

**LIVING BETWEEN WORLDS: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION OF  
INDIVIDUALIZED AND ENTANGLED THIRD SPACE**

by

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## **Abstract**

I had the honour of being able to attend two Sun Dance ceremonies in Southern Alberta, and found them to be transformative. The purpose of this study is to reflect on my identity as a product of colonisation and how participation in Indigenous ceremony, specifically the Sun Dance, impacted me both as an individual and as an educator. The guiding research questions are: why was the ceremony so impactful; how did participation in the Sun Dance help to increase knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures; how did participation in ceremony impact my third space identity; and how did my experience strengthen me as a critical ontologist. An autoethnographic methodology was chosen in part because personal stories have impact and can change the way the reader understands and navigates the world. It also gives voice to the marginalised, and can be more accessible to readers from various backgrounds. The data presented comes from self-reflection, reviewing relevant literature, and discussions with Elders. Supporting artifacts are included in the appendix. This autoethnography is grounded in three major philosophical schools: Indigenous ways of knowing and being, critical theory, and decolonial/post-colonial theories. Specifically, I connect myself and my work to two philosophies derived from these schools: Homi Bhabha's third space, and Joe Kincheloe's critical ontology. The former focusses on cultural hybridity, which describes my identity, while the latter combines Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewpoints, which describes my praxis. Immersion in ceremony, and self-reflection, provided a deeper understanding of myself and my place in the world, and impacted the ways in which I interpret information and relate to others. I gained a deeper appreciation of Indigenous cultures, and began to see how ceremony is both a powerful healing and teaching tool. I concluded that ethical teaching requires a classroom where

everyone's differences, cultures, and ways of being are respected and brought together to inform daily practice. Participation in cultural practices, including but not limited to ceremony, would help provide a multifaceted perspective by which one could more accurately evaluate their own sociocultural and political values, ethics, and practices both as a person and as an educator.

## **Lay Summary**

The purpose of this study is to reflect on my life as a person existing as a hybrid between coloniser and colonised. I attended a Sun Dance ceremony in southern Alberta, and found it to be a transformative experience. I use the Sun Dance as the framework for reflections upon my life and explain how, through ceremony and study, I came to accept my reality as a person outside the dominant society. I found that I exist as a perpetual outsider, which often is beneficial when interacting with others from various cultures. My study concludes that the educational system needs to become more inclusive of other ways of seeing the world as it is currently often unwelcoming to marginalised peoples. Such change is necessary if schools, from primary to tertiary, are going to be inclusive, respectful, safe, and socially just places of learning.

## **Preface**

I was fortunate to have the opportunity to be in the first class of a new UBC course, Indigenous Existential Resistance: the Sundance Practice Summer Institute, under the supervision of doctors Cash Ahenakew and Vanessa Andreotti. The course came about after the supervisors received an invitation from a Sundance holder, in southern Alberta, to bring students from UBC to participate in the set-up and operation of the ceremony. My contribution to this thesis includes the entire design, performance, and analysis of the research. No part of the thesis has been previously published. Due to being autoethnographic, and having taken steps to anonymize any persons discussed, ethics board approval has been deemed unnecessary.

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I also need to thank Keith & Karen, and all the Sun Dance Elders for their time, patience, and teachings. None of this would be possible without them, and they have had a lasting impact on my life. I may never become a Sun Dancer myself, but I hope to be able to return many more times and continue to help and support in any way I can.

Thank you to Dr. Michael Marker for agreeing to review my work and be on my panel, and whose publications were an inspiration for my own studies.

Finally, I could never have survived my years of post-secondary, let alone complete my thesis, without the support of my family. My aunt, Dr. Gail Bellward, my mother, Barbara Bethell, and my father, John Bethell, have been an immense help emotionally and financially. My mother especially was a huge help, reading every text to me from first year to now because otherwise it would have taken at least ten times longer with my dyslexia.

## **Dedication**

This work is dedicated to the people that society likes to forget, laugh at, and skew in the media. To everyone in the LGBTTIQQ2SA+ community, and everyone who fights with their own learning disabilities every day, this is for you. To the marginalised, the non-hegemonic, the people creating and discovering and exploring their own way of being in the world. This work is for the outsiders, the kids who never fit in, the adults who struggle to get through each day, and the people who refuse to give up especially when they are told they will never succeed. For the people who are dismissed because they will never fit into the binary gendered mould, and the people who do not love the way that society says they are supposed to. For all the freaks, and geeks, and weirdos, and crazy people who are just trying to get by without disappearing in the cracks of the world in which we must live, this work is for you.

Never give up; you are not alone.

## Prologue

Tānsi, dia dhaoibh, 'uy' skweyul, and greetings: I welcome you in Cree and Irish Gaelic, the languages of my ancestors, as well as Hul'q'umi'num', and English, the languages of where I live and was raised. I am Cree and Irish, but I grew up in English-speaking society, on the unceded territory of the Hən̓q̓əmin̓əm speaking Musqueam nation. This territory is more commonly known by a colonial name: Vancouver. I may have lived my whole life here, but I realize my ancestors were visitors to this land, and I am ever grateful to the First Nations of the city for being gracious hosts and permitting me to share this land with them. My grasp of non-English languages is, at best, limited. I believe Hən̓q̓əmin̓əm is a variation of Hul'q'umi'num', but I am not sure how close the two are, and could have made a mistake with my greeting. If so, I apologize. The same applies to the other two non-English languages as well. I offer the greetings as a sign of respect for the people on whose land I dwell, and for my ancestors without whom I would not be in existence today.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to reflect on my identity as a product of colonisation and how participation in Indigenous ceremony has impacted me as both an individual and an educator. I use the Sun Dance as a framework for reflecting on my life and how I have changed along my educational journey to grow and become the person I am now. This study connects these reflections to the concepts of third space and critical ontology, two post-colonial philosophies that impact both the educational system and educators.

### **1.2 My Background**

#### **1.2.1 Growing up Indigenous in a non-Indigenous Family**

I grew up in a privileged colonial space. There was a dichotomy in that my adoptive parents, knowing I was partly Indigenous (See Appendix A.1: Letter from my Birth Mother), did all they could to instil a pride in that heritage, but they did not share that heritage. Adoption laws at the time prohibited contact with the birth mother, resulting in an unknowable genealogy. Until I was thirteen, I lived in a neighbourhood of predominantly European colonial heritage that had been built upon unceded Musqueam First Nation territory only a few blocks from the Musqueam Indian Reservation #2. I did not know the land had been taken by force, but I knew that Indigenous people lived nearby, and I was also Indigenous, but my schooling, and the majority of the society around me, identified with the Eurocentric Western hegemonic knowledge, culture, and values.

Because I grew up knowing that I had Indigenous heritage, I found it strange that Indigenous peoples were only referred to as historical entities, not people still in existence. In my social studies textbooks, Indigenous people were granted a few paragraphs of Canadian history up until confederation, then quickly disappeared (Dion, 2009). From what I remember, Louis Riel and the Metis were not referred to as Indigenous (King, 2012). “Textbooks, then, need to be examined not as dead, dusty books but, rather, as [Chief Dan George] identified them – as vibrant tools of colonial power, prestige, and privilege” (Carleton, 2011, p. 127). It would not be until I was an adult that I really understood why the Metis opposed the Canadian government (Richardson, 2016). Outside of school, I loved visiting museums and seeing the Indigenous cultures displayed. I recall that Indigenous images rigidly stood near woolly mammoths, or in a village somehow frozen in an unknown past era with no clear markers of where or when the scene was supposed to be set. Clips from Edward S. Curtis’ infamous film, “In the Land of the War Canoes” (also known as “In the Land of the Head Hunters”), cycled continuously in The Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria. I was startled to learn the film was of questionable authenticity and likely staged (Longmuir & Jackson, 2013). Going back as an adult, I found the film on display in a greatly abbreviated format and a note explaining that it was not factually representative of the Kwakwaka'wakw people portrayed. Gone too were “Kwakiutl”, “Interior Salish”, and other names given by European anthropologists. Instead, proper names of the various First Nations were used, as well as more accurate representations of their territories and cultures. It gave me hope, but it also drew even more attention to the divide between settler and Indigenous cultures. Using the names that the nations prefer, and giving more recognition to their histories and cultures, puts some of the power back in their hands, where before they were treated simply as non-autonomous objects of study. Control of representation was still firmly in

the hands of the colonial powers, but at least some effort was made to treat the Indigenous peoples with a modicum of respect.

My desire to know and understand my heritage goes back as far as I remember. I knew I was adopted my whole life, and never took issue with it. I felt lucky having a loving and supportive family, but I always felt something was missing. Adoption can be viewed as resulting in a different environment than that initially intended by creation. An adoptee's disconnection comes from the fact that adoption causes a spiritual dissonance and sense of loss. "Explored in a spiritual context, this call of the ancestors enhances the feeling that one needs to search for a missing piece in one's life" (Carrier & Richardson, 2009, p. 54). This thesis is part of my journey to find that missing piece.

### **1.2.2 Post-Secondary Struggles**

From grade three until the completion of grade twelve, I was in schools that specialized in teaching students with learning disabilities (Zysberg & Kasler, 2017; Peterson & Pennington, 2011). I learned strategies that allowed me to read and write, and I learned how to advocate for myself. I never expected post-secondary to be easy, it seldom is for people with dyslexia, but I was not prepared for the exhausting and degrading requirements most institutions appear to have where one must repeatedly prove their disability. After fighting with the administration over various paperwork and reports forcing them to recognise the problem, and hacking through battle lines of bureaucratic red tape, they might finally consider allowing the student some accommodations for their learning difficulties, if the professor permits it. This war for recognition and equity is then repeated once a year in a sort of degrading anniversary re-enactment of the initial battle. I often found myself walking away exhausted and wondering how

often they force the blind students to prove they still are unable to see, or tell the students in wheelchairs that they need a new assessment before the school can provide ramps for the classrooms. I am so grateful that I was never marginalized or ostracized for being Indigenous in any of my post-secondary institutions, but each did, at some point, make me feel like I was less worthy of being at the school because I have learning disabilities. It was the most degrading process of my life, and I know right now there are dozens of first year students being subjected to the same shame and humiliation that I was at the start of every winter term.

My first post-secondary experience was at a small computer college called the Centre for Digital Imaging and Sound (CDIS), which later would become part of the Arts Institute Vancouver (AI). My first two to three years at CDIS were wonderful. I was immersed in a community of like-minded learners under the instruction of creative and talented professionals whose long histories in their respective fields inspired us. Looking back on it now, I feel these people were like Elders guiding us by demonstrating the way things are done and then working alongside us to ensure it was right. In my last years, after the school changed ownership, everything changed. AI modelled their method of operations on United States corporations. Many of the instructors I respected disappeared, and the ones who took over were cold and distant, preferring to dictate commands in an authoritarian manner than get directly involved with students. Competition was encouraged over collaboration, and those who fell in line were praised. Creativity was praised only as long as it served a practical and immediate goal. I had never felt so uncomfortable, marginalized, and powerless as I did in that last year. I was sad to see the downfall of the school I had originally loved, and was glad to leave when I did.



Unable to find a job in the video game industry, I decided to go to university and get a Bachelor's degree. Intimidated by the idea of huge lecture theatres and colossal campuses, I chose to undergo my preliminary undergraduate years at Langara College. The small classes and campus was exactly the sort of learning environment I was used to. I had a mix of excellent and not-so-excellent teachers, but none were so bad as to make me want to flee the school as had been the case at AI. My best friend was also a student there. We did not have any classes together, but it was nice to meet up for lunch sometimes. At first, I enjoyed a lack of community. After AI, I was hesitant to commit too much to any given situation. I had seen how a great start can still lead to negative ends. Over time though, I began to seek out others with whom I could connect. I discovered the "Queer collective" as they were informally known, and started researching my own sexual identity. The friends I made were few, but it provided me with a safe and supportive space which I needed emotionally at the time.

Transferring to UBC was bittersweet: I was going to miss my friends, and some of my professors, but I was starting my third year in a major university full of potentially like-minded students. My enthusiasm for my courses was, for the most part, well placed. I was fortunate to have many wonderful teachers. My enthusiasm for potential student life and new friends was, unfortunately, crushed by the reality of being an introverted, non-hegemonic student not living on campus. I never felt more isolated than in my years at UBC. I did not feel attacked and persecuted as I had at AI, which was good, but it disappointed me that in such a large campus, there was no space where I felt I belonged.

While working towards my Bachelor of Arts, I took every course in Indigenous studies that I was able: on culture, music, literature, and anthropology. I knew about the House of Learning, but did not know where to look for events concerning Indigenous students. I tried looking online for student clubs on campus, but there were few of interest, and I had no idea how to approach them. By the time I finished my degree in English Literature, I felt completely alone on campus. School had become just a building I took classes in. There was no spirit, no sense of attachment, and very little joy in it. One glimmer of hope came during my final year when I was taking my Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) certification classes. The class had to form groups and, over the course of a few months, develop a comprehensive unit plan for an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom. I was hesitant about the idea of group work given my experiences at AI, but my groupmates became the closest thing to friends I ever had at UBC. We kept in touch after the course was done, even though both my groupmates left the country to be with their families. It was TESL and that group project that convinced me I could become a decent teacher, which was also one of the few jobs for which I could think an English degree qualified.

Applying for the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) program at UBC was not a simple process. I applied for the secondary school program, with a specialization in ESL. My reasoning for this was that I had majored in English Literature, and I had completed the TESL certification program at UBC, with an added teaching practicum which not all TESL certifications have (See Appendix A.2: TESL Certificate). In addition, I knew that many Indigenous students, even in urban environments, qualify as ESL. I felt that by becoming an ESL teacher, I could help students in facing similar challenges to those I had when I was learning English. I also believed that I might be able to relate to Indigenous students better than many other ESL teachers because

of my background. The admissions department in UBC's Faculty of Education, though, determined that I was not qualified to enter their program (See Appendix A.3: Letter of Rejection). The stated reasons given were that I did not have sufficient experience in the previous two years working with secondary school children in a group setting, and I did not have six credits of courses focussed on "language/cultural studies" (See Appendix A.3). Some of this was not a surprise and I was prepared to deal with it; some of it I had no idea would be a problem.

I made an appointment to appeal my application in person, thinking that the problems had to do with a lack of clear information. I explained to the application reviewer/advisor that I was permitted certain accommodations (See Appendix A.4: Access & Diversity) due to being recognized by UBC as a student with learning disabilities (See "Auditory/Verbal Processing Disorder" in Appendix A.5: Language Letter & Psychologist Letter). For one, after appealing to the University (See Appendix A.5), my second language requirement had been completely waived by the institution. After spending the better parts of grades three to eleven learning how to compensate for my dyslexia, the idea of then expecting me to learn a second language was deemed inappropriate (See Appendix A.6: My Linguistic Journey). I had already spent significant energy and time during my Bachelor of Arts successfully fighting for the second language requirement for graduation to be dropped; I was not about to be rejected for it here. I went on to explain that as a person with sometimes significant learning difficulties, it generally takes me much longer to complete an assignment, or a test, or to simply recall what I had been taught that day and utilize the information in a meaningful or useful manner (See Appendix A.5). For a learning-disabled student, a full university course load is three classes rather than five or six. Each class often requires between four to six hours daily of studying at home to maintain

decent grades. To graduate within a reasonable timeframe, this required me to take courses year-round. Expecting me to then go out and volunteer in the community on top of that was unrealistic. Once presented with a letter of support from the Access & Diversity Department, the volunteer requirement was let go, but the language/culture requirement was not.

I asked why the TESL course, which was entirely focussed on teaching English to non-English speakers, was not sufficient to grant me access to the ESL path of education, especially when the TESL program at UBC is put on, in part, through the Education Department. The advisor's response was to show me a list of course numbers, and tell me that those courses, and only those courses, would fit the requirement, and none of the TESL courses were on the list. I was baffled by how a predetermined list, written by unknown people with unknown context, could take precedent over the informed decision of a person presented with relevant information to the contrary. I then asked about the "culture" component. Perhaps I did not have a second language, but I had done at least eighteen credits of First Nations studies during my B.A. Surely that more than met the requirement of "6 credits of courses in language/cultural study." She told me that I could present work from those courses for review as part of my appeal to see if it could apply.

I realised that I had to use the systems and tools provided by the colonising institution if I wanted to gain access to their classes, knowledge, and, ultimately, certification that would allow me to become a teacher (Lorde, 2007). At home, I scoured my personal records for everything culture-related I could find. I ended up with over half a dozen binders overflowing with articles, essays, projects, histories, and other memorabilia from my years of Indigenous studies. I had papers from First Nations Literature on Indigenous philosophy and representation. I had articles from First Nations Art & Culture about the rise, fall, and ongoing legacy of the Indian Residential

Schools. I had essays from anthropology about how traditional knowledge is being used today to manage reservations, as well as to help development of cleaner commercial and industrial practices outside of reservations. When I brought in the teetering stack of binders, I also included my work in Classical Studies, Art History, and the summer I spent in Italy in a course studying the art and history through first-hand experience. I had my suspicions that the Eurocentric institution would not value my Indigenous focussed courses as highly as my European cultural courses. I thought surely this would be more than enough to satisfy six credits – two courses – worth of “cultural study”. The binders were left in the reviewer’s office, and I waited for my appeal.

When the news came, I was frustrated and angry, but not entirely shocked. Policy does tend to favour the powers that be and is loath to question the status quo (Levinson et al., 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). After reviewing my submitted material, it was decided that I indeed did not qualify for the ESL program because, as far as the education department was concerned, I did not have any credits of cultural studies. Perhaps as some small consolation to mitigate the blow, they did offer an alternative. I was told my application was acceptable for the Secondary English program. I was angry, dispirited, and disappointed in the institution, but I accepted the decision. In retrospect, this lack of ability of the Faculty to recognise my Indigenous studies as equivalent to the study of another culture proved catastrophic to my professional goals.

The spectre of colonisation continued to haunt me during my year-long B.Ed. program. It seemed to me that BC schools were doing very little to help Indigenous students, a demographic in dire need thanks largely to the generations of abuse at the hands of colonial powers (Battiste, 2013). My experiences strengthen my view that the provincial government showed little real

interest in challenging the status quo of Indigenous education, and my fellow teachers were not given adequate information to invoke any real change at the classroom level. Worse, all courses dealing with Indigenous issues were optional, and each one I signed up for was cancelled due to lack of student interest. Only one class in the student teacher curriculum at U.B.C. dealt with social justice (See Appendix A.7: Social Justice Course Outline), and it only set aside a single week to discuss Indigenous issues. Of that week, only one class focused specifically on Canadian Indigenous peoples. It was something, but not enough. I took it upon myself to place a stronger focus on Indigenous students. Whenever possible, I made Indigenous educational concerns the focus of my assignments. I also made efforts to educate my peers about Indigenous cultures, ontologies, and customs. As I saw it, if the government was not going to force schools to provide Indigenous learners with culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy, then teachers would have the obligation to be aware of the problems facing Indigenous youth so they could take it upon themselves to enact change in the classroom. By the time I finished my B.Ed. at U.B.C. I felt that there was a great deal of work yet to do in education, and so I returned as a graduate student in the department of Educational Studies as I felt strongly that there was a great deal of transformation that needed to be accomplished in Indigenous education.

### **1.2.3 Connecting to my Biological Heritage**

Between finishing my B.Ed. and starting my Master of Arts (M.A.), I finally decided to try and locate my biological family. Like most adopted people, I always felt there was a missing piece in my life (Carriere & Richardson, 2009). I wanted to find out where I came from, and see if I could finally learn the details about my Indigenous heritage. My adoption records were simple to obtain thanks to changes in the adoption laws that allowed adoptees to obtain their records and seek reunions with their birth mothers. Once I had those, I was able to find my birth name, my

birth mother's name, and a list of resources to pursue should I desire to reconnect with her. It was soon after that I learned the bulk of my biological family lives in, or near, Edmonton, Alberta.

With all my biological family members, there was a sense of connection and belonging that seemed to exist on an instinctual level. "[...] Many Indigenous cultures teach that we carry the memories of our ancestors in our physical being. As such, we are immediately connected to those who have gone before us" (Anderson, 2016, p.5). I feel a strong sense of family with those who raised me. My adoptive parents are my mother and father in every sense, and I love my brother and my aunt as well, although I have no genetic ties to any of them. On the other hand, I felt immediately part of my biological family, and experienced a sense of connection that went far beyond shared interests or simple biology. I have no easy way to describe it, except that it was a feeling I had found something I was searching for: my people. They told me I reminded them of my birth mother's father, who had his Metis status (See Appendix A.8: Grandfather's Metis Status Card). He was one of the people in the family to really connect with, and take pride in, his Indigenous heritage.

I am Cree, Irish, French, and British, and any potential number of other things. I have no idea what my biological father's heritage is, although my biological mother is certain that part of his heritage was First Nations. On my biological mother's side, I am the grand-child of a government certified Metis man, yet have been told that I cannot claim Metis status for myself. I am a living embodiment of colonization, subjugation, and struggle: part oppressor, part oppressed. I am, to some degree, a modern variation of Edward Said's "Other" (1979), and exist in a place similar in ways to what Homi Bhabha describes as the Third Space.

#### **1.2.4 Finding my Place in Graduate Studies**

When I formally started my M.A., my area of study was Society, Culture, and Politics of Education (S.C.P.E.). At the time, there were no Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements, and certainly no mandatory inclusion of Indigenous culture in the curriculum. Education was as it always had been in Canada: Eurocentric and colonial (Battiste, 2013; Battiste & Henderson, 2009, 2000).

