Simpson” (Figure 9).

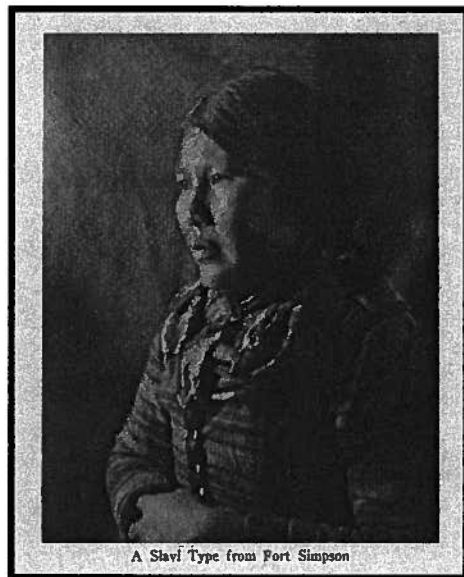


Figure 8. A Slavi Type from Fort Simpson

Source: Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North* (New York: Appleton, 1910) 183.

When we first see the Slavi woman she is a racial “type,” but in the next photo she is part of a family, consisting of a mother, small boy and newborn baby. All are in western style clothing, the boy in a white shirt and suspender trousers, the baby wrapped in a white cloth blanket, with the mother dressed in a plaid, gingham dress with fitted bodice and long

sleeves. With these photographs Cameron at first typifies, then domesticates the Slavi woman, suggesting a progression from racial other to European normalcy.



Figure 9. A Slavi Family at Fort Simpson

Source: Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North* (New York: Appleton, 1910) 184.

Another plate shows Dene children in western clothing playing “Farthest North Football” (Figure 9) in front of a school house. Like the Slavi family, these children are represented in a recognizable context to show their habituation to Europeans standards of social and cultural development. If, as Cameron suggests early in her narrative, her goal is to encourage settlement in the far north, then she would not want to present images that might seem too raw or too frightening to prospective settlers. Therefore, she reconfigures and organizes her subjects and landscapes imaginatively according to standards of colonial

progress such as attending schools and churches, playing sports, harvesting crops and living in conventional houses.

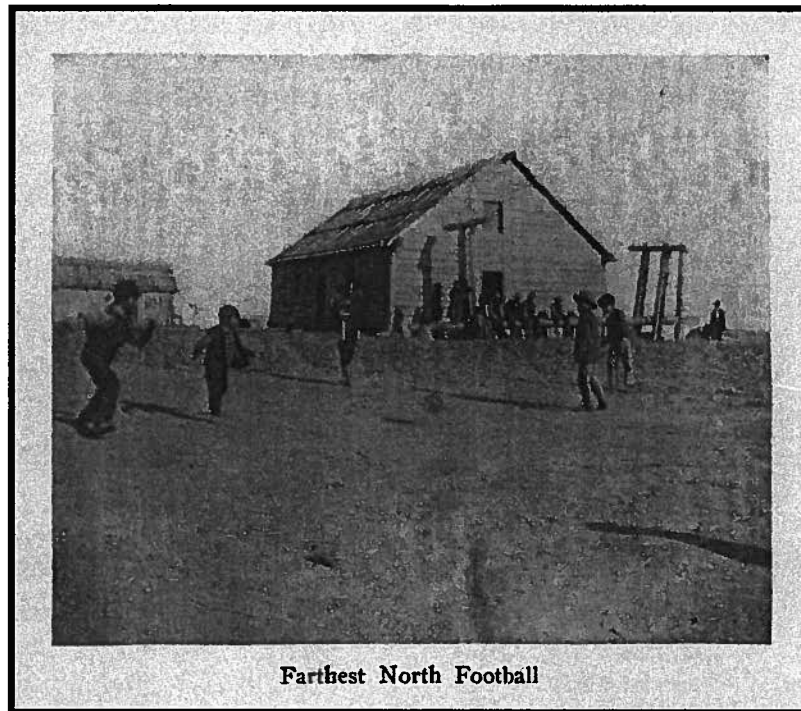


Figure 10. Farthest North Football

Source: Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North* (New York: Appleton, 1910) 232.

However, in some photographs the subjects retain vestiges of traditional native culture and dress, thereby emphasizing the transition to civilization. In "Two Spectators at the Game," a small child is shown in traditional skin clothing and the other, an older girl, in a plaid western style dress (232-3). A plate, entitled "Three Generations" (369), shows an old woman, a younger woman and three small children standing in front of a log house. The old woman has long unkempt hair and is partly dressed in native garb, whereas the young mother's hair is neatly parted and tied back, and she and her children are dressed in western style clothing. And, in "A Family on the Lesser Slave" (371) the reader is introduced to

seven members of a native family in front of a canvas wall tent. One of the adults is wearing skin clothing while the other is more westernized but with the traditional blanket around her shoulders. The children, however, are all in variations of western dress as evidence that civilization is advancing through the children even though the families are still living in tents.

It is quite possible to argue that Cameron's photographs are all of the candid, "sure-shot" variety and that she was merely photographing what was in front of her at the time. This is certainly true of the depictions of men working as seen in "Towing the Wrecked Barge Ashore" (75), "Coming to 'Take Treaty' on Great Slave Lake" (164), and "Starting up the Athabasca" (322). These photographs are action shots, taken at a distance and Cameron is not involved in their composition, but her photographs of people are clearly carefully posed. Some, such as "Three Generations" (369), and "Alec Kennedy with His Two Sons" (361), even have the effect of Victorian studio portrait groupings. Obviously Cameron could not dictate what her subjects wore, but she could pose them in ways that called attention to contrasts in dress or cultural features

Not everyone that Cameron encounters had adapted to western clothing and permanent lodging. The photograph, "Papillon, a Beaver Brave" (343), is of a hunter in native clothing, and photos of Inuit show them in traditional skin clothing. In the photograph entitled "A Nunatalmute Eskimo Family" (242), the family of three is pictured in front of a skin tent, and in "Eskimo Kayaks at the Arctic Edge" (254) two Inuit in fur parkas are paddling traditional skin kayaks. In her narrative Cameron's tendency is to valorize the Eskimo as a splendid noble savage of the far north and the ones in her photographs seem largely untouched by civilization. Their customs, clothing and traditional lifestyle are still intact as illustrated by the photographs, but as she points out, their culture is too fragile to

survive a European invasion. On the other hand, the Indians she encounters are represented as being partially assimilated into a European world. “Tricked out in grotesque garments borrowed from the white man and used in combination with their own tribal covering of skins and furs” (258), they appear in her photographs as in a transition stage between old and new. Being in transition implies occupying a position on a scale of improvement. While the Inuit who Cameron describes and idealizes as an evolutionary model for imperial superiority, already seem, in her view, to have achieved a state of perfection in their own culture, the Indians in her photographs are frequently engaged in some occupation advancing economic development and civilization in the north. She depicts them practicing western pursuits such as football, cultivating potatoes, constructing log houses and transporting goods and she most admires them when they are occupied in empire building.

Cameron’s photographs are fascinating historical artefacts with great archival value. She photographed a world that she believed was changing, developing and vanishing. She looked for and endorsed a “new north” in which indigenous people would be assimilated into the nationalistic Canadian dream and their land developed by generations of pioneers. Ironically however, the photographs deny Cameron’s vision, because they clearly represent the continuity and the still vibrant presence of the people and the life of the north. Many of the “types” that Cameron photographed are recognizable today and some people could likely be identified by name because their descendents still live in the area. Their traditional clothing, particularly caribou skin parkas and mukluks, would not be out of place in the north today, nor would the working clothes worn by some of the men. Scenes, such as David Villeneuve setting his net, with his dogs and toboggan in the background, could have been taken yesterday (Figure 10). The toboggan is identical to those that travellers on the land still

use (I have one I use often for winter picnics), and techniques of setting nets under the ice have not changed.

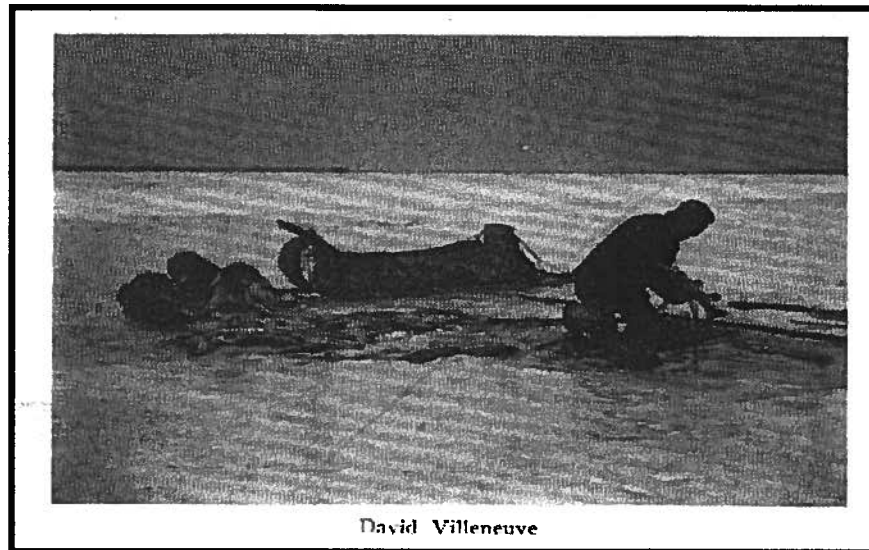


Figure 11. David Villeneuve Setting His Net

Source: Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North* (New York: Appleton, 1910) 173.

Most of the log buildings that Cameron photographed are likely gone, but the landscape surrounding some of them is unchanged. The photographs that are the most out-of-date are the ones at the end of the narrative, obviously not taken by Cameron, that show various dignitaries representing commerce and development. Charles M. Hays, President of the Grand Trunk Railway; William Mackenzie, President of the Canadian Northern Railway; the Hon. Frank Oliver, Minister of the Interior are all pictured in formal Victorian era dress and demeanour. Unlike the indigenous people and their ways of life that are still vital, the great men of Empire are gone and outdated but many of their dreams did materialize. The north has been developed in ways that no one could have imagined, but the old north has not vanished as Cameron predicted it would. Her photographs, ironically, tell a supplementary story about the old north that exists along side her written narrative, and remarkably they also

tell a story about a way of life that will not be suppressed or assimilated and continues into the present.

Travel texts, such as Cameron's, despite their detailed and self-proclaimed objective reporting of landscape, custom and culture, inevitably, as Ashcroft et al. point out, "privilege the centre. . . . their claim to objectivity simply serves to hide the imperial discourse within which they are created" (5). In both her text and her photographs, Cameron constructs images that express and articulate an imperialist ideology and, although she strives for objectivity and implies a polyphonic discourse through her use of transcribed speech of the people she meets, her narrative, in the end, is the voice of a white, educated woman with a one-sided imperialist agenda. But there is no reason why this should not be the case because Cameron is a product of her time and place, and her writing caters to an audience eager for first-hand information about the north. Throughout the narrative Cameron builds up a context in which the north is on the edge of a revolutionary breakthrough. "The sleeping giant has awakened," she says. "We are on the heels of the greatest economic trek this world has ever seen" (19). Her enthusiasm for this great imperialist trek resonates through her narrative, and her excitement and curiosity are reflected in her elaborate and ebullient prose. From the perspective of a reader one hundred years later, it is easy to vilify Cameron's narrative as a naïve, destructive and disrespectful report on the Northwest Territories and its people, but as a contemporary reader it would have been difficult not to have been caught up in what LaFramboise sees as her "summons to join the adventure of northern development" (152).

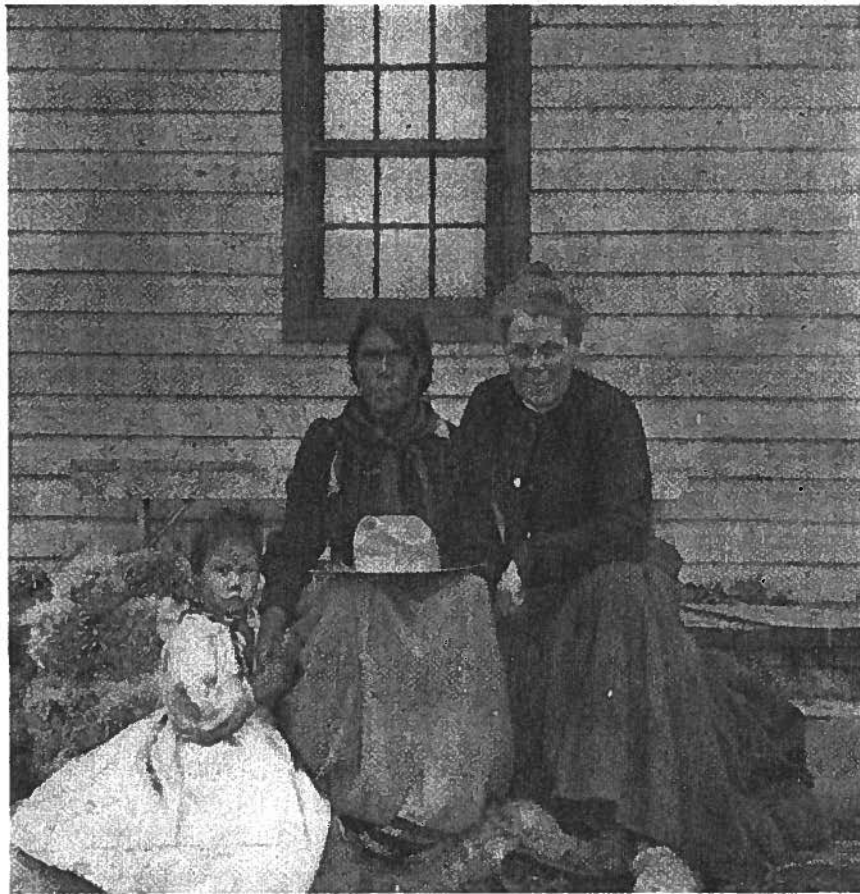
I began this chapter by arguing that in *The New North*, Cameron attempts to rewrite the Northwest Territories, constructing it, not as a barren, unpopulated and dangerous wilderness, but as a bustling, forward-looking frontier about to take its place as the site of

a great economic future. Throughout the narrative she valorizes early explorers such as Captain George Back, Samuel Hearne, Alexander Mackenzie and Sir John Franklin and firmly believes that “the day of our great men is not over,” and that the “great North” still has “Pathfinders of Empire” (378) who will lead Canada into the 20th century. During her travels down the Mackenzie, she finds these modern “Pathfinders” at work everywhere and concludes that a new north is emerging before her. However, in her enthusiasm for what she sees as the potential for exploitation of northern resources she never questions the impact, whether deleterious or beneficial, of this economic progress on the people of the north or their land. She is earnest in her attempt to talk to the people and understand them and her earnestness leads her to speak in a kindly and enthusiastic manner, but her representations of people and places suffer from what Homi Bhabha calls a “partial presence” produced by the “partial vision of the colonizer’s presence” (*Location* 88). No matter how empathetic she appears, Cameron always constructs and thereby distances herself, as the educated, white female traveller observing a developing country and primitive people. From this perspective the people and the land are always “other,” always in transition, always about to become, but not quite yet, “civilized.” The adult Indians in their ludicrous combinations of western and native dress and the school children, “learning how to *play* the white man’s game” (160), are applauded in Cameron’s narrative for mimicking western manners and trying to conform to western norms.

Bhabha develops a concept that he calls “colonial mimicry.” He defines it as “the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*” (*Location* 86). The essence of colonization is to instil the principles and values of the colonizing nation into the indigenous subject, or as Cameron puts it, to “graft a new

civilisation on an old stock” (102). But at the same time, as Bhabha would have it, the colonized subject must not be completely Europeanized; otherwise his role as “Other” would be compromised and he might become unmanageable. The object of Cameron’s desire is a new north and within this north she searches for and constructs subjects that conform to her criteria for a civilized and progressive other while still remaining in a subservient position. Her photograph and description of “Cannibal Louise” are a case in point. In her desire to create a discourse of possibility and improvement, Cameron finds a “recognizable and reformed Other” in a woman who has committed cannibalism, an act deemed the most appalling that a human can commit. The photograph, likely taken by Jessie, is entitled “Cannibal Louise, Her Little Girl, and Miss Cameron” (Figure 12) and shows “Cannibal Louise,” as she is known in the community, flanked by her small daughter on one side and Cameron on the other. All are dressed in western clothing and Louise holds Cameron’s hat on her lap. In her text, Cameron struggles to understand Louise’s “crime” but finds that it is impossible to have “a conception of the agony undergone by these poor creatures – women and children with affections like our own – shut for the greater part of winter within that cruel camp of death!” (365).

The circumstances of Louise’s story, as Cameron understands it, are that Louise and her sister were left alone in the wilderness after all her family had died of starvation. When the sister died Louise ate her flesh to keep herself alive. While Cameron does not want to blame Louise for committing such a terrible crime, she is obviously uneasy about it. In her own society, Louise’s behaviour is unpardonable and she has been shunned as a “Wetigo” or



Cannibal Louise, Her Little Girl, and Miss Cameron

Figure 12. Cannibal Louise, Her Little Girl, and Miss Cameron.

Source: Agnes Deans Cameron, *The New North* (New York: Appleton, 1910) 363.

“Cannibal,” by her family and community. Instead of accepting this judgement Cameron wants to exonerate Louise under Christian values of compassion for poor savages forced to live such a cruel and terrible life. Dressed in western clothes and looking, as Cameron remarks, rather like Cameron herself, Louise can be judged and forgiven under European standards of charitable pity even though her own people condemn her. In the end, Cameron concludes that very little distinguishes herself and Cannibal Louise and observes that “when

we look on our joint picture, it might be somewhat difficult to distinguish the writer from the Indian woman. She is ‘even as you and me’” (365). Almost the same, but not quite, is how Cannibal Louise appears in Cameron’s eyes and there is, therefore, the possibility of redemption. In her attempt to bring Louise up to her standards of civilization, Cameron cannot allow her to be simply a woman who ate human flesh in desperate circumstances and is now suffering the normal fate of ostracism from her community. She must somehow find a justification for the behaviour within her own Christian values. Through such moral manoeuvring, Cameron constructs and appropriates Louise as a model for the possibility of reclamation of degenerate types, thereby transferring the authority and power for forgiveness to Cameron herself and others such as the wife of Archdeacon Scott who took Louise in and “made her a member of their household” (365).

As a member of the Scott’s household, Louise becomes a model for one of Bhabha’s “reformed, recognizable other[s].” However, as he observes, “the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference” (*Location* 86). The mimic man or woman must not be a perfect copy but a “partial” presence. He or she must be naturalized enough to be under the control of the colonial machinery but, at the same time, kept at a safe cultural distance to ensure the stability of colonial authority. Mimicry stresses the power of the dominant culture to convert the Other, but at the same time ensure that he retains some part of the otherness. This state of the Other being not quite European and in need of guidance provides the rationale for colonial discipline and social control. No matter how reformed Louise becomes she will always be “Cannibal Louise” and carry a hint of savage danger that

can be controlled through her position as a domestic in the civilizing Scott household that keeps her “at a safe cultural distance,” and will never allow her to become a social equal.

In the Northwest Territories, the Church and the Mission schools assumed the role of facilitators of social reform. Priests, nuns and missionaries communicated not only the Christian faith, but also the entire system of western values and standards built on its foundation. One of the functions of the residential schools was to create responsible young Canadians. As Cameron notes, “The good nuns are trying to make reputable citizens of the young scions of the Dog-Rib and Yellow-Knife nations and are succeeding admirably as far as surface indications go” (162). “Surface indications” produce “mimic” boys dressed in westernized clothing, affecting western manners and learning to speak, read and write in English, and women such as Louise, dressed in western clothing and accepted as a domestic worker in the Archdeacon’s household. However, “surface indications” seem to be the extent of Cameron and other colonial writers’ understanding of the north. They cannot advance beyond what Northrop Frye, in a comment about early Canadian writers, calls “reportage” and are unable to “detach the mind from its customary attitudes” (236) of imperial possibility and development.

These early Canadian writers seem oblivious to any negative effects of the colonial presence on the lives of the indigenous people they encountered. In Cameron’s view, the native people are in a happy state of transition to civilization like the Indians or they are preserved in a pristine culture like the Eskimos and doomed to inevitable extinction. Neither Cameron, nor any other northern traveller, could conceive of a situation in which the colonial project might be threatened or dismantled by some future indigenous Other who refuses to conform to the rhetoric or practice of empire. Cameron constructs the people she

encounters and the land she sees as imitative. She imagines and describes the north and northern inhabitants in terms that reflect the familiar images of home by domesticating and commodifying them for the use of future travellers and settlers, and always viewing them in relation to western values and culture.

In the Northwest Territories the reformed and integrated subject as envisioned by Cameron stayed put until about the mid-1960s when rumblings and writings from marginalized and displaced groups began to be heard throughout the world, and post colonial theorists such as Said, Foucault and Bhabha began to provide a framework for analysing the discourses of such groups. All three theorists are concerned with what occurs when the gaze of colonial surveillance is reversed and colonial authority is disrupted. In Chapters 5 and 6, I look at two Northwest Territories writers whose narratives are written from the “Other” side of the imaginary north created by Cameron and her contemporaries. George Blondin reconstructs the legends and the history of the Dene that are nowhere to be found in early NWT writing, and Robert Alexie tells the story of the tragedy and aftermath of residential schools in the north from the perspective of those who suffered a loss of culture and dignity at the hands of the colonizers. In their act of writing back, both Blondin and Alexie create a new discourse that challenges the colonial vision of north and attempts to decolonize the land and its people. However, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out, decolonization does not mean a total rejection of all theory or research or western knowledge. “Rather,” she argues, “it is about centring our [indigenous] concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes” (39). Obviously, it would be a mistake to dismiss all colonial narratives such as Cameron’s or Pike’s for they contain valuable information about the early post-contact history of the north.

Their style, their rhetoric and their perspective may be one-sided and may create only a partial representation of north, but they are products of their time and they catered to an audience steeped in imperial values and desires. But as we have come to understand through post-modernist theory, history is not a fixed entity, the metanarratives of imperialism and conquest are subject to reinterpretation and the imaginary north created by western writers will not stay put. The Dene have always lived their lives and practiced their culture in a performative rhythm that is in tune with the fluidity of the land and the seasons and travellers to the Northwest Territories have long recognized that the north is always unpredictable, always unexpected and always in transition. Any northern discourse must take as its starting point the concept that there can be no fixed and one-sided interpretation of the NWT and its people.

Travellers like Cameron were in some sense concerned with “writing the nation” as they saw it through imperial eyes. But the nation that Cameron was constructing assumed that official history began and accumulated from the time when early explorers arrived in the new world, and at that point traditional indigenous knowledge and culture ceased to exist when it failed to appear in the written record. It did not reappear in the Northwest Territories until the 1970s when Dene stories told at the Berger Inquiry became inscribed in narrative, and the 1980s when George Blondin began to collect and write the history of the Dene. These narratives challenge official authority and create a space for the emergence and writing of a Dene history and culture. The Dene story contravenes the homogeneous and linear European view of history, and in discussions of Blondin’s and Alexie’s narratives I show how they rewrite the history of the Northwest Territories as a performative and continuous

story that has its beginnings in the dawn of time and intersects with western history only in modern time.

Notes

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- ¹ All references are to the 1910 Appleton edition of *The New North*. A modern edition was published by Western Producer Books in 1986, but because I first discovered Cameron in the original version, I have continued to use this edition.
- ² Kelcey offers evidence that between 1867 and 1939, at least 470 European women resided in the NWT (this means the NWT as it existed at that time, before the separation of Nunavut in 2001) or passed through as travellers for a long enough period to make some impact on the North ("Jingo Belles" 21).
- ³ It is not an uncommon term in certain locales today. One need go no further than the infamous Gold Range Bar in Yellowknife (see Chapter 2, Note 2) to hear any number of epithets based on the apparent lack of cleanliness of the Dene.
- ⁴ School children reading Alexander Pope's "Essay on Man" considered it hilarious to believe that the Indian's name was Lo.
- Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor'd mind
Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind
(625, lines 99-100).

Chapter 5: A World of Difference

*As long as I can remember, my father has been telling stories to whoever will listen. I didn't understand that he was doing this – not because he was good at it, but because it was his destiny and responsibility to pass these very important stories to future generations. It was very important to my father to explain and maintain a very important part of our culture, as Dene People – the real custodians of our lands – to continue our stability and responsibility to our land, our people and our future. (Ted Blondin, in George Blondin, *Trail of the Spirit* 5)*

In Chapter 3, I look at representations of the Dene by Warburton Pike, who lived and travelled with them in the Barren Ground and in Chapter 4, I show various representations of the NWT Dene from the point of view of Agnes Deans Cameron who optimistically envisioned an integrated and prosperous future for those whom she saw as wilderness savages being firmly led into the 20th century by churches, schools and colonial development. Pike, Cameron and other explorers constructed discourses of the NWT that represented it alternately as a progressive frontier, a wild and dangerous wilderness, a sportsman's paradise, an explorer's nightmare or a tourist's dream. The people they described were noble savages, abject nomads, skilled guides and hunters, unpredictable and dangerous companions, clever entrepreneurs and a host of other designations. In all these representations the Dene's own story was never heard except as a by-product of the European viewpoint. Chapters 5 & 6 discuss narratives of recovery. In Chapter 5, I describe how Dene elder, George Blondin seeks to give a voice to his people so that they, themselves can remember their myths and legends, reclaim their culture and find a vision for the future. At the same time, he hopes to make the Dene way of life known to outsiders who misunderstood a great deal in the past and continue to do so in the present. Like Blondin, Gwich'in writer, Robert Alexie also tells the story of his people, and like Blondin's works, Alexie's *Porcupines and China Dolls* employs strategies of oral narrative and story telling. Alexie is

also concerned with healing, and recovery of cultural values and traditions and offers challenges to Eurocentric readings of NWT history. However, where Blondin's tone is gentle and kind in its intent to share his stories, Alexie's anger at the devastation caused by imperial practices, particularly the residential school system, explodes in graphic descriptions of the colonial invasion of the culture, the spirit and the physical bodies of the Dene. Like most Dene stories, *Porcupines and China Dolls* is a narrative of travel, but unlike the tales of the Dene who travelled endlessly throughout their land, this story is about travelling backward through time. It is a journey of healing and restoration, a journey to confront memories and recover a culture that has been destroyed.

Before embarking on an analysis of these two narratives, I wish to establish a framework to discuss Blondin's and Alexie's work. Both are concerned with describing a certain way of life and how it was gradually eroded with the arrival of Europeans and their institutions. Blondin notes that the HBC and the church changed the Dene but most of the damage to their culture came from the residential schools. "The fur trade and the European settlement of the North changed us," he writes, "but it was the mission schools that really upset our way of life" (*Yamoria* 222).

Since the early part of the 19th century, the stated policy with respect to Indians in most of Canada was to assimilate them completely into the southern Canadian way of life. The policy that Duncan Campbell Scott, head of the federal Department of Indian Affairs from 1913 to 1932, inherited and administered was based on the idea that it was the duty of the representatives of the British Empire to civilize the native peoples, who were thought of as essentially savage. He and others believed that the kindest approach was to destroy all that

made Indigenous culture unique and distinct, and assimilate native people into the general population:

The happiest future for the Indian race is absorption into the general population, and this is the object of the policy of our government. The great forces of intermarriage and education will finally overcome the lingering traces of native custom and tradition. (D.C. Scott, in Titley 34)

Education of young children would be the key to cultural transformation with responsible and hardworking adults, trained for life on the factory floor, as Harold Cardinal notes, emerging from the schools. Without the influence of schools, Scott believed there was little hope for Indian people and that they might even prove a deterrent to orderly colonization of the country. “Without education and with neglect,” he argued, “the Indians would produce an undesirable and often dangerous element in society” (Titley 34). The children therefore should be confined to residential schools and taught Canadian and Christian values, or, as I heard it described at a Dene healing ceremony in Yellowknife on June 11, 2009, the policy was to “kill the Indian in the child.”

The residential schools acted as a reforming and disciplinary force on native people, shepherding them in from their life on the land and gathering them together under the colonizing gaze. Cole Harris, who has studied the effects of residential schools in British Columbia, explains their guiding principle: “Native children,” he argues, “were subjected to rigorous space-time discipline, watched, weaned as much as possible from their Nateness, and remade, at least in principle, as English-speaking members of a civilized, modern society” (269). Harris uses Foucault’s concept of panopticism to examine the social consequences of a system that regulated and disciplined Native people. The Panopticon, as

conceived by Bentham, was a prison in which inmates were observed but could not see their observers. Prisoners could be controlled simply by the knowledge that they were under surveillance. Foucault saw panopticism as a scheme that could be employed “whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a particular form of behaviour must be imposed” (*Discipline* 201). The organization of schools in general, according to Foucault, is a “mechanism for training” that subjects children to “intense continuous supervision” and normalizing practices in the interests of producing a homogenized and individualized society (172). Although these two principles, homogenization and individualization may appear to be at odds, what Foucault means is that, in order to have an ordered society, its members must be similar in a way that the dominant society demands, but also identified, bureaucratically, as individuals. Traditionally, the Dene do not encourage individualism. Before contact they lived as part of well-defined family and community units in which the principles of group participation and survival superseded the concept of the individual. An ideology of sharing and caring for members of the community and integration with the land and the animals structured their lives. When colonial administrators forced Dene children into residential schools, they fractured family and community ties, creating generations of children who had no knowledge of parental love, cultural values or family dynamics. These are the children who grew up to be the dysfunctional adults described by Alexie in *Porcupines and China Dolls*.

Mike Thomas, a bush pilot who, in his words, “kidnapped” native children for the government and flew them to residential schools, describes in his journals the centuries-old patterns of hunting, trapping, fishing, and smoking and drying food supplies that were performed by family groups throughout the appropriate seasons of the year. Then, he says:

“In came the white man who decided these kids had to be educated. . . . That was the beginning of the end. The old man can’t go out on the trapline without his family, it was a family affair” (Mathesen 18). Thus, government regulations regarding compulsory school attendance turned necessary, traditional family activities with well-established gender and age-related roles, and important educational and cultural values centred on the land, into solitary, male wage-earning practices originating out of government-built houses in government-regulated settlements. From being members of a cohesive social group with a rich and complex structure, the victims of imperial and colonial bureaucracy enter a state of dependency, in which, in a Foucauldian paradigm, the group or the people become part of a bureaucratic system that transforms them into individuals, “to be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day” (Foucault, *Discipline* 191). To facilitate their transformation into individuals, the Dene were given European names and numbers and expected to live within the structure of a white, Christian, and capitalist community.

Around the residential schools there developed what Foucault calls a “whole margin of lateral controls” (205). Of Christian schools in general he notes:

[The school] must not simply train docile children; it must also make it possible to supervise the parents, to gain information as to their way of life, their resources, their piety, their morals. The school tends to constitute minute social observatories that penetrate even to the adults and exercise regular control over them: the bad behaviour of the child, or his absence, is a legitimate pretext . . . for one to go and question the neighbours. (211)

The use of the panoptic schema strongly informs the colonial mandate which is to subdue or absorb the colonial object and assure the “ordering of human multiplicities.” As Foucault

notes in a statement that seems particularly appropriate to the Dene colonial experience:

“One of the primary objects of discipline is to fix; it is an anti-nomadic technique. . . . it arrests or regulates movements; it clears up confusion; it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways” (218-9). With the children confined to schools and their parents strongly encouraged to live in government settlements and conform to European laws, the nomadic and apparently random life of the Dene came to an end and the colonial gaze began to exercise its subtle, coercive powers within the boundaries of schools and settlements.

In the NWT authorities were convinced that “aboriginal economic activities such as hunting, trapping, fishing, and food-gathering would have to be abandoned. The Indian should learn how to cultivate the soil or prepare himself for employment in the ‘industrial or mercantile community’” (Titley 33). None of these activities is compatible with a hunting culture and when the nomadic life of pre-contact Dene was replaced with the sedentary life proscribed by Eurocentric agencies, the Dene lost more than their physical mobility. When they were contained in settlements and subject to the disciplinary practices of the HBC and the Church it is no exaggeration to say that the Dene were victims of what some native leaders have called cultural genocide. Cultural genocide, as described by Raphael Lemkin, has two phases: “one, the destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group: the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor” (79). These two phases were at work in the late 19th and early 20th century Northwest Territories as various agencies and policy makers deliberately destroyed the traditional, mobile hunter/gatherer pattern of the NWT Dene and imposed a Eurocentric regime of social improvement and enforced education.

It can be argued that the intentions of the government agencies and missionaries were inherently good, and it is clear that missionaries and government officials genuinely believed that religious conversion and civilizing projects were in the best interests of the northern Dene. However, the missionaries who were in charge of the residential schools made no attempt to understand religious beliefs or cultural values, and from the beginning they saw the children as abject and corrupt savages and heathens in need of purification and discipline. In an attempt to impose Eurocentric values on the children, it was necessary that they be reduced to an abject state which excluded them from normal positions of decency and respect. The effect of such discipline, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith explains in her discussion of New Zealand school children was “to suppress ways of knowing, and the languages for knowing.” She adds: “Reclaiming a voice in this context has also been about reclaiming, reconnecting and reordering those ways of knowing which were submerged, hidden or driven underground” (69).

The “ways of knowing” available to the Dene were completely different from those imposed by European cultures. Native writer Harold Cardinal describes the “Indian method” of educating children as “entirely pragmatic, and designed to prepare the child for whatever way of life he was to lead – hunter, fisherman, warrior, chief, medicineman or wife and mother.” A child was trained to perform functions that fitted him to his society so that “he knew who he was and how he related to the world and the people about him” (52). Aboriginal children customarily were given a great deal of responsibility and expected to contribute to family and social life by tending nets, feeding dogs, cutting and hauling wood and cutting up meat and fish for drying. Anthropologist June Helm quotes Martha Rabesca of Fort Good Hope, who remembers: “I teached all my children how to live in the bush.

They know how to make snowshoes, how to make their living in the bush. Now the kids are going to school. They're growing up a different life from what I grew up" (258). Helm also cites Mary Rose Drybone who recalls family activities in the bush:

When you are in the bush like a family everybody takes part in doing the everyday chores. My dad would go to visit his traplines by dog team. There was no such things as skidoos, and then my mother would be busy tanning hides and us children would cut wood or haul some clean snow for cooking and drinking water. (261)

The ability to act independently was essential for survival in a hunting society but the residential schools erased that skill by demanding little from the children except obedience and rote learning of lessons, and activities that had nothing to do with their culture.

An important aspect of indigenous survival is self-reliance and first hand knowledge. As Battiste and Henderson point out: "Since every individual is engaged in a lifelong personal search for ecological understanding, the standard of truth in Indigenous knowledge systems is personal experience. Indigenous peoples [are] suspicious of secondhand claims which form the bulk of Eurocentric scholars' knowledge" (45). As well as being learned through personal experience, knowledge in indigenous societies is transmitted through stories passed on by parents. But as indigenous legal scholar, Rupert Ross, observes, stories "provide only the raw materials from which conclusions can be drawn . . . it was necessary that everyone learn to use such raw materials, to draw their own conclusions using their own thoughts" (79). In residential schools the children were made to forget their stories and how to use them, and when the stories of their culture were replaced by European knowledge, survival skills based on observation and cultural transmission were lost.

Also lost was the intricate connection, based on seasonal activities, of the Dene to their land. In hunter-gatherer societies the concept of clock time and calendar time does not exist. All activity is dependent on daylight and darkness, the seasons and the need to search for food. Aboriginal people slept when it was dark, and travelled, hunted and attended to their needs during the day. All life revolved around the cycle of the seasons and the animals, particularly the migratory caribou. However, the schools, the government and the religious representatives imposed a system of time and space constraints on Native people that was necessary for the efficient function of the fur trading economy and the ordering of a European way of life. Canadian economic historian Harold Innis argues in his work on empire and communication that an important feature of administration is classification and control of activities in colonized countries. "In Western civilization," Innis writes, "a stable society is dependent on an appreciation of a proper balance between the concepts of space and time. We are concerned with control not only over vast areas of space but also over vast stretches of time" (64). Normally, according to Innis, the first concern of imperial invaders in a new country is to seize control of spaces from which economic and colonizing activities can be developed. The only way for Europeans to use and control such a huge space as the NWT was to encourage indigenous people to work with them in the fur trade and give up their migratory ways for a wage economy that required visits to permanent settlements on a timely basis. Instead of a cycle that revolved around the patterns of their migratory food source, the Dene began to organize their lives around the religious festivals of Christmas and Easter, when they delivered their furs to trading posts and received European goods in return. The residential schools were organized on the same religious patterns and the children and their parents were controlled through the colonial mechanism of time. These artificially

imposed restrictions on their ways of being undermined Dene relationships to their ecological systems and made them dependent on government administrators who determined when and where children should be at school, and the tasks and lifestyles their parents should be pursuing. Forced out of their seasonal patterns into a fixed routine in which they no longer had to rely on their own knowledge, indigenous people became, out of necessity, compliant with a system that placed them in a subservient and dependent position in relation to time and to their colonial masters.

Although the Dene were still near their traditional lands and still had access to them, they had been displaced from their traditional, nomadic life and culture in exchange for wage employment or, when fur was not plentiful, government welfare. In the Northwest Territories, most Dene, by the 1970s, had moved into permanent settlements where they lived in government built houses, relied on government services and handouts, and became second class citizens. Helm has interviewed many Dene who feel they were tricked and coerced into a way of life over which they had no control. Mary Rose Drybone explains:

The Dene accepted whiteman's education, low rental houses, and, the worst of them all, alcohol and Welfare. You think the Dene beg on their knees for those programs?

No way. The so-called Government threw it at us and we accepted their trick. (Helm 262)

The Dene were completely aware that they were being ghettoized in their own land but there was little they could do about it because they had lost their will and their self-esteem as their culture was eroded. As they became increasingly dependent on government handouts such as welfare, social assistance, subsidized travel for hunting, and public housing the Dene fell into a pattern of dependency believing that they could no longer look after themselves and relying

on the government for everything. Drybone describes the conditions in a typical Dene village:

Look at the housing where transient Government staff live. And look at the housing where the Indian people live. Look at which houses are connected to the utilidor [water and sewage pipes]. Look at how the school and hostel, the R.C.M.P and government staff houses are right in the centre of town . . . do you think that this is the way the Indian people chose to have this community? Do you think the people here had any voice in planning this community? (263)

As Helm makes clear, the point is “not that most Dene reject the comforts and entertainments of monetized urbanism per se . . . but that many have come to recognize that, to date, the price has been loss of decision about and control over their own lives” (264-5).

Both Blondin’s and Alexie’s narratives are about taking back control. Both look to the past, not in a nostalgic or revisionist sense of returning to it, but as a way of seeking a collective identity for their people that will enable them to work together to establish social, political and financial power to reconstruct their lives. Blondin’s method of recovering cultural unity is to tell stories. In the past, says Blondin, “children learned about Dene values by listening to elders tell stories” (*Yamoria* vii), and he believes that the method is equally effective today. His narratives tell the story of who the Dene are, where they came from, how they lived in their beautiful, harsh and wild land, and how the strength and endurance they had then will give them the power they need to survive in the future.

In this chapter, I look at the indigenous world view as it has been recreated by Blondin. I will show how Blondin reveals the history and mythologies of his people, the

Dene, and attempts to explain the concept of “medicine power” that the Dene relied on as a guiding force. Blondin’s personal history begins with his birth “near Horton Lake at the edge of the Barren Lands . . . in May 1922” (xi). He documents a childhood of learning traditional Dene ways until 1929 when he was sent to residential school for four or five years. Upon returning to his parents in the bush, he found he had to relearn his language and his culture. In the tradition of the responsibility of elders, his grandparents tried to transfer “medicine power” to him but were unsuccessful. Despite this lack, Blondin grew up to fulfill the most important role of a Dene man by becoming a successful hunter and trapper able to provide for his immediate and extended family. He attributes his success to strong values and hard work:

People were strong then; they never complained about working hard. They prayed every morning and evening, and children prayed with their parents. People respected each other. . . . They were wealthy if they stored plentiful supplies – fat, dry meat, berries and fish – for the winter. People worked hard every day. They got up at six in the morning and worked until late at night. (*When the World* 209)

For some, however, life was hard and starvation was never far away. Many of the elders Blondin cites tell stories of failing to find meat and living through terrible conditions. As part of his technique of multivocality Blondin uses the words of Caroline from Tsoti to tell of the harsh life of the Dene:

Then the wind started to blow and you couldn’t see a thing for snow. Our meat was running out, we had no more wood and the weather got worse; we had a blizzard for three days and nights. . . . we just stayed in the blankets and sucked

on drymeat and fat. The kids were pitiful but *that's the way things were* [italics mine] and we couldn't help it, since we didn't know of a better way to live.

(Yamoria 200)

An ethos of hard work, respect for family and perseverance in difficult times pervades these and other descriptions in Blondin's stories. "That's the way things were" is a common refrain and this expression of stoic or passive acceptance of their condition infuriated many of the Europeans who travelled and lived with the Dene, and caused them to believe that the Dene were helpless and abject primitives. However, Blondin tells a different story that combines stoic acceptance with hard work, faith in traditional values, and resourcefulness for living in a harsh land. His own story demonstrates strength and resilience as he tells of his introduction to wage-earning and his later entry into Native politics. In the 1950s Blondin's family all suffered from tuberculosis; his wife was in hospital and Blondin, with singular vision and foresight, realized he needed to live near a doctor, enrol his daughters in residential school and find a wage-earning job. Despite his father's protests, he loaded his wife and children onto his toboggan and moved them 1000 km to Yellowknife, where he felt he could improve his family's life. Unlike many indigenous people who believed the old way of life would never change, Blondin was a visionary and a practical man. He realized that the European world was encroaching on the Northwest Territories and that his people would have to accommodate it:

The Dene would have to change their way of life sooner or later, because the world around them was changing all the time. By then the federal government had set up schools and people were starting to live in settlements. That was the real start of the change. If people were travelling in the bush, how would their children

get properly educated? Besides, getting medical attention was difficult if you lived in the bush. The Dene were now in contact with many new diseases that they had not known before. It seemed easier to move from the bush to the settlements than to travel long distances when people fell ill. (*When the World* 244).

Blondin stayed in Yellowknife and worked in the gold mines for fourteen years until his wife died of cancer. Then he returned to his old home area near Great Bear Lake where he continued to hunt and trap as he had done before. He eventually became involved in Dene politics, in the creation of the Dene nation, and in the settlement of land claims. In 1989, he was elected Chairman of the Denendah Elder's Council. He worked with the Dene Cultural Institution and wrote articles for local newspapers. In 1990, Blondin was the recipient of the annual Ross Charles Award for Native journalism, and in 2003, he was appointed a member of the Order of Canada. Blondin died in Yellowknife on October 12, 2008.¹

Blondin wrote his first book, *When the World Was New*, in 1990. It was followed by *Yamoria: the Lawmaker* in 1997, and his last work, *Trail of the Spirit*, in 2006. He also wrote two locally published booklets and a weekly column for the Yellowknife newspaper, *News/North*. Blondin's works are a complex web of many genres and ideological threads. His three books could be called historical narratives in that they document the history and stories of the NWT Dene. However, they are also attempts to explain the mythology, legends and spiritual beliefs of the Dene and they are concerned with the preservation and dissemination of Dene culture and ways of being. The stories are a way of drawing attention to concerns such as land claims, employment, educational and social programs and cultural

identity. Blondin is well aware that, while preserving the stories and culture of the Dene is important, the exercise must be rooted in political awareness and responsibility. The stories are told, not just to remind the Dene of who they were and how they lived, but to emphasize that their strength and fortitude as a people can provide them with tools to give them the power to live well and with dignity in the 21st century and beyond.

The stories can be roughly divided into three categories: those that deal with myths and legends that have been passed down for generations; those that deal with historical people and events told by elders and collected by Blondin; and autobiographical stories of Blondin's own life that document 20th century experiences and events. The common element among these three groups of stories is their conceptualization of the past, both mythic and historical, not so that it can be relived or reinstated but so that it can be remembered and recovered as a form of resistance to what Blondin perceives as the detrimental or inappropriate practices of the dominant order. I begin with a brief description of the Dene notion of land and travel as a way of life and show how the Dene gradually became alienated from their history and the practices of their ancestors. I then discuss Blondin's writing as a way of recovering and remembering the past through stories.

Everything in the Dene world is connected to the land, and the symbiosis between land, memory and family is the aesthetic that informs Blondin's narratives. For the Dene, freedom to travel and live on the land is synonymous with life itself. "Before contact," Blondin writes, "my ancestors travelled constantly, following the caribou herds for meat or looking to find good year-round fish lakes. They were born on the land and they died on the land. They roamed across Denendeh and settled nowhere" (*Yamoria* vi). The ethos of the imperialistic invasion of northern Canada was in direct opposition to Dene concepts of land

and land use. In its most basic sense, imperialism must be understood as a condition by which wealthy, developed countries export finance capital to their colonies for exploitation and development of resources and continued investment for future profit. In contrast to European imperialistic principles, indigenous peoples did not view their land as a source for development and profit but as a spiritual being, a god or creator that provided for their well being. J.C. Catholique, a native of the small community of Lutsel K' on Great Slave Lake, explains this concept:

When the old people . . . talk about land, they say "Notsina" meaning god or Creator or great spirit. . . . Land to them is not like the way Europeans take it. Land to a European can be bought and sold in exchange for money, or trade. . . . land in a European sense has a monetary value in minerals, water, tourist potential – a lot of renewable resources that's there from which the Europeans can gain in terms of business, in terms of money. (Raffen 104)

And indigenous writers, Battiste and Henderson, explain the meaning of land as an entity that embraces indigenous people in a deep and integral way:

The ecologies in which we live are more to us than settings or places; they are more than homelands or promised homelands. These ecologies do not surround Indigenous peoples; we are an integral part of them and we inherently belong to them. . . . As Indigenous peoples, we invest the ecologies with deep respect, and from them we unfold our structure of Indigenous life and thought. (9)

Blondin describes the contrast between the Dene and the European relationship to the land more succinctly. "My people lived a nomadic hunting life and they respected the land. The newcomers said, 'We see the land, now how can we get rich off it?'" (*Yamoria* vi).