My goal became the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, histories, and ways of being into the mainstream classroom. To this end, my first proposed thesis involved curricular reform. I felt the government had an obligation to Indigenous nations over which it had control. I wanted my thesis to show the ongoing damage caused by subjugating and ignoring the colonised populace. This initial plan was dropped when the B.C. government did exactly what I had envisioned. Aboriginal Enhancement Agreements appeared, and curricular reform was promised (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015, 2013). The 2013 Ministry of Education's document, *Exploring Curriculum Design*, had as a guiding principle to include Indigenous perspectives and knowledge. This was seen as an important step in developing mutual understanding and respect. The 2015 document, *Aboriginal World Views and Perspectives in the Classroom: Moving Forward*, reiterated that First People's principles of learning are applicable for all. Two themes are developed: strengths-based, learning-centred practice, and overcoming racism. Indigenous peoples were finally being given a voice in mainstream education. I felt this logically led to my next thesis question: what should this change look like and how can Indigenous communities become more engaged in self-determining of the education that children experience? The concept was good, but too large a scope. The time requirement for interviews alone was far more



than would be reasonable for a Masters level thesis. As I struggled with how to reign in the scope of my proposed research, I enrolled in a course where a group of students were invited by the Ceremonial Leader to witness the Sun Dance ceremony (Hallowell, 2010; Pettipas, 1994). This experience was facilitated by Doctors Cash Ahenakew and Vanessa Andreotti (University of British Columbia 2016). I felt that beyond simply experiencing another culture first-hand, the Sun Dance might provide a means to help me better connect with my own Indigenous heritage. My ancestry was from a different nation, but one which lived in the same region and also included Sun Dances as part of their culture. After taking the Sun Dance course, Dr. Andreotti suggested that instead of focussing on the classroom as it is, I could consider what I learned from attending the Sun Dance and reflect on the effects of immersing people from one knowledge system into a totally different knowledge system. The Sun Dance provided a plethora of experiences to draw on, and offered new means by which to come to know the world. This new area of research excited me. For my thesis research, I changed my methodological approach from action research to the autoethnographical approach from which I could reflect and develop my memories and experiences of engaging within a ceremonial context.

After attending a second Sun Dance in 2016, I was able to start reflecting on everything I went through to arrive at this place in my journey. I realize now that my questions never really changed, only the focus. I am still concerned about the place of Indigenous peoples in a settler education system and how best to address the needs of a classroom consisting of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. After looking back at myself, my life, and what I have gone through, I realize that a major part of what brought me here, and what I received from the Sun Dance, is an acceptance of my position as a person of two worlds both political and existential (Ahenakew, 2016). My identity is experienced as neither entirely coloniser nor colonised, nor am

I truly attempting to bridge the two worlds. What I have realised is that I exist in a third space (Moraweski, 2016; Richardson, 2016; Reyes, 2015; Rochielle & Carpenter, 2015; Meredith, 1998; Bhabha, 1997; Rutherford, 1990) that shares connections with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. My identity is tied to, but separate from, other cultures. My hope now is that by sharing this space it may help others to realise that many peoples' existence is half way between established worlds. It is not a simple process, nor one with any kind of end point, but a continually fluctuating state of becoming. Third space, as I use it, should not be confused as a means of bridging cultural divides in order for those from opposite sides to interact, but as a place of comfort for the displaced who belong at the same time to both and neither cultures. For me, life is a verb, not a noun, and this thesis explores the reality of how I have come to live in a perpetual state of change, adaptation, and growth.

### **1.2.5 The Sun Dance**

In July, 2015, I had the honour of being able to participate in a Sun Dance (Hallowell, 2010; University of Ottawa, 2009; Pettipas, 1994; Spier, 1921; Dorsey, 1903) in southern Alberta, along with a number of others who had learned about the Sun Dance through the University of British Columbia (UBC). The Sun Dance course was a result of a vision and invitation to support the ceremony by Keith and Karen, who are Elders and the holders of this particular Sun Dance. Both at the site and after our departure from it, many members of the class discussed their experiences with each other frequently. A few took time to reflect on what happened in other ways. Everyone had different experiences, many of which might best be described as emotional or spiritual, or even as a blend of physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. Regardless of individual experiences, everyone felt it made them better people, and for those of us in education, better teachers.

A focus of this thesis is to understand and explain how my experiences at the Sun Dance influenced my life and my way of grounding myself as an educator by exploring those experiences, feelings, thoughts, and reflections. Through an analytical and evocative autoethnographic approach (Ellis et al., 2011), my intention, in part, is to challenge my readers to study their own lives and practices and reflect on what influences their decisions.

Like many of my group-mates, I grew up in a Cartesian culture that valued the mind and body above, and apart from, emotions and spirit. I adhered to this mind/body duality and dominance for most of my life, until I was about thirty and started having spiritual encounters. The encounters were small at first, and infrequent, but they gently pushed me towards exploring my Indigenous heritage and spirituality. In the summer of 2015, two months before my thirty-third birthday, my journey took me to the Sun Dance in a further attempt to understand myself and where I came from. The Sun Dance was a fascinating and enlightening experience for me. The concept that a person, or an experience, could be more than a summary of processes, is not one I understood nor adhered to prior to my experiences at the ceremony.

Since being at the Sun Dance, I have started embracing the medicine wheel model of being. The medicine wheel represents the interconnectedness of all things, and the balance needed to maintain a happy and healthy life (Iseke, 2013; Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>2</sup>; University of Ottawa, 2009; McCabe, 2008; Coyhis & Simonelli, 2005; Deloria Jr., 2003; Cajete, 2000; Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1996). The four parts of the Medicine Wheel represent the physical, the emotional, the mental, and the spiritual. I make no claims that I am a fully balanced person in all aspects of the Medicine Wheel, or that I am an expert in that world view, merely that it influences how I try

to be in the world day to day. Events at the Sun Dance made me aware that the four parts of my Medicine Wheel were not in harmony. I do not believe I will ever fully understand all elements of my experiences in Alberta. Perhaps part of it was due to my immediate connection to the land, an ancestral echo calling me home through the generations. Certainly, I left the Sun Dance feeling a deeper desire to travel northward to see where my Cree ancestors once lived. Between the discomfort of the heat, and the strangeness of so much flat land, I think that it would have been normal for me to feel out of place, yet I was not emotionally unsettled. I missed the mountains and trees of the coast, but I was not uncomfortable with the landscape. The plants and animals were different, but not so strange as to be beyond my ability to build a relationship with them.

I learned a great deal about myself by being there, more than I have yet realized. Since returning, I have continued to reflect on the trip to the Sun Dance, something I have seldom done with any class post-completion. There are things that have come from the trip that I do not feel I fully understand yet. For example, I cannot recall dreaming much or at all for most of the last six to eight years. Although, as Cajete, 2000 says, “dreams and visions are a natural means for accessing knowledge and establishing relationship to the world” (p. 71). I mentioned this in conversation while at the Sun Dance site, and in the two months or so since that night I had incredibly vivid dreams that helped strengthen my connection to my spirit animals. Indigenous knowledge is often connected to the unconscious and may surface through dreams, ceremonies, visions, and other such metaphysical occurrences (Kovach, 2012; Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>2</sup>; Wilson, 2008; Deloria Jr., 2003; Cajete, 2000). There are two spirit animals that have come to me in visions over the years; they help to guide my decisions and support me when I need it. In Vancouver, they are typically distant and only visit on occasion. At the Sun Dance, I was

surprised to see how present they were. They were with me every day of the trip, and remained much closer to me for a couple of months following my return.

One of my most powerful experiences at my first Sun Dance was a Naming Ceremony (Smith, 2012; Toelken, 2009; Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs & the Elders Advisory Committee, 2007; Deloria Jr., 2003; Lake, 1991). Following the gift exchange that ends the week of the Sun Dance, I had the rare honour of being adopted into the tribe and given a name that had come to the Elder in a dream or vision. The ceremony is special and I do not believe it is my right to attempt to describe it. The name, however, belongs to me now. It is part of me. The spirit name is Nattoo ain nis soo, the English translation is Vision Quest Messenger. A vision quest is when a person removes themselves from the community and enters nature in order to speak with, and hear, the spirits and creator, to attain knowledge or ask for assistance. Where one goes varies from nation to nation, as do the details of the ceremony that must be undertaken before, during, and following the vision quest. In many cultures, interpretation of one's visions by Elders is necessary in order to obtain meaning (Cajete, 2000; Elk, 1989). I am not sure why I was granted that spirit name, but some of the Elders in attendance were surprised. They told me it was a powerful name with great significance. One said that it meant I had the gift of interpreting visions. Another asked me if I had any experience with visions or communing with spirits, and I told them about my two spirit animals (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006; Lake, 1991). They were not surprised and said it made sense with the name I was given. My spirit name suggests that I am a person who is able to understand visions and is close to the spirits. I have had encounters with two spirit-like animal creatures, or visions that have animal-like forms. From discussing them with Elders, I have come to understand that they are what people tend to mean by spirit guides or spirit animals. One Elder has told me that it is rare for a person to have one spirit they interact

with, let alone the two who seem to come to me. Perhaps part of my stronger connection to my spirits comes from my embracing of the medicine wheel. As I grow stronger emotionally and spiritually, my ability to connect with my spirits increases as well.

Spirit is central to ceremony (Iseke, 2013; Kanu, 2011; Cajete, 2000; Elk, 1989), and is the aspect of Indigenous Cosmology least understood by Western science. Spirit cannot be easily qualified or quantified. From my understanding, there is no tangible way to prove or disprove the existence of my spirit animal companions, but nevertheless they are there (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006; Lake, 1991). My interactions with them are part of my search, and experience of, lived reality, and not considered abnormal. I am emotionally strong, physically healthy, and mentally sound. I am intelligent, and a capable scholar. I also believe that there is more to nature and the world than can be observed and measured. I believe in spiritual beings that may or may not take animal shape and commune with people. I do not know what the true nature of these entities are, nor do I feel it matters. Similarly, I know that all creation came from some source, but I do not know what this source is, and I accept that it could be an intelligent creator just as much as it could have been a random cosmological event. In the process of becoming a more complete, complex, and balanced person, I have come to accept that there are some things in life I will never know, never understand, and/or never control. The Sun Dance helped me to let go of that which was beyond me. It did not teach me to stop questioning, or to blindly accept things. I still have questions and I still am curious, but now I feel more human as well. I am not the same socially and emotionally disconnected person I was. I am not perfect, but no one is, and that is fine. I have learned that it will take more than just a Western style education and exercise to become the most complete person I can be. It will take spirit, and it will take help from others, such as the Elders at the Sun Dance and the traditional values they exemplified (patience,

humility, respect, kindness, community, and thankfulness). It will come from without (nature, Elders, friends, and family) and from within (spirits and reflection). That is the true value of the Sun Dance. I learned there are many ways of being a human and existing day to day, and that all these ways are equally valid. I learned that embracing difference does not mean adopting those differences, nor does it necessitate changing how one is already. There is a place for everyone at the Sun Dance. The Medicine Wheel exists in everyone and connects everything. It is up to each person to find the way of being that works best for them, and then to share that sense of joy and wholeness with the world. The Sun Dance was about the individual within, and working on that, growing strong, so that we may connect with and help the greater community of life and being that forms the world as a whole.

### **1.3 Guiding Research Questions**

- Why did the Sun Dance have such a strong impact on me?
- How did participation in the Sun Dance increase my knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures?
- How did participation in Indigenous ceremony, specifically the Sun Dance, help me to both understand and strengthen my third space identity?
- Considering my pre-existing pursuit of social justice in my personal and professional lives, how did reflection and study on my Sun Dance experience help me to grow as a critical ontologist?

## **1.4 Chapter Summaries**

The following is a summary of the chapters presented in this thesis. I have made a conscious effort to lay out my thoughts in a linear fashion, but I also include elements of storytelling. This thesis is my story, and I am attempting to be the reader's guide through this journey.

Chapter one provides the introduction to the study, discussing the background, the proposed research, and how I relate to it. The guiding questions for the overall study are provided, as these will help to shape the lines of inquiry I initially pursue, and they will later be used to help organize and present the data gathered.

In chapter two, I start with a brief discussion of how this proposed study differs from previous research regarding the Sun Dance, and why I feel it is important. I then provide a history of the Sun Dance and examine the effects colonization had on the Sun dance, and ceremony in general. The effort made by colonial powers to destroy that which they neither understood nor could exert control over is emphasized. Next, I present examples of how there has been a shift in recent generations away from the colonial hegemony. Much of this is thanks to Canadian courts recognizing Indigenous rights and title in regards to traditional territory. I follow this by looking at how ceremony is a tool of Indigenous colonial resistance and cultural resurgence, and I connect these concepts to the Sun Dances I participated in. Finally, I end by discussing the concept of third space and how it relates to a person who is a product of colonization.

Chapter three presents the theoretical framework for the thesis. My theoretical framework has four key parts: Indigenous ways of being, third space, critical theory and critical race theory, and critical ontology. In the section on Indigenous ways of being I provide an Indigenous-based



research paradigm as a basis for understanding my discussions about Indigenous ceremony and the significance of interconnectivity (Brayboy, et al., 2014; Calderon, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Battiste, 2013; Cornthassel, 2012; Kovach, 2012; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Deloria Jr., 2003; Cajete, 2000). Third space is a concept useful in discussing how new spaces of cultural engagement can be created when opposing cultures come into conflict such as during colonisation (Moraweski, 2016; Richardson, 2016; Meredith, 1998; Bhabha, 1997; Rutherford, 1990). These new spaces, and the people who occupy them, exist in a hybridized third space connected to, but different from, the parent cultures. This at times allows them to navigate both cultures, but just as often results internally in feelings of detachment, and externally in ostracization by members of both coloniser and colonised communities. Critical theory and critical race theory are schools of thought that took form in the Frankfurt school of philosophy during the 1930s and 1940s (Neuman, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Conquergood, 1991). They are primarily concerned with social power structures, such as how race, gender, culture, and political affiliations shape social interactions and limit (or not) one's freedoms and agency in a given society. Critical ontology, as it is used here, is a philosophy created by Joe Kincheloe, which calls for a combination of Indigenous and non-Indigenous philosophies and methodologies (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>1</sup>). Critical ontology was devised from a combination of Indigenous philosophy and critical race theory. It bears similarities to third space theory in many regards; however, third space focusses on the sociocultural impacts of cultural hybridity while critical ontology is more concerned with creating practical forms of philosophical and methodological hybridity. Critical ontology allows for a person to adhere to multiple, seemingly irreconcilable philosophical models, without having to merge them, nor having to submit one to the other. With critical ontology, the various epistemologies are considered of equal value, and

any of them may be drawn upon at any given time depending on what best suits the situation. In this thesis, I refer often to my own third space, which is sociocultural, political, and philosophical. I use critical ontology to describe the philosophical aspect of this multifaceted way of being, while I use third space to describe the lived reality of my being. In the process of this, I have come to appreciate that many students also exist in their own hybrid realities which needs to inform my teaching in order to create an ethical classroom that promotes academic success and personal, holistic, well-being.

Chapter four outlines my methodology. It is often a difficult thing for a person to be both a part of, and separate from, the cultures with which they are most closely connected. As an Indigenous, Two-Spirited, polyamorous, non-theistic spiritual person, fitting into the primarily white, male, heterosexual, Christian, Western-European, able-bodied hegemony has often been difficult. Having both severe learning disabilities and chronic depression has made me an outsider in my education as well. My identity exists in a sociocultural third space somewhere between traditional Indigenous peoples and colonial Europeans, with neither side fully claiming me, nor I fully claiming either of them. It is this perpetual state of being while non-being that ultimately led to my interest in adopting an autoethnographic approach which is a combined autobiographical and ethnographical method giving a voice to the marginalised in a way that is relatable to the reader.

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273)

In Chapter five, I finally come to my memories and experiences of the Sun Dance, and discuss some of the reasons as to why the Sun Dance was so impactful on my life. My two summers at a Sun Dance in southern Alberta provided me with the time and resources to reflect on myself, my place, my needs, and how I relate to others in all situations (personal and professional). I came to realize I occupy a third space (Rutherford, 1990) pieced together from a variety of communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner, 2015). The result is a unique identity and world view that shapes how I navigate life and society. Here, I highlight experiences from the Sun Dance that were significant in some way, either at the time or upon reflection. With each memory, I try my best to recount the event, provide a critical discussion based in academic research, and attempt to link it to other aspects of myself and my life.

With chapter six, we conclude the journey by looking back at where we have walked and what I gained by it. I begin with a return to the purpose of my study and a description of what insights I gained from my reflections. In the next section, I briefly discuss some further revelations I had during the writing of this thesis, unconnected to the Sun Dance but nevertheless of relevance to my story. I then point out the strengths and limitations of utilising an autoethnographic approach. This is followed by a discussion of how my thesis could be applied in a more practical sense, including logical changes to the praxis of teaching that could be drawn from my findings. Finally, speculation about future research into the subject area is presented as suggestions for what might be the next logical investigations.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 The Sun Dance as Subjective Experience**

For my literature review, I feel it is important to give an overview of the Sun Dance and its significance to ensure that the reader is familiar with the ceremony and its history, but first there is the important question of why conduct this study at all. The Sun Dance was, at one time, a major focus for anthropologists because of its fundamental cultural significance to a huge segment of the First Nations populations across the plains. As with numerous other Indigenous ceremonies, it was documented in great detail, mostly by European males such as George Dorsey (1903) who is discussed later in this chapter. This study operates under the assumption that such outside observers are incapable of capturing and understanding the nuances and essence of first-hand experience and, therefore, the significance of the experience to those who participate in the Sun Dance. More recently, the Sun Dance has become a matter of focus for scholars interested in the deeper sociocultural, psychological, and spiritual significance of the rituals done by the participants (Ahenakew, in press; Hallowell, 2010; Cajete, 2000; Pettipas, 1994; Elk, 1989).

Historical accounts came primarily from Eurocentric, academic observers. When they focussed on the actions and beliefs of the participants, it was through the perspective of the non-participating observer. No single person can clearly identify what makes the Sun Dance significant; the significance is made through the shared experiences of all participants, as well as the interconnectivity between people, place, and spirit. The experience is not centred in the individual, but in how the individual connects with themselves, others, the world, and the unseen forces that surround and connect everything (Simpson, 2014).

That sacred ecology of mind is a consequence of long residence in traditional territory and enduring spiritual and intellectual relationships between people, clans, and landscape (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 365)

Knowledge is intrinsically connected to land, meaning is built by community, and the interconnectedness of persons and place create a subjective experience of layered meanings that can neither be fully appreciated nor observed by emotionally, spiritually, and mentally detached observers.

I went to the Sun Dance with my own unconscious stresses that I had, at the time, no intention of addressing. I assume others must go through similar experiences. Thoughts, memories, and experiences can affect people in a variety of ways and it can be easy for many to overlook the pressures that build up on a daily basis. Through nature, community, and spirit, the Sun Dance provides a variety of means to help ease and release these stored tensions. How these stresses are specifically dealt with vary from person to person, but each exists within a ceremonial context. The acts of fasting, sweating, dancing, piercing, smudging, and smoking their pipes help the dancers enter into a state of being where they offer themselves to the creator and consequently for the good of the family, community, and world (Ahenakew, in press; Owen, 2013). For the helpers, that release may come from building and running the site of the Sun Dance (Hallowell, 2010). What then of the people who come to witness? They experience a release of stress through witnessing and supporting the ceremony. I believe, that in part, it is the sensations of music, dancing, and ceremony that help them find a sense of being and peace. The Sun Dance gives many opportunities to pray and to celebrate, but it also gives endless opportunities to talk and socialise, which are equally important (Holmes, 2012). I believe that to

understand the significance of the Sun Dance, one cannot simply look at the individual participants and question what is happening internally; one must become part of the experience and seek to understand that purpose and meaning exist between and beyond people.

Anthropologists have traditionally focussed on the physical, but ceremony, knowledge, and wholeness of person must include the mental, emotional, and spiritual as well. The Sun Dance ceremony touches all these dimensions of a holistic human being.

The Sun Dance gave me time, space, and means to help make me aware of the influences that formed me. At my first Sun Dance, an Elder told me that the ceremony was a means of getting a person's medicine wheel realigned, so long as the person was open to it. Both times I attended the Sun Dance were completely different experiences because of my interactions with others. The ceremony basically stayed the same, but the people changed, and that changed everything. At the core, this is a study about relationality: how one relates to themselves and everything around them (Wilson, 2008). It was my relationship with academia that brought me to the Sun Dance through a summer course at UBC (University of British Columbia, 2016), and it was the relationships of the instructors, Cash Ahenakew and Vanessa Andreotti, with Keith, the Elder who held the Sun Dance, that allowed the course to be created at all.

## **2.2 Origin of the Sun Dance**

While I was at my first Sun Dance, an Elder told me the story of Scar Face. Scar Face is a story that, among other things, tells about the origins of the Sun Dance. Each nation has their own stories to explain where various rituals come from. The stories change subtly over time, and from teller to teller. I do not recall for certain if the Elder who shared the story with me gave me permission to share it with others, and so I am not retelling it here. Gregory Cajete, in his book

Native Science (2000), provides a version of the Scar Face story and explains some of the significance these sorts of stories can have.

The story of Scar Face is a teaching story that reflects not only the courage of an individual in overcoming obstacles of cosmic proportions, but also the nature of the way Indigenous people viewed relationships with all things, people, animals, earth, and the sky. The story's about "face", that is, the spiritual nature of character and learning how to develop our true selves. The story is also about journeying to the centre, to "that place that Indian people talk about," the place of spirit, both within ourselves, and in the world as a whole. It is in "that place" that knowledge and gifts of spirit can be obtained. It is a place of spiritual vision, a place that one must learn how to seek, a place whose inherent message is to be found in the landscape of our souls and that of the wondrous multiverse in which we live (p. 250-251)

As I remember it, the practitioners of the Sun Dance believe that the ceremony has always existed. One thing I was told during the Sun Dance course is that, to the people hosting the ceremony, there is today, tomorrow, and the day after. There is also yesterday, and the day before yesterday. Beyond that, time is simply the past and the future, and there is no clear distinction between the two. In my mind, the description made the time we occupy seem like a leaf floating on a great lake of time. In the centre of the leaf is us. As one looks across to the edges of the leaf, they can see all the way to the day before yesterday and the day after tomorrow. Beyond that is beyond the leaf, and the waters are too vast for us to ever see across.