Respect for the land and a reciprocal relationship with it are integral to the Dene culture and it was difficult for the Dene to understand that land could be used for profit, or bought and sold to the extent that they might no longer have a place on it. Even today some Dene elders find the concept of land claims problematic, wondering why they should be required to reclaim land that they could never have given away because it could never be owned.² Concepts of nationalism conceived on imaginary lines drawn around large or small tracts of land within which are contained people of like-minded principles or beliefs was also a difficult concept for the Dene to grasp. Nationalism is based on discursive binary structures of Us/Them, Inside/Outside, Home/Away and so forth. Such concepts were naturally foreign to the Dene because they perceived no firm boundaries or enclosures on their land and, apart from neighbouring indigenous tribes, there was no “Other.” The land was endless and as far as the Dene knew, they and other indigenous peoples such as the Inuit, whose hunting grounds were loosely delimited by the treeline, were the only inhabitants of northern Canada and had been since the beginning of time. As nomads, the Dene moved from point to point as necessary for survival and as Blondin says: “There was no hurry to get anywhere: they travelled all over the Land, so every place was home” (*Yamoria* vi). When every place is home, there is no place that is not home, and therefore there can be no concept of a “limited” nation; as Anderson describes it: “The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them . . . has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind” (7). The Dene, in contrast, did believe that their homeland was “coterminous with mankind” because, until the arrival of Europeans, they did not know of a time when they did not occupy the land. As Blondin observes, the Dene do not accept “scientific stories about aboriginal people coming across the Bering Strait land bridge

from Siberia.” Instead, they believe that they, the Dene, gradually evolved from animals that were put on earth by the Creator. They see themselves as “people of the land; as no different than the trees, the caribou, and the raven” (*Yamoria* 18).

At first the implications of conflicting world views were inconsequential for the Northwest Territories Dene because generally they were pleased to welcome newcomers such as missionaries, traders and travellers to their land, to assist them in their travels and to acquire from them material goods that improved their ways of living. Blondin notes the appearance of cotton thread for fish nets, metal dishes, cloth, blankets, canvas tents, treadle sewing machines and outboard motors. All these commodities made life easier for the Dene, and food such as coffee, tea, rolled oats, dried fruit and eggs became valuable staples in their diet (*Yamoria* 32). However, as Blondin remembers, over a period of time the “direct link to the land for everything we needed was starting to become a little weaker as we bought more and more from the store and abandoned our old spiritual beliefs for Christianity” (34). Blondin’s texts show the gradual erosion of Dene modes of production and cultural tradition as they came to depend on European fur traders, religious institutions and government agencies. His work is also a testament to the power of Dene tradition and an interrogation into imperial discourses that contributed to ways of imagining the Northwest Territories and its people. Blondin provides a textual space for considering an alternative inscription of native beginnings, social practices and political organization. By telling the old stories and juxtaposing them with European history Blondin crosses narrative and cultural boundaries to redefine the Dene story, thereby enabling both Dene and European readers to break with conventional stereotypes of north and participate in a re-imagined north. In Blondin’s world the north is never silent, empty and threatening as Europeans perceived it to be. Instead, it is

noisy and joyful, populated with closely-knit families and ancestors making a living from their land and performing their ancient stories and myths.

Many of the earliest myths and legends are recorded in Blondin's first book, *When the World Was New*. "It used to be," Blondin writes, "that every family with a living grandfather or grandmother possessed a storyteller from another time. The duty of storytellers was to tell stories every day. That is why Dene tradition is so complete, as far back as the days when Na?ácho – giant now-extinct animals – roamed the world." These stories are about "stone-age people in the beginning of the new world" (*When the World i*). Many of them are violent and crude, filled with actions and dialogue that contemporary readers may find objectionable, and some may be incomprehensible or, like the stories that refute claims of indigenous peoples crossing into North America from Siberia, unbelievable according to accepted scientific principles. Almost all involve conversations and interactions between human beings and animals because they are from a time when "human beings were just developing [and] many people were reincarnated from animals" (5). Like stories the world over the Dene stories generally come with a moral and a lesson in proper ways to live, or they explain the existence of idiosyncratic features in the landscape or of animals. "How the Bear Stole the Fox's Leg" for example, explains why Fox's legs are always a bit crooked, and "Why Raven is Black" tells how all the birds painted Raven with coal from the fire after he had demanded that he be more beautiful than everybody else. These myths and legends show the close connection that the Dene had with the world they lived in and with each other, and it scarcely matters today if we believe that Raven really spoke, or if he and the other animals held conferences and conversed with each other and the early people that they encountered; the important thing is that as ancient tales of cultural beginnings these stories

are as relevant to the Dene as religious myths and rituals are to any other society. They are the narratives that were spoken and handed down through the generations and as the stories that all Dene knew, they were, and still are, the glue that holds families and tribes together.

The use of stories as a tool for cultural preservation has been well documented by both indigenous and non-indigenous writers. Indigenous writer and activist Jeannette Armstrong explains what it means to preserve native stories:

Our cultural survival in the future depends on our ability to re-focus our attentions creatively and artistically. . . . Through our writing we can continue to break the conventions which have strived to render us voiceless and 'illiterate.' In fact, we are not and never were wordless . . . we must continue to assert our own definitions of who we are and to reject the imposed definitions of a colonizing system which would reduce us to nothingness with misrepresentative, overly-broad or trivializing labels of identifications. By freeing ourselves of the constricting bounds of stereotypes and imposed labels of identity we empower ourselves and our communities and break free of the yoke of colonial power that has not only controlled what we do and where we live but who we are. (176)

The challenge for Armstrong has been to find a literary space in which to assert definitions of who her people are and to break free from "the yoke of colonial power."

Like Armstrong, Blondin was born into an oral tradition and like her he also seeks a literary space that can adapt oral stories and the story-telling process to the written text that can then become a tool for cultural reclamation from European domination. His mission is to recover, explain, promote and preserve his culture in a way that will permit the Dene to participate in the economic, political and cultural benefits of the modern-day Northwest

Territories, while continuing to discover and maintain an identity that was erased and redefined by others. As Penny Van Toorn explains of indigenous stories, the “story and its telling are integral to the process of self-definition; a repository for cultural practices and social memory, challenging the biases and strategic silences of anglo-european history” (42). Both Armstrong and Blondin, like other indigenous writers, view narrative in this way, using it, not only as a way of recovering culture, but also as means of exploring history, myth and memory, thus making it a potential tool for rewriting history from an indigenous perspective and promoting what post-colonial critics like Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin have called a “hybridised and syncretic view of the modern world . . . a framework of ‘difference on equal terms’” (35).

As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin. argue, a characteristic of “dominated literatures is an inevitable tendency towards subversion.” They point to a number of writers who challenge European “realities” not by reversing the hierarchical order but by “interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which that order was based” (32). Although Blondin interrogates a colonial regime that systematically worked to devalue and destroy Dene ways of living and ways of knowing, his texts are rarely adversarial or combative. His strategy is to insinuate his own stories into the dominant narrative and, rather than aggressively confronting the Eurocentric point of view, Blondin looks for alternative or supplementary ways to tell the Dene story. The term “supplement” is used by Bhabha to refer to stories that confront the totality of the “national” narrative (*Location* 154). Supplementary stories do not negate accepted conventional history. They add another dimension that may, as Bhabha describes it, “disturb the calculation” and they are “pluses that compensate for a minus in the origin” (155). In Blondin’s narratives, the stories are supplemental in that they have never

been acknowledged in the national story or the *grand récit* (to borrow Lyotard's term), and are interventionary in that they exist side by side with recorded history and occasionally intersect it, but they are not an adjunct to it. Blondin does not dispute the master discourse; he insinuates another local story around it, "antagonizing," to use Bhabha's phrase, the privileged master narrative. Somewhat like Bakhtin's heteroglossia that swirls as a "centrifugal force" around the "centripetal forces" of large, authoritative texts (271), Blondin's stories have the potential to undermine European representations of Dene culture and to create a new awareness of Canadian and NWT indigenous peoples. Blondin's narratives capture the fluidity of heteroglossia and multivocality of oral narrative and the existence of these stories celebrates a history and a way of life that, as Blondin says, "early Europeans, and non-native writers after them, missed" (*Yamoria* vi), and that are not contained in official narratives.

The myths and legends may be, as Blondin claims, as old as 30,000 years. It is extremely difficult today, as modern readers and listeners, to grasp the importance and meanings of these early stories, and one of the problems is that our first impression on reading some of them is disbelief and sometimes, in the ones that deal in extraordinary cures or events, even disgust. It is hard to reconcile some of the more fantastic stories of animals turning into humans, and humans making impossible journeys and performing arduous tasks with what we conceive of as "reality," but as story analyst Edward Chamberlin points out, just because something cannot be proven or seen does not mean it isn't there. "Just as we can't find Moby Dick out in the Pacific; or Queequeg's home" does not mean they are not there. Chamberlin notes that in all cultures and at all times people grow up with and come to accept stories, songs and images about strange things and things they have never seen. Art,

storytelling and stories, Chamberlin argues, always tell of places “where things happen that don’t,” and of “the happening that is not happening” (129). People have always recognized allegiances to both reality and imagination and the line between the two is not as distinct as we might think, nor are tales from other cultures as far-fetched as they might, at first, seem. Many Christians believe implicitly that Jesus fed the multitudes on two fishes and a loaf of bread, that He changed water into wine and, most startling of all, that He returned to life to offer salvation to others after He himself was killed. Yet we might have difficulty believing that a man with “fishing power” could catch thousands of fish in a single afternoon and feed a starving band of Dene, or that a woman who became trapped inside a cliff face long ago is still there to this day accepting offerings and granting favours and good luck to Dene travellers (Blondin, *Yamoria* 86). The difference, of course, is attributable to culture and familiarity. We accept those stories that are familiar to us and are sceptical of those that do not fit into recognizable patterns. The stories that gain wide public assent are the ones we share in common with people we see as like ourselves and the ones that are part of what Bourdieu calls our *habitus*.

The concept of habit or habitus refers to those aspects of culture that are anchored in daily practices of individuals, groups, societies and nations. It includes the totality of learned habits, bodily skills, styles, tastes, and other knowledges that might be said to “go without saying” for a specific group. “The *habitus* – embodied, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history – is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product” (Bourdieu 56). Narrative representations of the Dene habitus were embedded in stories, legends, practices and learned habits. Blondin relates how stories were told every day to teach the people about Dene history, values and culture. “Elders gathered children every day,

as soon as they could talk, to listen to stories about heroes and bad people of the past, and about the history of the world and human beings. The teachings were in the stories” (*Yamoria* 70). Without a language and without stories there can be no knowledge and nothing to anchor faith. When the stories were no longer told and the language of the Dene was replaced by European language, and when new European stories were learned in residential schools, the Dene culture was gradually eroded. Although Blondin is fully aware that modern young Dene have no time or inclination to listen to old stories told by their elders he still believes that the teachings and wisdom are in the stories and he is optimistic about the future. Believing as he does, “that nothing is ever completely lost, it is just forgotten,” he is confident that through reading his books young Dene can relearn their culture and gain pride in their ancestry.

The relevance and usefulness of Blondin’s stories for Dene readers is obvious; however for a cultural outsider, knowing how to read and hear these stories is a challenge. The impulse to interpret and explain is strong, but it is also important to respect the Dene way which is not to make comments, not to intervene and not to explain. In storytelling, listeners are responsible for finding their own meaning in narrative and the result, to use Said’s terms, is the production of a “noncoercive knowledge,” that is not forced on listeners but is available through their own interpretation for whatever use they choose to make of it. Listening is difficult. It means disassociating oneself from what Cruikshank calls “one’s own implicit social knowledge” (*Life Lived* 41). Cruikshank was one of the first researchers of indigenous stories to recognize that when one is collecting stories, listening involves casting aside a list of questions based on one’s own historical knowledge, so one can listen to what is being said and participate in the dynamics of the story. She observes that “if we think of oral

tradition as a social activity rather than as some reified product, we come to view it as a part of the equipment for living rather than a set of meanings embedded within texts and waiting to be discovered” (41). She reminds us that there is more involved in oral tradition than textual analysis and that oral narrative is part of a “communicative process” in which indigenous story telling is a shared activity, one in which the reader/listener is integral to the communicative process and the stories unfold as loosely defined mosaics of mythical, traditional, ancient, spiritual knowledges combined with modern situations. In Eurocentric literary criticism the impulse to interpret and explain is strong, but as Margery Fee points out, the challenge when looking at marginal or alternate texts is to practice “a kind of knowledge that, while remaining conscious of the lessons of rhetorical theory, recognizes European theory as a *local phenomenon* and attempts dialogue with other localized systems of discourse” (32). Discourse conventions among Dene story tellers rely on audience interaction and a minimalist style that refrains from making comments or intervening in the story and explaining it. Western critical inclination aims for precision in exploring for the exact meaning of what people or sources say, and the expectation of a linear account with a beginning and ending. In contrast an oral story teller will never tell exactly what he means, the stories are seldom linear and they lack well-defined endings or closure. Unlike Eurocentric stories, which are “self-contained discrete unit[s] defined by closure” (Ong 148), with a plot formula represented by “relentlessly rising tension, exquisitely tidy discovery and reversal, perfectly resolved denouement” (146), Dene stories resist well defined organization and clarity. There is a sense of what Rupert Ross calls a “celebration of the rich diversity of life, thought and feeling, rather than a contest between opposing views about what we ‘ought’ to think or feel” (x).

Although Blondin writes in English, his stories retain the rambling and repetitive characteristics of Dene oral narrative. The same story is often repeated from a different perspective by a different narrator and there is also a great deal of repetition of stories throughout Blondin's various books and articles. To a great extent, the narratives retain the essence of oral story telling but they have been edited. To understand what changes had been made and the process by which the oral stories became written works I spoke to Lee Selleck, Blondin's first editor. When Blondin began writing in 1983, he sent his articles to an NWT newspaper called *Native Press*. Selleck, the editor of *Native Press* at the time, told me that Blondin would come in with articles hand-written on lined yellow paper. He would say, "Here's the column and this is what I wanted to do." He expected details like grammar and spelling to be fixed. If Selleck didn't understand the story, Blondin might tell another that could guide his thinking. According to Selleck, the oral stories that Blondin told him were far more powerful than the written ones, but Selleck did his best to replicate the intensity of the stories. Blondin apparently was always happy with the editing. He never questioned anything and never changed anything. Any feedback he received from Selleck was good. I asked Selleck about Blondin's use of language and he told me that his English is not perfect but it is powerful. His use of punctuation is minimal to non-existent. He attended a residential school at Fort Providence for about four years and finished grade three. He uses whatever words he knows and cares only, as Selleck says, that he can "make one world view intelligible to a very different one." The stories are, according to Selleck, "very serious stories by a guy on a mission. George is a story teller and he is charged with telling the stories. That is what he does." Selleck takes the stories as absolutely literal. No matter how fantastic they may appear to us, he says that George believes, and makes the reader see, that these are true stories, not

just fabrications. The reader has to accept that he is entering a different world and Blondin's job is to make sure that that world is not forgotten. "George is a very determined person," says Selleck, "and he wants the stories of his people to be continued. He wants Dene culture and Dene history to be understood. He doesn't care who tells the stories, as long as they are continued." Many people other than Selleck have helped to produce the various narratives, and all have respected the integrity of the original stories as Blondin wrote them. Grammar, punctuation and spelling have been corrected and obvious repetitions have been eliminated, but the stories remain close to the ones that Blondin heard from the elders he talked to, and those that he remembered from his own life.

The earliest stories that Blondin tells are about mythic events and practices. They describe the constant fight for survival in a harsh land, hunting practices, interactions between animals and humans, and conflict with neighbouring tribes. They are also about the importance of unity, working together and using medicine power for good ends rather than divisive ones. They describe a set of values and social practices embedded in a traditional way of life. The world Blondin presents contrasts with the highly developed and organized culture of western societies, and he gently criticizes the modern world that he believes has "devalued the holiness of life and creation" (*Yamoria* 64). However, he never suggests that early life for the Dene was ideal or easy, and he does not advocate a return to pre-contact ways. It is obvious from the stories that life was difficult and violent. However, despite the harshness, there was a fundamental order and harmony. "People died from accidents and starvation, they froze to death or were killed by enemies, but nevertheless there seemed to be a definite order and sacredness to life" (64). This contrasts with the views of early Europeans who assumed that because the Dene lived a minimalist and migratory life it was random and

chaotic, without a spiritual component. The Europeans believed that the people had nothing, that their lives were abject and comfortless and that it was their duty to civilize them. But as Blondin notes, although many material benefits and ideas were welcomed, the accumulated benefits have proven to be destructive to traditional Dene culture and will continue to be destructive unless attention is redirected to values that were embedded in a previous lifestyle. Such values are contained in the stories that Blondin tells. However, it is difficult to find a way of appreciating the way of life that Blondin's stories describe within the terms or language of dominant discourse, which is structured around oppositions such as civilized/savage that systemically devalue hunting cultures such as the Dene. The task in examining these stories is to find a way of decoding and interpreting a different way of looking at the world without imposing abstract and Eurocentric theoretical models that fail to consider the material, social and historical conditions.

In the work of indigenous writers, it is impossible to separate the text from the social world and the historical moments that engendered these narratives. Indeed, it is largely the realities of historical events and social conditions created by various manifestations of colonial power and authority, as well as the resistances offered by indigenous people to institutions, authorities and orthodoxies that make their texts possible. In analyzing Blondin's narratives, therefore, I wish to follow Said's advice and consider the texts as part of the social, historical and mythical world that they belong to. In advocating a retreat from overtheorizing, Said notes that texts should be considered in the context of their natural social and historical conditions. "Texts are worldly," he argues, "to some degree, they are events and even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless part of the social world,

human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted” (*The World* 4).

To consider Blondin’s work, particularly the mythic narratives, in a worldly context I have found it useful to make use of certain tools of narratology. Narratology is the theory and study of narrative and narrative structure and the way that it affects our perception of both cultural artifacts and the world around us. Its usefulness in cross cultural situations is that narratives are frequently universal, attending to stories and phenomena that are recognizable in all societies. As Hayden White explains: “Far from being one code among many that a culture may utilize for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a meta-code, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted” (1). In other words, no matter what our habitus, our history or our culture, it is possible that narrative can transcend individual realities and facilitate universal understanding. Jungian scholars believe that all human beings share a “collective unconsciousness” (Neumann) that is born in ancient times and contains similar patterns of thought, myths and stories. However, as conscious and abstract thought become more developed in individuals and cultures they lose touch with their unconscious selves and their stories, and it becomes difficult for modern humans to intellectually recapture their primitive impulses and thoughts. In his work, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, Said observes that: “Man’s world begins among stones, rocks, frogs, and cicadas. . . . this is quite another world from Plato’s realm of forms or from Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas” (348). Leaving the world of forms and clear ideas to return to frogs and cicadas or, in the case of Blondin’s world, caribou, ravens and bears, is not easy for modern readers. But by approaching early legends and fables that document primitive worlds and mythic events with

“sympathetic imagination,” a term that Said borrows from Vico, and by using certain narratological tools, it is possible to experience what White calls a “shared reality” with the culture of early myth makers and story tellers.

Cruikshank also has explored the idea that “myths are not clear-cut reflections of either past or present, but statements about the human mind.” She explains that one purpose of symbolic narratives is to resolve issues that cannot be worked out in everyday life. Such approaches, she argues, “underscore the importance of looking at how oral tradition is *used* rather than focusing narrowly on its factual contribution” (*Life Lived* 4). In other words, narrative can be a valuable tool for de-coding cultural differences and for understanding ways of thinking that may not be part of a reader’s or listener’s familiar habitus, and even though we may not understand or believe all the factual components of a story there may still be a level at which a cross-cultural understanding can be reached.

Narratologists argue for the capacity for cross-cultural understanding through narrative, believing that even though readers or listeners may not share cultural experience or habitus they do possess certain strategic abilities to decipher texts. Jonathan Culler, for example, advances the idea that, through a process he calls *naturalization*, readers [or listeners] can “try to erase or synthesize textual inconsistencies by establishing overarching interpretative patterns that neutralize the inconsistency and provide an explanation for it” (Fludernik 251). Culler notes that the process of *naturalization* is related to interpretative frames; “rather than seeing textual inconsistencies or contradictions as a frame clash, the process of naturalization manages to link both areas within one common frame. . . . In this manner, the contradictions become necessary functional elements within the superadded . . . frame” (252). This is a similar concept to that of “blending,” a process by which story

tellers, readers or storyworld participants construct or construe meaning by “mapping” two or more mental spaces and arriving at an emergent structure which provides meaning to apparently unrelated threads. Cognitive linguist Mark Turner explains how activating two conflicting mental structures, or “blending” them, can be an effective method of extracting information for comprehending situations and decision-making from narratives that might otherwise seem incomprehensible. Turner maintains that, rather than suppressing stories that do not seem to support familiar circumstances, human beings have the capacity to make a “great mental leap” (119) that allows them to connect two stories and then blend them to make a third story. The third story frequently has the ability to explain or reconcile difficult or incomprehensible circumstances.

Cruikshank discovered the benefits of this technique when collecting oral narratives from Yukon indigenous elders. During the thirty years that she spent in the Yukon as an anthropologist and oral historian listening and talking to native women, Cruikshank noticed that rather than answering her questions about historical events and how such events affected their lives, the women she interviewed were steering her in a direction of their own design. She found that when asked specific questions that appeared to require straightforward answers, the women would ignore her requests and respond by telling her a different story. I had the same experience during some of my conversations with Blondin. If I asked him to tell me about a specific historical event, such as living at Great Bear Lake during the time of uranium mining, he would not answer that question. Instead, he would tell me a story from prehistoric or mythic times. I gradually came to realize, as Cruikshank did, that the events and *facts* of historical stories were not important in themselves. What was important was how the event affected the social processes of the Dene, and the methods they used and the

alternate stories that they told to deal with the unreliability of a rapidly changing world.

Cruikshank notes further that although many of the stories she heard were from an extraordinary time of legend and myth, the stories retained their power in modern times and continued to be told in a variety of situations and combined with modern stories to explain various conditions and troublesome events. In recounting their experiences to Cruikshank, the Yukon elders made it clear that “narratives that have been passed on orally for generations continue to provide a foundation for evaluating contemporary choices, and for clarifying decisions. The local stories interact with larger social, historical and political processes and provide a framework for “experiencing the material world” (*Social Life* xii). The stories that Cruikshank listened to, and the ones that Blondin tells, continue to be told in many different venues and to diverse audiences, and each time they are told they have the power to project their traditional knowledge and values onto contemporary situations and find solutions to social problems or difficult circumstances.

The process of combining ancient and modern, and local and universal stories to provide understanding and guidance is analogous to what Turner and certain narratologists call “blending” or creating “double-scope stories.” David Herman, for example, explains that stories in general, “help us recognize and organize social situations,” and allow us to “reconcile constancy and change, stability and flux.” He shows how the concepts of blending stories can “reveal ways in which particular narratives can be exploited as a tool for thinking about specific situations, as well as ways in which narrative in general constitutes a primary resource for building, recognizing, and using cognitive artifacts across variable circumstances” (172). This approach emphasizes the effort required on the part of the reader to understand the story. Disentangling early mythic stories requires that they have been

carefully told but, more importantly, it entails careful and active listening in which readers or listeners bring to bear certain cultural ideologies and habits that cause them to accept or reject particular ways of knowing and viewing the world. When a reader or listener encounters stories that run counter to his or her anticipated norms, it may then be necessary, as Turner puts it, to “pluck forbidden mental fruit” or “take a great mental leap” (117) that allows readers to reconcile two or more mental spaces and arrive at a different story that explains unconnected events. Blending of stories occurs on two levels. On the one hand, the story teller himself may create a story containing two or more disparate parts and then make “a mental leap” to blend the stories into one that he believes can provide truth or comprehension about an entirely different situation. On the other hand, readers can hear two or more stories that initially seem unrelated either to themselves or to any pertinent question or event, and then by employing certain kinds of cognitive reasoning can create an emergent story that opens up new possibilities for understanding a situation.

Many of Blondin’s stories combine elements of both ancient and modern circumstances, and Blondin, like the oral story tellers from Cruikshank’s study, makes use of these blended stories as tools to manage complex historical, social and cultural conditions. As a modern preserver and teller of stories, Blondin, as narrator, decides which stories to tell and he creates the blended models, but in the stories themselves, he withdraws his voice. In place of a single narrator, various unidentified voices arise at certain points in the narratives to direct and comment on events occurring and decisions taken and to produce what Fludernick calls an “empty deictic centre,” or an “anonymous or abstract viewing point/subject” (253) that takes no responsibility for the story, but offers “markers” to guide listeners to certain ways of understanding. The absence of a central voice reflects the

tradition of indigenous oral story telling and teaching in which there is generally no clear, central narrative authority but a multi-voiced social performance that invites audience participation. Because there is no central authority directing the narrative the stories can be seen as “non-coercive” (Said) and non-directive. As Blondin explains: “You may have to work out the meaning of some of these stories for yourself. Dene legends don’t all have a nice beginning, middle, and end like on television” (*Yamoria* viii).

To illustrate how Blondin’s stories perform their role as tools of teaching, cultural reclamation and mythic re-creation I will consider a story from *When the World Was New* called “The Old Man, the Young Men and the Raven” (18-19). This very short story starts out: “Animals and birds have always told native people where to find game,” and goes on to explain that animals, particularly ravens, can predict future events. “Wild creatures also used to know whether a sick person would become well again, and ravens have been known to predict disasters and epidemics. So it was important to listen to the animals, even if medicine people frequently had to interpret.” Here are the first two focal points of the story: one, the animals who have always given advice; and two, the medicine people who had to interpret. With these two focal points the story is already distanced from Blondin or any other controlling agency. It exists by itself in any time and any space. In the story a Dene elder and his sons are on a winter hunting trip for moose. They awake one morning in their tent to hear a raven squawking outside. The younger son remembers that his father understands raven talk, indicating a time when humans and animals could still communicate, and asks him to interpret. “Father, I think the raven is trying to talk to us,” the younger son said. “What is it saying?” The man refuses to answer, telling the boy that if he gave up his fast living lifestyle and listened more, he too would understand “simple raven talk.” The father’s voice

constitutes a third focal point, that of the advisor. The father tells his son: "In Déline, you go visiting past midnight and you get into fights over girls. You'd better slow down – you don't know how long you will live."³ He then advises: "From now on, you must listen to me!" and he reveals that the raven is telling them where there are three moose. So the man and his sons go to the spot that the raven has indicated and shoot the three moose. They butcher them and leave enough meat on the bones "to satisfy their benefactor, the raven." Underlying the three focal points in the story there are now two more, that of Blondin, the modern story teller who relates the events but is not involved and, we must assume, the focal point of the person who told Blondin the story in the first place. These voices occur in the last paragraph:

So the hunters packed up their camp and, following the directions given by the raven, set out in search of the moose. They came upon a ridge, and looking down into open country, they spotted a stand of willows. Sure enough, three moose were sheltering in the willows. Taking a good position, the man and his sons shot all three. When they butchered the moose, they made certain to leave enough meat on the bones to satisfy their benefactor, the raven. (18-19)

One might well ask, what is the point of this rather simple story and what significance does it have for both the story teller and his audience? It tells of a successful hunting trip but there are also a number of important cultural features to consider. In the first instance it reflects a recurring thematic in Blondin's stories that reinforces the close integration between the people, the animals and the land. It emphasizes the importance of maintaining a close relationship with animals, respecting them and listening carefully to what they say, and furthermore, it suggests that young people who do not listen to their elders and lose touch with the animals and the land will lack the capacity to make a living for themselves because

they will not understand anything about the habits and preferences of animals, which are their only source of life. Although this story is set in a time of myth and miracles when animals could speak, it has connections to historical time as well as to the present. The old man admonishes his son for his unacceptable, modern behaviour and suggests that because the son apparently cannot understand simple raven talk he has no knowledge of survival techniques. This story anticipates Blondin's concerns in other works in which he attributes loss of Dene culture partly to the fact that young people today have little contact with the land and the animals, refuse to listen to their elders and have no knowledge of their language and culture. "Their attitude toward each other is terrible, no manners or love at all. No sharing, everyone talks English, they watch TV, no one listens to parents or elders" (*Yamoria* 217). In other words, young Dene, caught up in modern Canadian culture, have lost the capacity to survive as Dene in their land. They have lost the ability to understand "raven talk" and have no connection to the land and the animals.

Blondin believes that his rewriting of mythical stories like this one will remind his people "of the strength of our ancestors, of our Dene laws, and to live the best way we know how" (233). At the same time, he makes use of the ancient stories to identify issues in contemporary society (i.e., children staying up late, fighting, watching T.V. and losing respect for cultural values) and guide his readers toward a resolution of these problems and others that stem from them such as lack of education, lack of motivation, loss of identity and unemployment, all of which affect young people in modern Dene communities. To address modern cultural problems using old myths Blondin creates a double-layered story. By inserting a modern component into the raven myth he combines the ancient past with the historical present, and by *blending* the two stories introduces a third story that suggests

solutions to cultural turmoil. As Mark Turner explains, this kind of “double-scope” story allows human beings to “activate two conflicting mental structures . . . and to blend them creatively into a new mental structure” (117).

“In a double-scope story network,” Turner notes, “there are input stories with different (and often clashing) organizing frames that are blended into a third story whose organizing frame includes parts of each of the input organizing frame” (128). Blending two stories, according to Turner, always involves at least a provisional mapping between them. The mapping typically involves “connections of identity, analogy, similarity, causality, change, time, intentionality, space, role, part-whole, or representation” (127). In the Raven story there are connections of identity, similarity, space and time. The young man and his family apparently exist in both stories and go on hunting trips in time and space frames that are simultaneously mythic and modern. We know they are hunting in a mythic time and space because ravens can speak and offer advice, and they are also participating in the modern time and space of Déline where young Dene men might misbehave. Different elements of each story world are “selectively projected” to the blended story. In the mythic story we learn that although the son can hear the raven he cannot understand what it is saying, and in the modern insert we learn that because the son engages in unsuitable behaviour in Déline, he cannot hear what his elders are telling him. From this blend of two stories comes the “emergent structure” that suggests that those who do not pay attention to Dene values as found in mythic tales will fail to find their moose, or the present day equivalent such as the ability to earn a living. If the young man continues to engage in inappropriate behaviour, his status in the community will be compromised. In a hunting society where a man is judged by his ability to provide for his family, this would mean not only starvation but lack of cultural

identity and social worth, which of course are the modern problems that Blondin is addressing. However, Blondin believes the traditional values are not lost to young Dene; they are just forgotten. A return to Dene cultural values and ideals is possible if youth are willing to listen to and respect the words of elders and important truth tellers such as ravens. The second part of the emergent structure brings the mythic and the present world together when a voice within the story reminds the listener that it is important that the man and his sons “leave enough meat on the bones to satisfy their benefactor” which could be the raven, the ancestors or the entire Dene cultural tradition. In other words, the voice is saying, even if you do manage to shoot three moose, or acquire equivalent material possessions in the modern world, you should not allow these acquisitions to cause you to lose respect for your culture, the land and the animals.

Blondin’s raven story can obviously be read as a moral lesson for modern Dene youth and as a reminder to them of the strength and power of their culture that lives on in inherited stories. However, by applying additional cultural and historical knowledge, as well as tools of narratology, it is possible to understand the story as a source of power that can subtly undermine dominant discourses. As Cruikshank notes, “an enduring value of informal storytelling is its power to subvert official orthodoxies and to challenge conventional ways of thinking” (*Life Lived* xiii). For example, by introducing Déline, which became a permanent settlement in 1952 when the federal government built a school there, into his mythic story, Blondin suggests that the loss of culture and Dene values began when families were encouraged to give up their nomadic hunting mode of production to live in government-built settlements. Furthermore, not listening to elders and not understanding “raven talk” is a reminder that young people lost their language, their culture and their ability to

communicate with their parents as a result of enforced attendance in schools in places such as Deliné. The two stories together suggest that although the ability to understand raven talk has been lost, it can be regained through listening to elders, remembering the stories and by not engaging in unsuitable behaviour. Furthermore, the recovery of cultural knowledge and values will enable young Dene to make a living in the modern world.

It can be seen from this very simple hunting story that Blondin's concern is not just with retelling old tales that demonstrate the close affinity the Dene had with their land, but also to use the stories to subtly challenge Eurocentric practices and interpretations of the Northwest Territories. For example, we have seen in Chapter 4 how Agnes Deans Cameron praises the residential schools and the nuns who rescued children whom she calls "wilderness waifs" from an abject life of hardship and illiteracy. Blondin's narratives tell a different story. In Blondin's stories, there are no "wilderness waifs," only closely-knit and loving families who travel and hunt together. Rather than being oases of comfort and learning, the schools, in Blondin's world, are places where children were removed from their families and stripped of their culture and their self-esteem. Other colonial institutions come under similar scrutiny. In Cameron's narrative, and in the stories of white trappers and traders, the Hudson's Bay Company is always a respected and revered institution. Blondin, however, suggests that the Company cheated the native people and took advantage of their ignorance of the economics of trade. "The trading post was very important to the Dene," he remembers, "even though the traders cheated them. They had nowhere else to go to get what they wanted" (*My Life* 17). Representatives of the Catholic and Anglican churches write and speak of the happiness of the Dene at being introduced to Christianity, but Blondin notes that his people were coerced into abandoning their own spiritual beliefs by priests and

missionaries. “The priests,” Blondin notes, “told us our culture was evil. They preached that we would burn in hell forever if we kept singing with our drums and offering food to the fire. They told us to stay away from ceremonies and not to listen to our medicine people” (*Yamoria* 36). The point is that many stories of events, people, and so-called facts that became part of an accepted discourse about the Northwest Territories, when looked at from an indigenous perspective, can be viewed quite differently. It is not that the European accounts were wrong or even uninformed; it is simply that the indigenous account was never considered and remained untold until the Dene began to write their own stories, and many of those serve as counternarratives to the European interpretation of events in the NWT.

It is also important to remember that although many of Blondin’s stories are critical of colonialist practices in the north, at the same time he is fully aware that change was inevitable and the Dene would have to adjust. Blondin, himself, realized the importance of education for his children and the value of white man’s medicine, and he moved his family out of the bush so that they could benefit. Like many of his people he also became a devout Catholic and is easily able to reconcile Catholicism and the Dene world view. He notes that the priests, although they turned the Dene away from their religion, acknowledged Dene prophets and spiritual figures such as Yamoria, and told the Dene that “God sent this person to help you Dene to survive” (*Yamoria* 70). Although the Anglican and Catholic churches were responsible for much of the violence and suffering that occurred in residential schools, many of the people embraced Christianity and found its rituals and laws of love, respect and sharing to be similar to their own codes of behaviour.⁴ Even today the Catholic and Anglican churches in Yellowknife and the small settlements in the Mackenzie Valley are filled with Dene worshippers while the white population is conspicuously absent. It is tempting

sometimes, when reading indigenous texts, to believe that the ways of the colonists were always bad and the Dene were always the innocent victims, but this kind of postcolonial revisionism is not the best way to approach Blondin's narratives. There is no doubt that there were victims and that significant changes were forced on the Dene, but Blondin himself is remarkably objective and non-judgemental and his dialogic and multivocal discourse is concerned with differences rather than oppositions. Blondin does not challenge the Eurocentric narrative in the sense of dismantling it; instead he tries to reclaim a space within the dominant narrative for the indigenous point of view.

Blondin's narratives are an attempt to conceptualize the past and present of the Dene in order to present an alternate world view, and the historical and autobiographical stories act as "counternarratives," to use Bhabha's term, to the extent that they question colonizing discourses and open up possibilities for local narratives. Although an imperialist narrative has been told and is still being told about the north and its people, we become aware through the narratives of writers such as Blondin, that there is no certainty and what we knew, or thought we knew, "dissolves," as Bhabha explains it, "in the telling of a new story" (*Nation* 301). There can be no "nationalist claim to cultural mastery, for the position of narrative control is neither monocular or monologic" (301). Bhabha uses the notion of supplementarity to describe how minority discourses can insinuate themselves into the dominant discourse to "antagonize the implicit power to generalize, to produce the sociological solidarity of the national narrative" (306). The supplement "cumulates and accumulates presence. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*. . . . If it represents and makes an image it is by the *anterior* default of a presence . . . the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance" (305). The supplementary space is not one of plurality, but one of *doubling*, and it is this

concept of doubling that I wish to concentrate on when addressing Blondin's historical and autobiographical writing.

Although Blondin is the author of his narratives, the texts are polyphonic. They are a compendium of Dene voices and they are quite similar to the literary genre defined by John Beverley as "testimonio," which is a "novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in the first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or significant life experience." Testimonio involves "an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, implicated in the act of narration itself" (Beverley 31-2). Testimonio does not claim a specific author. Instead it involves a "sort of erasure of the function, and thus also of the textual presence, of the 'author' . . . the author has been replaced in testimonio by the function of a 'compiler' or 'activator'" (35). Testimonio is commonly associated with narrators and peoples who have been severely repressed and are struggling against extreme and dangerous threats to their culture and survival. Although Blondin's writing is never angry and seems quite neutral in its descriptions of Dene interaction with colonial forces, beneath the placid voice is an accusatory undercurrent that locates the loss of Dene culture firmly within the time of colonial rule and places the blame for this loss on colonial initiatives. Like the narrator of a testimonio who is considered to be the representative of the social group for whom he speaks, Blondin "bears witness" for his people and speaks for what Beverley calls the "reality of a whole people" (34). As the "compiler" or "activator," Blondin pervades the narrative but he is not the centre of it, nor does he claim it as entirely his creation. Instead his accounts of Dene life are what Beverley calls "polyphonic testimonio,"

made up of accounts from different participants in the same event. Many of his stories begin with: "Elders have told me..." or "The Dene believe..." and others are told by specific narrators, identified by name and community. The stories frequently overlap and present multiple versions of the unfolding history. Although Blondin is the writer, he makes it clear that the stories belong to the people and the community and, in a kind of postmodern move, he never claims a position as sole author. The concept of the anonymous story teller is familiar to indigenous writers and story tellers who are well aware of the potential for narrators to create a multivocal tapestry woven from the discursive practices of ancestors. They believe that the stories cannot be the creation of specific individuals and that their value lies in their ability to create participatory experiences between families and communities, between generations, and between the present and past. Through their invitation to participation the stories replicate their oral beginnings. As Cruikshank reminds us, oral tradition is a "social activity" and oral narrative is part of a "communicative process" (*Social* 41) in which the reader/listener is integral to the communicative process.

Erasure of the function and the textual presence of an author, in this case, Blondin, makes possible a complicity between narrator and reader that is similar to that of oral story teller and audience. Blondin sets up encounters between speakers and listeners/readers that engage them in mutual consideration of the unfolding story. For example, in a chapter in *Yamoria* called "Health and Well-Being," Blondin directly addresses his readers as he explains why the Dene were so healthy and long-lived and the part that "Medicine Power" played in their lives. He involves his reader with a question, and also, for fun, makes a small jibe at those who wrote and spoke of "dirty Indians:"

You might ask, “How could the Dene live so long when they lived such a dirty life, with no soap to clean themselves or their clothes?” All I can think of is the land was clean and people didn’t pick up the germs that they do now. I guess a little dirt here and there doesn’t hurt you after all. (158)

He goes on to explain that medicine power was partly responsible for longevity. “Dene of long ago also had medicine power working for them and sometimes grandparents used their powers to make a child live long. . . . there are many legends about children who helped their elders and were given the gift of long life by them” (158-9). To explain how medicine power works Blondin relates the accounts of various people who have experienced the gift or the use of medicine power. Blondin himself remains in the background as these participants in the workings of medicine power speak for themselves and share their experiences. Tacheam, for example, a man who has seagull medicine for healing, explains to a group of people how he achieved it:

I travelled in spirit form on earth and in space and that is when I received my powers. At one time I became a giant. I was standing on earth with my head in the heavens. My head went through the three protective layers around the earth.⁵ In the middle layer were all the animal and insect spirits we know of on earth. They were all offering me their services to be part of my medicine powers. . . . It was the seagull that I chose. . . . The seagull gave me a song to sing when I made medicine, and gave me medicine words to invoke seagull powers when I needed them. (159-60)

The interaction between Tacheam and his audience replicates daily story telling sessions that used to take place within the Dene community. Blondin is the compiler or

activator presenting an old story that belongs to the people and is retold in situations when the possibilities of the possession and use of medicine power are discussed. Tacheam tells of an occasion when he used seagull power to cure a man who fell ill after eating fish, and the rest of chapter is a compendium of other voices telling other stories of seagull medicine, swan medicine and bear medicine, and how they work to cure people, kill people, settle disputes and bring justice when it is needed. In the story called "Bekah's Seagull Medicine," a woman is dying in a bush camp. "Various people had made medicine over her, but they didn't have the right kind since she just kept getting worse." The relatives of the woman "had placed a holy picture at the head of her bed and prayed with the Bible trying, to cure her," but that was not working either. Bekah, a man with seagull powers, "grabbed the holy picture, and threw it into the fire." He said, "This will not help you! Such praying will not help you!" With that, Bekah cut open the woman's stomach and pulled out "hundreds of small, wriggling bugs." The woman was cured but at the end of the story we learn that medicine power is getting weaker and "people believed the priest who said medicine power was bad and began to rely more and more on the white man's technology" (161-3).

This is an odd and somewhat unpleasant story and it is difficult to know how to read it. It seems to place medicine power over Christian teachings; it tells a story about what appears to be primitive surgery to remove parasites and it reinforces belief in a mythic world of close relationships between animals and people. Paradoxically, it notes that medicine power is getting weaker but somehow Bekah, a man with seagull medicine, is still able to perform a cure. Bekah's primitive surgery may be analogous to "white man's technology," and it is possible that in this story the people are beginning to realize that neither medicine power nor praying will cure certain types of illnesses and that the Dene may have to turn to

white man's medicine.⁶ Blondin certainly realized this himself when he moved his family to Yellowknife in the 1960s so that they could be near a hospital. Like many of Blondin's seemingly incomprehensible stories, this one challenges our perception of reality but as a story about adaptation to change it offers alternative ways of looking at traditional customs. Narratives about Tacheam and Bekah with their seagull medicine may have lost much of their power today, but they continue to celebrate connections between people and their land and the importance of knowing how ancestors lived and thought and how they adapted to difficult circumstances. "The seagull gave me a song to sing," says Tacheam and with that song Tacheam obtained "medicine words to invoke seagull powers when I needed them" (*Yamoria* 60). The ancient stories that Blondin has collected are also powerful songs that the Dene can sing when they need a ceremony of belief in their ancestry and their culture, and a way to evaluate contemporary choices.

Although Blondin's texts are a compendium of Dene voices, some of the more recent stories are autobiographical and Blondin's own presence is evident. In 1993, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples requested a series of life histories of aboriginal peoples across Canada and Blondin was asked to write about the aboriginal people in the far north. He chose to write about changes in Dene life that had occurred during his grandfather's lifetime from 1850 until 1930. His grandfather, Paul Blondin, was born in 1850 near Great Bear Lake in the Sahtu area of the Northwest Territories. Paul's only son, Edward, was born around 1890 and George himself was born in 1922. The Blondins are obviously a well respected and powerful family unit and their stories resonate with tales of successful hunting trips, large family gatherings and a great capacity for resilience, adaptation and the ability to prevail despite changing cultural conditions and values. In addition to telling his own family

history, Blondin documents the stories he has heard from other elders such as Helen Rebesca who “was one hundred years old when she talked to me about her life on the land” (*Yamoria* 204), and Suzie Bruno who tells about the “eight months in his life when he worked tirelessly to take care of a group of elders in the Barren Lands” (215). The stories are about the arrival of the fur traders around 1850, the use of medicine power, the day-to-day life of the Dene, the arrival of missionaries, the influenza epidemic of 1928 and the gradual development of the north. These stories reveal a way of life that was difficult but enjoyable. Where early explorers and travellers may have seen the Dene as starving, unclean, nomadic heathens, Blondin’s stories present a counter view. “Our lives were hard,” says Blondin, “but we were satisfied with small victories and minimal comforts. We didn’t know any other way” (*Yamoria* 220). Joe Wedzin tells his story of his travels and life in the bush.

Before the traders and the government came to Denendeh, people were poor and worked hard, but there was no disease and no violence. . . . We governed ourselves with Dene laws and we kept our children in line by the elders teaching them each day. People lived a long time and they were happy. Problems started when outside people started to bother the Dene. Then their lives started to change and they started to worry more. (211)

Like all the elders’ stories this one employs a rhetoric of hard work and material poverty, and celebrates strong community values, close family ties and pride in traditional customs. Many stories are informed by expressions of difficulty and loss when the Dene world was disturbed and there is a tone of passive acceptance of a hard but happy life, changed forever by European ideologies. This same tone pervades most of Blondin’s own stories. He documents the deaths of his sisters, which he attributes to the influenza

epidemic, in a single dispassionate sentence. He treats his residential school experience in the same way. “My childhood was taken away from me when I went to the mission school. Fortunately I returned to my family and learned traditional ways from my father again” (*Yamoria* xii). Blondin does not ignore the large events that caused the demotion of the Dene from a position of self-sufficiency to one of dependency, nor does he attempt to resist the power structures that ensued. Instead, he transforms the story of victimization into one of survival by shifting the focus from the Dene as hapless victims of colonial rapacity and hegemony to a story of the Dene as a proud and resourceful people connected to the power of their ancestors and still very much a people of the land. His minority and local discourse then writes a new history that transfers power and credibility to the Dene who have been marginalized by Eurocentric history.

In *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, Robert Young cites Aimé Césaire who speculates on the problems of writing a new history when the only accepted history is white (158). Blondin overcomes this difficulty because the history he writes does not depend on “white” history. White history often appears in the stories but generally as a small detail or an aside, rather than an important event. For example, in a chapter called “The Great Mining Rush” in *When the World was New*, Blondin notes the discovery of uranium in 1930 at Port Radium, Great Bear Lake. “In 1930,” he writes, “Gilbert LaBine [a prospector] found pitchblende on the shores of Sahtú [Great Bear Lake] and the next year there was a staking rush” (184). The uranium discovery became associated with major events in Canadian and international history; the manufacture of the atomic bomb, the bombing of Hiroshima and the end of the Second World War. However, to the Dene, the story was unimportant except as a new source of temporary employment, a means of providing for their

families and a way to regain their self-sufficiency. Blondin blends his local story into the national story of uranium mining and the emergent story reveals the Dene as resilient and energetic, able to incorporate new developments into their old ways of life:

The Dene found new ways of making money: cutting line for stakers, cutting and hauling wood, building cabins, and guiding. Many Dene did this work to get food for their families, even though much of it was different to trapping. The people would sell moose and caribou meat to the whites, or exchange it for groceries.