### **2.3 Historical Context of the Sun Dance and Colonization**

From the time of the Royal Proclamation of 1763, until the Gradual Civilization Act of 1857, official imperial policy had generally been to gain Indian approval and cooperation when

wanting to settle new territory or engage in any business west of the existing colonies. The goal of the 1857 act was to enfranchise any Indian who was educated, free from debt, and of good moral character. These Indians could apply to receive a grant of land within the colony; however, enfranchisement meant loss of Indian status. The Act's goal of gradual civilizing was to be accomplished largely through education. The first residential school was opened in the late 1840s in Upper Canada, and, by 1879, residential schools were adopted throughout the country (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

Self-government by the various tribes was seen to be a serious block to the enfranchisement of the Indian. By 1863 not one person had opted to take up the offer of being enfranchised (Milloy, 2008). With missionaries and Indian Agents lobbying the government to take away Indian self-government, the Federal authorities passed the first Indian Act in 1876. The Act supported Prime Minister Macdonald's words that "Indians were like children, like persons underage, incapable of the management of their own affairs" (Macdonald cited in Milloy, 2008). For the first time, control of Indian life passed into the hands of the Department of Indian Affairs. The act spelled out in detail that First Nations would lose self-determination as to all aspects of their existence. Expecting First Nations to either die out or be absorbed into the European hegemony, anthropologists began to take special interest in First Nations due to the awe and admiration they inspired in much of the European populace.

The missionaries and Indian agents both recognized that the cultural practices of the First Nations tribes created a close spirit of community and cultural identity. This was a hindrance in the civilizing of the Indian child through the education offered in the residential schools. In 1885, the Indian Act was amended to outlaw potlaches which were viewed by the Canadian authorities



as debilitating economic activities that prevented the advancement of the individual by hindering the acquisition of wealth, stability, and independence from the tribe (Lutz, 2008). The potlatch was attacked by the missionaries on moral grounds, and by the government due to the notion that it undermined colonial authority (Marker, 2011; Cajete, 2000). This was followed by an amendment to the Indian Act in 1895; Section 114 made the celebration of the Sun Dance, with the attendant piercing of the body, illegal (Pettipas, 1994).

Every Indian or other person who engages in... any Indian festival, dance or other ceremony of which the giving away or paying or giving back of money, goods or articles of any sorts forms a part... and every Indian or other person who engages or assists in any celebration or dance of which the wounding or mutilation of the dead or living body of any human being or animals forms a part... is guilty of an indictable offense (s. 114 of the Indian Act as amended 1895)

The ban of these two ceremonies struck at the heart of the First Nations cultural messages of cohesion, present, past, and future, by destroying the authority of the Elders, belittling tradition, and destroying the passage of historical continuity (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; Chandler, 2013; Chandler & Lalond, 2008, 1998).

The Saskatchewan uprising of 1885 changed the viewpoint of the government. This Indigenous rejection of the Eurocentric colonials strengthened the federal government in its resolve to enforce its policy of gradual civilization. Cultural ceremonies attracted large numbers of First Nations peoples at critical times of the year: spring, summer, and autumn. The Sun Dance, in particular, raised suspicion among authorities who felt it was primarily political, not spiritual, in nature, and used to subvert tribal members against the government (Pettipas, 1994). However, traditional oral histories often deviate from colonial histories. One story told at my first Sun

Dance was that a local governor used to enjoy watching the Sun Dance ceremonies, until one day he brought his wife. She fainted when she saw the piercing ceremony, and from then on he spearheaded the banning of the Sun Dance.

In 1913, Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent of Indian Affairs, issued a directive to his agents to remind them of their responsibilities associated with S. 149, previously s. 114:

...all gatherings which tend to destroy the civilizing influence of the education imparted to Indian children at schools, and which work against the proper influence of agents and farming instructors should be discouraged in every possible way (as cited in Pettipas, 1994, p.124)

The Agents were assisted in the enforcement of their decisions by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (Pettipas 1994). Between 1913 and the end of the Second World War, s. 149 of the Indian Act was sporadically enforced until the section was simply repealed in 1951. Maggie Hodgson writes:

Taking away these and other ceremonies meant taking away the ideas, values and principles basic to community mental health. With the ceremonies went security, ideology, rituals, belongings, beliefs, access to resources, time together, healing and justice (cited in Bell & Napoleon, 2015, p.450)

George Dorsey was among the anthropologists interested in preserving accounts of the lifestyle and ceremonies of First Nations. He was invited to witness the Sun Dances given by the Arapaho in 1901 and 1902. In 1903 he published his version of what he witnessed:

Of all the ceremonies of the Plains Indians, that of the so called "Sun Dance" is probably the most famous but the least understood. On account of the large number of tribes which

performed the Sun Dance, the wide distribution of these tribes, and the popularity of the Sun Dance itself, it has probably been witnessed by more people than has any other ceremony of the Indians of the United States (p.1)

In his publication, he wrote about every part of the ceremony, and included pictures and stories. He also noted and commented on the apparent antipathy to the Sun Dance by the government. The Sun Dance was also studied by Leslie Spier, who wrote a treatise on the development and diffusion of the Sun Dance in 1893, later published in 1921. What he found was that the dance was widespread on the American Plains and practiced by all tribes except the Comanche. All dances had common general features, but each dance had its own particular internal ceremonies and regalia. The dance was usually called for by an Elder claiming a vision.

The problem with most anthropological accounts of the Sun Dance is that they typically describe only the physical aspects of the ceremony, which, while meticulous in details and protocols, do not capture the powerful emotionality and spirituality of the events. Western science lacks tools or models to explain personal experience. Philosophy and Psychology can come close, but these, again, fall short. The experience, like most Indigenous experiences, is holistic by its very nature. To be balanced in body, spirit, emotions, and mind is the ideal of the medicine wheel, and results in a synergistic relationship (Cajete, 2000). The whole cannot be understood when broken down into parts.

#### **2.4 The Loss of Culture and Legacy of Cultural Genocide**

The United Nations' Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, (2008) affirms that Indigenous peoples have the right to their Indigenous knowledge systems and such knowledge cannot be discriminated against. Despite relentless attack by colonial powers, Indigenous culture

and knowledge systems have survived. Indigenous culture and knowledge systems have been denigrated, belittled, criminalized, minimalized, marginalized, transformed and co-opted by the dominate European powers since the early days of colonization (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012; Battiste & Henderson 2009, 2000). Culture is marked by two properties: both content and process. While it is relatively easy to destroy the content (outlawing Sun Dances), the processes are much harder to completely remove. Indigenous learning processes are holistic in nature with links to community backed by measures of respect, reciprocity and responsibility, and grounded both in language and in world view (Chandler, 2013; Marule, 2012). Michael Chandler has made a career studying the relation of youth suicide and cultural continuity. His findings show that Indigenous communities are associated with significantly lower rates of youth suicide when they possess high agency over matters of traditional territory control and governance, as well as a strong connection to language and culture. In communities with lower levels of cultural connection and agency, the suicide rates significantly increase. Agency here is defined by the following: pursuit of self-governance; having some control over education, health, police, and fire services; having constructed cultural facilities within the community; having a majority of women in local government; and having control over family and child services (Chandler & Lalonde, 2008, 1998; Hallett et al., 2007). Language was identified as a particularly strong factor of health and wellbeing in Indigenous communities (Hallett et al., 2007). Of particular interest, Indigenous youth suicide rates in British Columbia are significantly higher than the provincial average, but during the period of 1987 to 1992, less than 10% of the Indigenous bands in the province constituted 90% of the suicides (Chandler, 2013; Chandler & Lalonde, 2008). Those 10% of bands had low levels of agency as previously defined. In those few Indigenous bands that contained a population where at least 50% could carry a conversation in their native language,

there were no suicides (Hallett et al., 2007). Therefore, it would seem proper that all levels of government facilitate the introduction of Indigenous culture and knowledge systems within their school systems. This would also have the benefit of introducing non-Indigenous students to the history of their Indigenous peers, and, hopefully, foster an empathy and understanding of their situation, which, to date, has been largely lacking. Among various Indigenous communities there has been a resurgence of ritual and ceremony, including the Sun Dance, to combat problems arising from generations of coloniality by providing traditional culture, knowledge, and processes.

Reservations, the residential school system, and the forced imposition of European sociopolitical customs are all part of the on-going colonial mandate of Indigenous cultural genocide. The people on these reservations have, in most cases, been forced to adopt European models of governance. Residential schools have left a legacy of trauma-induced emotional and mental health issues. Poverty rates are high, food is often of low quality, and, as a result of all these things, general physical health is poorer than in the general populace. First Nations on reserve have a rate of diabetes three to five times higher than that of other Canadians (Chief Public Health Officer, 2016). Twenty-one percent of tuberculosis cases are among Indigenous peoples (Chief Public Health Officer, 2016). Indigenous people are 1.3 to 1.6 times more likely to develop arthritis (JointHealth, 2013), and are 1.5 to 2 times more likely to develop heart disease than the general Canadian population (Heart Research Institute, 2017).

From a Eurocentric and economic perspective, given the subsequent costs to Canada's public health system, improving the lives of First Nations would seem to be the wisest course of action

for any political body concerned with long-term costs. Control of traditional, unceded, territories, and improvements to civil infrastructure would help a great deal, but what about Indigenous peoples living off reserve, or places where multiple territories overlap making granting of Indigenous-control difficult? What does one do if the location of the First Nation(s) in question is a major urban centre where many cultures overlap? One possible way to mitigate the problems in all locations, urban and otherwise, is to give greater attention to educational practices, and to fund the development of tradition-based language and culture programs.

## **2.5 Breaking Away from Colonial Traditions**

In the last few decades, there has been a re-examination of First Nations' rights to control over their lives and culture: from equal legal freedoms outside of reservations (*R. v. Drybones* 1970), to hunting and fishing rights (Lutz, 2008), to the acknowledgement of the reality of unceded territory and the use of resources within those territories (*Uashat Mak Mani-Utenam and Matimekush-Lac John v. Iron Ore Company of Canada*, 2015; *Saik'uz and Stellat'en First Nations v. Rio Tinto Alcan*, 2015). The increase of Indigenous self-government and economic self-determination necessitates adequate, culturally responsive schooling that may help break the cycle of colonial education and cultural genocide. This is particularly true in British Columbia where Indigenous title has arguably not been extinguished (*Tsilhqot'in Nation v. British Columbia*, 2014; Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada, 1999).

Contemporary ongoing curriculum transformation in British Columbia has woven within it an understanding that "Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge are part of the historical and contemporary foundation of BC and Canada" (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015).

As a result, one of the seven guiding principles for future curriculum development is to integrate

Indigenous world views and knowledge. One of the stated goals is to integrate Indigenous perspectives into curricula to ensure that all learners have opportunities to understand and respect their own cultural heritage as well as that of others, and extend Indigenous perspectives into the entire learning journey (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013). This means that from kindergarten to graduation, students will experience Indigenous perspectives and understanding as an integrated part of what they are learning. It is expected that integration of Indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and culture into the curriculum will address misunderstanding of Indigenous peoples and cultures and give a foundation “for developing mutual understanding and respect” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2013).

Western education has been and is Eurocentric to the exclusion of other epistemologies: how then do teachers trained in the Eurocentric tradition, now being tasked with teaching Indigenous epistemologies from K to 12, become knowledgeable, empathetic and competent to meet the new curriculum? If society is ever going to break out of an Eurocentric cycle of education that continues to perpetuate a colonial agenda of assimilation and an imposition of a history, knowledge, and value system which has consistently devalued Indigenous knowledge systems as well as other minority systems, the provincial school system has to undergo serious change (Smith, 2012). Schooling is an inherently political construct which has since its creation been used to perpetuate social structures and political agendas (Foucault, 1977). Real change is possible, but it requires an appreciation for ethical, socially just, and sometimes socio-politically difficult courses of action (Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, 1996). I believe that critical intellectual engagement which respects various cultures, multiple knowledge systems, and sometimes conflicting belief structures, is not only necessary but also possible.

The perceived dichotomy of dominant and marginalized knowledge systems has been described by Portuguese sociologist B. de Sousa Santos as “abyssal thinking” (Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>2</sup>, p.223). A central issue in teaching both indigenous and non-indigenous students is the inability of students and teachers educated in the colonial mindset to recognize and acknowledge other ways of being and understanding the world. Santos describes this inability as an abyss between the cultures where the gap is so wide that those on one side cannot see those on the other side. The abyssal model holds that any knowledge produced on one side of the divide is so foreign as to be perceived as being non-existent, irrelevant, or primitive by the other side. Indigenous students and teachers who maintain and utilize the knowledge systems of their culture then have to fight against the negative stereotypes of colonial society. The ridicule these people face naturally leads to feelings of inadequacy, embarrassment, and a lack of self-esteem.

The denial of the way of being by those on one side of the abyssal divide about those on the other side allows for the idea of a single homogenous future for all peoples. The vision of a homogenous future then justifies the violence and appropriation of the other carried out to achieve it. Thus, the appropriation and destruction of the non-dominate culture by the dominant culture affirms the universality of the dominant culture’s way of being (Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>2</sup>, 2011). Santos goes on to argue that social justice is inseparable from cognitive justice and thus political resistance must be premised on epistemological resistance (Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>2</sup>).

“The recognition of epistemological diversity beyond scientific knowledge entails a renouncing of any general epistemology” (Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>2</sup>, p. 42). A recognition by the dominant society that those on the other side of the abyssal line possess their own culture does not necessarily translate into a recognition that they may also possess their own epistemology. This then is the central problem: how to ensure that those charged with the education of Indigenous



students through the school system, despite their own Eurocentric upbringing and education, be attuned to the value of Indigenous epistemologies so that those knowledges are taught and recognized as of being on an equal plane to the existing Eurocentric curriculum.

In order to attempt to bridge the abyssal line, one must understand and question the social-historical and political mechanisms of knowledge production. Questioning knowledge production could lead to the legitimization of other ways of being and knowing. The introduction of epistemological controversy in higher education via the exposure to multiple realities requires a relativization of hegemonic knowledge. The cognitive dissonance and destabilization brought by this relativization would increase the capacity of students and teachers to situate themselves in different knowledge systems thus bridging the abyssal divide (Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>2</sup>). Bridging the abyss is not meant to create a new superior knowledge system, but to recognize a plurality of knowledge systems each with their own strengths and weaknesses. “Such epistemological pluralism should [...] support both indigenous and non-indigenous people to expand their frame of references and open new possibilities for thinking, seeing, knowing, relating and being.” (Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>1</sup>, p. 235).

Andreotti et al. (2011<sup>2</sup>) ask the question:

If the traditional way of learning aboriginal knowledge is embodied in an experiential (through ceremony and relationship with the sacred/spirit/land) what, if anything, can be usefully done within the four walls of classrooms or through on line tuition? (p. 49)

Although history and theory can be taught in a classroom setting, in order to bridge the abyss one must experience educational structures from the other side such as by participation in traditional ceremonies.

The Sun Dance course led by Cash Ahenakew and Vanessa Andreotti created a more useful classroom experience by not limiting learning to the classroom itself. By allowing non-Indigenous people to participate in the Sun Dance ceremony, it provided an opportunity for them to learn in a new way and possibly discover tools for better understanding Indigenous concerns and perspectives. The reverse has been happening since the earliest days of colonization. Indigenous people naturally took interest in European culture and practices. Due to colonial suppression of Indigenous ceremonies and culture, Europeans limited their own opportunities to develop meaningful communication with Indigenous peoples. The tools provided to the students by their participation in the Sun Dance could be useful in providing new avenues of communication between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Teacher education could benefit greatly by providing courses in Indigenous ceremony and epistemology.

## **2.6 Ceremony as a Form of Colonial Resistance**

Ceremonies have traditionally been used to educate and to affirm cultural identity. They were and are used to not only teach about the world, but also to connect one to the world and to the community (Hallowell, 2010; Pettipas, 1994). One example was the pipe ceremony that followed each round of dancing. The dancing takes place in a circular structure called an arbour (Elk, 1989). The edge of the arbour is a structure that provides shade for those not in the central, dancing area. Half the arbour is for those witnessing the Sun Dance, a small performance area houses the big drum and singers, and the rest is for those participating in the Sun Dance to rest in between rounds of dancing. Four wide gates lead into the arbour, one from each compass point, marked with coloured flags which helps the structure achieve its role as a visual representation of the Medicine Wheel. Those watching in the arbour took pipes from the dancers and then formed

circles in the shaded area to smoke, pray, and then talk before the pipes were returned. People, who may or may not be strangers, communicated thoughts, feelings, and stories freely with each other with little reservation. Sometimes an Elder would share a memory, sometimes people would ask each other where they came from, what brought them there, and how they felt about the experience, and sometimes groups would sit in relative silence for a few minutes before departing to wherever people wanted to be. There was never any pressure involved, nor expectation, and people who did not want to smoke the pipe were welcome to pass. It was a moment of rest that allowed the spectators in the harbour time to pray, reflect, and connect with the community.

The purpose of rituals is to achieve epistemological pluralism, those educated within the dominant culture must be willing to take part in ceremonies not as outside observers, but as active and willing participants.

Not all aspects of the rituals will be understood by everyone. [...]. The community shares a physical experience marking important changes in the earth [...] and in the lives of individuals [...] to make the person aware of the meaning of life and his or her contribution to the community. [...] The purpose of ceremony is to integrate, to connect the individual with his or her fellow humans and to link the community of people with that of the other life forms (Graveline, 1998, pp. 63)

Due to generations of suppression by colonial powers, much indigenous knowledge has been lost. The Indian Act (1876), and later amendments such as those in 1884 & 1885 which outlawed potlaches and Sun Dances, forced Indigenous peoples to fiercely guard their ceremonies from those outside their communities, in particular from non-indigenous peoples. Although no longer banned, the majority of Sun Dances have remained closed to those not part of the particular Sun

Dance society which holds them. The Sun Dance I attended in southern Alberta is a fortunate and important exception. Although it is one of many Sun Dances in the area, it is the only one that welcomes people of all nations and cultures. Keith, the holder of this Sun Dance, was granted a vision where people of all nations came from the four directions to join him. It is for this reason that he has invited outsiders to come and be a part of the ceremony. The Sun Dance is an important ceremony not only as a method of education and cultural renewal, but also because of its traditional role as a major centre of social convergence and interaction (Hallowell 2010, Cajete 2000, Pettipas 1994). Ceremony helps people to re-centre, heal, and renew relationships with the community, ancestors, and cosmos.

While I was at the ceremony site in Alberta, no one ever said explicitly that the Sun Dance was a form of combating or resisting colonization, but I believe the implication was there. It is sometimes easy to forget that the Sun Dance was made illegal for many years, which is why I am glad that fact was mentioned many times. Over the eight days I was in Alberta, I heard the story of how the Sun Dance was banned at least four or five times. To me, the Sun Dance represents a way of understanding the world that is drastically different from that of the Europeans colonizers. Because it was not understood by the colonists, it was frightening, and looked upon as harmful to the Indigenous peoples (Shrubsole, 2011; Pettipas, 1994). Canadian colonists recognized ceremony as part of religion. Christianity has been the dominant religion of Canadian society since its earliest days. Perhaps if the Sun Dance was done around a crucifix, and if the dancers wore robes, and the musicians were a church choir instead of drummers, and the singing was done in Latin, perhaps then it would have been celebrated instead of banned. Perhaps the piercing would have been seen as holy and pious, instead of barbaric and harmful. The Sun Dance is not Christian though, nor is it part of any sort of religion. At the Sun Dance, there were

people from many different religions. In our student group alone we had at least one Christian, a Jew, an Ifa priest, multiple agnostics and atheists, and a few people who described themselves as “spiritual but not religious”. The group also contained a few Indigenous people, who would often compare the Sun Dance ceremony, and stories from Elders, to the ceremonies and stories they grew up with. One Elder told our group how she enjoyed a spirituality which allowed her to be both a Sun Dancer and sing in a church choir. She did not identify as Christian, she just liked to sing and dance, and so long as she was welcome, she would do so. I believe that this acceptance of all people, and refusal to conform to suppressive European norms, is what made colonists want to destroy Indigenous ceremonies. When you take away ceremony, and language, and land, and history, what is left by which to define a culture or a civilization? The ongoing practice of traditional ceremonies stands as a living testament to the endurance and persistence of Indigenous peoples against assimilation into the colonial hegemony. These types of experiences truly lead to a transformation in consciousness, with a possibility of forming different relationships between Indigenous and settler peoples.

## **2.7 The Importance of Place and Education**

Indigenous knowledges are inevitably linked to land and place (Brayboy et al., 2014; Simpson, 2014; Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>2</sup>; Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Cajete, 2000). Educators need to find ways to bring the classroom outside of the Eurocentric institution if they wish to provide students with the tools to effectively engage with those that do not conform to the hegemony. Battiste & Henderson (2009) write:

[Indigenous Knowledge] is a growing field of inquiry both nationally and internationally, particularly for those interested in educational innovation and problem-solving. It includes Indigenous science, arts, humanities, and legal traditions. Each manifestation

reflects an ecology centered way of life or expresses a sustainable humanity. Each is integral to the renewal and revitalization of [Indigenous Knowledge]. Together they are embodied in relationships, songs, ceremonies, performances, symbols, dramatic representation, and works of art that animate the transmission of [Indigenous Knowledge] and authority from generation to generation. Their purpose is to maintain the integrity of the people and place and the cosmology (p. 5-6)

The Sun Dance is a focal point in the year for many Indigenous cultures, and many people attend multiple Sun Dances. These ceremonies impart a knowledge that cannot be easily disseminated into texts, graphs, or any quantifiable evaluator means. The whole of the event – the people, the arbour, the nature, the music – will always be greater than the parts, but I believe one must be part of it in order to access any true portion of that vast synergistic potential. Vickers (2007) points out that a loss of ceremonies creates a loss of culture, knowledge, and being, leading to destruction of life at all levels: social, environmental, global, and personal. Post-secondary institutions, whose mandate is the education of their students, and the expansion of knowledge including, in this case, Indigenous knowledges, need to recognize the legitimacy of ceremony as an educational medium, and the significance of place to such ceremonies. Sun Dances do not occur in random locations. The one to whom the Sun Dance is gifted must, as their first task, go to the location told to them by the land and spirits where they must construct their Sun Dance ceremony. There is a method to the location, creation, maintenance, and use of things, such as a sweat lodge or arbour, which carries with it a history, culture, and way of being in the world (Shrubsole, 2011; Elk, 1989; Dorsey, 1903). For students to learn these details they must be present and part of the process. The process of educating then becomes a ceremony in itself. For a group of students from a Eurocentric school to be invited to participate in such a ceremony

represents a paradigm shift: the students become exposed to a holistic way of being in the world where not everything can be, nor should be, intellectualized, and emotions are as potentially valid a reason for an act as thought (Cajete, 2000). Such a radical shift runs counter to the typical colonial educational narrative, which is exactly the point.