The women sold them moccasins, mitts and other garments. (186)

This excerpt, like other episodes in “The Great Mining Rush” chapter, has very little to say about the mining rush and its consequences and much to say about the Dene way of life. The chapter is a compendium of descriptions of memorable events in the lives of the Dene at the time. Blondin writes of the rapids leading into Great Bear Lake where miners hired Dene to pilot their boats, and he describes trapping, fishing and hunting during the winter months, when Dene men such as Blondin’s father, Edward, trapped fur-bearers and set their fish nets under the ice. He relates in detail how Edward hunted moose and returned triumphant to his family:

As he got near his tent, Edward called out, “I shot a moose!” The Dene always did this when they got within hearing distance of home. The people in the tents called out their thanks, and that night they all feasted on moose and the lake trout the other man had caught. (185)

With its rhetoric of successful hunting, the joy of homecoming, family life, gratitude and feasting, this small story reflects Dene life at its best. In their feast or famine society, the killing of a moose was an event of great significance and the celebrating and socializing

that followed was a time of perfect happiness and contentment in the Dene world. The scene reflects the continuity of Dene life; it could be from any time in Dene history, or prehistory if one excludes the fact that the moose was shot, yet we know it takes place in the early 1930s which was a time of great stress for indigenous people in the NWT. Residential schools had taken children from their parents, trading posts and government settlements had lured the Dene off the land to live in poverty and slum conditions, game was scarce, starvation was always a problem, and in 1927-1928 the influenza epidemic throughout the Mackenzie Valley had decimated more than one-sixth of the Dene population (Dickerson 45). European representations of the Dene at this time show them as an abject, marginalized people who had lost their ancient knowledge and culture and were becoming increasingly dependent on the government for food and shelter. Blondin's stories however, present a different picture, a supplementary narrative that depicts the Dene as a proud, hardworking people, still occupied with their traditional customs and culture on the land, while at the same time adapting, when necessary, to a wage economy.

Additional stories in "The Great Mining Rush" relate, in minute detail, life around Cameron Bay, Great Bear Lake, ⁷ during the winter of 1932, treating all events, large and small, with the same detachment that gives the stories the sense of being equal and inevitable vignettes connected along a continuum of life. No event is insignificant and no story is more important than another. The deaths of Blondin's sisters is told in a single, simple sentence: "That year, Edward and Julia Blondin lost their three young daughters to influenza" (*When the World* 187). In white history the influenza epidemic is documented as an event of great significance, but in the Dene world its meaning is contained in small tragic events that are part of a continuing story of Dene life. The next story is similar in its blending of a small,

personal tragedy with a larger significant event. Following the death of their daughters, the Blondins wanted their remaining children home, and George and his brother were *flown* to Cameron Bay from their residential school at Zhatí Kóé. Aircraft in the north were rare and their appearance in the 1930s was an important historical event from the white perspective and a significant breakthrough for administration and development in the NWT, but Blondin mentions them only in the context of *his* return from residential school. Similarly, Treaty 11 signed in 1921, was a major historical milestone in the NWT but the only mention of it in Blondin's narrative is in reference to the death of another baby sister in 1935. In those days, Blondin relates, "there were no doctors, and no other medical help, even though the treaty signed in 1921 had promised such help to the Dene" (188). These small, local stories, when blended with larger, historical events, act as "supplements" to confront what Bhabha calls the "totality of the national narrative." They insinuate themselves into the larger stories and "disturb the calculation" (*Location* 154) by revealing the individual lives acting out their presence alongside the official narrative.

The rest of 1935 appears to have been a happier time for the Dene. In the spring the Blondins joined a gathering of people from Déline and Béchokó:⁸

There were about 40 tents, caribou were plentiful. Everyone ate well, including the dogs, and there were handgames and drum dances. Many of the people went to Béchokó and by the time they set out it was May and the snow was melting. The people from Déline set out for Sahtú, traveling at night because the days were too warm. Along the way they shot two moose, and after 32 kilometres they reached the shore of Sahtú (*When the World* 188).

This story again reflects Dene life as it had been for generations: travelling across the land in family groups, hunting caribou and moose, hand games and drum dancing, and visiting in the spring. But as part of “The Great Mining Rush,” it shows how the discovery of uranium, so important to Canada and the world, is merely a thread in the tapestry of Dene social history that documents the far more significant, to the Dene, stories of birth and death, hunting and survival, games, music and family relationships. But underlying the stories of traditional life are subtle reminders of the difficulties of adjusting to the social and economic issues that were having such an impact on Dene lives, and these details provide the element that has the power to undermine official orthodoxies and to confront conventional ways of thinking. For example, in an account of herring fishing Blondin mentions that the fish were not as plentiful since the mining companies had carried out underwater blasting to dredge the river. In other stories he describes problems with the way the Dene dealt with money and trading, as well as the effect of land laws, game laws and liquor laws on their lives. Also addressed, as we have seen, through the story of the death of Blondin’s young sisters, is the devastation of the Dene population as a result of the influenza epidemic of 1928, and broken treaty promises that meant that medical assistance was not available. Finally, Blondin mentions the impact on the children of the residential school system that erased their language and their familiarity with the land. When Blondin and his brother returned from school, they had lost the ability to communicate with their parents:

The boys didn’t know how to speak Gokedé (Slavey), and Julia didn’t know how to speak English. Parents and children had to use sign language. In addition, the boys were green in the bush. In time they would learn Dene ways again, but for a while everything was new to them. (187)

Within the Dene community the personal stories of life, death, hunting and leisure at first overshadowed the larger events going on around them as the Dene continued to live their ancestral lives as best they could. However, in time their lives became more complicated as their lives and their stories intersected with larger national and international narratives. When the Dene began to move off the land, the small stories were lost or, as Cruikshank explains it, they became “marginalized by more powerful knowledge systems” that swept aside local knowledge or attempted to contain it in anthropological, ethnological, governmental, political and academic systems (*Social* xiii).

The Dene are a significant presence in the history and prehistory of the Northwest Territories and their stories are as important as those of white Europeans. As Leslie McCartney insists in her work on northern archival collections: “Aboriginal people are entitled to the importance of their pasts; their sophisticated stories embodying cultural and historical contexts can make important contributions to the historical record” (13). McCartney is concerned with preserving oral stories in an archival context and granting them the same respect as larger holdings of the historical record. Blondin, of course, has preserved the Dene stories in a different way, in books. But the question still remains of how the stories can contribute in a significant way to northern history and be given the same attention and respect that conventional and canonical works receive. To consider how this can be achieved I turn again to Said who discusses the responsibility of the reader and the critic in the production of meaning of the text. As Said argues, “The reader is a full participant in the production of meaning, being obliged as a mortal thing to act, to produce some sense that even though ugly is still better than meaninglessness” (*The World* 41). The text, like the oral story, should be a discursive situation involving speaker and audience. “The designed

interplay between speech and reception, between verballity and textuality, is the text's situation, its placing of itself in the world" (40). By bringing his people's stories together in a published text, Blondin has established their significance as literature and their value as a history worth telling. However, as Said argues, in order for stories to exert their "will to power" they must rely on the process of criticism to "create the values" by which they are judged. Critics are influenced by their own western perspectives and ideologies concerning the processes of reading, writing and speaking, but by accepting the arguments put forward by Said that texts are "worldly," and by recovering the locally grounded and culturally specific stories and engaging in criticism that privileges minority culture, I agree with Said that academic and philosophical limitations can be overcome. Despite the argument by critics such as Hayden White, that there is no way to get past texts in order to apprehend "real" history directly, Said believes that "such a claim need not also eliminate interests in the events and the circumstances entailed by and expressed in the texts themselves" (*The World* 4). By apprehending the parallel stories that interact with, and quietly oppose, larger national movements the critic can help to articulate those voices that Said describes as "dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of texts" (53). Most of all, Said insists "criticism is worldly and in the world so long as it opposes monocentrism, a concept I understand as working in conjunction with ethnocentrism, which licenses a culture to cloak itself in the particular authority of certain values over others" (53).

Since their first contact with Europeans, the Dene have been subject to forces of imperialism that include ideologies of monocentrism and ethnocentrism. From the time of the earliest missionaries to the era of bureaucrats such as Duncan Campbell Scott, the Dene were caught up in a relentless campaign that privileged Eurocentric values over their own

traditional culture. They were subject to outside bureaucratic decisions that came from autocratic politicians in London or Ottawa who had little idea of life in the far north⁹ and through the practice that Kapferer, calls “bureaucratic erasure,” the Dene were isolated from their nomadic lives and modes of production by governmental, religious and economic rulings. As a result of imperialistic forces, the balance of power for the Dene shifted from that of a people integrated with their land and their wildlife resources to that of a marginalized people who had become distanced from their knowledge and way of life. With the loss of their culture the Dene entered a state of dependency in which they became part of a bureaucratic system that transformed them from being part of a cohesive social group into individuals and numbers. Assigned government numbers and European names, and schooled in bureaucratic institutions the Dene became part of a Eurocentric space in which their own voices and their own history were discounted. They were, paradoxically, silenced through the relentless textuality of historical narratives, ethnographic studies, bureaucratic recommendations and procedures and the entire corpus of knowledge that developed and grew as a result of the discourse of the “civilizing” mission to which they were subjected. Their lives became controlled through a system of knowledge which they did not understand, to which they could not contribute and over which they had no control.

Blondin’s works act as correctives to the colonizing discourses and open up the possibility for a multivocal exchange of mythical and historical memory. However they are much more than textual re-enactments of oral mythology and history. In their subtle blending of Dene cultural practices and stories with known historical moments they bring a kind of performative possibility to NWT history. As small, supplementary stories incorporated into the national narrative they are able to offer resistance to the imperial ethnocentric discourse.

Instead of a monologic history of European imperial control, indigenous writers like Blondin offer a multi-voiced discourse made up of the voices of Dene prophets, medicine people and ancestors that challenges the unitary official voice. Blondin's texts resist all attempts at uniformity of speech and action, and the classification of thousands of years of memory and inherited cultural understanding into a single Eurocentric interpretation of Dene history. His narratives are fluid, living forces that re-enact the nomadic, ever-changing, seasonally-driven Dene culture. The retelling of these stories has the potential to release Dene history from the static textuality of colonial narrative and allow the Dene and others to experience what Dene elders have described as the "spirituality of the land." Blondin believes that his work can make a difference to the future of the Dene.

Because the earth has changed, and because we Dene do not live in the same way as our ancestors – eating only wild meat and living outdoors in the clear air – medicine is not the same as it was before. But we still have power. We have our imagination, our dreams, our virtues, and our faith in the Creator, and those are a medicine person's most important tools. May this book remind us of the strength of our ancestors, of our Dene laws, and to live the best way we know how. (*Yamoria* 233)

Notes

¹ This obituary by Brodie Thomas appeared in *News/North* on Monday, October 20, 2008:

BEHCHOKO/RAE-EDZO – The NWT lost one of its most respected and knowledgeable elders last week. George Blondin, 87, died on Oct. 12 after suffering a stroke at his home in Behchoko. Blondin was born and raised on the land near Great Bear Lake. His son Ted said that even at an early age, elders knew that Blondin would be a storyteller. “His grandparents and all the elders talked to him as if he was designated as the storyteller and he took that mission on all his life,” said Ted.

As a young man Blondin and his father Edward Blondin helped guide surveyors along traditional hunting trails through the unmapped Mackenzie Mountains as they built the Canol Trail. He also worked providing lumber for Port Radium during the 1950s. After losing his oldest son Walter to pneumonia in 1958, Blondin moved his family to Yellowknife to be closer to hospitals and schools for his children. Ted said moving to Yellowknife was a sacrifice for his father. He loved living off the land but he also wanted to provide a good education for his children.

Blondin was almost rejected for work at Giant Mine because its hiring policies discriminated against aboriginal workers. Blondin’s contacts at Port Radium convinced employers to take him on. Work in the mine was only a means to an end. After his children were finished school he moved back to Deline to resume hunting and trapping. While there he was elected chief of the Deline First Nation in 1984. Blondin also served as vice-president of the Dene Nation, and was heavily involved in land claim negotiations. He eventually settled in Behchoko to be closer to his family. Blondin was best known as a storyteller and author. He wrote three books and penned a weekly column for *News/North*. As a columnist he was best known for keeping traditional Dene stories alive. However, he was not afraid to weigh in with his political opinions of the effect of modernization on aboriginal lifestyle. In 1990, he received the Ross Charles award for native journalism and later in 2003 Blondin was inducted as a member of the Order of Canada. As a child, Tlicho Grand Chief George Mackenzie often listened to Blondin speak with his father. Blondin was a friend of the Mackenzie family and frequently stayed at Mackenzie’s childhood home in Behchoko when he was travelling between Deline and Yellowknife by dogsled. “I had a lot of respect for him because he contributed to the society and the culture,” said Mackenzie. After moving to Behchoko, Blondin was eventually registered as a Dogrib beneficiary although he was born near Deline. He always took part in community meetings and often offered advice to Mackenzie throughout his political career. Mackenzie praised Blondin’s storytelling skills. He remembered driving home from Edmonton with Blondin on one occasion. Along the way Blondin told stories from his youth to help pass the time. “He told me a good story that took two hours and in no time I was in Peace River,” said Mackenzie. Blondin’s stories appeared regularly in *News/North*. Managing editor Bruce Valpy knew Blondin and remembered him as a wise spiritual writer. “I think that unlike many writers he will be read for a long time, and people will be interpreting what he wrote,” said Valpy. He described Blondin as a prolific writer who submitted pages and pages of handwritten material. Much of that writing ended up in Blondin’s weekly column. He also succeeded in publishing three books. In 2006, it was thought Blondin had put his pen down for good when – midway through one of his submitted columns – he resigned. At the time Blondin said failing eyesight and deteriorating health was forcing him to stop his weekly submissions. But he couldn’t stay away for long. Earlier this year, his handwritten epics once again began to cross the *News/North* editorial desk, replacing weekly reruns selected from more than a decade worth of material. His final submission appears in this edition of *News/North*. Ted Blondin said there is still a lot of material waiting to be published. There is a fourth book in the works and enough material ready for a fifth. “He always wanted to put things in print because in his earlier life, storytelling was easy in the evenings around the campfire. But nowadays he felt he had to write it down because young people are occupied with television and video games,” said Ted. Blondin was always at a loss to understand the awards he received for his writing according to his son. “He was only doing something he really enjoyed and doing his duty as his grandparents

told him to,” said Ted. Blondin was predeceased by his wife Julia, sons Walter and John, and daughter Georgina. He is survived by six children as well as numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Blondin’s funeral was held in Yellowknife on Oct. 15. He was laid to rest in the NWT capital next to his wife Julia.

- ² In *My Life in the Sahtu* Blondin remembers how newcomers obtained land in the NWT:

About this time [1915] two RCMPs came to the settlement [Fort Norman] and obtained a big piece of land to build their houses on. The transfer of land was not known to the aboriginal people. They never believed in somebody owning any land. The RCMP transferred a large piece of land for themselves. The HBC and the first missionaries all did the same thing. They got land for nothing and received big sections later, which would affect the aboriginal people in the future, but not at this time when everything was just starting. There were all kinds of white people building cabins all over the country. Nobody talked to the Dene. Anyone was really free to do whatever they wanted and nobody bothered anyone about it. (21)

- ³ Déline is located on the shores of Great Bear Lake in the NWT. The site was originally called Fort Franklin, named for Sir John Franklin who used the area as his base for exploration in the 1820s. During that time the Hudson Bay Company re-opened its store to supply Franklin’s expeditions. In the 1920s the settlement grew when pitchblende was discovered at Port Radium and oil at Norman Wells. Great Bear Lake and Great Bear River became important trade routes. In the 1940s-1950s the Roman Catholic Mission, a Federal Day School and a Hudson Bay Company post were built and the community became a semi-permanent settlement for the Dene who lived in the area.

- ⁴ Blondin explains how the Dene were able to equate their own knowledge and powers with Christianity:

The Dene had knowledge to look into the unknown world in the past. So when the early priests came and started to preach about their church, their talk was not new to Dene knowledge. As a result, when the priest talked about the bible it was not new to the Dene. It was a different way of explaining the power of the creator. The Dene believed it was just another way to look into the unknown world. They already had experience in that area so as time went on, the Dene really became religious to the Roman Catholic church. When they heard of individuals who saw holy people and talked about them in their visions, they believed that the power of the creator wanted to communicate through this individual (*My Life* 23).

- ⁵ This is one of the few Dene stories I have found that mentions extraordinary growth. Robert Alexie also makes use of the phenomenon in *Porcupine and China Dolls* when he describes people growing fifty and one hundred feet tall as they gain power through disclosure in a healing ceremony for victims of residential schools.

- ⁶ Blondin notes that the people began to turn to white man’s medicine when the influenza epidemic of the 1920s devastated a large part of the population. “The great flu epidemics of the 1920s helped weaken the ties we had to our spiritual ways. Many of our elders died and we lost great teachers who reminded us of our Dene way of life. Medicine power was snuffed out and it looked as though the white way was the only way” (*Yamoria* 226). The flu epidemic was also responsible for many people’s conversion to Catholicism:

The missionaries were the ones who were busy, converting the Indians. They knew that the Dene were poor, and it was getting worse around 1920, because too much sickness got around now and more people were dying. So the missionaries did more funeral services and preached more about death. It scared the people since they were in a period of changing lifestyle. So the Dene really moved quickly toward the Roman Catholic church. (*My Life* 28)

- ⁷ Cameron Bay was first settled in the late summer of 1932 in response to silver and radium prospecting in the Great Bear Lake area of the NWT. It was probably named for Professor Allan Cameron of the Geological Survey of Canada. Four regional mines opened but only one of them, Eldorado Mine, became a producing

operation. Cameron Bay serviced the mine and its employees for several years. In 1936 the name was changed to Port Radium.

- ⁸ The community of Béchokó takes its name from the Tlicho word meaning Mbehcho's Place. Béchokó, which was formerly called Rae Edzo, after the explorer John Rae and the Dogrib chief, Edzo, is on the northwest tip of Great Slave Lake. It was established as a trading post by the Northwest Trading Company in the early 1700s.
- ⁹ "Ottawa was introducing more and more laws, even though the politicians who made them lived in eastern cities and had no idea of what life was like in Denendeh. The RCMP enforced these laws and this took away even more of our identity and independent spirit" (Blondin, *Yamoria* 226).

Chapter 6. Taking it into the Street

*How the fuck do you describe something like this? Words can't describe shit like this . . . watching your children being led down a long hallway knowing their hair was going to be shaved or cut. It was knowing they were going to be stripped and their clothes burned. It was knowing their brown bodies were going to be scrubbed by white hands. It was knowing white lips were going to mutter "Dirty fuckin' Indians" one or two million times under their breath. (Alexie, *Porcupines* 283)*

Robert Alexie is a member of the Teetl'it Gwich'in Dene of the Northwest Territories. He was born and raised in Fort McPherson and attended residential school in Inuvik. He became the chief of the Teetl'it Gwich'in of Fort McPherson, served two terms as vice president of the Gwich'in Tribal Council, and was instrumental in obtaining a land claim agreement for the Gwich'in of the Northwest Territories. His early life as an adult was not easy because, like many residential school survivors, he had trouble with alcohol, drugs and anti-social behaviour. Recognizing that he was an alcoholic, he began a rehabilitation program where his counsellor read a novel he had written and sent it to a Toronto literary agent. The novel, *Porcupines and China Dolls*, was published in 2002 and republished in 2009. A later work, *The Pale Indian*, was published in 2005. Alexie now lives in Inuvik, NWT where he is working on a third novel.

Porcupines and China Dolls is about the lives of a group of residential school survivors in a small village in the Northwest Territories. There are many accounts of the abuse that occurred in Native residential schools across Canada throughout the 20th century. A series of radio broadcasts, for example, called *Hidden From History: The Canadian Holocaust*, with the sub-title, "The Untold Story of the Genocide of Aboriginal Peoples," documents instances of murder, sterilization, sexual abuse, starvation and disappearance of native children. There are a number of accounts in fiction of the residential school

experiences. *Sammy Goes to Residential School* is a short, children's story that attempts to relate from a child's perspective the humiliations of residential schools, such as the deprivation of language and culture (Lingman). Tomson Highway's *The Kiss of the Fur Queen* explores the residential school experience, not through autobiography, but through a storytelling process that enables him to re-conceptualize his life in terms of native spirituality and traditional narrative, and Joseph Boyden devotes a short section in *Three Day Road* to the mistreatment of Xavier's Aunt Niska in residential school. Niska believes that she can heal the trauma of Xavier's war experience by telling him of her own troubles at residential school.

Native people have known for years about the problems of the schools but there was little they could do about it. White people either refused to accept the stories or were not interested in them, and until recently, the terms "genocide," or even "cultural genocide," were considered too exaggerated and inflammatory to apply to what happened in residential schools. However, in the past year, Canada's role in the abuse of aboriginal children has been widely acknowledged. On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper publicly apologized in the House of Commons to all aboriginal people:

Two primary objectives of the residential schools system were to remove and isolate children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption that aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Indeed, some sought, as it was infamously said, "to kill the Indian in the child." Today, we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country. . . . Therefore, on behalf of

the government of Canada and all Canadians, I stand before you, in this chamber so central to our life as a country, to apologize to aboriginal peoples for Canada's role in the Indian residential schools system. (Harper *Debates*)

More recently, on April 29, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI offered his "sympathy and prayerful solidarity" to a delegation from Canada's Assembly of First Nations over the abuse and "deplorable" treatment that aboriginal students at Roman Catholic residential schools had received (CBC News).

Alexie wrote his novel before either of these apologies was made and before the residential school issue was widely acknowledged. In the Northwest Territories, many people have articulated their school experiences in different ways, such as through Healing Societies, website postings and at Public Forums, but Alexie is the only writer who has described in powerful and heartbreaking detail the current lives of residential school survivors. *Porcupines and China Dolls* is set in the fictional Dene community of Aberdeen in the Northwest Territories and deals with the dysfunctional lives of members of a tribe of Dene that Alexie calls the Blue People, who represent Alexie's own people, the Gwich'in Dene. "In order to understand this story," Alexie says, "it is necessary to know the People and where they came from and what they went through. . . . The Blue People," he explains, "are one of the aboriginal peoples of Canada's western Northwest Territories. They got their name from the fact that they lived in the Blue Mountains to the west of the Mackenzie River" (5). Alexie outlines the history of the Blue People and the Gwich'in Dene from a time before white men arrived in the NWT:

The people did not have an easy life. Theirs was a daily struggle for survival, and starvation was always the enemy. In the summer they fished along the rivers, then

moved into the hills to harvest caribou in the fall. Theirs was a nomadic existence; they moved from one camp to the next, from the mountains to the rivers, from where game was scarce to where it was plentiful. (6)

The Dene (and the Blue People) lived, undisturbed and self-sufficient, hunting and fishing in their land for thousands of years until 1789 when the first European explorers arrived, followed in 1840 by fur traders, and then the missionaries in 1850. The fur traders introduced a barter system of European goods for furs, and the missionaries practiced their Christian duty to “civilize” the People, baptizing them, giving them Christian names and taking away their drums, their stories and their funeral practices. In 1903, the North West Mounted Police arrived to enforce the White man’s laws and finally in 1921, the “Treaty Party” came from the Canadian government to sign treaties with the indigenous people giving them certain rights in exchange for their lands. Among the many conditions of the various treaties, the most important for the story Alexie tells is the clause that stated: “His Majesty will pay the salaries of teachers to instruct the children of the ‘said Indians’ in a manner deemed advisable by His Majesty’s government” (*Porcupines* 7). The manner “deemed advisable” was that the church would be given sole responsibility to educate the Indian children in whatever manner it saw fit. The result of this decree was that every Indian child was required to attend a residential school from the time they were six or seven years old until they were sixteen. The legacy of the residential schools was the loss of Dene culture and a Dene way of life that had traumatic and long lasting consequences for future generations.

Porcupines and China Dolls is a novel with fictional characters but it is based on the reality of the impact of the residential school experience from the perspective of a group of

dysfunctional Dene who attended the schools. Alexie takes the residential school debate out of formal courthouses and theoretical discussion into the streets of Aberdeen where he frames a kind of Bakhtinian spectacle of the underside of life in a Dene community, and a loud and angry denunciation of the forces that devastated his people. He disrupts the European “facts” of history and colonial necessity, and exposes the ugly and painful side of residential school abuse and colonial oppression. By revealing the Dene story of the residential schools Alexie is engaged in the reconstruction of NWT history.

The novel focuses on the lives of James, Jake and Louise, who attended residential school as children in the 1960s. Part One, “The Dream World,” is dedicated to a description of the Blue People’s history, and the children’s experiences at school. It ends with the “Tick! Tock! Tick! Tock!” of the hall clock that regulates their lives and is a metaphor for the loss of a seasonal, nomadic life that has been replaced by one governed by discipline and mechanical time:

Something else happened today. Today they will start counting the weeks until Christmas. After Christmas, they will start counting the weeks, then the days, until Easter. After Easter, they will start the countdown until summer. Time has become important. (29)

The next sound, echoing the clock, at the beginning of Part Two, “The Awakening,” is the “Click! Click! Click! Click!” of James’ boots on a road as he heads for the local “Indian bar.” The year is now 1999 and, although time has moved on, it is evident that James and his friends have not. They are mired in a life of booze, drugs and meaningless sex that is carried out in The Saloon:

The Saloon would never make the list of the ten best places to be. It was an Indian bar. People came here to drink, to look for possibilities and to bitch, whine or cry in their drinks – in that order. They also came to beg, borrow, whine, cry or demand a beer, smoke or the means from anyone and everyone. But that was normal. It was a fucking Indian bar. (35).

Part Two depicts what has come to be seen as “normal” life in Aberdeen. The Saloon is the social centre for many of the citizens of Aberdeen including James, who is the main character. Other patrons include Jake, James’ best friend and fellow residential school survivor; Louise, James’ first girl friend, now a “forty-million-year old woman with a soon-to-be ex-husband and a child to raise” (43); Karen, the sexy bartender, whom James fantasizes about; Brenda, who falls in love with James and believes that he loves her too. Other characters in the novel range from the down and outs such as Mutt and Jeff, “the town drunks, bums and lepers all rolled into one” (36), and Larry and Daryl, deserted by their mother as children and “reminded by other children that they were raised on bootlegs and the misery of others” (78). Their father, Sam, whom Larry and Daryl later kill, is the local bootlegger despised by all. There are also a number of hardworking and respectable people in the town such as Chief David William, who cares deeply about his people and wakes up every morning wondering “*what sort ’a shit my People created for me last night*” (86). There is also Mary, Jake’s fiancée; Bertha, who listens to and counsels the townspeople; Old Pierre and his wife, Dora, who remember the old traditions and try to keep them alive, and Martin Lazarus who was “an elder in the true sense of the word and a leader” (89). These people and others make up the small community of Aberdeen. They are all descendents of the Blue People and all have memories, however faint, of a better time and a better life.

There are only two white people in the novel; RCMP Sergeant Herbert Johnson is highly respected in the community, but also disillusioned. He had thought that his first posting “North of Sixty” would be the best time of his career. “He thought he’d come to a land where the People still lived off the land and the troubles of the outside world were far and away. They weren’t. The troubles were here long before he arrived” (87). The other white person is Tom Kinney, the teacher at the residential school who raped James and Jake and at least a dozen other children. Although Kinney, as the representative of every white missionary, priest and minister who ever abused native children, is the catalyst for this narrative of healing, his appearance in the novel is brief and he himself, when finally seen in the courtroom, is a pathetic and inconsequential old man:

The fucker was a million years old. He wasn’t big and fat, he was short and skinny and his beard was gone. His hair was white and sparse. They watched the old man slowly walk into the courtroom handcuffed and wearing a bullet proof vest. . . . He turned to face the bench, then sat and disappeared into the chair.

(265)

By this point in the novel, James, Jake and Chief David have performed a disclosure at a healing ceremony in front of the entire town, the drums have been returned from where they have been hidden for years, the people have sung their songs of the past and it would seem as if the horrors of the past, represented by the now insignificant Kinney, are over. If this were a conventional novel, Alexie would quickly tidy up the loose ends in a denouement and close the book. However, there is still Part Three, “The Real World” that seems hopeful at first but it soon becomes apparent that it will take more than one healing ceremony to change years of colonial injustice.

This is the bare outline of the story, but beneath the “facts” of this narrative is another story. After the disclosure ceremony people ask, “What really happened at the community hall in Aberdeen that day?” and the answer is, “it was all very simple: three men disclosed” (197). But as I have tried to show in my analysis of Blondin’s stories, the facts of a story are not that simple and “what really happened” is less important than what the story reveals about social processes and cultural memory. In my evaluation of *Porcupines and China Dolls* I attempt to show how, in the writing of a healing journey, Alexie assumes the role of a story teller who navigates through shifting perceptions of events and practices to perform a ceremony of belief about home, cultural unity, ancestors, land, happiness and the security of connectedness. All these ways of knowing were lost when children were confined in residential schools and their parents separated from their land and the result, as seen in the town of Aberdeen, is a community of dysfunctional, directionless adults lost in a world of alcohol and meaningless relationships. As so many residential school survivors have stated, they never learned how to love and how to care.

We have seen how Blondin rearticulates cultural values and identity by gathering traditional stories and writing them down so that they will be available to modern young Dene. Alexie is also involved in a process of memorialism, but his approach is to remember and reveal the truth of what happened in residential schools and to drive out those demons so that memories of the old ways can be recovered. Alexie’s narrative discredits the colonial practice of assimilation through education and tells an alternative story that explores the underside of the residential school experience. But unlike formal reports, commissions, and literature that seek closure for residential school victims, Alexie’s novel is about *disclosure*. It is about opening up old wounds and offending sensibilities. It is about screaming and

crying, and breaking the silence surrounding residential schools, and it refuses to conform in content or structure to conventional ideology or narrative form. Instead, the novel employs traditional oral story techniques as the narrative weaves back and forth through time and space recapturing and revitalizing the Dene story through strategies of multi-vocality, repetition, hyperbole, dream sequences, circular and tortuous structure, offensive language and suspension of realism. It has the power of informal story-telling to subvert official orthodoxies and to challenge conventional wisdom about indigenous peoples and their treatment under a colonial regime.

Like Blondin's narrative, Alexie's work also uses many of the conventions of testimonial and trauma narrative. Trauma narratives are often testimonials that seek to end the silence surrounding previous unspeakable acts that have been committed against marginalized people. Testimony is polyphonic and, as John Beverley points out, it involves a sort of "erasure of the function, and thus also of the textual presence, of the author" (35). The author is replaced by the function of a "compiler or activator" who is a representative of the social group. In this way *testimonio* closely resembles traditional indigenous storytelling, which may relate the experience of a single individual, but is meant to represent situations and possibilities for all members of the group. Alexie's narrative is not just about his protagonist, James Nathan, but about James' story within his community, and the stories of other members of his community. Beverley notes that *testimonio* is similar to the picaresque novel but different in that it is not the life of the hero, "it is the problematic collective social situation in which the narrative lives" (33).

Although Alexie's narrative does not follow all the conventions of a picaresque novel, it is predicated, as many indigenous stories are, on a journey and travel. The journey

undertaken by James is the story of his metaphorical travels from a dark and tortured present to a future that locates itself in his people's past. It is a journey to reclaim a lost identity and, as James says, it is also a journey of healing. "Healin' is a journey – there is no end" (203). However, it is not only James' journey. The multiple voices of the narrative speak for all Dene who experienced the devastation and pain of colonial practices in the NWT and who are engaged in a struggle for cultural and social restitution. The stories performed by various characters throughout the narrative are parochial, and individually seem ugly, fractured and inconsequential, but together they form a larger common perspective on all indigenous peoples who were victims of residential schools, government interference in ancient cultural traditions and the imposition of western ideologies. Their healing journeys start with memories that provide missing perspectives on the past.

The narrative begins with James standing beside a highway in the Blue Mountains, wearing a black leather jacket that "glistened like blood-soaked armour from another time," and looking like "Death ready to go on a rampage." He looks to the sky and asks the question, "Why?" and he realizes, "he'd always been alone. He'd always be alone." Then he takes his gun from his truck, puts the barrel in his mouth, pulls the trigger and hears the sound of metal on metal as the gun fails to fire. "He waited for his ultimate journey to Hell" (1-2). The first journey to Hell began in 1962, when James remembers how he and his friend Jake, both six years old, were taken from their home in the Blue Mountains to a residential school hostel where their clothes were removed, their bodies scrubbed clean and their hair cut short so that they resembled porcupines. The girls suffered the same treatment, but their bowl haircuts made them look like china dolls. Boys could not recognize their sisters, and girls did not know their brothers because they all looked alike, dressed in the same clothes

with similar hair cuts. James' memories of the hostel are interspersed through the narrative as dreams in which he is confronted by a small boy with vacant eyes, dressed in pyjamas, in a shower room. Each time he awakens just as he feels a fat, hairy hand on his shoulder. The memories elude him until he encounters, in person, the school administrator who abused him thirty years before and then, "the memories return as though it were a fucking rerun."

The memories were still there. . . . He saw the same man thirty years ago. He could feel his hairy arms and hairy hands. He could smell the foul stench of his body and breath. He could smell his cock. He could feel his cock in his hands. He could feel his cock in his mouth. He could feel the pain as Tom Kinney forced his cock into him. He wanted to cry. (268)

This type of discourse, prevalent in Alexie's narrative, is unpleasant and some readers might well ask why Alexie's writing has to be so offensive. However, the reader's discomfort cannot begin to approach the pain of the young boy who suffered the abuse, and the power of this writing is its ability to articulate pain and suffering through touch, feel and smell, and to write back with an aggression that matches that of the people who inflicted it. Dreams like this one that appear to James throughout the narrative are the half-forgotten experiences of his life at school. Like the residential school story, they have been suppressed, but are volatile beneath the surface. The ugliness of this chapter in Canadian history is expressed through the language and descriptions that James uses to remember his experience.

Trauma narratives that deal with the pain of bodily violation and sexual abuse frequently have a disturbing visceral quality that may offend aesthetic sensibilities, but I argue that offensive language and graphic description are necessary to emphasize the damage caused by European interference in Dene culture. Sodomy and sexual exploitation,

as well as being brutalizing acts in themselves, are metaphors for the cultural oppression inflicted on indigenous people by the colonizers. It is well documented that adult depression, lack of self-esteem, social and economic failure, anxiety, and substance and alcohol abuse, all of which are present in Alexie's narrative, have been linked to child sexual abuse (Mullen and Fleming 9). Alexie presents characters who have not only been subject to extreme abuse of their bodies but have been uprooted from their culture, their memories, their land and everything that gave meaning to their lives. Some, such as Michael, James' friend, have already given up through suicide, and others are either drinking themselves to death or killing their families and friends.

Since their days in school, James and his friends have spent their lives "concentrating on booze, broads an' nothin' else." Their "thirty years of hell" (*Porcupines* 206) have been acted out against a backdrop of third world houses, the Saloon and the street. In contrast to the ordered discipline of residential schools, life in Aberdeen is performed in the atmosphere of an ongoing carnival. In the Saloon we are introduced to some of the most miserable and desperate characters, and the blackest humour in Canadian literature. The bar, and indeed life in Aberdeen, is a "spectacle" in the Bakhtinian sense of a public celebration of life. The community of Aberdeen celebrates life in the open and on display in an ongoing revelry in which the people seem, ironically, to have reverted to a modern state of degeneracy and abjectness that to the colonizers would be as unacceptable as the original so-called degenerate state they sought to remedy. The citizens of Aberdeen are drunk, they are shooting each other, they are having sex with each other and they are abusing each other. There is a sense of an on-going, out-of-control carnival that Chief David contemplates every morning: "He dreaded waking up to more assaults, break and enters, child neglect, child

abuse, sexual abuse, spousal abuse, Elder abuse and more abuse than he cared to think about” (86). While nobody is particularly happy at this continuous party, the exuberance and intensity of life lived contrasts sharply with the surveillance and discipline imposed by colonizing institutions such as residential schools. In describing the ribald, visceral life on the streets and in the bar, Alexie challenges the Eurocentric monologue of structure, enclosure and discipline and constructs a multi-voiced dialogue of community that offers a counter-narrative or supplementary story to the rigidity of residential schools, the one-sided seriousness of colonial endeavour and the “bureaucratic erasure” that the Dene endured.

To give a voice to the dysfunctional characters who are the result of various kinds of abuse, Alexie employs a strategy reminiscent of Bakhtin’s “parodic-travesty forms” (52). Parodic-travesty literature, according to Bakhtin, exists in relation to all straightforward genres. “Any and every direct discourse – epic, tragic, lyric, philosophical – may and indeed must itself become the object of representation, the object of a parodic travesty of ‘mimicry’” (55). The purpose of mimicry is to allow the listener or reader to experience those sides of the discourse that are not otherwise included in the official story, and to reveal and undermine the deficiencies and sometimes foolishness of hegemonic discourse. One way parodic-travesty mimicry achieves this is through what Bakhtin describes as the “permanent corrective of laughter, of a critique on the one-sided seriousness of the lofty direct word” (55). Laughter breaks through the “grim atmosphere of seriousness” and challenges sanctioned decorum and protocol. Laughter breaks up misery and eases pain, and in extreme adversity can facilitate survival. The Dene have long been known for their propensity for ridicule and laughter even in the face of desperation. Samuel Hearne, who travelled with them in the 1700s, notes that even after three or four days without food the

Dene men would remain “merry and jocose . . . and would ask each other in the plainest terms, and in the merriest mood, if they had any inclination for an intrigue with a strange woman” (McGoogan 130). Although this is a European perception of the “Native personality,” the stereotype is well founded and freely acknowledged by indigenous people themselves. As native writer Gregory Scofield explains:

For Native people, humour has always been an important part of our culture, a way to see our own idiosyncrasies and the foolishness of others. It is inherent in our stories and legends, entwined in the very fabric of our lives and traditions. The old people love to tease and laugh, poking fun at one another in a serious world. (67)

Indigenous writer Elsie Kipp also writes, “Of all the stereotypes surrounding Aboriginal people, I’ve never minded the one about our wicked sense of humour” (1), and native writer, Thomas King, of course, is well known for his parodies of native people. Alexie’s ability to inject humour into the dysfunctional lives of his characters reflects his belief that they can survive and even, occasionally, triumph in the most adverse conditions, thereby challenging the rigid regime that sought to suppress them.

One method of invoking humour is through irreverent, and what, at first, seems to be unnecessarily crude language. Alexie’s profanity and his use of scatological and sexual expletives are characteristic of humour in what Bakhtin calls the “unofficial side of speech” or the “underside of language . . . a rich store of curses both simple and complex, with its various indecencies . . . [and] words concerning drunkenness and defecation and so forth” (238). Such speech, which is characterized by laughter and humour, never takes on an official character and is never “sublimated” to religious, mystical or philosophical interests. “Laughter,” as Bakhtin points out, was “never infected, even slightly, by the ‘red tape’ of

moribund officialdom. . . . Laughter remained outside official falsifications. . . . Laughter alone remained uninfected by lies” (236). Bakhtin shows that “irony, parody, humor, the joke, various types of the comic and so forth” are all strategies for expressing laughter in the word and all contribute to “that special force and capability to strip, as it were, the object of the false verbal and ideological husk that encloses it” (237).

Parody and laughter are characteristic of Alexie’s prose and he uses them effectively to undermine the official discourse of colonial administration. Although Alexie’s story is primarily an exposure of residential schools, he also destabilizes the entire foundation of imperial, capitalistic values and shows what Bakhtin calls a “different and contradictory reality” that undermines the colonial legacy. The reality of modern life in Aberdeen makes a mockery of the lofty, official words of administrators such as Duncan Campbell Scott who regarded themselves as paternalistic protectors of indigenous people and proclaimed education and assimilation as their “ultimate destiny” (Titley 116). Scott genuinely believed that there was no future for “Indians” except for assimilation into Canadian culture. He imagined a process of “social engineering” that would achieve a total cultural transformation and the creation of Indians who were no longer Indians but white people in all but appearance (Titley 35).

To achieve these ends Native children in residential schools were taught to imitate the white culture and by doing so it was believed that they would lose their Indianness and become white. But through his parodic-travesty style, Alexie creates characters in Aberdeen who have succeeded in imitating white culture but are, in reality, pathetic imitations of idealized western figures. Lisa, the “sex goddess,” for example, is the persona of a drunken, promiscuous Indian woman but when she visits Larry, hoping for a party, she

becomes a sordid parody of a Hollywood idol when she imagines herself as Nicole Kidman.

The scene is one of wretched, loveless debauchery:

Larry took his cup and gave it to Lisa, who drank it without stopping. She wiped

her mouth on her sleeve and smiled,

Hi Tom [Cruise]. I'm Nicole.

Hi, Nicole, wanna fuck?

Sure, why not? Got nothin' else to do.

Your enthusiasm is admirable (84)

When Lisa and other characters pretend to “shapeshift” into Hollywood “heroes” of the dominant culture they are performing a grotesque travesty of western culture. In this passage, the contrast between two types of dialogue, the careless, truncated Native speech (“wanna fuck. . . . Got nothin’ else to do), and the more formal, “Your enthusiasm is admirable” strengthens the parody. Obviously, there is nothing admirable about the behaviour, but Lisa can be interpreted as enthusiastically mimicking white culture, which is what her residential school training required. Through his depiction of characters like Lisa, whose lives consist of excessive drinking and indiscriminate sex, Alexie exposes the worst aspects of the colonial project by showing the broken and pathetic products of its work and their grotesque attempts at mimicry. Alexie is writing a double parody here. First he represents Lisa in a way that parodies characteristic portrayals of degenerate natives, and then allows her to perform her own parody of Hollywood and cultural hero, Nicole Kidman.

The characters represented in these parodic depictions appear to be, from a non-native point of view, stereotypical Indians such as might be found in the “downtown Eastsides” of urban centres, or bars such as the famous “Strange Range”¹ in Yellowknife. The Aberdeen

saloon that Alexie describes abounds with such types. Characters like Lisa, and Angie, the town slut, are “normal” there and it is easy to accept the normalcy of drunken, degenerate Indians if there were not another story available. But Alexie’s rage and anger refuse to accept this kind of normal and he takes us into painful, humourous realism through his use of parody and crude, explicit dialogue, and then he reverses the gaze so that the degenerate “other” tells his own story. The blending of the two stories creates a different reality that opens up possibilities for a new interpretation of degenerate Indians.

James, who spends most of his time in the bar drinking and dreaming of women, engages in an inner monologue with Karen the bartender, in which he is both the participant and the observer:

Karen had on an old sweatshirt and a pair of loose-fitting jeans that didn’t hide her small compact body. She still looked good enough to eat. “What you like?” she asked and smiled. *Know what I’d like? Like you to stick your head between my legs, take a deep breath ’n go for it.*

I’d like to rip your pants off ’n eat you. “Two Blue,” he said.

She took two beers from the cooler while he watched her ass.

Wonder what it be like to hold ’em while I jammed.

She took the ten he left and watched him walk across the floor.

Wonder what it would be like to wrap my legs ’round him while he jammed. (52)

With this sexually explicit material Alexie parodies the stereotypical native and ridicules the life of the “normal Indian bar.” James *is* the stereotype but he is well aware of it. As he observes himself observing Karen he knows that he is drinking his life away, that he is sexually irresponsible, that he cannot make commitments, and that he somehow needs to

change, but the difference between the white perception of the dissolute native who needs improving and Alexie's text is that the gaze has shifted so that the marginalized and degenerate subject has stepped back from his actions and is viewing himself in a mocking parody of what is expected of him. By being aware of his situation and telling it like it is, James/Alexie is untelling it. The perspective has changed from that of the white observer to that of the abused and marginalized Other. From this vantage point, the victim or Other, by using language and humour that are outside official and serious speech, can take control of the narrative, deliberately disrupting Eurocentric concepts of necessity and decorum. Sherrill Grace, discussing Tomson Highway's methods of "writing back" in the *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, writes: "To put this in the form of one of the governing metaphors of the text, Highway buggers English and the great English form of the novel" (*Canada* 258). This observation is equally appropriate for Alexie's text which has the same governing metaphor, and "buggers" not only English and the novel, but Euro-Canadian sensibilities and expectations with crude, dialogue and the sexually explicit inner monologues of the victims.

This language and behaviour serves as a way of turning the gaze from the white perception of indigenous peoples to a parodic representation of their own perception of themselves. By depicting James as a drunken, crude Indian in a native bar, Alexie reinforces stereotypes of Indians, but at the same time rejects them. Like Tomson Highway, Alexie is "writing back to the dominant discourse of north" (255), but his strategy is to turn his Indians inside out through their interior monologues and open a critical space for observing their self-evaluation. Alexie makes visible what white Canadians might prefer to keep invisible and he makes the visibility embody exactly what we thought we knew was there but did not want to see. The popular conception of Indians in the past was that they were genetically disposed to

brutal, savage behaviour, and scarcely human in their depravity. As Battiste and Henderson observe: "Indigenous people . . . were called less than human. Savages, slaves, commodities, half-castes, and half-breeds are just some of the names that have been used to describe them" (13). And in some Canadian literature, such as Duncan Campbell Scott's short stories and poetry, Indians were invariably depicted as savage, dangerous and pagan.² Representations like these and tales like Samuel Hearne's description of the murder of Inuit by Indians at Bloody Falls (see Chapter 1, note 1) create "textual attitudes" (Said *Orientalism* 93) that are long-lived in the Canadian imagination.

These images have been hard to dislodge, even in recent times, and for many people some variation of them is still the "Indian" they expect to see. And when indigenous people do appear in modern fiction exactly as we feared they would be; loud, aggressive, obnoxious, drunk and dangerous like James and his friends, we are shocked into a realization that the truth is real and perhaps even uglier than expected. But what *did* you expect? asks Alexie. As he suggests frequently, the aggressive, obnoxious behaviour is *normal*, the Indian bar is *normal*, and the third world houses are also *normal*, as are the drunkenness, the sexual promiscuity and the violent deaths. Alexie's novel is an "in your face" confirmation of the Indian project gone wrong. He maps out a complex terrain of confusing images, dialogue and descriptions that have the unsettling effect of confirming what we thought we knew, but have tried to forget, coupled with the realization that the concept of indigenous normalcy is the result of years of western interference and improvement.

Normal life in Aberdeen is represented through a montage of small stories that perform the work of unfolding ways of knowing that interrupt both the historical truth of colonization and also the more recent constructions of small town Indian life. The purpose of

these mini-stories is to intervene in the main narrative to unfold other possibilities and to invite a reading of the stories within the story. Stories of modern life in Aberdeen provide the framework for the novel, but underlying them are intratextual stories that suggest oral story telling. They are told through interior monologues, dream sequences, historical reminiscences and the “thoughts” of an old wolf that appears like a Greek chorus at intervals throughout the text. Stories such as Mutt and Jeff’s hit and run death by Daryl and Larry, Larry shooting his father Sam, James’ suicide attempts and other vignettes of community life are a realistic picture of the sad and sordid life in Aberdeen, but each episode prompts the memory of a past experience and offers a different perspective.

Mutt and Jeff, for example, are depicted through much of the narrative as worthless and degenerate layabouts, “cartoon characters” as James calls them. On the night they are killed they have left the Saloon and are looking for a party:

It was three-thirty and Mutt and Jeff had finished one bottle and were out of beer and common sense. They were normal.

“Wanna look for party,” Jeff slurred.