## **2.8 Third Space as a Post-Colonial Model of Being**

Homi Bhabha created a theory of cultural difference and intermingling that gave rise to the term “third space” and its associated concept of “hybridity” (Richardson, 2016; Janks, 2005; Meredith, 1998; Bhabha, 1997; Rutherford, 1990). Cultural hybridity occurs when two cultures clash, typically through colonisation, and produces people who share heritage with both cultures, and therefore belong to none. These hybrid people create a third culture, the “third space” from elements of both parent cultures, which is different yet similar to them and, in turn, becomes an agent of change as it pushes back on both cultures (Richardson, 2016; Bhabha, 1997). Bhabha posits that all cultures bordering a third space are in a continual process of hybridity, that is, the cultures change in response to each other and the third space that is continually created between them. The in-between (third) spaces disrupt the hegemony, creating new forms of culture without unity or fixity (Janks, 2005; Meredith, 1998; Bhabha, 1997; Rutherford, 1990). Paul Meredith, a Maori scholar, goes further, suggesting that third space provides for a politics of inclusion rather than exclusion, as the third space population grows (1998). Third space creates new sites of identity formation with innovative means of cultural collaboration. Put another way, it is a counter-hegemonic social lubricant that aids in the translation, negotiation, and mediation of otherwise conflicting cultures (Meredith, 1998).

The Sun Dance gave me a chance to work through some of the damage done by colonial society while developing a deeper understanding of myself and my connection to place. I began by questioning how reality is a subjective experience formed through interactions with others. I stopped looking at the relationships between people, and began to question the relationships one has with themselves, specifically, my relationships with myself. The Sun Dance had provided me with a different way of understanding the world, but my life and being is a product of events. I realized that if I wanted to better understand how I connect with others in the way I do, I first had to come to understand who I am and how I came to be. It was this line of thinking that ultimately led me to adopt an autoethnographic approach for my work. It is my hope that those reading might not only be able to share in my self-discovery, but might also be inspired to undertake their own inner journey to deepen their understandings of who they are and why they do what they do.

This concept of third space gave me a starting point to begin analysing myself and my experiences. I identify as Indigenous yet I grew up in the Canadian hegemony. I have attended Eurocentric schooling my entire life, yet I do all I can to question and push back against colonial cultural norms. I see both sides, but do not fit neatly with either. At the individual level, though, the realization that a person can create their own space is a powerful thing. I took Homi Bhabha's concept of third space as a tool to begin explaining how my own identity has been formed over time in a piecemeal fashion from fragments of other cultures that I felt a connection to. To me, third space is a place one makes for themselves, like an island floating in the space between dominant cultures. I am aware of the other cultures around me, but I am apart from them. I take from them that which suits me, and learn to leave behind that which only weighs me down. I do not believe I would have had the emotional or spiritual insight to understand this



position, or its significance, had it not been for my experiences with ceremony, most notably, the Sun Dance.

I do not agree that the third space always pushes back on the dominating cultures, nor do I agree that all third space individuals will see themselves as such, but it is a useful tool when trying to understand how a person can exist between two (or more) sociocultural worlds. Cultural hegemony is a powerful thing, and many people feel an innate desire to belong to a group, especially a well-established cultural group. I believe it is entirely possible, and typically expected by colonial powers, for the dominating hegemony to assimilate subjugated peoples (Menzies & Butler, 2008, 2007, 2001; Menzies, 2006). One need only look at the disappearance of languages around the world, or the geopolitical effects of globalized capitalism, to see how a powerful dominating culture can destroy an ancient way of being (Romaine, 2015; Battiste, 2013).

## Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

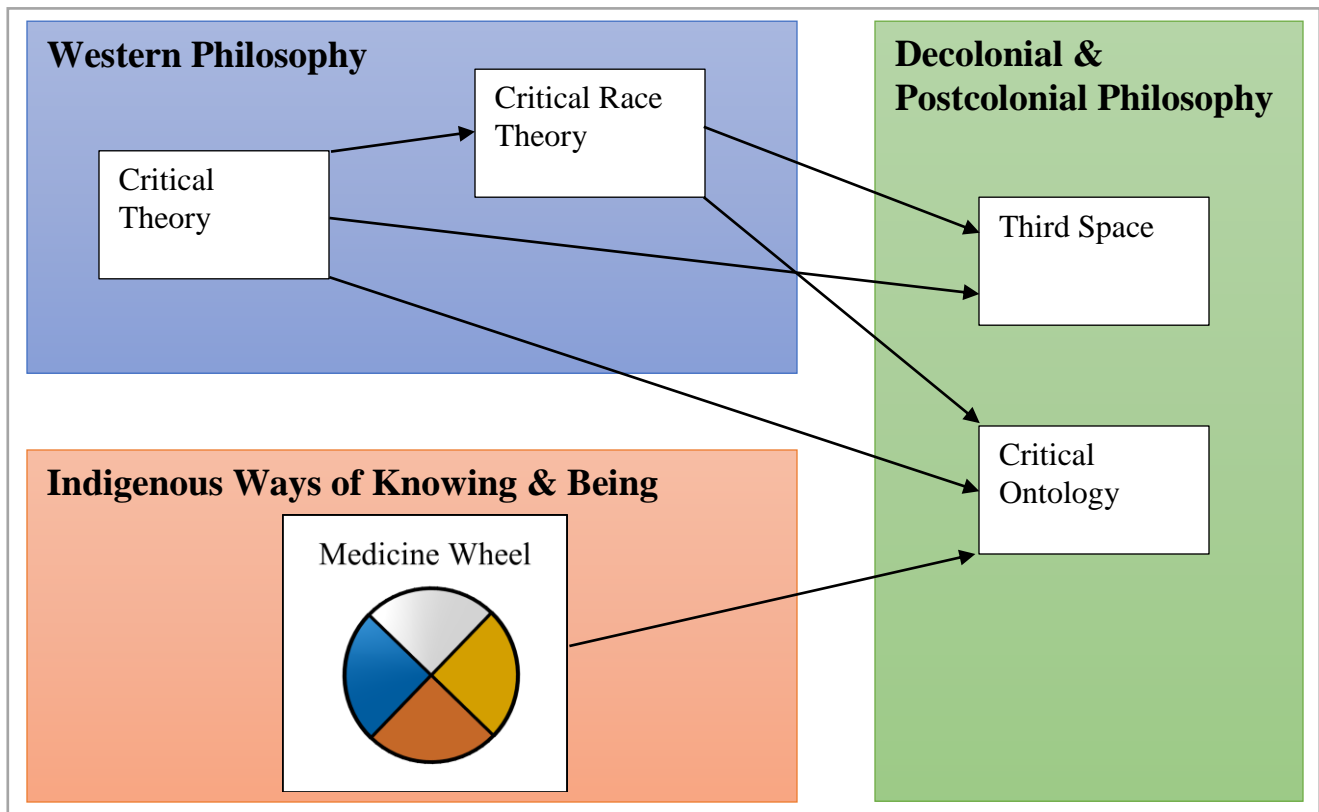


Fig 3.1 Relationships among philosophies referenced in my framework

The theoretical basis for my thesis is critical ontology which is a philosophy that takes a multifaceted approach. Below I provide overviews of multiple philosophies that are inherently linked in this framework and consequently inform my work. Critical theory is an umbrella term for the work of a number of philosophers and social scientists who identify and critique social power inequities in an attempt to correct them (Neuman, 2014). Critical race theory is a subset of critical theory concerned with systemic racism in society, culture, and politics (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Third space is a postcolonial theory that took the power dynamics of critical theory and critical race theory and applied it to colonisation with an emphasis on cultural hybridisation (Bhabha, 1997; Rutherford, 1990). Critical ontology holds that one can achieve

greater perspective and understanding by looking at the world through multiple lenses rather than simply adhering to a strict hegemonic, Cartesian, western perspective.

A critical ontology involves the process of reconnecting human beings on a variety of levels and in numerous ways to a living social and physical web of reality, to a living cosmos (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>1</sup>, p. 335).

Critical ontologists' interest in multiple perspectives puts great value on Indigenous knowledges and ways of being for the insights they grant into the interconnectedness of all things and the construction of knowledge (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>1</sup>)

Native philosophy has always been broad-based. It is not based on rational thought alone but incorporates to the fullest degree all aspects of interactions of "human in and of nature," that is, the knowledge and truth gained from interaction of body, mind, soul, and spirit with all aspects of nature (Cajete, 2000, p.64)

In order to understand my philosophical positionality, it is necessary to understand the fundamentals of all these philosophies, and accept that no single one will fully describe my viewpoint. I use critical ontology to describe the multifaceted way in which I understand the world mentally, while third space cultural hybridisation is useful in describing the process by which I create a unique sociocultural environment for myself. Underlying and influencing both my third space and critical ontology is my academic training in critical theory, critical race theory, Indigenous histories, and the lessons I have gained through participation in Indigenous culture and ceremonies such as the Sun Dance.

### **3.1 Indigenous Ways of Knowing & Being**

“Relationality sums up the whole Indigenous research paradigm” (Wilson, 2008, p.70-71). An Indigenous research paradigm is made up of four parts: ontology (multiple realities or relationships), epistemology (a process of relationships), axiology (relational accountability), and methodology (how things are done). These are inseparable and form an unbroken circle where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Wilson, 2008). All parts of the circle have to do with relationships. The ontology and epistemology are based upon a process of relationships that form a mutual reality. The axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining accountability to these relationships. How things are related is more important than the things themselves. This paradigm is more than a way of knowing, it involves the cosmos as well as culture, world views, language, stories, spiritualities, and the land. Indigenous ontologies often consist of multiple realities based on internal and external relationships (Battiste, 2013, 2010; Kovach, 2012; Smith, 2012; Wilson 2008; Deloria, 2003; Cajete, 2000). To interact with something, even to simply observe it, is to form a relationship with it. To understand something requires one to build upon those relationships.

The importance of relationships aligns strongly with the common Indigenous belief that all things contain spirit, and spirit connects all things.

Spirituality comes from the process of exploring and coming to know the nature of the living energy that moves in each of us, through us, and around us. This knowledge is considered completeness in its most profound form. (Cajete, 2000, p. 261)

Although this spiritual presence or energy is intangible, invisible, and may be unknowable to most people, there is an acceptance that it exists. The presence of spirit necessitates a respect for

all things, animate or not. The interconnectedness of body, mind, and spirit is represented in the medicine wheel which must be balanced for a person to lead a happy, healthy life. The medicine wheel represents an Indigenous cosmology that puts humanity on equal footing with the rest of the natural world and stresses the importance of leading a life that is interconnected with the rest of the world (Cajete, 2000).

In the medicine wheel, the four quadrants of body, emotion, mind, and spirit are linked together, but are not equally served by all things in life. Sport can strengthen body, and classrooms can strengthen mind, but these do little for emotional and spiritual growth. This need has given rise over the countless generations to various social and ceremonial practices which, as one Elder told me, work to “realign” one’s wheel. A shared set of structures and tools for learning about spirit – such as the Sun Dance – are used in similar ways by different Indigenous peoples (Cajete, 2000). These practices reconnect the participants with the unseen (spirit) world, while at the same time operating on a more mundane level to build stronger communal bonds.

The essence of Native spirituality is not religion in the Western sense of the word, but rather a set of core beliefs in the sanctity of personal and community relationships to the natural world, which are creatively acted upon and expressed at both the personal and communal levels (Cajete, 2000, p. 14)

Spiritual belief and practice then connects individuals to each other, as well as to the land upon which ceremony is built and practiced. Knowledge is passed implicitly and explicitly through ceremony. This creates an inextricable link between people, place, and the beliefs and practices which arise over time from that place in order to maintain a good way of being.

Because all knowledge is connected to place, it can seldom be translated to new locations (Brayboy et al., 2014; Calderon, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Cornthassel, 2012; Smith, 2012). To Indigenous peoples, everyone has a connection to the world around them. The essence of a person has a genealogy that can be traced back to an earth parent. One does not stand alone but shares with animate and inanimate beings a relationship based on a shared essence of life. The arguments of Indigenous people based on spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape, and to stones, rocks, insects and other things seen and unseen are difficult for western systems of knowledge to accept or deal with (Smith, 2012).

### **3.2 Critical Theory**

Critical theory was first developed by the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, most notably Horkheimer and Adorno in the 1930s and 1940s (Neuman, 2014). It is not a single well-defined theory, but a group of related theories and concepts modified over time with a common focus on critiquing the sociopolitical influences behind cultural practices with the intent of invoking change (Neuman, 2014; Conquergood, 1991). Critical theory holds that lived reality is a subjective experience consisting of multiple layers of power dynamics, personal understandings, and social exchanges. It rejects positivist notions of a singular objective truth. Contemporary philosophers such as Michel Foucault have continued to develop critical theory and use it to explain the power struggles of society, which in turn has inspired a number of decolonial and post-colonial philosophers such as Homi Bhabha and Joe Kincheloe. In critical theory, research is not and cannot be an apolitical act, nor can the researcher be fully removed from the situation. The goal of critical theory is to use knowledge to bring attention to, and thereby work to change, the inequities in society.

### **3.2.1 Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory is a progression of critical theory that applies the concepts of power dynamics to matters of race and racialisation. The critical race theory movement came to prominence in the 1970s following naturally from the work of philosophers such as Paulo Friere who employed critical theory when working with “Brazilian peasants” (Freire, 2014). Critical race theory was developed by a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). They looked at race in broad terms including history, economics, context, group interest, self-interest, feelings, and the unconscious. They questioned the foundations of the western liberal hegemony (equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment rationalism, etc.). Critical race theory holds that racism is embedded in all aspects of society, is difficult to address, and is hard to recognise. This ascendancy of one group over another serves important purposes in the society, benefitting the dominant culture. The theory recognizes that the concept of race is socially constructed, and different minority groups are racialized at different times in response to the needs of the hegemony. No person has unitary identity; everyone is a combination of cultural influences. Because of their different histories and oppression, the oppressed have a unique voice and are able to communicate ideas that the hegemony cannot. Racial categories have a significant impact on both personal identity construction and social interactions, and may become a part of cultural identity as it is passed from one generation to the next (Ahenakew, 2011).

### **3.3 Decolonial & Postcolonial Theory**

#### **3.3.1 Third Space**

Third space is a post-colonial theory that originated with Homi Bhabha, and refers to the construction of culture and identity within a colonial framework (Meredith, 1998). To Bhabha, third space creates a cultural hybridity which starts in the colonized people. The dominant culture exerts influence on the colonised, who then push back on their oppressors. Over time, this cultural push and pull combines to form a new space (third space) that is separate from, yet connected to, both original cultures.

[Third space] unity is not found in the sum of its parts, but emerges from the process of opening a third space within which other elements encounter and transform each other.

Thus, identity is not the combination, accumulation, fusion, or synthesis, but an energy field of different forces (Bhabha as cited by Richardson 2016, p. 57)

In an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Homi Bhabha stated,

The difference of cultures cannot be something that can be accommodated within a universalist framework. It is actually very difficult, even impossible and counterproductive, to try and fit together different forms of culture and to pretend that they can easily coexist (1990, p. 209)

One need not claim membership in any dominant culture for others to ascribe those cultures to them. The inverse is also true, that one may be identified as an outsider when engaging in cultural activities that they, in fact, identify very strongly with.

The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable. A new area of negotiation of meaning and representation (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211)



Some cultural identifiers may apply to people who are not immediately recognizable as part of a given culture. Perceived cultural norms and expectations generally give rise to stereotypes that may have, at best, extremely loose attachments to reality (Bhabha, 1997). Some scholars, such as Richardson (2016), have pointed out that there are times that groups of third space individuals can come together to form a new, solidified, third space cultural identity.

Many third space people exist in a constant state of flux.

Lives of individuals are always in flux, moving back and forth along a sociocultural spectrum affected by numerous factors such as neighbourhood, self-confidence, parental involvement, learning style, perceived sibling position, gender, race, and much more, making almost no one immune to the adverse effects of a controlled and constricted curriculum contrived by a minority of policy stakeholders, who are almost always identified as the majority (Moraweski, 2016, p. 3)

The awareness, and embracing, of difference is what makes third space so important to teachers. Post-colonial, multicultural, diverse classrooms exist in a third space. To reject the combination of cultures and enforce only an outdated hegemonic norm is potentially damaging to the emotional and mental wellbeing of the students. Bhabha says,

[...] hybridity is precisely about the fact that when a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself, it may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them (Rutherford, 1990, p. 216)

New ideas, new principles, new ways of addressing new situations is necessary if we do not want to alienate the non-hegemonic learner. The difficulty is in creating an inclusive third space. Many learners come from places where they were part of the dominant culture, and it forms a

strong part of their identity. Challenging them to join in the formation of a third space environment could not only be upsetting, it could be seen as offensive.

The concepts of hybridity and the third space contribute to an approach that avoids the perpetuation of antagonistic binarisms and develops inclusionary, not exclusionary, and multifaceted, not dualistic, patterns of cultural exchange and maturation (Meredith, 1998, p. 5).

It is not simple to make a member of a cultural hegemony understand why their way of seeing the world is not the correct way, or the only way.

### **3.3.2 Critical Ontology**

Indigenous ways of being do not fit into Western philosophical models, and discussing Indigenous philosophies in English creates many opportunities for misunderstanding due to the imprecise nature of translation. It is this difficulty that led to the development of critical ontology: a theory that allows a person to hold multiple ways of knowing and use all of them in any given situation. It differs from third space in that it does not advocate for hybridity. The multiple philosophies are not combined into one, but held in parallel.

Joe Kincheloe was not an Indigenous person, but he did work in Indigenous communities after finishing his degree. It was there that he came to deeply appreciate the work of Paulo Freire, an influential educational theorist most famous for his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Kincheloe saw and experienced the power struggles inherent to the Indigenous Americans living on the reserve where he lived and worked. He did not see himself as a saviour, nor were the people in need of saving, but he did recognize that the current situation was not adequate. He made an

effort to “create a conversation” about the complexities of working with Indigenous peoples (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>1</sup>). When I first encountered Kincheloe’s writings I was excited over the idea of a potentially blended Indigenous and European educational model. Kincheloe’s critical ontology (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>1</sup>) presents an amalgam of critical theory and Indigenous knowledge that, in many ways, reflects my own views. Kincheloe’s concept argues for the valuing of all knowledge systems, without necessarily placing preference on any single one: the work itself draws from various philosophies including those of Michel Foucault (from where the term “critical ontology” originated) and Paulo Freire, and heavily on Indigenous epistemologies. Critical ontology strives for personal growth through critical engagements with as many different theoretical and cultural perspectives as possible. Indigenous knowledge systems are embraced as a means of dealing with problems that Eurocentric thinking is ill-equipped to handle, and as a way of pushing the boundaries of Western thought in the creation of a new twenty-first century curriculum. Kincheloe makes the argument that Western society places strong emphasis on European knowledge structures which has resulted in a damaged world full of people detached from everything around them. The holistic and relational nature of Indigenous frameworks of knowing the world are offered as a possible solution to these problems. The key in critical ontology, though, is recognizing that all systems are potentially equally valid, but some may do better in certain situations. An examination and combination of knowledge systems is essential for one’s mental and emotional growth and well-being.

I believe critical ontology suits my research as I am seeking to give voice to Indigenous knowledge systems while still maintaining a connection to the established colonial systems already in place. I am not seeking to completely throw away the current educational system; I merely want to restructure it in a way that gives equal voice to local First Nations as well as to

the established colonial powers: a process that would benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Critical ontology makes a point of being careful not to dismiss the positive aspects of a knowledge system along with the negatives.

Through the personal change of the learner inherent in critical ontology, one could expect social change to follow.

Thinking in a new way always necessitates personal transformation; indeed if enough people think in new ways, social transformation is inevitable (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>2</sup>, p. 210)

It is my belief that for a socially just society to become a reality, change must happen at all levels, and the first step to that is changing the way people view the world (Andreotti, 2010). The lens through which one comes to know the world is shaped largely by how they are educated. If the education is Cartesian, Positivist, and Eurocentric, then that is how people are likely to see the world. Critical ontology presents multiple narratives which force those engaged with them to expand their thinking and understanding of the world around them, and, by doing so, enables people to be more mindful of the impact one's ways of thinking can have on the world and all that inhabit it.

Although critical ontology is based originally in critical theory, it goes beyond that in giving equal value to all knowledge systems. It was Kincheloe's version of critical ontology that eventually led me to an autoethnographic methodology. Scholars who wished to elicit change have reached out to autoethnography as a research method because:

[...] they wanted to concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of

representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, as cited in Ellis et al., 2011, p. 274)

Critical ontology provides a theoretical foundation for a mental model that combines dissonant epistemologies without generating cognitive dissonance in the individual. In essence, it is a form of philosophical third space, which is what my methodology intends to explore.

### **3.4 Entangled Spaces**

The English language is the only one I know in any detail, and it is woefully limited when it comes to describing relationships beyond the physical. It is for this reason I have added this section to try and contextualise, define, and explain my language so as to better convey my meanings. I hope that this helps clarify my understandings and experiences for my readers.

In my use of both third space and critical ontology, it is important to note that relationality defines my positionality. In my title, I use the word “individualized” to describe the unique intersection of shifting relationships that create my third space. The individualized space is not an individual space. My usage is not intended to describe a self-contained, physically definable, and separable entity simply impacted by outside influences. The individual, as I mean it, is a fluid being whose self and sense of self are fully entangled with countless others, known and unknown. My use of third space is intended to describe the idea of a self that can be defined and understood by its fluctuating and interactive relationships to multiple communities, histories, stories, beliefs, and that, at the same time, also exceeds knowledge and knowing. To know oneself is to understand how one relates to the world and those who inhabit it, and to understand one cannot understand everything: it is to relate to the unknown and unknowable. To be a third

space individual is to lack a singular anchoring identity, and instead be defined by the multiple intersecting and mutable relationships one builds throughout their lifetime.

Critical ontology promotes the use of multiple ways of knowing, but it is important to consider how one knows something, as well as the limits of knowing. Knowledge, and the ability to use it, becomes constrained if one limits the knowable to the observable. Indigenous ways of knowing and being entangle knowing with being; however, being is not reducible to knowing. How one exists is informed by what one knows, and what one can know is informed by how one exists. Knowledge in this context goes beyond the limitations of the physical and observable and takes into account the spiritual, the storied, the relational, the timeless, the unknown, and the unknowable. When I describe myself as a critical ontologist, I am saying that I can, and do, understand the world through simultaneous hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interpretations. To understand a situation, I must know it in a positivist manner, but I must also know it in a relational and relativistic manner, and I need to acknowledge and accept the limits of what I can know and understand. The positivist and relational ways of knowing and understanding are not prioritised or separated, but concurrent and always in dialogue with each other. The critical ontologist, as I define it, is a person in flux due to constant engagement with multiple ways of understanding, and acceptance of entangled forces beyond understanding. Many of these views will likely seem inherently incompatible with each other, but it is the investigation of – and reflection on – this apparent discordance which forces the critical ontologist to grow cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually.

The Sun Dance allowed me to experience a relationality that transcended the limitations of the physical self and the containment of this self within cognitive frames. For some people, it is possible to become wholly absorbed by an activity, or an experience, to the point that they cease to perceive the presence of everyone around them. What I am describing at the Sun Dance is the opposite effect, where one is aware and connected to everything and everyone (known and unknown), and experiences a shared energy and being that extends beyond the self but does not detach from the self. When that experience happens, the self as an individual ceases to be, but the self as a conduit between the physical and non-physical worlds remains. It is an interconnected energy that is greater than the sum of the parts, and can affect different people in different ways, but the resulting communality is undeniable.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

Mainstream teacher education provides little insight into the forces that shape identity and consciousness. Becoming educated, becoming a critical teacher as researcher/teacher as scholar necessitates personal transformation based on an understanding and critique of these forces [...]. Such a concept explores self-production for the purpose of conceptualizing new, more just, and more complex ways of being human (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>2</sup>, p. 202)

The purpose of this thesis is to use my experiences at the Sun Dance to analyse my reality as a post-colonial person in the hopes that sharing my reality might help inspire others to undertake their own journeys of self-discovery, and/or become aware and appreciative of those they encounter who may exist inside a self-constructed third space. This is especially important for educators who, by the nature of their job, can help or hinder the perpetuation of hegemony by the narratives they promote in their classrooms.

My whole life, I have had a relationship with stories. I love hearing stories, telling stories, and even writing stories. Stories build relationships, form histories, explain realities, stimulate minds, and construct being. In the eyes and minds of others, all we are is stories. Stories give us form, allow us to build communities. The Sun Dance helped change the way I understand some of the stories that build my life. In order to try and demonstrate this, I use an autoethnographic approach to share and discuss a number of my stories with the reader. In this way, I am seeking to build a relationship of sorts with my audience, even though I am not interacting with them directly. I am letting the reader, at different moments, into my mind, body, and/or spirit so that



they can hopefully start to understand my own critical ontological approach, see my constructed third space, and appreciate the value such difference brings to any setting, or culture, be it a workplace, a school, or a Sun Dance. My guiding research questions all focus on my lived experiences relating to the Sun Dance: how did participation in the Sun Dance increase my knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures; what revelations into my personal and professional lives came from my active participation in the Sun Dance ceremony; how did participation in the Sun Dance help to solidify my sense of identity; and why did the Sun Dance have such a strong impact on me?

Autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). It is a method that “attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283). Ellis et al. (2011) describe several different autoethnographic approaches which I elected to choose from. I did this because autoethnography, like my guiding questions, is inward looking. My study is an examination of self and the impact of a significant life experience upon that self, and I required a methodological approach which could be utilized to accurately recount and analyse that change. I do not believe that what I have provided, based on Ellis et al.’s work (2011) is an exhaustive list of ethnographic methods, but it is well constructed and diverse enough to provide a sufficient basis. I am providing a summarised version of the potentially applicable methods below, all of which have aspects that overlap with my chosen method, and briefly explain how the rejected forms of autoethnography did not adequately fit my work.

Indigenous ethnographies develop from colonized or economically subordinated people, and are used to address and disrupt power in research, particularly an outside researcher's right and authority to study exotic others. Adopting this method is appealing, but inaccurate. Although I identify as an Indigenous person, my connection to Indigenous culture is tenuous as I was not raised within an Indigenous community.

Narrative ethnographies refer to texts presented in the form of stories that incorporate the ethnographer's experiences into the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of others. The focus of my thesis is myself, not others. As much as I intend to incorporate shared events into my narrative, the focus remains firmly on myself and my experiences.

Layered accounts often focus on the author's experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature. This form emphasizes the procedural nature of research. At first, I strongly considered this approach as being most relevant to my goals and intentions, but I feel too much focus is placed on being in dialogue with existing research when I am more interested in sharing my own transformative experiences without having to first worry about what I am framing it against.

Community autoethnographies use the personal experience of researchers-in-collaboration to illustrate how a community manifests particular social/cultural issues. This could only be an option for me if my focus was more on the Sun Dance community and less on my individual experiences.

Co-constructed narratives illustrate the meanings of relational experiences, particularly how people collaboratively cope with the ambiguities, uncertainties, and contradictions of being friends, family, and/or intimate partners. I may discuss some of my relationships with others, but it is certainly not the central point of my thesis.

This brings me to the last option, personal narratives. Personal narratives are stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives. This is the method that best fits the purpose of my study. The subject I am presenting is myself. I use my Sun Dance experiences as a framework for reflection on my life, for it is those life experiences that made my time at the Sun Dance significant. As one who inhabits no single system or world, my Sun Dance experience is impossible to encapsulate. A holistic, narrative format is required for me to start discussing why the Sun Dance had such an impact on me. My very nature is a shifting target and it is one facet of the whole that I am intending to examine, contextualize, and compare to previously existing works while at the same time deriving my own greater meaning.

Personal narratives propose to understand a self or some aspect of a life as it intersects with a cultural context, connect to other participants as co-researchers, and invite readers to enter the author's world and to use what they learn there to reflect on, understand, and cope with their own lives (Ellis, 2004, as cited in Ellis et al., 2011, p. 277)

The data I gathered for this thesis comes from my memories surrounding the Sun Dance. Due to my learning disabilities, I did not take notes or keep a journal, as I find such tasks taxing and tedious, nor did I make any recordings as the Sun Dance is generally not a place for electronic device beyond, perhaps, an emergency phone once can turn on to call for help if they become

lost. Instead, I relived my experiences through story, and divined meaning through dialogue. Each experience was explained, reflected upon, and revisited multiple times with my family Elders. Their academic training is different from my own, as is their experienced reality, and so they were able to provide an outsider perspective to my accounts, reflections, and explanations. For each memory or experience I present, the discursive strategies I use are to embed my story within the literature, theory, spiritual interpretations, structural forces, or institutions; to describe my personal story; followed by linking the two to a deeper understanding of other events in my life and their relationship to my theoretical perspectives.

The reliability of my stories depends not only on my memory but also on external records, photos, reports, letters, and other artefacts to substantiate my perspective whenever possible (Muncey, 2005). Facts, like my Indigenous heritage, can be shown easily, in this case by a copy of a report from the Indian Agent (See Appendix A.9: Government Purchase of Ancestor's Land in Peace River).

The validity of the work is largely up to the individual reader to determine (Wall, 2008, 2006; Holt, 2003). "What matters is the way in which the story enables the reader to enter the subjective world of the teller – to see the world from his or her point of view, even if this world does not match reality" (Plummer, 2001, as cited in Ellis et al., 2011). Readers provide validation by comparing their lives to the author's, by thinking about how their lives are similar and different and the reasons why, and by feeling that the stories have informed them about unfamiliar people or lives (Ellis et al., 2011; Wall, 2008, 2006; Holt, 2003).

The generalisability of any ethnographic study is limited due to having only a single research subject; however, the way it is written is often more accessible to those outside the research's field. This accessibility provides a voice for the marginalised, or those that would otherwise be absent from academic discourse. Autoethnography can increase the reader's empathy – and serve a socially just mandate – by alerting them to a larger world view. This expanding of knowledge can place a reader in an uncomfortable, although often ethically necessary, position (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>1</sup>, 2011<sup>2</sup>).

When dealing with other people, especially colonised or otherwise subjugated or marginalised people, ethics is always a concern (Mendez, 2013). When it was necessary to include another person in an account, efforts were made to keep their identity anonymous and omit any identifying qualities. Some names were included with the permission of the individuals. Bishop & Glynn (1999) point out that Indigenous research needs to be based in Indigenous epistemology, and be culturally appropriate, both things that I strove for in my final draft. It is precisely because of the Indigenous basis of my thesis that my accounts deal with the physical, the ethical, the spiritual, and the social. My supervisor, who is a dancer and member of the Sun Dance society, has discussed my research with Keith, the holder of the Sun Dance, and both have given their blessing to share my memories and experiences of the Sun Dance.

The data I discuss is related to both the Sun Dance, and to my life as a whole. The reason for this is that the experiences I had were not isolated. What occurred for me at the Sun Dance started years before, and will stay with me for many years to come.

## **Chapter 5: Research & Reflection: Living in the Third Space**

### **5.1 Being Invited to a Dance**

In 2015, while attending classes at UBC, I was presented with an extraordinary opportunity to be part of an entirely new type of university course on decolonial, experiential, land-based education, Indigenous knowledge systems, and ceremony as a form of colonial resistance. I am speaking, of course, about my invitation to the Sun Dance. The invitation to be helpers and supporters for the Sun Dance ceremony, and to attend corresponding classes on the history and cultural significance of the Sun Dance the week prior, was a project of my two supervisors, Dr. Cash Ahenakew and Dr. Vanessa Andreotti, and the founding Elders of the Sun Dance we would be attending. The university was hesitant about allowing such a course to happen because it had been informed by Elders from other Sun Dances that it was inappropriate to have students engage with a Sun Dance in such a manner. Undeterred, the keeper of the Sun Dance we were to attend wrote a letter explaining the underlying purpose of the invitation he was extending to us. He had received a vision of peoples from all nations, all colours of the medicine wheel (red, black, yellow, white), coming together at his Sun Dance (UBC 2015). The Sun Dance is a sacred ceremony granted by spirits via visions; if the spirits said to open the Sun Dance to everyone, then that particular Sun Dance needed to be open to everyone. Other Elders in the area need not agree, but it would be wrong to suppress the ceremony and defy the spirits just because it does not conform to current traditions (Cajete, 2000; Lake, 1991). “A vision creates a personal responsibility to carry out its directive” (Henderson, 2000<sup>1</sup>, p. 267). UBC conceded, and my supervisors underwent the task of organizing the pre-ceremony portion of the course.

From the initial course information session I was thrilled; learning about the Sun Dance from written accounts could never compare to being there first hand. By that point, I had already been travelling a life path that included a great deal of introspection, self-realisation, and occasional ceremony. In Vancouver, I had participated in a medicine wheel ceremony, two sweat lodges, and various celebrations of Indigenous culture. The Sun Dance is a significant event that I did not think I would ever have the opportunity to experience, and I jumped at the chance when it was presented. My mother remembers clearly how excited I was after the information session. My family did not hesitate with the logistics of the endeavour. Before the UBC portion of the course even began, I was well underway in my preparations.

The Sun Dance gave me ample opportunity to view the world in ways that the university never could. Being a critical ontologist, I appreciated the exciting opportunity provided by the Sun Dance for utilising and strengthening my Indigenous-based ways of understanding and interpreting the world. “Ontological knowledge cannot be separated from experience. Indeed, some may define experience as knowledge translated into action” (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>2</sup>, p. 207). For the duration of my time there, I was focussed on experiencing each moment with little regard as to “what next?”. Having never fully experienced life through an Indigenous perspective, it took time and reflection on my experiences to derive any semblance of proper understanding. I found the Sun Dance a place of emotionality, physicality, and spirituality: three things that the rigorous intellectuality of the university often seemed to sacrifice in the name of knowledge. The Sun Dance helped me to eventually realise that I occupy a different way of being. My realisation of lived third space came from reflection on the knowledge I gained from being at the Sun Dance and putting my conscious mind on hold. Below I discuss – in a mostly linear fashion – a few of

the experiences that had an impact upon my way of understanding and being. My role as a learner, an educator, and a person, was changed by the Sun Dance that first year, and more so the next year when I returned for a second time.

## **5.2 Liminal Lay-Over**

For the trip to my first Sun Dance, I decided to go by plane. I arrived at the Calgary airport without incident; the flight from Vancouver was faster than I expected. I was supposed to meet up with two other people from the course who were also flying to the Sun Dance. I had missed them in Vancouver, but we did find each other eventually at the departure terminal for Lethbridge. The two women were very nice, neither of Indigenous heritage, but both very interested in the Sun Dance. As we sat in the waiting area, we talked, and I eventually started sharing stories about some of the things I was carrying. We all came from education backgrounds, and we all signed up for this course, so I felt that gave us common ground to start a conversation. I do not normally speak with strangers unless I know we have something to discuss. They were interested in the symbology of the items I carried and stories that went along with them.

There was my hat, bought specifically to keep the summer sun from cooking my head. It is the only hat that I have ever enjoyed wearing. I had two feathers tucked into it, one from a bald eagle, and the other from a raven. An Elder who worked with my mother had found the feathers while she was visiting family in Haida Gwaii. She used some red yarn to make them into a hairpiece for me. She said that I reminded her of the men in her village, and she was certain I must have some Haida blood in me. No one at the time knew I was Cree, only Indigenous.



Sometimes people I met liked to guess what Indigenous nation my ancestors were from, because I reminded them of people they knew or had met. Over the years, the yarn had fallen off, but I kept the feathers. When I bought my hat, I found I could tuck the feathers nicely into the braided leather hatband. I sent a picture of the hat with feathers to my birth mother before I left Vancouver, and she said her father had a hat almost exactly like it that he used to wear all the time. I wondered at the time if maybe I shared a sort of genetic memory that was responsible for me liking it so much.

I told stories about the eagle and raven. My mind was tired from the trip so I could not remember much, at least not clearly. Still, the two ladies I was with seemed to enjoy it. They had not heard stories of Raven stealing the sun, or breaking open the clamshell, both tales I had heard many times growing up. They admired the beauty of the feathers in my hat, which led to my fan and smudge bowl. They were happily surprised that I thought to bring a large bag of sage, and another of tobacco. I taught them briefly about smudging, although I obviously could not do it in the airport. I imagine that lighting sage on fire in the terminal would be a good way to attract unwanted attention from airport security. They found my fan very interesting with the banded feathers and a single sharp talon dangling from a bit of leather fringe at the bottom of the handle. I have no idea from what avian the talon and feathers originate, but my best guess is a barred owl.

Finally, I showed them my drum bag, with the button image of raven stealing the sun. I talked more about how Raven is usually understood to be a trickster and teacher. I took a few gentle strikes of my black drum so they could hear it, but we kept it quiet so as not to disturb people in

the crowded terminal. I told them the story about how my family gave me the drum, and how I was excited now to use it at the Sun Dance.

They told me some things about themselves, such as how they came to the course, where they were from, and how one of them used a special bracelet to keep her from getting motion sick on the plane. We had a long wait because poor weather was making for unflyable conditions. The first time we went out to the tarmac, the wind nearly pulled my hat off and left the feathers ruffled. A storm was currently hitting our destination and sending winds north to meet us.

When I returned inside, I remember something the course supervisors told us about listening to the land. I looked again at the windblown feathers and noticed they were almost completely flipped upside down from the direction I had laid them. I removed them from the hat, turned them over, adjusted their positions, and secured them once more, this time curving upwards rather than down. The next time we went to board the plane, the wind whipped just as strongly but my hat and feathers remained secure to my head.

As we started to board, there was lightning and the rain poured down harder. The crew assured us that we could take off now, and so I grabbed a seat near my two colleagues and we departed. I told them that it looked like Thunderbird was welcoming us, but he had not liked my feathers the way I was wearing them so they had to be changed or else he would take them away. They laughed and remembered our course readings about knowledge being connected to place. I had just learned how to wear my feathers when visiting the prairies.

As I looked out the window over the flat farmlands, rolling foothills, and green gullies, I started to feel excited. Even the tiny turbulent twin-engine commuter plane did not bother me. I watched the rain and the clouds and the lightning, and realized that from the moment the wind had first hit me and almost taken my hat, I felt welcomed. Now that I was seeing the whole prairie stretch out far below the plane, I felt I was coming home. There are very few places that I have ever felt such a connection to.

When I first considered this memory, the most prominent feature was my connection to place. It was as if the environment itself was reaching out and teaching me. Even though I had never been to that part of Alberta, I felt a connection to it. Many Indigenous peoples are removed from their home territories, yet still possess a connection with their places of origin and sacred sites (Calderon, 2014). The feeling of being home could be a form of ancestral attachment: what Kim Anderson (2016) calls “blood memory”. “Many Native cultures teach that we carry the memories of our ancestors in our physical being. As such, we are immediately connected to those who have gone before us” (Anderson, 2016, p. 5). Thunderbird’s greeting pulling at my hat reminds me of one of Cajete & Pueblo’s (2010) elements of Indigenous education:

Teaching and learning are a collaborative cooperative contract between the “teacher” and learner. In this sense the teacher was not always human but could be an animal, a plant, or other natural entity or force (p.1131)

Wilson (2008) holds that knowledge for First Nations is “held in the relationships and connections formed with the environment that surrounds us” (87), and that “there is no distinction made between relationships that are made with other people and those that are made with our environment. Both are equally sacred” (87). This brings up another important point: the

experience was not simply about how I was connecting to the land, but how I was forming connections with my fellow group members. At the time, what I did not realize was how the experience was a manifestation of my own third space.

I was in an airport between connecting flights, a literal example of being between worlds. There, in that liminal space between Canadian hegemony and Indigenous ceremony, I met my companions, two people who had only recently begun to be exposed to Indigeneity. In order to connect with them, I offered an entrance to my third space, to show them who I was and what brought me there. They were excited, but nervous, and feeling a bit out of place. As Meredith (1999) writes, those within the third space can act as a cultural lubricant, easing the tensions that can arise when outsiders are brought to the brink of their comfort zones. As a post-colonial person familiar with multiple cultures, I have the ability at times to “translate, negotiate, and mediate affinity and difference within a dynamic of exchange and inclusion” (Meredith, 1999, p. 3). Exchange was exactly what we were doing: sharing stories, histories, interest. In doing so, I also hoped to include them in my interests and my feelings, so that they in turn might be able to become more comfortable with the situation.

Critical ontology is obsessed with new and better ways of being human, being with others, and the creation of environments where mutual growth of individuals is promoted and symbiotic learning relationships are cultivated (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>2</sup>, p. 207-208)

Travelling with strangers can be uncomfortable; travelling with friends is much less anxiety-inducing. By the time we were finished the flight and checked into our hotel for the night, we were talking as if we had known each other for much longer than half a day.

### 5.3 Sacred Space

My first full day of the Sun Dance ceremony started on the road heading across the United States border to visit a sacred site. I am uncomfortable going into much detail about the site or what happened there; as Vine Deloria Jr. (2003) explained, knowledge of both ceremony and location of sacred land should not be shared<sup>1</sup>. I can, however, reflect on some of my feelings and experiences surrounding the event.

In my life, I have visited numerous sacred sites, from the Vatican, to the Sun Dance, to Stonehenge, but the number of spiritual experiences I have had are few. This is a feeling that is different from either an aesthetic experience or a deep respect for historical significance. I describe it as a sacred feeling. It is as if the place and I are connecting on a fundamental level and I can feel an energy flowing through it. When I arrived in southern Alberta and felt I was coming home, I sensed a connection between part of myself and the land; that was a feeling of the sacred. I had a similar feeling when I visited Wales and sat upon the few fallen rocks of the monolithic standing stones known as Pentre-Ifan in the Preseli Mountains of Pembrokeshire. My experience of the sacred there inspired me to attempt to draw the site and to create a poem to share the feeling with others, while my experience with the sacred during the week of the Sun Dance is in large part what led me to write this thesis. “Each sacred site in a Native homeland is a place for “remembering to remember” to care for life-sustaining places” (Cajete, 2000, p. 205). It could be argued that I am as much Welsh as I am Cree, and what I felt in Wales was the ancestral memory again welcoming me back home. My biological mother and sisters have very strong attachments to their Irish Heritage, but there is a story in the family that the Irish lineage was originally Welsh. Having seen first-hand how close Wales and Ireland are geographically,

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<sup>1</sup> I recall that before we left the sacred site, the Elders asked us not to talk about the site or the events there.

and being made aware of how much travel there was between the two lands historically, I have no reason to doubt the family's oral history. Genetic memory does provide a reason for the otherwise foreign sense of familiarity I felt with the land. No emotional connection had to be made for me to feel at home; home was already there waiting for me. The Welsh and Cree are both suppressed, colonised people, both of whom have seen the rise over recent generations of hybridized members who exist in a third space between cultures. In a way, being a descendent of these marginalized peoples, I feel my liminal existence is carrying on a proud but quiet tradition of counter-hegemonic subcultural creation.

During the preparatory classes for the Sun Dance at UBC, we were told to bring our passport if we wanted to participate in the journey to the sacred site. The class did talk about the importance of ceremony and the sacred, but no lecture can truly prepare a person for the reality of experiencing such a site and participating in sacred ceremony with the Elders. I imagine the feeling may differ slightly from person to person, but the gravitas of the experience for me was both humbling and exhilarating.