“Sure,” Mutt slurred back. *I need a smoke.*

Jeff put the bottle in the sleeve of his jacket and stumbled into the darkness to look for a party with smokes. . . . In their drunken stupor they decided to go to Fred’s which was less than a mile from town out on the highway. (77-79)

As they stagger down the highway they are run over by Larry and Daryl who are also drunk and speeding along in a truck stolen from their father, also looking for a party.

Mutt and Jeff could be just two drunk Indians that no one cares about, walking down a highway killed by two more drunk Indians but when Chief David remembers them after

their deaths, he does not see them as worthless alcoholics. Instead, he recalls "*Mutt 'n Jeff who worked for the band a few weeks ago. The same Mutt 'n Jeff who cut wood for me last winter . . . who sold me fish a few days ago . . . who didn't hesitate to go huntin' for the community when I asked them*" (102). He remembers Mutt and Jeff as competent, community-minded young men, capable of living on the land, looking after themselves and sharing with others. Through Chief David's memories, Alexie reveals other interpretations of the figure of the "degenerate native," interpretations that can only be seen from within the community and that are inscribed in the "I remember" tradition of oral story telling. Alexie returns the gaze through memory and story, and inverts the colonial image to restore dignity to his people.

Memory also comes alive through dream sequences that haunt certain characters. James, for example, is tormented by dreams that recur throughout the narrative when he is most conscious of being alone, and suicide, an all too common act for young native men, seems his only choice:

He reached under the sofa and pulled out the gun case his mom had made in another time and another place. He smelled it and the memories returned. *Tanned moose skin! Mom! Dad! The Redstone! Home.* He didn't fight the tears this time. *Mission schools! Residential schools! Hostels! Hellholes! Shitholes!* He closed his eyes and hung his head. *Dark rooms! Hairy hands! False promises! Little boys! Shower rooms.* Once again he dropped to his knees. *The pain! The foul stench of his breath! His hairy hands!* The scream that came had been bottled up for a thousand years and then some. *Why?* (133)

James cries and screams for his lost innocence but he is powerless and no one hears:

He is now sobbing. *Why?* The scream that followed came from the depths of his being and echoed off the shower-room walls. It was a silent scream, but if it were given a voice, it would've sounded like a million porcupines crying in the dark.

(135)

The juxtaposition of memories represented in italics and the narrator's comments in the present combine to offer a perspective on what would otherwise be unacceptable behaviour. James appears to be a sad and drunk Indian contemplating suicide, but the memories in italics offer a different story of a tortured childhood and the loss of family. James' memories and Alexie's description of them provide an alternate story to the colonizers' perceptions of what was good and necessary for the assimilation of native people.

In another scene, Angie, the drunken and promiscuous bar girl, with smeared mascara and pants around her ankles, is drinking spilt beer from the floor at the same time as she remembers being raped as a teenager. Alexie layers memory over description: "The tears came and they were filled with a million emotions she'd kept hidden for thirty-five years and then some. *Fuckin' assholes! 'I was only fifteen. I was a virgin'*" (79). Alexie then provides a further, unknown narrative voice that speaks for the victim: "Angie had been raped as a teenager. The two men . . . took her virginity, her dignity and her future. . . . No one heard the little china doll that night, but if she were given a voice it would've sounded like a million porcupines screaming in the dark" (79-80). Like all of Alexie's characters who find themselves assaulted by memories and nightmares, Angie is given a voice by the narrator or story teller who blends the narratives of the present and the past to tell another story of abuse. Alexie strips his characters to their ugliest essentials and provides first, the "underside of language" ("*Fuckin' assholes!*") to dislodge "false verbal and ideological shells" (Bakhtin

237), and then, the voice of the unnamed narrator that invokes oral tradition by introducing new layers into the story that swirl around the text like heteroglossia disrupting the narrative and preventing closure of the scene of Angie as a just another drunk Indian girl. The reader is encouraged to move beyond the textual representation of a “normal” Indian Friday night into a tortured dream world of young boys and “china dolls,” where a “million porcupines” scream in the dark to tell a story that would otherwise never be heard. The million porcupines that appear at various times in the narrative are the voices of the residential school children. A screaming porcupine sounds very like a child in distress and is a vivid symbol of the suffering of the Dene under a colonial regime.

Most of Part 2 depicts scenes of James and his friends drinking, passing out, partying, and waking up hungover to repeat the cycle. In between these episodes James starts a relationship with an old friend, Brenda, and talks about selling his house and starting over in Yellowknife. One day he drives to the mountains with Jake to look for caribou and realizes that they are parodies of Indians and it is time to make a change. The trip into the mountains signifies James’ and Jake’s desire to re-connect with the land and their heritage. It is also the turning point in the novel and in their lives as they alternate between being Hollywood Indians and real Indians. After walking five miles in their cowboy boots, coughing and wheezing from smoking, James asks, “You ready?”

“Yeah,” Jake stretched. “I think I’m gonna survive. Today is not a good day to die.”

“What’re you some sort ’a Injun outta *Dances*?”

“No, heard a Klingon say ’at in a movie once.”

“Injuns in space. What next?”

Jake . . . took out his binoculars and came face to face with the old wolf.

“Speakin’ ’a wolves. There’s one out there.”

“Yeah, where?”

“Look like he’s alone. Scraggly lookin’, Jake said, “Wanna shoot him?”

“What for?”

“We’re hunters. We shoot critters.” (124)

The wolf has appeared intermittently as a symbol of a still wild and still vital life on the land. But throughout the narrative it also comes to symbolize Dene culture as it grows weaker and tired as it fails to find the caribou and feed itself. James’ decision to leave fish for the wolf rather than shoot it signifies his desire to change from being a parodic Hollywood Indian to an Indian who is still in touch with the land and an older, harmonious way of life.

James looked at the wolf. It was skinny and its fur wasn’t in the best of shape and it was the fall. *Old*. He took the two fish and laid them on the side of the road.

Mutt ’n Jeff’s fish. (124)

With this act of kindness, James, Jake and even Mutt and Jeff, who had been depicted as the community wastrels, are re-united with the wildlife and the land. As Blondin might say, they are feeding the land and thanking their benefactors. When they return to town they find Chief David and Bertha, a community healer, sitting around the fire outside, cooking, eating and talking. They are talking about Mutt and Jeff and “what good men they were and wondered why these things happened” (127). At the same time, Bertha tells Chief David that Jake has told her that he was sexually abused by Tom Kinney. Chief David admits that he too was abused and that he finally has the courage to tell his

story. Soon others come forward and this puts into motion the decision to hold a healing ceremony and involve the entire community in breaking three decades of painful silence.

If there is a traditional narrative climax in *Porcupines and China Dolls* it occurs during the healing ceremony that takes place at the community hall. For his description of the healing ceremony, which is surely one of the saddest, funniest and most powerful scenes in native literature, Alexie marshals an arsenal of oral narration, hyperbole, personification, repetition, parody, black humour and suspension of realism to enhance the stories of painful remembrance. The disclosure ceremony is described with impossible hyperbole and comic absurdity, but given a subject that is far from amusing, these scenes disrupt normal decorum and officialdom as the victims of colonialism participate in a carnival-like performance of public display, ritual, demon slaying and recovery of voices and power.

The ceremony begins when Chief David puts on his moose-hide slippers and picks up an old talking stick that had not been used for many years: "*Gone like so many of our traditions an' customs*" (183), and prepares to disclose to his people:

He looked at his wife and children and made up his mind. *It's time*. He stood and grew ten feet tall. . . . Then he said it. "Thirty years ago I was sexually abused in the hostel." One hundred people did a double take. They looked around to see if others had heard. *What 'a hell did he say?* The sound of so many empty heads reverberating in the community hall woke a million, trillion, gazillion demons, dreams and nightmares from their slumber. They poked their ugly little heads out of the ceiling, walls and floor to see what the fuck was going on. They wondered who the hell had woken them up so early in the day. (184)

The healing ceremony is about waking up after the nightmares of abuse, and the first to wake up at the ceremony are the personified demons and nightmares who are surprised that they have been disturbed. But it takes more to waken the people who would rather be at a bingo or a poker game; it takes the plain language of the sexual acts that took place to get their attention. Chief David says,

“Thirty years ago Tom Kinney sexually abused me. I was thirteen years old.”

“Shit!” someone whispered.

“Thirty years ago Tom Kinney forced me to perform oral sex on him.”

“Holy shit!” someone else said a little louder.

Thirty years ago Tom Kinney sodomized me.”

“Holy fuckin’ shit!” everyone yells. (184)

The rising crescendo of accusations and responses illustrates the desperation of native people, over the years, to make their case heard. We might wonder why so much of Alexie’s narrative has to be so crude and sexually explicit, but it is obvious that more polite and acceptable language has not been loud enough for the story of residential school abuse to be known. We often close our ears to narratives of pain and abuse. We cannot bear the stories so we ignore them or quietly whisper, “Shit,” until the accusations get louder and the details become more sordid and only then do we yell, “Holy fuckin’ shit!” Canadians have shut out the details of residential schools and if attention has been paid it has been in the context of Eurocentric cultural agencies that work in what Diana Brydon calls the “privileged space” (62) that colonialism has constructed. Until the very recent Prime Minister’s apology, there had been little public acknowledgement of the residential school issue and no acceptance of guilt. In dealing with post-colonial issues generally, Brydon argues that Canada needs to be

“reconceptualized as a contact zone” in order to properly address the full implications of the colonial invasion (62). With his description of disclosure and the demon war that follows, Alexie creates a full-body contact zone in which the demons, that represent all the horrors of colonization, are forced out of hiding, physically beaten up and dispatched.

James and Jake join Chief David to help him take on the demons while the people “pulled out their cell phones and called their friends, family and acquaintances and told them to haul ass to the community hall cause shit was gonna fly. *Oh an’ pardon ’a French*” (186). Cell phones appearing in the midst of the mayhem of disclosure and demon wars add a sense of normal, modern life to the setting. Indications in the narrative suggest that Aberdeen might be a somewhat backward, northern, Indian village in which people live in primitive conditions; the sort of place that could easily be ignored. There are a number of references to familiar northern scenes such as cooking on outdoor firepits, hauling water in plastic containers, chopping wood for wood stoves, and living in third world houses, but the cell phones make it clear that even though the residents of Aberdeen are not far from their traditional life, they are very much part of the Canadian present and fully deserving of recognition and respect. The modern cell phones also contrast nicely with the mythical and surreal scenes that follow indicating that giant warriors and epic battles are not as far away as one might think.

In the tradition of warriors of old, James stakes himself to the floor with a caribou-skin rope and challenges the demons that have haunted his life:

James Nathan kneeled for a few seconds like he was praying to his Creator, then he slowly stood and grew to one hundred feet tall. He had a scowl on his face and his eyes were blood red. He picked up the meanest-looking war club ever seen

and slowly looked at the ceiling and in a loud, thundering voice called out to his demons, dreams and nightmares: “Come on out, you motherfuckers!”

James Nathan’s voice was like the north wind just before it blew you off your arse: cold, hard, mean and loud. He stood there like Conan the fucking Barbarian and screamed something terrible for his demons to come forth and show themselves. “I’m here, you little rubber boot wearin’ chickenshits! I ain’t goin’ nowhere!” (190)

No longer alone, and with the support of his family and his community, James gains the power to challenge every act of violence and indignity that has ever been inflicted on him. He grows “one hundred and twenty-five fucking feet tall,” and as his head breaks through the roof, the demons appear. Tales of phenomenal height, overgrown, semi-human monsters and people whose heads break through the sky are told in Dene legends from a long ago, mythical time (Blondin, *Yamoria* 47, 159-69) and James’ exaggerated growth and his terrifying appearance suggest that, in order to confront his demons, he must return to the world of his ancestors and their ancient tales. The balance of power shifts toward James when he becomes a terrifying hundred-foot tall warrior. The demons, in contrast, are still ferocious but reduced, as they appear in childish rubber boots that diminish their appearance and add to the absurd humour of this serious moment:

Demons, dreams and nightmares started oozing from the walls, ceiling and floor. They were ugly, mean and pissed. They were humongous. They smelled something terrible. They smelled of hopelessness, despair and death. There must have been a bazillion of them. All shapes, sizes and colours. They were the meanest motherfuckers this side of hell. They were hell’s rejects. (191)

With the help of others in the community hall, James, Jake and Chief David start banishing demons, colonial nightmares and residential school dreams:

They slayed demons and nightmares, left, right, centre and in between. . . . They picked up big fucking scary dreams and hurled them back from whence they came. They watched as the dreams scurried off with their tails between their legs. Demons, dreams and nightmares looked around and saw others fucking off out of there, then whipped their tails between their three hind legs and fucked off faster than a bootlegger can count money on a cold night in December. *We're not sticking 'round here. Fuck 'is shit!* (193)

Rubber-boot wearing demons who scurry off “from whence they came” saying, “*Fuck 'is shit!*” as they go offer a ridiculous example of the contrast between official language and Bakhtin’s “unofficial side of speech.” The obsolete and pompous “from whence they came” parodies inflated, official language, and the dialogue in italics further strips the scene of the dignity and propriety expected in a public meeting, leaving behind the raw, unadorned truth.

In this scene of ribald and carnivalesque celebration Alexie creates a kind of Menippean satire in which, as Bakhtin explains, “the unfettered and fantastic plots and situations all serve one goal – to put to the test and to expose ideas and ideologues” (26), and this is frequently achieved through exaggeration and laughter. Bakhtin describes how Menippean satire works to dislodge grand narratives and ideologies:

The liberty to crudely degrade, to turn inside out the lofty aspects of the world and world views, might sometimes seem shocking. But to this exclusive and comic familiarity must be added an intense spirit of inquiry and a utopian fantasy . . . the entire world and everything sacred in it is offered to us without any distancing at

all, in a zone of crude contact, where we can grab at everything with our own hands. In this world, utterly familiarized, the subject moves with extreme and fantastic freedom; from heaven to earth, from earth to the nether world, from the present into the past, from the past into the future. (26)

In the familiar and lowly setting of a town hall meeting, James, Jake and Chief David grow to fantastic heights, breaking through ceilings and moving from earth to heaven, into the “nether world” of demons, into the past world of nightmares and into the future world of recovery and dignity. Their performance is shocking as they turn inside out the lofty ideals of colonial administrators. This town meeting makes a mockery of the forums that were developed by official agencies to address “the residential school question.” There are no polite questions and answers, no talk of closure and no thought of calling in white counsellors or social workers to ask politically correct questions and make benign and well-meaning suggestions. There is, instead, the much more satisfying declaration of a bloody and violent war on demons and memories in a “zone of crude contact (26):”

James Nathan started laying demons out left, right and centre. Demon arms, legs and heads were flying everywhere. One head fell into the lap of Old Pierre.

He picked it up, poked out its beady little eyes, and threw it on the floor. . . .

James Nathan was slamming dreams into the floor. Dream blood was splashing everywhere . . . James Nathan was kicking nightmares in the balls with his big fucking cowboy boots. Nightmares were flying this way and that way and into the laps of the good folks. The good folk stomped the little peckers right on past oblivion and into China. (192)

Nothing in this scene is as it should be. The residential school world of order, time, manners and Eurocentric values has been thrown into disarray and slammed into the floor by its victims and by Alexie's astonishing representation of their frustration and anger. Bakhtin's description of the form of the novel in general, as "a comical operation of dismemberment," (24) seems particularly appropriate to this fantastic and surrealistic scene of demon slaying:

There was such a fucking commotion what with blood, guts, arms, legs and heads flying every which way that no one breathed or blinked an eye lest they miss a thing. The skies opened up and the People could see a billion light years into the universe. They watched as a million stars suddenly went supernova and lit up the entire universe and then some. A gazillion neutrinos came slamming into the community hall and blasted demons, dreams and nightmares into smithereens and knocked some good folk on their asses. (193)

Some readers might be tired of the exaggeration and the chaos at this point, but just at the moment it seems that Alexie's imagination has gone too far, he parodies his own excess and in the middle of enthusiastic and profane hyperbole, inserts the formal and outdated construction, "lest they miss a thing." Similarly, it might seem as if a "gazillion neutrinos" could cause extensive damage if they hit a community hall, but all they do is knock "some good folk on their asses." Alexie's abrupt contrasts between fantastic and prosaic act as disruptive functions to introduce multiple perspectives on the narrative. We are simultaneously in the fantastic world of myth and magic and, at the same time, squarely in the world of the "good folk," the bingo players and cell phone users. There are also radio reporters, newspaper reporters and "bureaucrats from the higher echelons of government"

present at the ceremony. The bingo players swipe at demons with their bingo daubers, the reporters make sure they get the ceremony on the tape and the bureaucrats smile at each other and say, "*Where would these People be without us?*" (195). The main story will fragment as each person hears and interprets his own version.

When the extraordinary ceremony ends the people ask themselves, "What *really* happened?" A Dene story-teller might say that whatever you want to happen, happened and whatever you wanted to hear, you heard. Some people's lives were changed by the disclosure, some were not. In Dene story-telling there is a clear expectation that different people will react to "what was said" in very different ways. In the tradition of oral story telling, Alexie's polyphonic form allows each character to tell his or her story, to disclose his or her history, and to engage the reader or listener in a discourse that explores myth, history and memory, and opens the possibility of a multiplicity of interpretations of what "really happened." What really happened in the residential schools and what really happened to the Dene during the colonization process must now be open to question. There can be no closure when everyone discloses and no unitary truth when everyone has a story to tell. There can only be new memories, new stories and new ways of apprehending historical "truth."

When the disclosure spectacle is over and the people have cleaned the blood, guts and demon parts from their faces, clothes and hair they experience a sense of peace. No one is absolutely sure what happened, except that, "Despite all the blood and gore, it was all very simple: three men disclosed" (197). But disclosure is not the same as closure, which suggests an end, a conclusion, something locked into place and finished. Closure is what occurs in Eurocentric novels in which the narrative is composed in the traditional pyramid form of beginning, middle and end arranged as a "self-contained discrete unit, defined by closure"

(Ong 148). Disclosure, on the other hand, is an oral performance, a revelation of episodic events, which may or may not be pleasant to recall. The disclosure that occurs in the community hall is a multivocal oral performance, a ceremony of belief, a cathartic spectacle in which the People come together in a public celebration of life.

After James, Jake and Chief David talk about their abuse and unhappiness, others come forward and share the experience: "Fifty people stood that day and wrenched their demons from their souls, threw them on the floor and stomped the shit out of them while three Warriors stood by and dared the little fuckers to fight back" (198). Everyone has a story to tell and, as Chamberlin notes, any situation in which people come together as a group involves engagement with "story" in its deepest sense and it is in the act of believing in stories and ceremonies that we come together and "access the common ground . . . that we long for" (226). Following the disclosure ceremony the people experience a sense of a great battle won and a reconnection with tradition, customs and legends. When Old Pierre and Dora light a fire outside their house, the people sit around it "hoping to keep the feeling that the tragedies had brought to the community. The feeling of togetherness. The feeling of family. The feeling of tradition" (200). Old Pierre brings out the drums he has kept hidden from the missionaries for many years and the people begin to chant a song from "another time and another place." They are united and transported to a time when they still "lived on the land and still became part of the land, part of the water" (203).

The drums had found their way home, if only for a while, in the form of five old men and four old women singing as if they were young again. They sang of beautiful women and strong young men. They sang of little girls in caribou-skin dresses. . . . They sang of great battles in days gone by. . . . They sang of the great

Warriors who did them proud. They sang of tall mountains and wide-open valleys. They sang of thousands of caribou moving to the rhythm of the seasons. They sang of the Old People moving with the caribou. They sang of hope and new beginnings. They sang their hearts out. (203)

The anaphoric parallelism of the words, “They sang,” echoes the songs of the old people. Alexie’s prose in this passage is, itself, a song that reflects the power of oral narrative. Singing, as Ong suggests, is an important aspect of oral narrative. A singer “effects, not a transfer of his own intentions, but a conventional realization of traditional thought for his listeners, including himself (146)” The singer does not convey information or organize narrative in a linear plot sequence but remembers “in a curiously public way . . . not a memorized text . . . but the themes and formulas that he has heard other singers sing. . . . Song is the remembrance of songs sung” (146). One old man at the fire suggests that “we should compose a song to mark this great battle” (*Porcupines* 195), but there is no need to compose a new song for there are already songs that celebrate a time before colonial pedagogy and linear narrative, songs that are remembered by the people when they shed their demons and regain their pride in their culture and heritage. “Neil [one of the old men] was once again a proud young Warrior and grew two hundred feet tall. No one had ever grown this tall before and the People looked with admiration and respect. He sang so loud he shook hills, mountains and trees far away in another time and another place” (203). Alexie’s narrative itself is a song of disclosure and a celebration of life as the people reaffirm their collective identity and their long ago connection to the land. But just in case we find ourselves relaxing into a satisfying, traditional ending with an optimistic chorus of happy Indians singing about hope and reclaiming identity, Alexie abruptly ends his passage with

“it was a fucking sight to behold,” and we are right back where we were in the language of the streets. It is as if Alexie is saying, “Don’t think for one minute that this disclosure ceremony, or this novel solves anything. It doesn’t; it just makes it public and gets your attention, but the Dene are still living with painful memories, their lives are still dysfunctional and there are many tragic and sad days ahead, both in the novel itself and in the lives of the Gwich’in Dene.”

After the disclosure ceremony, the people decide to reclaim another of their traditions and return the body of Michael, one of Tom Kinney’s abused victims who has committed suicide, to the land. The arrival of the caribou coincides with the exhumation and cremation of Michael:

Martin and Jane lit the fire, and the People watched as an old tradition was reborn from the flames. They stood in silence, and most wished him well on his journey to find the peace he couldn’t find on this side. The north wind fanned the flames and Michael was slowly returned to the land. As the fire burned, Old Pierre and the Elders started drumming and started singing an Old Prayer Song. It rose from the crowd and drifted over the land. (222)

Soon after, the people watch as “a thousand caribou in their full autumn glory” appear over the ridge and, “as their ancestors must have done at least ten thousand times, they witnessed the return of the caribou to the Blue Mountains. Chief James stood with his wife and Old Pierre and Dora on the side of the highway. ‘The caribou are home again,’ he said in the language, ‘Mussi’ [Thank you]” (223). The continuous ebb and flow of the migratory caribou in the People’s lives is a powerful image in Alexie’s story, and the return of the caribou

suggests a sense of continuity and optimism that the old ways are still vital and that somehow the People will find their way back to the traditions of their elders.

At this point, Alexie might have ended his novel if he were writing from a Eurocentric position. But Alexie's narrative and his ideology defy the plot formula of the modern novel with its "relentlessly rising tension, exquisitely tidy discovery and reversal, perfectly resolved denouement" (Ong 146). Just as the migratory caribou will leave again to resume their endless wanderings, so too will the People's story continue. There are no conclusions in episodic and tangential oral narratives and also, as Alexie told me, "Native stories very seldom have happy endings." This one is no exception. Still to come is Part 3, "The Real World," which contains broken relationships, recriminations, the last confrontation with Tom Kinney who hangs himself after his court appearance, and finally James' break with alcohol and his attempt to begin a new life. However, when Jake and Mary die tragically in a boating accident all James' memories return because he realizes there are still no answers and no one to blame:

He spread his hands, then slowly lifted his head to the heavens as if to ask a question. What came was something he didn't expect: the hate, the rage, the anger and the sorrow. They burst from his tormented soul and ripped a hole in his chest and were given a voice. They sounded like a million deaths rolled into one. They spread out over the land of his People, shook the sky, then echoed off the distant mountains and disappeared into hell, where they belonged. He was alone. He'd always been alone. He then did something he'd thought about and tried for a million years. But this time he knew he'd do it. (284-5)

The words in this passage are identical to those in the Prologue (1-2), when James tries to commit suicide for the first time. In oral tradition, the novel ends where it began on an Autumn day with James standing beside the highway, looking like “Death ready to go on a rampage” (1). The highway, that “cuts across the land like a rip in a painting,” represents the destruction of civilization that has encroached on the northern wilderness, and it also represents the journey that James is about to embark on in the narrative. The journey is triggered, literally, by the failure of the gun to fire as James, assaulted for years by his memories, decides to commit suicide:

All in one smooth motion he got down on one knee, put the barrel in his mouth, then pushed the trigger. He watched the hammer fall and closed his eyes.