As our journey began, I experienced some anxiety knowing we were going to have to cross the border into the United States. Colonisation carved the land and split nations without regard for the people of those nations. Add to this the dark history and ongoing legacy of violence between government authority figures and Indigenous communities and it is no wonder that many Indigenous peoples have a deeply rooted dislike and distrust of colonial authority. I believe my own negative experiences with authority go back to childhood, but I lack solid memories from most years prior to about the age of ten or eleven. In order to avoid unnecessary confrontation,

my father, being a criminal lawyer, often warned my brother and I about dealing with police. He has numerous stories of law enforcement going too far in pursuit of their orders and infringing on the rights and well-being of people. My father also trained me in how to speak with and deal with officers: speak when spoken to, do what I am told, do not make jokes, answer questions briefly and directly, and always address the officer as “sir” or “ma’am”. This unnatural formality helped to cement the anxiety I feel when confronted with law enforcement of any kind. My distrust of authority became a complete lack of respect after taking Indigenous studies classes and learning about the ongoing difficulties between Indigenous peoples and government agents such as the RCMP (Craig, 2016; Commission for Public Complaints Against the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2010). The anxiety was complicated further as I became more engaged in the Queer community and learned about the routine mistreatment of non-gender conforming, non-heterosexual people. This has left me as someone who avoids contact with uniformed authority figures at all costs, largely as a matter of self-preservation. It was therefore a pleasant surprise that crossing the American border was not a difficult task.

At the site, we participated in a ceremony to mark the start of the Sun Dance. Reaching there was not simple; we had to pile into the Elders’ pickup trucks and go through a forested trail. The view from the back of the truck was beautiful, but my heart raced when we hit large bumps along the way. I had never ridden in the bed of a pickup truck before and I felt at times as if I was going to be jostled right out of the vehicle. It was a grey day, and there was a cool breeze that chilled many of my companions. At the site, there was little discussion; my group was focussed on listening to the Elders and taking in the beauty and power of the place. I like cold weather, but

I faintly recall some others using blankets. If the weather had been clear, I am sure we would have had a wonderful view of the nearby mountains. I remember the site being strangely quiet.

During the sacred ceremony to open the Sun Dance, drums, singing, and prayer filled the clearing and seemed to seep into the trees and ground itself. We all listened carefully to the Elders explain what was going on, and why certain things were done. Some of their protocols were explained which would be important later at the Sun Dance site. It was during the drumming that I saw two shadowy animal figures watching from the treeline. I knew there were bears, eagles, and other animals in the area, so at first when I saw a bear in the forest watching us, and a large avian shape in a tree, I wondered if we were going to have the local wildlife joining in the ceremony. I had to look a number of times before I realized that what I was seeing were my spirit companions: Grandmother Owl and Brother Bear. It is always a nice surprise when they manifest visually as usually I can only feel their presence. Perhaps it was the power of the site that drew them in such a way. Sacred sites such as where we were that day are said to have immense power (Cajete 2000), and it certainly felt that way to me. Regardless of what brought them, it was comforting to see they had decided to follow me there. I have heard the drum described as the heartbeat of the world, and perhaps that is why my spirits – particularly Bear – enjoy it so much. They disappeared shortly after the drumming stopped, but their presence remained, watching me from just out of sight. That feeling of being watched over lasted until the ceremony was finished and the rain started.

I was glad to ride back inside the vehicle, at least for part of the journey. What had been deep potholes in the path on the way in were turning to small muddy ponds on our way out. One truck



got stuck in the prairie mud, and it took some time to devise a plan to free it. I jumped out immediately to help the Elders push, while a few people hitched a rope from the front of the stuck vehicle to a free one. I was perhaps too enthusiastic in wanting to lend a hand, or too sure of how good my hiking boots' grip was, but regardless of reasons, I ended up slipping and falling into one of the deeper potholes as I rushed around trying to help with the truck. Most of my lower body, my forearms, and good portion of my torso was muddied, but I did not mind. I learned at a young age to accept my clumsiness. I am not as bad as I used to be, but I still have a habit of stumbling or walking into walls at times. The medication I was on as a child did a wonderful job of destroying my sense of balance, which when coupled with a poor kinaesthetic sense, meant I tended to get scraped up a lot. The Elders and my classmates did not tease me; instead, they were concerned if I was hurt. They thanked me for my help when I got back up and kept pushing the truck. One Elder joked that I was simply being welcomed and embraced by the land. I could not help but laugh at the time, but looking back on it later I believe she might not have meant it entirely as a joke. As it turns out, my now torn, mud-stained shorts made for an excellent conversation starter. In other company, I might have been embarrassed, but the compassion and humour of the people I was with allowed me to simply shrug off the slip and continue with the important task at hand. Landscapes have the power to transform mindscapes (Marker, 2015), and I think being there, in a sort of mental state of ceremony, made it easy to shrug off discomfort. Neither the cold from the mud, nor the wet mist in the air, nor the small tear in my new shorts bothered me in the slightest. I was a little sore later, but at the time I was glad to have helped out. Needless to say, I returned to the truck bed after my mud bath for the rest of the ride.

Back where the trail met the road, we rallied around the vehicles and had a picnic dinner that the Elders had prepared. In my experience, ceremonies often include a feast of some kind.

Sometimes there is not much food to spare, but whatever is available is shared. It is a way to honour guests, welcome them, and thank them for sharing in the event. I believe the meal after the ceremony at the sacred site was no different, and it was a good chance to start reflecting on events. It also allowed me to get to know the Elders better.

The events of that day were an amazing introduction to the Sun Dance. They have stayed with me ever since, and my understanding of their significance has deepened the more I reflect upon them. “To suggest that educational leaders learn the spiritual sense of place is not to propose bringing religious traditions and ceremonies into classrooms. It is more to recognize sacredness in the ecology of a people’s territory” (Marker, 2015, p. 249). I saw how connected that site was to the people, and to the history of the Sun Dance in that area. If I had never experienced the Sun Dance course, or any Indigenous ceremony, I doubt I would truly understand what is meant when Indigenous peoples discuss their attachment to the land and the importance of place. The land is part of the people, and they are part of it; creating divisions between person and place is damaging and dangerous. The removal of humans from the natural world may be one of the most insidious things colonial culture did to the Indigenous peoples (Iseke, 2013; Corn tassel, 2012; Sheridan, 2006; Cajete, 2000).

Returning to Canada was far more difficult than leaving. We were detained an hour because one of our party was missing a document they required to travel. I have heard stories far too frequently about the difficulties faced by Indigenous people crossing borders in order to see

family, attend ceremonies, or visit sites of spiritual significance. As Cornthassel (2012) wrote, “being Indigenous today means struggling to reclaim and regenerate one’s relational, place-based existence by challenging the ongoing destructive forces of colonization” (p. 88). Perhaps one brighter moment came about when we were pulled over for speeding. I tensed at first expecting it to be an RCMP officer. When I saw that it was an Indigenous officer with a reservation police uniform, I was both slightly relieved and greatly fascinated. Previous to that day, I had never heard of a reservation having their own police force. It was surprising to hear the driver and the officer discuss the situation in a friendly manner. I had never before witnessed such a pleasant exchange with an officer, and I felt that perhaps this was one step towards creating a post-colonial society. I still would be uncomfortable dealing with a reservation police officer, but I would neither fear for my life nor expect my rights to be infringed upon as much as I would when dealing with colonial authorities.

It was dark by the time we finally arrived at the Sun Dance grounds that night. There was not enough room for the group in the two teepees that were already set up. Due to the cold and lack of space, most of the others set up in the sweat lodges, while I chose to sleep alone in one of the teepees. I enjoyed how cold and quiet the nights were. I heard dogs in the distance; I believe they might have been coyotes but I am uncertain. They did not sound like the coyotes in Vancouver. Knowing Coyote is a trickster, perhaps they simply changed their voice. As I laid there in the still, dark night, I thought I was going to be less comfortable than I was. I remembered the story the Elder told us about how that particular Sun Dance came to be, and how spirits sent visions to identify where to host the Sun Dance. “Certain sites in their landscape are sacred to Native cultures because of particular life-giving natural qualities they possess” (Cajete, 2000, p. 205).

The site did have a comforting nature, although I am unable to say if it was the site itself, the people I met there, or a combination. Regardless, that week became my first ever positive camping experience. Even when the teepees became full of people, I did not mind. I never felt my space was being encroached on, and I enjoyed getting to know my teepee-mates. Two of them happened to be the women I met on the flight. The others who shared the teepee with us would also become lasting friends. Sharing ceremony builds relationships and strengthens communities. Most of us started that week as little more than strangers, but by the end of the week we were like family. “Native ceremony is associated with maintaining and restoring balance, renewal, cultivating relationship, and creative participation with nature” (Cajete, 2000, p. 70-71).

Since being at the Sun Dance, I have come to better understand the four major categories of sacred sites as defined by Deloria Jr. (2003). In order to explain these types of sacred sites, I will use examples drawing from the histories and mythologies that I am most well acquainted with: Indigenous and Christian colonial. The categories are:

- Place of Revelation
- Holy in and of itself
- Historical
- New sites found through vision or formed through new historical events

The Sun Dance site is an example of a place of revelation; the spirits guided the Elder there through visions and instructed him in how to construct the arbour. This is not unlike Christian tales of Noah being given a vision of the ark, or Moses being granted the Ten Commandments. The site was not considered particularly sacred until supernatural knowledge was revealed to

someone there. The sacred site we crossed the border to reach is an example of a place that is holy in and of itself. The site is a place of spirits and power that would be equally as sacred if humans never found it. The Bible has an example of this with the story of the burning bush. When people find the bush, the voice of God tells them that the ground under them is sacred and to remove their shoes when upon it. Sites such as Wounded Knee and Vimy Ridge are examples of places that have taken on a sacred stature due to historical events that happened there. The final category is less about sites in existence and more about how new sites come to be. Vine Deloria Jr. believes that it is possible for new sacred sites to form, or to be discovered, and not to dismiss people who identify an area as sacred simply on the grounds that it was not previously identified as sacred. The lack of written history coupled with colonial oppression has greatly complicated, and often hindered or even extinguished, the transmission of sacred knowledge and ceremonies among many Indigenous peoples (Ahenakew, in press; Iseke, 2013; Corntassel, 2012; Cajete, 2000). It is impossible to translate sacred sites to text, or to explain their importance in a classroom detached from their culture. People and place are interconnected, and to understand both requires a person to be invited in and participate in the culture directly.

Thus, the epistemology at work here involves more than simply knowing about something. It involves tuning oneself into the other's mode of being – its ontological presence – and entering into a life generating relationship with it (Apffel-Marglin, 1995).

Critical ontologists take from this an understanding of a new dimension of the inseparable relationship between knowing and being (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>1</sup>, p. 340)

I was honoured to be able to share in a very sacred ceremony at a sacred site. I am asking the reader to understand that some sites and ceremonies are not possible to share, and respecting the

people who revere those sites and ceremonies requires one to accept the sacredness of those sites and ceremonies even if one is never exposed to them.

#### **5.4 Traditional Cultural Practices vs. Colonial Schooling**

It was a hot afternoon by the teepees when the truck pulling a trailer of long, thin logs parked in front of where some of my group were resting. After a busy morning, it was not unusual to rest and rehydrate. We had been told the new teepees would most likely arrive sometime that day, but we had no idea when. The three men from the truck introduced themselves to those of us gathered in the area, and explained they had come from a neighbouring reservation to put up our new teepees. This was welcome news as there had not been enough room for everyone the previous night and most of my companions had to sleep in one of the sweat lodges.

There were about eight of us when we started hauling the poles off the flatbed. It usually took two people to carry a single log, although some people were weaker, others stronger. One person could move a pole alone, others needed two or three people to give them a hand. A couple of the people, who were unable to lift logs, distributed water bottles to the rest of us. When the truck was unloaded, we moved four poles to an area of flat ground. The man who had driven the truck was the only one who knew how to construct a teepee. He was our Elder and led us through the process.

The four poles were tied at one end with rope, and then pulled up as the rest of us pushed the poles to make them stand. It took effort by all of us, but before long we had the skeleton of the teepee up: four poles evenly spaced and securely tied together at the top. More poles, the same

size as the first four, were eased up at roughly even intervals between the main supports and had their ends rested upon the place that the knot held together. The “V” made by the top of the poles cradled the rest, which in turn all crossed and leaned upon each other. The result was a circle of very large sticks, holding each other up in a way that moving any single one of them was difficult. Next came the canvas that wrapped around and secured at the front over the door. Wooden pegs were used to “stitch” the canvas together above the doorway, and more anchored it to the ground. By the time we finished, we had two new teepees, and everyone in my group had a place to sleep.

After we had started putting up the teepees, more of my companions showed up and joined in; what started as eight people easily became over a dozen. Everyone contributed to the project as much as possible in whatever capacity they were able. Our role at the Sun Dance was to support people, and that meant each other too. When something needed to be done, everyone pitched in. Even though the day was hot, and the teepees did not always want to cooperate with us, there was plenty of laughter. After they were built, the Elder told a few stories about the teepee, I think, although I do not recall them now. One thing I do remember is him explaining how these teepees used four legs for a base, while the Cree used three. Being that my ancestors were Cree, I found that piece of information particularly interesting.

My learning difficulties have made my school years exceptionally taxing both mentally and emotionally (See Appendix A.5). Most likely due to trauma from medical and educational difficulties, I have almost no memories from before the age of ten. My mother has told me that for my first four years of schooling, I would cry in her arms every night. The classroom does not

often provide an environment that is inclusive to learning, and when one has cognitive difficulties, standard Eurocentric educational models can quickly become excruciating. Schools are typically highly structured settings with rigid systems to promote order, efficiency, and consistency. Traditional Indigenous educational practices appear to care very little for any of these qualities, preferring instead to promote multi-layered learning, community building, and connection to place. The Elders were not concerned about being teachers; they were concerned about imparting knowledge. Often it is up to the individual – their feelings, thoughts, and needs – to determine what knowledge can and will be obtained from any given task.

Experiential learning is key at the Sun Dance, and is the primary mode of transmission for Indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous education is not Indigenous or education from within our intellectual traditions unless it comes through the land, unless it occurs in an Indigenous context using indigenous processes (Simpson, 2014, p. 9)

Emulating a process purely from a recorded account is inherently ripe for misunderstandings and mistakes due to the learner's need to approximate without the necessary oversight to correct errors. Learning alongside a knowledge-keeper, or Elder, creates a sort of apprenticeship where corrections and adjustments can be made without sacrificing the integrity of the results. The process of performing traditional tasks, such as building teepees, preparing sage, or participating in ceremonies, connects current generations to those who came before.

The lessons of Elders are embedded with layered meanings beyond the task itself. Conduct and protocols are demonstrated, relationships are strengthened, and stories are shared that often build



on the knowledge conveyed by the task itself. Experiential learning in the community provides a greater context and understanding which connects practical knowledge to the greater wholes (Cajete & Pueblo, 2010). There is also the practical aspect that when one is taught in an experiential manner, it can be difficult to demonstrate the knowledge to others in a less physical manner. When I tried to explain to my family how the teepee was raised, I found it much simpler to demonstrate with toothpicks. I am typically perfectly capable of using words to convey ideas, but this was one instance where the words did not come easily, even though I remembered the physical process quite well.

It is mainstream scholastic practice to rate students based on the outcome of their work. Those whose results are achieved quickly and without perceptible flaw are praised, while those, like myself, who struggle in achieving the set goal within the allotted time, are made to feel inadequate. The resulting reinforced sense of personal failure often leaves the struggling student convinced of their own stupidity and inability to attain success. Repeated successes or failures in this competitive atmosphere breeds a sense of superiority in those that perform well, and scholastic apathy in those who do not. In my experience, this effectively encouraged students to compare themselves with their peers, building division between the top and bottom students. As one's sense of personal worth became defined by an arbitrary, human-made, grading system, enforced by a seemingly autocratic teacher-dictator, the struggling student naturally built resentment towards the educators that continued to torment them and make them a mockery among their peers.

[...] the restricted opportunity for experiential learning (which accounts for the personal nature of Aboriginal epistemologies) in favor of content-centered pedagogies in the

school system completely distorts and marginalizes a way of teaching valued by Aboriginal peoples and interferes with genuine cultural understanding among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Kanu, 2011, p. 131)

Working with the Elders and community at the Sun Dance provides someone like myself an experience that seems entirely opposite to the toxic one I experienced in mainstream schooling. There is no sense of competition or time limits at the Sun Dance. Work is done collaboratively, and everyone is encouraged to help each other. Those who achieve the set goal quickly then become secondary teachers, often providing more modelling for others, or explicit instruction in how they achieved the goal. Learners are allowed to work and process at their own pace. If a person decides it is necessary to take a break or change to another task, that is fine. When one asks for help, they need not wait on an Elder necessarily, and the entire group will generally come together to try and work out any problems people are having. Elders are Elders because of the knowledge they have to share, not necessarily because they are the best at a task. The goal of any task seems to be the ability to do it adequately enough that the purpose is served. Perfection is not necessary nor necessarily praised: no one cares if you have the nicest looking prayer ties on the tree, just so long as they stay on. This open, collaborative, supportive, self-directed, low-pressure learning style creates a phenomenal environment for experiential learning. For me, learning in this method was simple, intuitive, enjoyable, and far more memorable than most classroom experiences at any level of schooling. The stress I normally feel in classrooms was never present.

[...] critical ontology pursues human agency – the disposition and capacity to act on the world in ways that involve self-direction and the pursuit of democratic and egalitarian principles of community formation (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>2</sup>, p. 207)

Experiential learning provides a hurdle for post-enlightenment Eurocentric factory-based models of education. Kanu notes that the clockwork curriculum, which is time driven, means that there is never enough time for experiential learning. The teachers he interviewed were calling, she felt, for the creation of space and time to make “the creation of knowledge and understanding in the actual lived situation” (2011, p. 208). Educators have a desire to teach Indigenous learners, but the Indigenous learners get little from the methods of teaching typically employed. The colonial mindset would be to view this as a perceived cognitive shortcoming on the part of the Indigenous peoples that helps justify the rightful rule of the colonising powers. In a decolonised society, though, it is the educator’s duty to seek a more effective means by which to impart knowledge on the learner (Battiste, 2010). Indigenous populations have a high proportion of Visual Cognitive learners who utilize reflective thought processing with great success (Hilberg & Tharp, 2002). A Medicine Wheel model of learning, that is, one that respects all aspects of a person (emotion, spirit, body, and mind), may provide a starting point for an inclusive classroom (Kanu, 2011).

Decolonisation requires decolonizing practices; European thinking and methodology perpetuates Eurocentric values and norms regardless of community or intent. A decolonized society starts with a decolonization of the mind. For the week prior to the Sun Dance, my group started the process of decolonising our ways of thinking during our classes at UBC. Amid lessons on the history of the Sun Dance ceremony, we also left the classroom to connect with nature and reflect on what we felt. We also learned that we were going as helpers to the Sun Dance, so that we could work alongside Elders and learn from them for the entire week. The classroom was part of our learning, but it did not dominate our learning.

Indigenous education integrates the notion that there are many ways to learn, many ways to educate, many kinds of learners, many kinds of teachers, each of which has to be honored for their uniqueness and their contribution to education (Cajete & Pueblo, 2010, p. 1131)

I went to a talk given by some local Elders in Vancouver, I believe it was a month or two before my first Sun Dance. One of them explained that one need not be old to be an Elder. The term Elder is something of a mistranslation, and what is really meant is that the person is a knowledge keeper. Because knowledge generally comes with age, the one who held the knowledge and taught others would normally be one of the older members of the group. This is not always the case anymore. The man who led us in putting up the teepees was our Elder even though he was only in his forties (at least that is my best guess). His knowledge of that traditional cultural practice is invaluable, and, in its own small way, connected us: his group, my group, and the land. A teepee is a product of location; it was designed to meet certain conditions that exist in the North American prairies. Real decolonisation happens when one is fully allowed to exist in a way conditioned by tradition and place-based cultural practices (Corntassel, 2012). Through participation in the teachings of Elders, and respectfully engaging in a variety of cultural practises – from teepees to sweat lodges to singing and dancing in the arbour along with the music – we were engaged with the land and traditions and embodying our own small form of colonial resistance.

## **5.5 Third Space Ceremony**

For the whole week of the Sun Dance, there were sweats every day. I never was certain how many times each day the sweat lodges were used, even when I was helping to tend the fire. When

rocks were called for, the fire keepers brought rocks, called the Grandfathers. Perhaps it was because time passed differently that I never took note of how often the Grandfathers were invited in to the sweat.

From what I recall, the staff bearers needed to perform one or two sweats each day. Two sweats would make sense as the sweat lodge is a way to cleanse and purify a person, as well as strengthen their spirit. However, if we had to sweat before the morning procession, we would not be rushing to gather in time, so I feel there are details I am having a hard time remembering. It is the job of the staff bearers to lead the Sun Dancers into the arbour and dance with them in the morning, and again leading them out of the arbour at night. The staffs they carry represent guardian animal spirits – buffalo, coyote, and four eagles – and remind people at the Sun Dance to be mindful of the unseen entities that are attracted to a ceremony as powerful and sacred as the Sun Dance. The staffs are considered sacred objects, and the staff bearers are the only non-Sun Dancers who are allowed to enter the centre dancing area of the arbour (although only during the processions). The arbour is a place of great emotion and spiritual power, especially towards the centre where the tree is. It is a sacred tree, chosen through vision and ceremony by the Elders to join the Sun Dance as a representation of the tree of life. The power and prayers of all the people witnessing and participating in the Sun Dance are focussed there. It is the role of the tree to stand in the middle of the arbour and deliver up the prayers of everyone to the spirits in the sky and to the creator. It remains there a whole year watching over the site until a new tree takes its place at the next Sun Dance (Cajete, 2000; Elk, 1989).

I remember the staff bearers having short sweats, perhaps only one round of songs and prayers instead of the usual four. The Sun Dancers had very long, hot sweats, and I think the staff bearers only joined them for the end of their sweat. That quickly became the only sweats I would attend.

I attended a few sweats my first Sun Dance, always at the end of the day, and each time they finished I would make my way down to the stream. The sweats were hot, sometimes almost unbearably so, and I have never handled heat well. The water under the setting sun was cold and refreshing. It was the closest thing available to a bath or shower. The stream was only deep in a few small places, and, even then, the water never rose much higher than my chest. Most of the water was barely deep enough to reach my waist. The water gave me a means of bathing, rinsing clothes, and reconnecting with nature in a way that I could not otherwise. As cold as I may have been walking back up to my teepee each night, it was worth it for the time spent with the insects, fish, and birds.

At my second Sun Dance, after my first sweat, something changed: something inside told me to not bother with the sweats anymore and to just go to the stream instead. The water gave me a new way to commune and connect with nature. The Sun Dance was hot, and dusty, while the stream was cold and reminded me of the coast. Vancouver is a very wet climate, and I enjoy the smell of damp soil, grass, fir and cedar. In my experience, the summer dryness in Alberta is sometimes as hard to handle as the heat.

I have always been fascinated by the amount of life that lives in and near water. One Elder told me how he used to swim in the stream when he was young. Back then, it was a deep river. Over

time, neighbouring farms needed water and diverted it. Thanks to irrigation canals, most of the water never makes it past the Sun Dance. It still draws animals though; birds mostly from what I experienced, but fish as well

During my first Sun Dance, I discovered a shallow section of river inhabited by baby pike. The sandy riverbed formed a small pool near a fallen tree. The sediment had built up a partial dam by the shore where water would be temporarily trapped in a pool about two metres long and a metre wide. The shallowness of the pool, combined with the retention of heat in the rocks, made it a nice, if somewhat muddy, place to sit. As I sat there in the warm water, watching the lowering light filter through trees, I noticed small movements in my pool. My first thought was insects of some kind had come to visit, but upon closer inspection I discovered a sizable school of tiny fish were lightly tickling my feet. I later discovered these were new born pike whose aggressive, predatory nature was driving them to attack me. Being far too small to actually bite me, the most they could achieve was to nibble at the old skin cells that sloughed off in the stream. Anytime I moved, even just my toes, the tiny pike would scatter to whatever sandy hiding place they had been in previously. I amused myself letting the swarm nibble at me for a bit, then splashing the water and trying to see where they disappeared to. Often, I would hear drums and singing coming through the woods from the ceremony. I felt at peace.

As I wrote this part of my story, I struggled with how to capture the experience, and realized that it is impossible with the limitations of the medium.

It is not possible to know both the context and definition of an idea at the same time. The closer you get to defining or explaining an idea, the more it loses its context. At the same

time, the more the context of an idea is explained, the further you get from its definition of focus (Wilson, 2008, p. 99)

Indigenous research and methodologies are inherently subversive to Western academia because of the value placed on spirit and emotion over intellect (Ahenakew, 2016). My times in the stream were my own sort of ceremony that helped to connect me to my lived experiences as a coastal person. My Cree ancestors may have come from northern Alberta, and that is part of me, but that is not my life. “All human development is predicated on our interaction with the soil, the air, the climate, the plants, and the animals of the places in which we live” (Cajete, 2000, p. 187). My third space is made between many worlds, and water is an important part of that space.

I recall an Elder telling me to be mindful of my emotions and spirit at the Sun Dance, and listen when those parts of me speak; my time in the stream was in response to those things.

The land, aki, is both context and process. The process of coming to know is learner-led and profoundly spiritual in nature. Coming to know is the pursuit of whole body intelligence practiced in the context of freedom (Simpson, 2014, p. 7)

Freedom to connect with your whole being is a large part of why people attend the Sun Dance. One must listen to what their body needs and act on it. To some, that may mean gathering sage or cutting wood for the fire; for others, it means embodying their feelings in the safety of a sweat and releasing them. For me, my spirit danced to the caws of birds and the softly rippling noises of water moving across smooth stones.

Transcendence refers to a way of enlarging your beliefs and moving on with your lives in a new way- a way that works. Transcendence refers to integrating that which has value into a new self that is larger than the former self (Richardson, 2016, p. 132)



I listened to my spirit and discovered a new way to feel and be. What peace others discovered in the heat and community of the sweat lodge, I found in the cold isolation of the stream. Isolation has never been a negative thing for me; I am introverted by nature and entirely happy being so. There are many times when I need space that is my own, and that can be hard to find at the Sun Dance. At the same time, the sense of community there is phenomenal and something I also deeply value. This creates another liminal space for me to exist within and between: the social and the isolated. Too much of one creates desire for the other, which forces me to strive for balance between the two. As one Elder said, the Sun Dance provides opportunities to align one's medicine wheel. Placing too much into any one area throws the wheel out of alignment. The water rejuvenated my body, my spirit, and my emotions, so that my body could endure the work done the rest of the time.

## **5.6 A Sun Dance Miracle**

The Sun Dance is about much more than dancing in the arbour; there are lessons to be learned everywhere and every day if one is open and ready to receive them. It takes a lot of work to both prepare the Sun Dance site, and to keep the ceremony going. The Elders overseeing the ceremony have the difficult task of making sure everything is being done properly, which is not easy as many volunteers forget some of the details. The Sun Dance forces many people to learn to be patient, and to accept that sometimes things will not go perfectly. The leaders do their best but must be willing and able to adapt when necessary.

At both Sun Dances, I was chosen to be part of the procession that leads the Dancers into the arbour in the morning and back out in the evening. There are six animal totems – one coyote

staff, four eagle staves, and a buffalo skull – representing important spirits that are carried in and out with the dancers. The staff bearers are the only non-Dancers that are allowed to step into the centre of the arbour once the ceremony begins. At my first Sun Dance, it was the Keeper of the Sun Dance ceremony who asked me during a sweat to carry one of the staves. I was a bit intimidated at the responsibility – I am not the most energetic or athletic person – but it was a great honour that I gladly accepted. That year, I carried one of the eagles. At my second Sun Dance, I led the procession carrying the buffalo skull.

Each morning started the same way: a person went through the whole site singing the wake-up song. I never did learn what the song was called, but it was one of the nicest alarm clocks I had ever experienced. Ceremonies are one of the only instances in most Indigenous cultures where daily life operates (more or less) on a fixed schedule. Time was marked by the sun and tradition, not clocks, but there was still a schedule. At my first Sun Dance, the woman who was asked to wake people up each morning did not have a drum of her own and asked to borrow mine. I was happy to hear it being played every day. Depending on where one was sleeping on the site, and how long the wake-up person took to walk the grounds, staff bearers had anywhere from fifteen to thirty minutes to get ready and in position (assuming one did not wake up before the singer, which I did once). I do not move terribly fast, but I typically had enough time for a trip to the restroom, a cup of coffee, and a bite of whatever food was available (often there was none that early). The leaders blew their eagle bone whistles to alert everyone when the procession was about to start. The staff bearers knew that the first whistle was our five minute warning, and the procession started on the third whistle. The Elder in charge of the staff bearers often commented on the anxiety he endured having to round them all up in those last minutes.

One morning, at my second Sun Dance, a rare occurrence happened. All of the staff bearers were assembled by the arbour and ready to go before the Sun Dancers had even finished their morning sweat. When the leader arrived to prepare for the procession, he was surprised to see us all waiting for him. He exclaimed, laughing, it was a “Sun Dance miracle”, to which another Elder responded by telling us to not make it a habit or else the leaders would start to get lazy. The Elders often used humour and would joke with everyone, especially by joyfully teasing each other in a light-hearted manner. All through the ceremony, people could be found laughing, even while tired or working. Often the most difficult tasks were accompanied by the most laughter.

Laughter builds community, reduces stress, and can help remind people in a group that they are all equals (Dokis, 2011; Cajete, 2000).

There are two common characteristics of teasing in First Nations humour: permitted disrespect and self-deprecation. Permitted disrespect implies you have the other person’s permission to joke about them or to tease them (Taylor 2005:28). This form of teasing requires a level of intimacy between individuals [...]. First Nations people tend to respond to teasing by not only laughing along, but by joining in and teasing themselves (Dokis, 2011, p. 62)

The Elders teased each other often, but seldom teased anyone else. Teasing was a sign of familiarity and closeness. In this way, teasing became a sign of affection. The people who teased each other the most tended to be the people who had known each other the longest. Self-deprecating humour was far more common when an Elder was trying to demonstrate how to do something. I believe there is a natural tendency for a person to become frustrated when trying to

imitate someone's actions and failing. The self-deprecating humour of the Elders helps to bring them down to the same level as the younger, less experienced volunteers. It is also a way to model for younger people the importance of not taking oneself too seriously.

While non-First Nations people tend to respond to teasing by trying to set the record straight, First Nations people tend to respond to teasing by not only laughing along, but by joining in and teasing themselves (Dokis, 2011, p. 62)

Humour can mitigate hardship and stress, giving people a means by which to endure otherwise crushing circumstances. This has long been used as a survival technique by Indigenous peoples (Dokis, 2011).

At the Sun Dance, people are not supposed to have electronic devices, including watches. There is an area to park cars and one can leave their electronics in their car, but when walking around the site it is encouraged not to have any gadgets. For most of us, this was the reason why any semblance of adherence to clock time was pure coincidence. We learned to measure time in relation to various events, for example: how many rounds of dancing had happened that day, what activities were going on around the site, and where the sun was in the sky. That is why having all the staff bearers show up early and be prepared was so surprising. Generally, a couple of staff bearers will arrive on time, but others will be having some breakfast, going to the toilet, or still getting dressed by the time we were supposed to line up for the procession. Most mornings, the leader who kept track of us would have to send some of the younger, faster volunteers as runners to go locate missing staff bearers. Often the last of us would not arrive until the first or second blow of the eagle bone whistle. It was for this reason, that after the 'Sun

Dance miracle' morning procession, when the Elder who led us said he would see us early again the next day, I smiled and felt comfortable enough to responded with "don't count on it".

There was one morning during my first Sun Dance when I missed the procession. I woke up before the drum, and made it to the dining hut in plenty of time for a morning coffee. I sat on a bench there with my coffee waiting for the first whistle as had become my habit by that point. The whistles were loud, and could usually be heard through the entire site, but something was different that morning. I waited, and I waited, and there was no whistle, and no runners, and it was not until I heard the pounding and singing of the people at the big drum for the procession that I realized I was late. I ran to the arbour, but by then I had missed the morning procession. The Elders had asked another volunteer to take my staff. I was confused as to what happened. I was told runners had been sent to find me, and I was surprised none had arrived at the kitchen as it was one of the most common places to check for missing staff bearers. Later that day, I found the Keeper of the Sun Dance ceremony and I apologized to him for not being there to do what I had promised. The other staff bearers were surprised I had not heard the whistle. The Elder did not scold me nor make me feel guilty, but rather reassured me that everything was fine. He told me that there was a reason I was not there; that I had not been able to hear the whistle. We could not know what that reason was. It was not necessary to know. I was told I had not failed in my duties, and if I still wanted to carry the staff the next morning I would be welcome to. That was the last morning I ever waited until the whistle to go down to the arbour.

For much of my life, I have been forced to endure fixed schedules that placed importance on events happening at certain times of day. Being late to these events often resulted in chastisement

or punishment. I have been conditioned to carry clocks, sometimes multiple clocks, with various alarms set, in order that I do not offend the hegemony around me by missing a meeting or similar obligation. The Sun Dance, and other encounters with Indigenous peoples, have often been a welcome relief from the burdens of clock time.

There are many definitions of, and identifiers for, time. Two models that seem to encompass most others are monochronic and polychronic. Monochronic societies, such as much of western and northern Europe, and colonial North America, believe in the “linear” model of time (Golemon, 2003, p. 231). Time moves like a stream with all events happening one after the other and people being swept along like leaves caught in the current. Some move together, others drift apart, a few break or sink, and sometimes new leaves enter the stream. Polychronic societies, such as many Native American and African cultures, as well as many Mediterranean and South American countries, see time as being more open, malleable, and relative (Golemon, 2003, p. 231). For these peoples, events may not have a specific order, and multiple events could unfold all at once.

Einstein once remarked that, among all people, twelve-year-old children of the Uto-Aztecan language groups (which include the Hopi) were probably the best prepared to grasp his Theory of Relativity. The Hopi have no expression for “time”, far less “past” or “future”; time is not linear but a circulating space where past, present, and future are always together (Matthiessen, 2009, p. 138)

Monochronic time is measured in units of seconds, minutes, hours, days, years, and beyond. These units are absolute and inflexible. Polychronic time is measured in events and relationships, with days and years being defined by what happened, not by a clock or calendar. I have always

felt that one wonderful advantage of polychronic time is the idea that events happen when they are supposed to happen. A person can never be late, because the clock is simply a loose guideline. If a person does not show up for an event, then one can assume that something happened which caused them to miss it. Of course, such an attitude does not blend well with Eurocentric models of schools where the classroom is structured like a factory and everything is controlled by clocks and bells. The Sun Dance, though, is a way to escape such colonial trappings.

It was my desire to be a staff carrier after I was invited to do so that compelled me to wake early each morning; there was never any fear of punishment. My apology to the Elders was more about me reconciling my failure with myself than to beg for mercy from my superiors. Simply put, the Elders were not bothered by my absence, and were surprised that I sought them out to apologise. They reasoned that if I was meant to hear the whistle and be at the arbour that morning, I would have. They recognized my desire to remain a staff carrier and that was more than enough for them. They never thought less of me for not showing up. There was no guilt, no need for apologies, simply a recognition of what happened and a willingness to move forward. The few minutes that the procession had been delayed while another volunteer was found to fill my space made no difference. In the end, it was the Elders' acceptance of me that made me even more dedicated to the task. I continued to carry the staff not out of a sense of obligation, but because I had a desire to. That was only one of many times at the Sun Dance where Elders taught me to be kind to myself. While learning about ceremonies and practices, I learned the deeper lesson of listening to myself and doing what I need to do, not what I want to do or feel forced to do. The Sun Dance ceremony may follow a schedule, but the needs of each person are more

important than any other ceremony work. The whole point of the ceremony is to renew life, and sometimes that requires a person to step aside and listen to what is going on inside them. I always heard the whistle, except for that morning. For whatever reason, I was not meant to. That morning, I was meant to rest, and to be reminded that the world will not stop or fall apart just because I take time for myself.

## **5.7 Sweat Lodge Spirit**

In Western society, researchers and the academy generally avoid consideration and discussion of spirit and spirituality. I believe part of this comes from a misunderstanding of what is meant by religion and spirituality. “[...] religion is (or at least should be) the external manifestation of spirituality” (Wilson, 2008, p. 19). Participation in a religious practice does not necessitate a spiritual connection to the ceremony being done, just as understanding the world through spiritual connections does not necessitate a person to practice anything structured or routine enough to be recognised as a religion. The following is a list of five general principles that characterize American Indian spiritual traditions as discussed by Cajete (2000):

- They lack a formal doctrine of religion. They do not even have a word for religion. The words most commonly used for religion refer to a way of living. It is an orientation to a process, rather than an intellectual structure
- Spoken words and language have a quality of spirit because they are expressions of Human breath, and the breath of life is sacred
- The creative act of making something with spiritual intent (commonly referred to simply as Art) has its own quality and spiritual power



- Life & Spirit move in never ending cycles of creation and dissolution. The cycles follow patterns of nature and the cosmos
- Nature is the true “ground” of spiritual reality. Forms and forces of nature are expressions of spirit which interpenetrate the life and process of Human spirituality

For many, if not most, Indigenous people spirituality cannot be compartmentalized. It is important in both ceremony and everyday life (Wilson, 2008). “In reality, spirituality is not separate but is an integral, infused part of the whole in the Indigenous world view” (Wilson, 2008, p. 89). It is for this reason that, for some people, objects and acts that would otherwise seem non-ceremonial can take on ceremonial qualities. As with many other aspects of life, spirituality is about relationships. For many Indigenous people, seemingly mundane relationships can have as much spirituality as grand events. Spirituality is “one’s internal sense of connection to the universe. This may include one’s personal connection to a higher being, or humanity, or the environment” (Wilson, 2008, p. 92). If one has this sort of understanding of the world, then spirituality can never be removed, nor can things be fully understood without it.

I believe that for many Indigenous people, the most important sacred ceremony, the one most focussed on building and strengthening their relationships with the world, is the sweat lodge (McCabe, 2008). Sweat lodge size and construction varies between places and nations, but the basic structure is the same: a half-sphere, covered by blankets, with a shallow pit in the middle. People fill the space inside the lodge and go in a clockwise circle offering prayers and songs, many share stories. Between each round there is typically drumming and singing, and hot rocks are added to the pit, often with a sprinkling of sacred herbs such as sage. Water is put on the rocks with a cedar bough or other implement in order to fill the air with steam and create a sort

of sauna. In that place, it is not unusual for some people to experience visions. So too was it for me; while in my first ever sweat lodge, long before my first Sun Dance, I had a vision of an owl swooping down towards my face. Grandmother Owl, as I came to know her, has remained with me every day, but, more often than not, is at a great distance watching events unfold.

The sweat lodge is like both a cave and a womb: into it people who are lost seek shelter, and from it they may emerge reborn (McCabe, 2008). Going in to a sweat lodge, everyone there may be strangers, but upon leaving, they are like brothers. The sweat lodge is a safe space for vulnerability in a world that often targets and preys upon the vulnerable. People who were taught to never show emotion have wept without reservation after finally being able to let go of the emotional weight that had been crushing them, sometimes for years. Sweat lodges have been the salvation of the depressed, the angry, and the hurt. For some people, it is part of a plan to stop substance abuse. For others, it is simply an alternative to therapy. As part of a larger ceremony, such as the Sun Dance, the sweat lodge can become a place of cleansing the body and soul. It is a place of reflection, vision, and guidance where one can become reattuned to the spirits and to themselves.

“The power of the sweat lodge is a symbol of cultural integrity for Aboriginal people and serves as a reminder of the value and beauty of the traditional ways, which, in turn, encourages belief in self and community and creates hope for the future. These are two very important factors in overcoming the problems brought on by colonisation and oppression” (McCabe, 2008, p. 148)

Growing up outside of Indigenous society, I was disconnected from my heritage. I knew about reservations, and I knew some traditional stories, but most of that information came from books, articles, and museums. “You don’t look like an Indian” was a common response I got from many Indigenous people when I mentioned my mixed background. At the same time, others told me that I looked like the men back on their home reservations. One thing I found was that a number of students, even those with status, had similar issues of not appearing “Indian” enough. I started attending gatherings at the UBC House of Learning. I hoped that by meeting and getting to know other Indigenous students, I might find a sense of community and have opportunities to explore my own culture. At one of these gatherings, I learned about a UBC sweat lodge ceremony.

The UBC sweat lodge is outside the House of Learning, and well hidden. There is a parkade next to the House of Learning, and between the two structures is a small wooded area. I did not realize until my first sweat lodge that anything was hidden away amongst the trees. When I arrived, I still did not realise anything was there except for trees, and so I wandered around the House of Learning until I heard voices. I followed them and eventually came across the sweat lodge and the fire. The site was a small clearing, maybe ten metres across, bordered by the House of Learning on one side, and trees on two others. The north side was open, and where people were gathering. There were men and women, mostly students. I recall that at least some were not Indigenous. A man and his son, a boy of about eight to ten years old, were tending the fire and the sweat lodges. The UBC sweat lodge is actually two identical sweat lodges: one for males, one for females. The Elder, who was the man helping watch the fire, welcomed everyone and gave a talk. He introduced his son, who was learning to be a firekeeper. He introduced the lodges, explaining that this particular sweat lodge ceremony had been gifted to UBC many years

before by a Lakota Elder. The UBC sweat lodge is segregated by gender because that was part of the vision given to the original Elder. Many sweat lodges are not segregated at all.

The UBC sweat lodge was described by the Elder as a “learning sweat” so we were not expected to know much upon arrival. As I knew that offerings of tobacco were common, I brought a pouch of cigarette filling. I learned later when I went to the Sun Dance that ceremonial tobacco is different, and considered more appropriate, but any kind of tobacco is acceptable. The gesture means more than the quality of the product being given. In front of the sweat lodges, there was a branch from a tree in a ring of stones next to the fire, on which were tied a few strands of coloured ribbon. Before going into the sweat lodge, we placed tobacco by the tree as an offering to the spirits so they would join us and take our prayers back to the creator. Whenever we passed the fire, we had to walk around it counter-clockwise. The light was getting dim and wood smoke filled the air. I enjoyed hearing the pops from the fire as damp patches made little flares amongst the flames. Men wore only shorts, women were wrapped in special sweat lodge dresses, a lovely red light-weight wrap dress. The women had their own Elder leading them into the sweat lodge. Before entering the sweat lodge, I had to put my glasses by the tree where they would be safe. No glasses are ever worn inside.

The ground inside the sweat lodge was covered in cedar boughs. As we sat inside, the Elder explained how the rocks that were brought in from the fire were called “grandfathers”. During each round, seven grandfathers would be welcomed in, one for each of the seven ancestral teachings. Each round there were prayers, and singing, and stories, and drumming. The meaning of the grandfathers never came up at the Sun Dance, and the Sun Dance sweats used far more

grandfathers each round. At the UBC sweat, people did not leave the lodge until after the final round. At the Sun Dance, everyone left the lodge each round. That could simply have to do with the amount of heat, or it could be a cultural difference, or a different vision given to the Elder who holds the ceremony. I have been told by multiple people that every sweat lodge is a little different. When the rocks were called for at the UBC sweat, we would loudly welcome each grandfather in, thanking it for joining us.

Inside the sweat lodge it was nearly black except for what little light was given off from the orange and red glow of the grandfathers. The air smelled faintly of cedar from the boughs we sat upon. The air was also filled with the scent of sage which was sprinkled on the grandfathers at the start of each round. Whenever a person shared a prayer or story with the group, the Elder would use a cedar bough to splash water from a bucket onto the grandfathers so the lodge would fill with steam. The steam carries the words to the spirits. I tried to keep low to the ground where the air is cooler, but the sweat lodge left little space to move. Sometimes in the moments of silence, I thought I could hear the drumbeat coming from the women's sweat nearby.