He tensed waiting for the explosion. After a million years he heard it: metal on metal. It was the loudest sound he’d ever heard. . . . He took a deep breath, dropped the gun, then exhaled. He heard it: the peace and the silence. He waited for the ultimate journey to hell. (2)

The journey to hell occupies the entire narrative and seems to offer some respite to James’ torment but at the end, when he realizes that Jake and Mary are dead, the “rage and horror returned” (283) and James attempts to commit suicide again, but twice more the gun fails and James is left to continue “his ultimate journey to hell:”

He waited for an answer that he knew would never come. Instead it hit him like a slap in the face. There was no God and there were no Old People. Shit happens and there’s not a fucking thing you can do about it. (265)

In the chapter on Warburton Pike, I made the point that Pike learned that when travelling on the land it is necessary to adopt a certain *laissez faire* attitude to events,

because, in the uncertainty of the north, plans and goals have a way of dissolving. Survival for native people meant being able to adapt to all circumstances, to feast or famine, life and death, and to take the good with the bad and make the best of it. As James says, “Shit happens,” and there is very little you can do about it. This novel is about the “shit” that happens, but it is also about the realization that although nothing much can be done to prevent it there are ways to survive it. Early in the narrative the narrator describes some of the practices of residential schools:

A missionary leads them in prayer. They have no idea what he’s saying, but that doesn’t matter. In a few weeks, they’ll learn the words. They won’t understand them, but they’ll learn them. Their *survival* depends on it – literally. (11)

And later when the boy has returned home, he realizes “he has to relearn his language and the ways of his People. His *survival* depends on it – literally” (16). Alexie uses the same words when he writes about the old wolf. “*He could no longer wait for the caribou. He would have to meet them. His survival depended on it*” (120). Alexie’s use of identical words here, and in other passages, reflects the oral tradition of repetition to emphasize continuity and enduring values in troubled times. However, his technique of narrative reversals that seem designed to suppress hope when it is within reach is also in the tradition of oral narrative that always takes a tortuous and varied route through the telling of any story. These story-telling strategies reflect the lives of the Dene in their nomadic travels through their land, the twists and turns of fate, the ever-present narrative of survival and the need to stay connected to the land. But the Dene of the NWT have proven that they are survivors. They survived the harshness and uncertainty of their early life on the land, they survived the residential school experience that tried to assimilate them into white culture, and they survived the colonizing

project that forced them to leave the land and move into settlements. Despite its harsh language, its bleak outlook, and its forlorn and lost characters, *Porcupines and China Dolls* is a narrative of survival and hope. When James' gun fails to fire for the last time he stops running:

He dropped the gun and closed his eyes. He raised his head to the sky and
surrendered to the Powers that Be. And for once in his life he surrendered totally.

(286)

At that moment, Louise, his first love, appears and the "journey had come full circle, and the future had unfolded as it should" (286). In native stories, as Blondin points out, there are no beginnings and no endings, there is no linear structure of traditional novels and there are no conclusions. There is just, as James knows, the present and the future unfolding "as it should" and Dene life continuing on as it always has.

In *Canada and the Idea of North*, Grace devotes a chapter to the idea of northern voices "writing back" in "protest, anger and pride to the dominant discourse, which has constructed the North as a homogenous, empty space, outside of history, a place of romance, danger, challenge, mineral resources, and so forth for white, southern men" (xv). The dominant discourse that represented the north as an empty and silent wilderness has constructed and shaped public opinion since the middle of the 19th century and for most of the 20th century. But in the so-called barren and unfriendly land, Alexie's narrative shatters the silence and the ignorance with a voice "like a million porcupines screaming in the dark." His novel is full of screaming, anger, frustration and terror as he writes back against colonizing forces that stripped northern, indigenous people of their history, their culture, their language and even, in the residential schools, the dignity and sanctity of their own bodies.

Through its circular structure, dream visions, ribald characters and language, oral stories, legends and myths, Alexie's novel inverts and ridicules the concept of a deserted, dangerous and barren land. The stereotypes of the north, created in the south, are, like James's demons and memories, finally exposed and sent packing "into oblivion and beyond." Through his narrative Alexie aggressively writes back, deliberately accosting and disrupting the dominant discourse to challenge any colonial misconception that the northern landscape has ever been anything but a familiar and beloved homeland to the Dene who live there, or that indigenous people have ever been, or ever can be, complicit with Duncan Campbell Scott's vision of a "happy future" of "absorption into the general population." In the tradition of oral storytelling Alexie offers no solutions to his People's continuing troubles but, like James, he has travelled to the edge and broken a silence that has gone on too long and like James, he knows that the future will unfold "as it should."

Notes

- ¹ A former Yellowknifer, who calls himself McSnowWriter, reminisces on his Web site about the Strange Range:

The Strange Range or properly called the Gold Range Hotel's beer parlour was usually the start for a Friday evening. It is renowned throughout Canada as one of the wildest bars in the North. Its patrons were a cross-section of Yellowknife and the North; miners, construction workers, trappers, truckers, diamond drillers, office workers, exploration workers, nurses, bank managers, natives, non-natives all sitting around in large groups with beer glasses covering the top of the tables that were usually pulled together. Sitting with your back to the wall was the safest, however that did not exclude you from any of the action. Thrown beer, thrown glasses, thrown words, thrown fists and thrown out was the normal sequence of events. ("Pamphlet")

I used to visit the Strange Range regularly on Friday evenings and it was exactly as McSnowwriter describes it. I had not been there for many years, but dropped in again in the summer of 2009. It seemed as if the same people were sitting in the same places, with the same beer in front of them; the décor had not changed; stained, red terry-cloth covered the tables, the same country music was playing, and it was as if nothing had happened in 25 years.

- ² To describe the Iroquois in Upper Canada, Scott quotes John Graves Simcoe, the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada:

The savage nature was hardly hidden under the first, thinnest film of European customs. Scalps were hung up in their log huts, and arms that had brained children upon their parents' door-stones were yet nervous with power. (Titley 33)

Chapter 7. Conclusion and Future Work

The first explorers and travellers to the Northwest Territories represented the land as a vast and empty wilderness available for any civilized nation to claim as their own. They viewed the indigenous people, the Dene, as primitive savages, who because of their nomadic, hunting lifestyle were not making proper use of the land and had only vague, undefined rights to it. Around 1880, when the Federal Government of Canada began to take notice of its huge and undeveloped northern territory, it took the position that if there were resources to be developed and land to be settled then it was imperative that title to the land was clearly defined. In 1891, a Privy Council Report stated that:

A treaty or treaties should be made with the Indians who claim those regions as their hunting grounds, with a view to the extinguishment of the Indian title in such portions of the same, as it may be considered in the interest of the public to open up for settlement. (Fumoleau, *As Long* 41)

This policy was characteristic of any typical colonialist and imperialist power of the time. The government's attitude was ethnocentric and racist and made the assumption that the vastly different social, cultural, political, economic and spiritual systems of the Dene did not warrant their recognition as a nation-state. In various claims over the years the Dene have asserted that the treaties were unfair, that people did not understand what they were signing, and that they were losing their land and their cultural identity. However, little attention was paid to these accusations until the 1960s, when the Dene joined other colonized and marginalized peoples as part of a world-wide cultural revolution to reclaim homelands and traditional ways of being.

Cultural reclamation is often achieved through story telling and remembering. For the Dene of the NWT story telling was a vital and integral part of their life. Every event was a story, every ancestor was remembered through a story, every place had its own story and the land itself was framed as a story etched from the memories of Dene who had travelled through it for thousands of years. This was the Dene history and while it was never, until recently, fixed on paper, it was a permanent and well-established record of ancestors and Dene tradition. I have argued that the colonialist movement of the late 19th and early 20th century produced its own information about the Northwest Territories that gradually became part of a discourse of accepted knowledge about the land and the people. Travellers' tales contributed to ideas about the north and perpetuated a "textual attitude" that, in time, superseded the actuality of the land as it was known to the people who had always lived there. Agnes Deans Cameron, an intensely nationalistic and forward-thinking woman, was profoundly impressed by the potential of what she called the "new north" and envisioned a future for its people as part of great "melting-pot" in "a thickly populated" (*New North* 390-91) and economically prosperous land. Warburton Pike, a more rugged adventurer, travelled with the Dene on his journey to the Barren Ground. Because he lived closely with them, his representations of the people and the land have more credibility than Cameron's but he too was a product of his age and culture and his representations of the people and the land are often racist and derogatory and framed, like those of all travellers, through the lens of his own Eurocentric beliefs. The attitudes of both these travellers contributed to knowledge of the north that formed the basis of powerful economic, social and political systems that were developed to take control of the land and its people.

It was not my intention in this dissertation to vilify the colonizers and their practices; they were acting within paradigms of well-established principles and beliefs of their time. Nor is it productive to always view the indigenous peoples as victims of a system that has been interpreted as a calculated attempt to destroy their culture, their livelihood and their spiritual beliefs. That injustices were performed in the development of the Northwest Territories cannot be disputed but, as Blondin points out, the pre-contact Dene lived a harsh and difficult life on the land and many welcomed European goods and comforts and were happy to modify their ways of living and adapt to both material and cultural change.¹ My goal, therefore, has been not to produce a rigid post-colonial style critique whereby I find that all colonial practices and narratives in the NWT have been responsible for the victimization of all indigenous subjects. I certainly find value in Said's theories that bureaucratic systems develop as a result of discourses built up through textual representations and that there can be a great deal of violence in the act of representation. The narratives of travellers and explorers in the NWT were biased and often damaging in their representations of the Dene, but they are also valuable in that they contain the first signs of what Bhabha calls a "native consciousness," and that they frequently and ironically undermine their own cultural assertions and offer a view of early indigenous life that would otherwise be unknown in written history. I have attempted to show how certain colonial practices in the north have been responsible for a great many injustices to the Dene, but my purpose has not been to uncover and ascribe blame. While I concur with Blondin and Alexie that the residential schools were the main catalyst for the erosion of Dene culture, I believe that by examining representations of the impact of the schools and other colonial systems it is possible to uncover the many local

stories and events that contribute to a varied and multifaceted social history of the Northwest Territories.

As I sought to capture the indigenous story, believing that it could be found both in small spaces of explorer narratives, and later in narratives of indigenous writers, I discovered that the two histories were separate but intertwined. The indigenous story had existed for thousands of years, but was unrecognized as Canadian history because “real” history is something that is preserved in writing, and oral stories, as we learned in the case of *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia*, have no credibility in a court of law or in a formal history book.² I found the pre-contact Dene history in Blondin’s narratives and then caught glimpses of early post-contact stories in explorer narratives. Finally, I noted how writers such as Blondin and Alexie had inserted their indigenous stories into the dominant narrative and subverted the official position that there was only one story worth telling. But at the same time as I was discovering and reconstructing the indigenous story it became clear to me as I read the early traveller narratives that there are a great many small and local histories of the Northwest Territories and that they are all worth telling. The official narrative about political developments, redistributions of provinces and territories, economic and social initiatives, and land claims will remain in the formal history books, but like Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, the small stories swirl about the central story creating deviations from fixed hegemonic positions. The small stories do not displace the official stories, but they intervene and interact with them performing as supplementary narratives to disturb, as Foucault suggests, “the tranquility with which [official stories] are accepted” (*Archaeology* 25).

In the last half of the 20th century, certain historians began to concern themselves with ways to rectify the exclusion of certain events and the story of marginalized groups from the

historical record. For example, E.H. Carr called for the inclusion in history of “groups and classes of peoples that hitherto lay outside” this record (182), and Keith Crowe argued that “the uneven balance of power is reflected in written histories that ignore or undervalue the pre-European period, the native side of trade and exploration, and the part played by individual native men and women” (*History of Native* 45). Although Carr was writing in the 1960s and Crowe in the 1970s, the situation has scarcely changed. The small narratives and indigenous voices from the NWT continue to be excluded from Canadian history and the Canadian literary canon, and indeed, from popular perceptions of the NWT. As far back as the 1960s, W.L. Morton called on Canadian historians to reassess their thinking about the North. The North needed to be better understood, he argued, because it was central to the story of Canada (“The North”), and more recent historians, Abel and Coates, confirm this view when they argue that “to fail to incorporate the North into one’s understanding of Canada is . . . to misunderstand one of the fundamental realities of Canadian history” (21). They suggest that the North is one of the “central and defining images of Canada as a whole” and that it has an importance that extends far beyond its physical borders (21). Today it is imperative to recognize our North because global decisions in the future will be closely tied to events occurring in Canada’s northern territories. In response to international concerns over global warming, indigenous rights, renewable and non-renewable resource development, land claims, and the controversy over sovereignty and arctic waterways, other northern countries are directing attention to their arctic regions as reflected in the proliferation of academic work on northern issues and the increasing number of northern conferences. Canada has not yet been as prepared to recognize that northern studies must become an integral part of academic research. In the future, any economic, environmental or

international development that takes place in the North will necessitate responsible political action and social adjustment. This cannot take place until people, both indigenous and non-indigenous, understand the multiplicity and complexity of their history and their cultural past. It is my belief that a revisiting of NWT history and culture through a literary lens will contribute to a more pluralistic perception of the events that contributed to the formation of this territory, and that this in turn may lead to a re-evaluation of future responsibilities.

I do not assume that a dissertation such as mine will cause any changes in “political action and social adjustment.” The value in my work, as I see it, is that throughout the course of my research I have discovered the wealth of literary material that is available about the Northwest Territories. Most of this material is unknown, and I find that when people ask me what my dissertation is about and I tell them it is about the literature of the Northwest Territories, they invariably say, “What literature?” and then, “Oh, you mean, Robert Service,” who, of course, wrote about the Yukon. But, who can blame them? Although Canada is an overwhelmingly northern nation, Canadians in general have done little in the past to acknowledge their land north of sixty and most barely know where their three northern territories are, how vast they are and what they look like. As a follow-up to my thesis, I hope to draw attention to the north, particularly the Northwest Territories, by using the material I have collected in the course of my research for this dissertation to compile a literary history of the Northwest Territories. Such a work has been done about Alberta by George Melnyk who published the two-volume *Literary History of Alberta* (1998 and 1999), Melnyk presents the history of Alberta from a postmodern perspective and quotes Robert Kroetsch who says, “I don’t trust the narrative of history because it begins from meaning instead of discovering meanings along the way” (*Literary History Volume One* xviii). A

literary history such as Melnyk's allows for a more fluid approach to history and permits meaning to unfold from a myriad of narrative works and multiple small stories. In my thesis I believe I have shown that I too do not trust the "narrative of history," and have sought to reveal counter-narratives that tell supplementary stories of "what really happened" in the Northwest Territories. I hope to continue the work I have done and, following Melnyk's example, write a *Literary History of the Northwest Territories* that has the potential to challenge traditional views of the NWT as hostile, alien and uncanny, and available to colonial exploitation, and reveal instead the stories that portray the land as a familiar and beloved homeland, a place to work hard and make a living, and a place, as Saltatha told Pike, more beautiful than a Christian heaven.

A comprehensive social history of the Northwest Territories has not yet been written. The official story is documented by historians such as Morton, and Abel and Coates but there are also a great many works dealing with individual stories and histories. Explorers such as Frank Russell (*Explorations in the Far North*) and Fullerton Waldo (*Down the Mackenzie through the Great Lone Land*) made journeys like Pike's where they travelled through difficult and dangerous terrain, sometimes with the Dene and often alone. Government biologist, W.H.B. Hoare, made an extraordinary journey that began in January 1928 and ended in the fall of 1929. Hoare travelled by dog sled, field-constructed canoe and on foot to carry out a survey of the proposed Thelon Game Sanctuary, east of Great Slave Lake. RCMP reports from the early 20th century also tell of heroic journeys and exploits such as the report of the trip to investigate the tragic site of the Hornby expedition and to bury the bodies of John Hornby and his young companions.³ *Reindeer Trek* by Allen Roy Evans tells of the five-year, 2500 km journey that began in 1929 to bring 5,000 reindeer from Alaska to the

NWT to provide an alternative food for starving Inuit. There are narratives of mineral discoveries such as *Great Bear: A Journey Remembered* by Frederick Watt that tells the story of the development of the Cameron Bay uranium project at Great Bear Lake. There are a great many other stories of individual adventures both past and present, stories of settlers, stories of hunting expeditions, canoeing expeditions and dog team treks. There are far too many books to recount and, although I have noted a large number in my bibliography, the list can never be comprehensive as I continue to discover new ones. These are the stories that make up the history of the Northwest Territories and give continuity and meaning to our lives as northerners.

Canadians like to think of themselves as northerners but unfortunately most know very little about the “northness” of their country. Alex Hall, who has spent more than thirty years guiding, hunting and exploring in the Northwest Territories, believes that Canadians don’t deserve Canada. “They don’t know that they are the luckiest people on this earth. They have more wild land than any other nation and yet most “educated” people in Canada don’t even know where the Northwest Territories – 40% of their country – is” (Raffen 204). Hall made these accusations nearly twenty years ago and I hope they are not still accurate today. Most of us who live here believe that we live in the most ideal place on earth and we are always amazed when other Canadians do not seem to understand this. We love our land and our lives and are constantly telling our stories. As Edward Chamberlin and Julie Cruickshank argue, and as all story tellers know, our stories define us; they connect us to our families and our communities, and they give meaning to our lives. Our stories are our history; our past and our future. Without them, we would lose our way because we would have no way of knowing where we came from or where we are going. This is what happened to the Dene when their

stories were lost and this is why story tellers like Blondin are so impassioned about the need to recover Dene history. I have tried to convey some of Blondin's urgency and have attempted to understand some of the stories. But as a white transplant from the south, even though I have been here for more than thirty years, I am very late to the discovery of Dene culture. I am limited in my understanding because I do not speak a Dene language. I attend Dene cultural events but can never be truly a participant. I have Dene friends and neighbours but our lives are quite separate. In some ways I might be considered as much a passive bystander as Cameron, viewing the people and the land from the deck of her steamer, and interpreting them through the lens of her educated, Eurocentric background. But there is more to the Northwest Territories than the Dene story. As northerners, however recent, we have our own story to tell and I like to think of myself as more like Pike than Cameron, actively travelling on the land, experiencing it in all its moods and seasons and finding a story to tell from the land itself and the people who use it.

Since coming here in 1974 I have spent many seasons working in mining exploration camps, living in tents for up to six months at a time, and flying and walking over hundreds of kilometres of tundra and bush. I do not do that so much anymore but I still travel on the land. As I write the concluding pages of this dissertation I am sitting in my tent on the shores of Great Slave Lake. Like so many travellers who have attempted to cross this vast, deep and dangerous body of water, we are windbound. Maybe the wind will drop this evening and we will travel through the night for at this time of year there is nearly twenty-four hours of daylight. Meanwhile, we wait as others have done and I contemplate the beautiful, rugged and wild land that Pike and other explorers travelled through. But they were recent travellers following in the footsteps of the Dene who have travelled this land since the glaciers

retreated nearly 6,000 years ago. Despite Cameron's dreams in the early part of the century of a new developed north and Prime Minister, John Diefenbaker's more recent vision in the 1950s of a "road to resources" around Great Slave Lake, the land is unchanged since the Dene followed the caribou and camped in family gatherings at traditional places where they fished and feasted and told stories.

Like them, we are meeting up with friends farther down the lake and like the Dene we will fish and cook our meal on an open fire and tell stories of friends, families and other trips. The mood will be relaxed and easy for we have been doing this for twenty-five years. There are no children with us now, the dogs are different and the boats a bit bigger and better, but the lake is the same, the land is unchanged and every year we build on the legacy of stories that we are discovering in this land.



Figure 13. Story Telling with Friends on Great Slave Lake.

When we leave our friends we will travel to Old Fort Reliance at the east end of Great Slave Lake (Figure 3) and visit other story sites. We will stop at “Back’s Chimneys” where the stone fire places built by Captain George Back in 1834 are all that remain of his overwintering site. We will leave a loonie or a small trinket at some Dene graves overlooking the mouth of the Lockhart River, and we will venture a few kilometres into Pike’s Portage where so many travellers made their way to the Barren Ground and the Thelon River. At the site of Old Fort Reliance we will look at the remains of Gus D’Aoust’s trading post where high-heeled shoes from the 1930s and 40s are still arranged on the dusty shelves where they tempted the Dene ladies of long ago. D’Aoust was a trapper on the Barren Ground for fifty years and tells his story of his life on the land in his biography, *Those Were the Years that I Lived and Loved* (Harpelle).

Like D’Aoust, many people who travelled to the Northwest Territories or stayed to live there, fell in love with the land and felt compelled to tell their stories. Stories are the roots of our culture and the source of our beliefs. We tell them to entertain and we tell them to preserve our memories and our ways of knowing. Stories can connect us to our pasts and help us solve problems in the present. Stories are the way we share our lives with others and the way we understand other people’s beliefs. Stories have the power to preserve and the power to destroy. In the Northwest Territories the Dene culture was severely damaged, first by the violence of colonial representation and then by the imposition of a new culture with different stories. I have tried to show that by recovering their stories the Dene are reclaiming their identity and their sense of who they are. It is important that these stories are heard because the Dene now share their land with others who also have a stake and have their own stories to tell. I can never be an expert on Aboriginal culture but I can listen to the Dene

stories and through their power I can begin to gain an understanding of what this land means to the Dene and to those who live here now. From the different perspectives of all those who live in and love the north a mosaic of NWT stories will continue to be told and new ones will be added. From these blends of different cultures and different beliefs I am confident that as Canadians we may come to know ourselves better as a northern nation.

Notes

¹ On June 19, 2009, I attended a reception for visiting Canadian ambassadors in Yellowknife where the speaker was Tony Whitford, Commissioner of the NWT. Tony is a proud Métis and an eloquent speaker. He made the very perceptive comment that the indigenous people of the NWT have a great capacity for adaptation. They have received many cultural and material things from western culture, starting with small items such as tea and flour and continuing with much larger entities such as education, religion, economic opportunities and material wealth. All this may have changed how they live, but as Whitford points out, it has not changed who they are. No matter where they live, what they wear, what work they do, how many possessions they have, they will always be Dene and Métis, the proud and enduring people of the land.

² In *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* [1997] British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Allan McEachern dismissed the oral testimony of Elders and chiefs and ruled that Aboriginal rights to land in the province had been extinguished in 1871:

The factual findings made at trial could not stand because the trial judge's treatment of the various kinds of oral histories did not satisfy the principles laid down in *R. v. Van der Peet*. The oral histories were used in an attempt to establish occupation and use of the disputed territory which is an essential requirement for aboriginal title. The trial judge refused to admit or gave no independent weight to these oral histories and then concluded that the appellants had not demonstrated the requisite degree of occupation for "ownership." (Lamer et al. *Judgments*)

In 1998 McEachern's ruling was overturned.

³ The story of the Hornby tragedy has also been told by Pierre Berton, *Prisoners of the North*; Malcolm Waldron, *Snow Man*; George Whalley, *The Legend of John Hornby* and Christian and Whalley, *Death on the Barren Ground*; and Clive Powell Williams, *Cold Burial*.

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