It was in the impenetrable dark of the sweat lodge that the owl appeared to me, as if it flew out of a starless sky. The sightlessness of the sweat lodge, and emotional connection one makes with the others there, creates an atmosphere that is not nearly as confining as might be expected. The space is filled with song and fragrances and can feel like a void stretching up through time and space. From that void came the owl with a white, round face, blue eyes, and dark bands near the edges of the wings, body, and tail. It circled above and then dove as if catching a mouse – claws extended towards me. I thought it was going to collide with my face, and then the vision was

gone. I was not frightened watching it, simply curious. After the encounter, I felt the owl was with me but I did not see it again that day. The vision stayed with me, and as soon as I was home I attempted to draw what I saw. Over the years since that first encounter, I have come to understand my owl spirit companion better. It is an older female spirit that I now refer to as Grandmother Owl. I believe she may, in part, represent my own feminine/female half. Along with Brother Bear, my spirit companions have helped me to better understand my own Two-Spirit identity.

Upon reflecting on these events, I realized my participation in the sweat lodge was a decolonising act. What I was focused on while participating in the sweat lodge was the pursuit of my own Indigeneity. It did not consciously occur to me at the time that pursuit and participation in Indigenous culture and ceremony was counter to the colonial goal of Indigenous cultural extinction. Had I been asked about it, I am certain I would have realised that was the case, but my focus was elsewhere. I was looking inward, seeking a path laid out by personal interests and spirituality, and working to uncover aspects of my own lost history. Both the active pursuit of my cultural heritage and my resulting encounter with my second spirit guide were decolonial acts, but until writing this thesis I had not framed it that way in my mind.

“Decolonizing and spirituality are inextricably linked” (Iseke, 2013, p. 36). The Canadian hegemony does not value visions, or Indigenous ceremony in general. I was born a colonised person, to a colonised mother, adopted into a colonised family, and raised in a colonised society. I went to a hegemonic school with Euro-centric teachings, and on Sunday mornings I went to an Anglican (Church of England) service. Spirituality and education were strongly segregated. Prior

to taking First Nations studies courses at UBC, I had never heard of a sweat lodge. When I learned about the UBC sweat lodge, I saw it as an opportunity to try and connect more with my Indigenous heritage, a heritage that was largely devalued by mainstream culture. The fact that the ceremony was put on at an institution such as UBC, in a way, made it even more of a decolonial act. One of the five major foundations that underlie Indigenous education is the visionary or dream tradition “based on an understanding that one learns through visions and dreams” (Cajete as cited in Battiste, 2000, p. 184). The sweat lodge is a place where one can get in touch with their emotions and spirit, and sometimes achieve visions as I did. Encountering Grandmother Owl helped me see and understand the world in a new way. “With a vision comes supernatural aid, or what you might call a totem or spirit guardian. This spirit ally can become our advisor, teacher, protector and secret partner” (Lake, 1992, p. 43-44). Grandmother Owl was not my first companion spirit, but she was the first to come to me through ceremony. My spirits help to advise and guide me, never in a demanding way, but by helping me to reflect on situations and see them in new ways. Through ceremony I found community, and ways by which I can strive to achieve healthy emotional release. It is a form of healing, one that works to rebuild the part of me that colonisation worked to erase. “Spiritual and intellectual integrity is achieved on Turtle Island, by the interplay of Human and more-than-human consciousness” (Sheridan & Longboat, 2006, p. 365).

## **5.8 A Bear in the House**

During the third year of my Bachelor of Arts, I experienced a very unpleasant case of influenza; that was when my bear spirit arrived. I was living with a partner at the time and, wanting to minimise her chances of contracting the illness, was keeping my distance from her by occupying

as little space as possible. My desk was adjacent to the chesterfield in the living room, and I had turned this area into my own diminutive hospital ward, stocked with all manner of over-the-counter medication to alleviate as many symptoms as possible. The illness was worse some days than others, and there was one particularly bad night that I could not force myself to move from my makeshift bed. My cough was so bad I was having difficulty breathing, let alone sleeping, and I was too physically drained to enact my default solution of taking a dose of cough medication and sitting at the computer until my airways calmed. There are points where one is very ill, that it becomes natural to contemplate the severity of one's illness and wonder how much worse one might become before the illness becomes life threatening. These moments, for me, come much swifter when breathing becomes problematic. And so there I was, in a dim room, in the middle of the night, physically unable to move except for the near full-body convulsions that came with each painful, choking cough, wondering if I might be dying, when a large brown bear put its head on my lap.

I knew perfectly well that a very large, young, male grizzly bear had not wandered into my home, just as I knew that what I was seeing did not really exist yet I knew it was something I was actually experiencing for whatever reason. I could see it, but I could also see through it. I touched it, even though I knew it was not there. I felt the weight of the creature, even though it was clearly insubstantial. I had experienced sleep-deprived hallucinations before, but this was nothing like that. The bear was detailed, with personality and mannerisms. I could feel an energy about it. For lack of a better explanation, I called it a spirit, and I spent time studying it. I had never encountered anything like it before, and I was surprised that I could tell things about it instinctively. It was a young bear, despite its size, and it was friendly. It wanted to comfort me. I



felt it could hear my thoughts and feelings, even though I could not hear any kind of communication from it. After it came, my cough diminished. I was not cured by any stretch of the imagination, but I was able to calm my breathing and feel less like I might asphyxiate where I sat. Strength returned to me after a time, and I was able to go through my usual routine and finally sleep. The bear curled up next to where I was laying and spent the night. When I woke in the morning, he was gone.

The spirit I have come to know as Brother Bear has been with me ever since. He is far more present and felt far more often than Grandmother Owl. I believe, in part, he represents my masculine/male half. In many ways, he is opposite of Grandmother Owl, and, perhaps, the two balance each other out in my life. There are points they agree on: they enjoy music, ceremony, and dancing. Beyond those topics, they seem to keep a distance from each other, more from a lack of common interests and shared perspective than any sort of animosity.

At the time, I understood that one typically underwent some form of journey in order to attract a spirit animal, which confused me because all I had seemed to do was become almost bedridden for over a week. I had only taken a few classes in Indigenous art, history, and culture by that point. My journey to understand myself more was not yet fully underway. I had immersed myself in Indigenous literature which perhaps helped to mitigate the oddity of the encounter. I am aware now, and was then, that I should have felt surprise to be comforted by an insubstantial grizzly bear, but I did not. If anything, it was a calming sensation.

Brother Bear changed my life for the better. He not only made me aware that spirit animals do in fact exist, he also helped guide me to new ways of understanding myself, and pushed me to continue when my own shyness threatened to stop my progress. More often than not, I feel his presence nearby, always just out of sight. Grandmother Owl keeps her distance, watching from afar, but Brother Bear stays by me, appearing and disappearing from the shadows whenever it suits him.

Prior to my encounter with the bear spirit, I did not believe in the spirit world. I have always enjoyed the idea of animal spirits, and stories that involved them, but I understood them as being symbolic, not actual entities that people could interact with. When the bear first appeared, beyond being physically ill, I was dealing with emotional difficulties for a variety of reasons. I was also steeped in Indigenous literature due to my ongoing studies at UBC. I realize it is not common to encounter a spirit animal; however, when it does happen, it is usually through ceremony or during times of physical and/or emotional distress (Lake, 1991). Perhaps the literature played a part as well, it is hard to say. I was not looking for spiritual guidance or support, but it came to me regardless. One could dismiss the bear as a hallucination spawned by a combination of poor health, strong medicine, and literary influence, but I believe that is too simple. The bear stayed with me and helped me long after my physical and emotional health recovered. I never asked him to stay, he simply did. Although I would not have considered it at the time, upon reflection, I concede that the Indigenous literature I was immersed in could have made me more open and receptive to such an occurrence.

While I was reading the various novels for my Indigenous Studies classes, I was horrified and saddened by the accounts of physical, emotional, and mental abuse, while at the same time fascinated by the way the world around the characters was portrayed, often as a character unto itself, and populated by many entities that appear to be of a more-than-human nature. Examples of the fiction I had read around that time include Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, Beatrice Mosionier's *In Search of April Raintree*, Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*, Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*, and Rudy Wiebe & Yvonne Johnson's *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman*. I did not feel an emotional tie to the novels at the time, or more specifically, my muted emotional response came from a connection that was primarily, if not entirely, intellectual. I understood things like residential school abuse, and the subsequent domestic abuse that it created, to be terrible things that negatively impacted people and society at many levels, but having never experienced anything like that, I believed it impossible to truly empathise with the characters. I have read some scholarly work since that has made me start to reconsider whether or not it is possible to be emotionally affected by a theoretically real yet totally foreign situation (Taylor, 1995).

I enjoyed *Monkey Beach* and *Solar Storms* as examples of the presence of the spirit world in literature. What these novels help to stress is how people, as beings that exist within nature, must maintain their connections to nature, for a disconnect leads to sickness in, and, often, destruction of, the self and others. These entropic forces are often exemplified in relation to colonial, or colonial-derived, powers. In *Monkey Beach*, this is embodied by spirits encountered in the city. An anaemic ghoul-like spirit that appears to be almost feeding off the psychiatrist, and the ghost of Tab that lets Lisa know she will die if she does not turn away from her Vancouver lifestyle.

There are also multiple references to the sexual and physical abuse suffered by children both at the hands of those who operated the residential schools as well as by those who survived through the schools: a prime example of the way in which violence begets violence (Robinson, 2001). In *Solar Storms*, the reader is told repeatedly how Europeans shattered the once healthy and strong societies of the First Nations. In addition, the Europeans are accused of having killed off both nature and the spirits in their homeland, and because of it, had forgotten how to live in a way that promoted a happy and healthy society. It is this disconnect that is used to help explain matters that science struggles with, such as why fish yields seem to vary without “logical” reason, or why so many Indigenous people end up trapped in a cycle of drugs, violence, and alcohol (Hogan, 1995).

All things and all thoughts are related through spirit (Cajete, 2000), but to have an animal spirit with which one can interact shapes the relationship in new ways. When I made prayers at the Sun Dance, I did not simply give them to the creator; instead, I prayed for my companion animals to deliver prayers on my behalf. Sometimes I prayed directly to them rather than the creator, depending on the nature of the prayers. The hegemony denies the presence of spirit except as a personal, largely abstract, concept that is detached from day to day existence. As I have reflected upon my spirit companions writing this thesis, I have had the realization that accepting my spirit companions was an anticolonial act of hegemonic resistance (Anderson, 2016). By embracing the counter-hegemonic, I reinforced my third space identity. Bear provided me with a new tool by which to interact with the world; however, other people would largely be unable to recognise his presence as the Western hegemony is generally void of any conscious spiritual presence. This creates what I believe Bhabha would describe as a new area of negotiation of meaning and

representation (Rutherford, 1990). I inherently use a hybrid model of understanding based on Eurocentric education, and Indigenous ways of utilizing spirit to help inform my decision-making processes. Thanks to Brother Bear and Grandmother Owl, I can be anywhere, do anything, and am never truly alone.

Contact with the third space by members of a cultural hegemony provides encounters that encourage those of the dominant society to reflect on their position by contrasting it with the experiences of the marginalized. My exploration of Indigenous literature demonstrated this first hand when my aunt was so upset by the content of *Stolen Life* that she broke down into tears and could not finish the novel. Due to my learning disabilities, and how I process information, it is far more effective and expeditious to listen to a novel being read than to read it myself (See Appendix A.5). For my university studies, my mother and aunt have both helped by reading course material out loud. While reading *Stolen Life*, it became impossible for my aunt to proceed. Reflecting back on that event, I have come to realise that exposure to the literature of an oppressed people can have a significant impact on the reader. My form of learning disability is by no means rare or unique; many learners may benefit from, or even require, a third party to read course materials to them. Teachers of such students, and the parents who may be helping them at home, could be as impacted by a novel to an equal or greater degree as the learner themselves. I understand that, when teaching English, it is necessary at times to be aware of how a novel can impact members of the class. The incident with my aunt illustrates that it may be necessary to be aware of how a novel can affect not just the class, but those who support the learners outside the class. *Stolen Life* did not particularly upset me at the time; I had already seen, read, and heard about the awful conditions that many Indigenous people are, or have been,

subject to. For my aunt, though, as a member of the hegemony who was not actively aware of such matters in her ordinary life, the reality was emotionally devastating. Educators need to be aware of how important and impactful the literature of the oppressed can be. While emotionally challenging, the lasting impact of wrestling with these challenges creates opportunities for the creation of third spaces and the restructuring of the hegemony.

## **5.9 The Dancing Spirit**

Anthropologists and colonists have made a number of mistakes, sometimes amusing, sometimes with serious consequences, when it comes to interpreting Indigenous cultures. These misunderstandings can result in connecting events that are not connected, attributing qualities to cultures that they do not possess, or grossly overexaggerating the popularity or influence of social groups and movements. At the worst of times, these mistakes result in excuses to further attack Indigenous security, rights, and culture. At the best of times, these mistakes result in making anthropologists look foolish, especially when their conclusions are published for future generations to later mock.

Anthropologists have explained the “Ghost Dance” as a religious movement that incorporated Indigenous and Christian beliefs into a system that was popularised among the Sioux; adherents supposedly believe that the dance summons up spirits of the dead to fight the colonial oppressors (Pettipas, 1995). A search for the history of the Ghost Dance will likely reveal a story involving Wounded Knee, bullet-proof body paint, necromancy, and the gradual disappearance of “white” people from North America. This story is intriguing if you like the idea of a messianic dance that somehow undoes hundreds of years of colonization (Henderson, 2000<sup>2</sup>; Pettipas, 1995). I was

never able to see a connection between the “Ghost Dance” presented by academic accounts, and that which I witnessed at the Sun Dance. The closest description I have found is in James Youngblood Henderson’s (2000<sup>2</sup>) account of the ghost dance:

Eurocentric writings about the Ghost Dance misunderstood the visions. The normative visions and the dances were not part of a messianic movement, but were a sustained vision of how to resist colonization. It was a vision of how to release all the spirits contained in the old ceremonies and rites. The dance released these contained spirits or forces back into the deep caves of mother earth, where they would be immune from colonizers’ strategies and techniques. Their efforts were a noble sacrifice for future generations. What is more important, the dance would allow the spiritual teachings to renew the ecology and eventually the forces of the ecology would forge a traditional consciousness of the following generations. In time, through post-colonial ghost dancing, these forces would foster a new vision of Aboriginal renewal, thus restoring the traditional consciousness and order. Part of the renewal is understanding the colonizers’ strategy of Eurocentrism, epistemological diffusionism, universality, and enforcement of differences (p. 57-58)

I agree that the Ghost Dance, as I experienced it at the Sun Dance, was an act of colonial resistance and renewal, but I was never given a detailed account. From what I was told, and from what I witnessed at the Sun Dance, I believe the Ghost Dance was a way to invite in and honour the spirits that were already there due to the nature of the Sun Dance. The Sun Dance creates a nexus of spiritual, emotional, and physical energy that intangible beings are attracted to, just as Brother Bear was.

At my first Sun Dance, the night of the Ghost Dance was black; a blanket of clouds blotted out the moon and stars as a cool breeze rustled the bushes, deepening the chill on an already cold night. I think it was the final night of the Sun Dance. Come noon the next day, the arbour would be desanctified, the dancers and supporters would feast, gifts would be given, and everyone would drift away back to their outside lives; however, that night we were not thinking about tomorrow. Over the course of the week, time had ceased to exist, carried off on rising rivers of sage and tobacco smoke. The Ghost Dance was something no one had really told me about, at least not directly. It was a name from a book, a conversation between Elders, or a reminder mentioned between helpers outside the arbour. My part was that of witness, which is an important role in any great Indigenous ceremony. Before the time of photographs and videos, if you wanted to record an event, people had to see it; the stories of those witnesses made the event real as time continued to slip in and out of the infinite cosmic lake upon which life was cast adrift: the far stern the day before yesterday, the far bow the day after tomorrow, and the present sitting right in the midst of the main deck halfway between the two ends.

Flashlights were used to get to the arbour without injuring ourselves, but upon arrival we had to shut them off and allow the darkness to cover us. We stood, silently watching and waiting; the only movement from sage smoke, more than I had ever seen. It danced in the faint glimmer of distant electric light, and as I watched the big drum started. The Ghost Dance songs are special; they are not played at any other time in the Sun Dance. The dancers in the arbour are attended to closely by the Elders, one of whom stands with the warrior dancers and blows his whistle in time with the beat. This lets others know where he is, but it also helps to protect the dancers by fending off spirits that may try to attack them. The dancers are vulnerable during the Sun Dance,



more so as they grow weaker over the days, and the Ghost Dance is a time to invite in everything unseen, not all of them necessarily friendly. The spirits and dancers are what accounts for the mass of sage. There are frequent smudgings done where people wash themselves in sage smoke to be purified, and there is always sage burned when the sun dancers are dancing in the arbour, but never so much as on the night of the Ghost Dance. I was told that the dancers are most vulnerable during the night of the Ghost Dance, although I am not sure why that is. I believe it may have to do with it being the only time there is dancing in the arbour at night. Burning sage cleanses the area, driving out negative energy and unwanted spirits. During the Ghost Dance, the arbour fills with enough sage smoke that it can become hard to see the tree in the centre, even when the moon does peek through the clouds.

Witnesses and supporters also have the important role of dancing and singing in the arbour to support the Sun Dancers. Without food and water for three days, dancing in the heat, they grow weak. I was told by one of the dancers on the feast day that all he could hear and see were the people singing and dancing to cheer him on, and that is what gave him the energy to make it to the end. I do not handle the heat well, and so, often I am tired, sore, and sluggish, but cold has the opposite effect. At my first Ghost Dance, I pushed myself as hard as I ever had. Wearing just sandals and shorts, I stood and danced the entirety of the Ghost Dance. I cannot give all credit to the cold, nor sheer determination, nor the heartbeat of the big drum marking out the only time that mattered. It was my spirit brother, the bear, who came to dance with me and picked me up when I grew too weak to stand on my own.

The Ghost Dance is longer than normal rounds of dancing during the day, and even with those I had difficulty making it through an entire round. I am strong, but neither athletic nor in good shape, and although my legs are, what my friends have called, “built like tree trunks”, I have fallen arches that makes too much time standing an exhausting and excruciating experience. The night was cold, and I was energized by the dark and the sage. Sometimes I feel Grandmother Owl at night; it is when she prefers to wake. I believe that is why, regardless of how tired I may be, I often receive a burst of energy, positive emotionality, and creative acumen around the hours of midnight to three in the morning. For the Ghost Dance, that burst started early, and my footfalls matched each strike of the drum. My legs started to hurt and burn a quarter of the way through the dance, but I looked to the Tree and kept going. I prayed to the owl spirit, if she was present, to ask the creator to take the pain from my legs. I was taught that the dancers gave prayers to the Tree which then were passed on to the creator; the stronger the prayer the more likely it would be answered. The dancing and fasting were themselves forms of strong prayer to help ensure the wishes of the dancers would reach the creator. While dancing, the sun dancers would pray that the creator take their pain and give them the strength to continue. In my experience, that worked for a time, but before the dance was half over, I felt I would collapse.

I prayed to Brother Bear, asking him to lend me his strength to keep going so I could support the dancers. Praying for strength was something I had done before in my life, but not often.

Typically, when the bear helps me in such a way, I feel a little stronger, or have a little higher endurance. It is the sort of thing that helps when dancing, or when not wanting to fall over after dancing. This time though was different. I could feel a wave move through me, almost like a mild electric shock that moved impossibly slow starting in my feet and up through my whole

body. Pain, spasms, tingling, and any other negative side effects typical of electricity were not present. My manner changed: the way I felt, the way I stood, and the way I moved were different. I could tell it was the bear spirit filling my body. I almost felt like I had grown fur and claws. I was no longer tired, and I felt stronger. More importantly, the pain was gone. I danced until everyone was finished for the night. When I stopped, the bear left me and wandered back to wherever it resided. I prayed and thanked it for lending me its strength.

Spirituality, dance, and culture have been closely linked for the entirety of human history. For Indigenous peoples, the imposed politics, laws, and customs of European culture caused irreparable harm to those they were forced upon. The Canadian government suppressed ceremonies and dancing for decades through legislation (Indian Act amendment of section 149) and through the Indian Agents, because:

- It interrupted farm work
- It promoted regression of school children to traditional habits
- It brought Indigenous people together as a community so they might continue their struggle against government control
- Government agents felt the Indian people were incapable of using good judgement
- Some feared that the festivities would decline into debauchery
- Some government officials thought dancing caused physical deterioration and mental instability

The importance of the dancing and ceremonies is seen through the actions of the Indigenous leaders who tried to change the minds of the federal government through:

- Writing letters

- Petitions
- Legal battles
- Claiming the dances were secular
- World War 1 veterans arguing that these dances were necessary in honouring and blessing enlisted Indigenous soldiers
- Sought support from sympathetic whites and American anthropologists
- Morphing dances into more acceptable variations

None of these worked. Their major means of resistance was holding the dances in secret (Pettipas, 1995). The Sun Dance was kept alive as an act of spiritual and social resistance.

Examples of spiritual resistance include Indigenous peoples ignoring being told not to engage in ceremonies, continuing these practices, and, in some cases, taking the ceremonies underground or holding them on hegemonic holidays so the gatherings would seem like just another seasonal celebration (Iseke, 2013). Indian agents were expected to control on-reserve dancing through removal of leaders, ration control and refusal of passes off the reserve. Trauma caused by the repression of Indigenous ceremonials such as dance cannot be measured but can be seen in the stories of the Elders today. People were unable to fulfil sacred vows putting them and their families under stress. Sacred objects were lost, confiscated, destroyed, or given away to preserve them. As late as the 1960s and 1970s, some Elders still believed that they would be arrested for performing their ceremonies openly. Many times, when they did them in secret, they did not have community support, adding further stress (Pettipas, 1995).

Dance has a long history as a counter hegemonic act, and, upon reflecting on my experiences, I have realized that the Sun Dance was not my first time using dance as a tool of cultural

resistance. In my lifetime, Vancouver has always seemed like a city whose society is preoccupied with image. In the birth place of Lululemon, both brand names and one's physical appearance matter. I have a large beard, long hair, am overweight, and generally bear a striking resemblance to the character Hagrid from the Harry Potter stories except in clothing tastes. I do not in any way resemble the stay-at-home partners who stroll along Kitsilano Beach with a yoga mat in a designer bag that was made to look like it was handmade by Californian hippies in the 60s rather than modern sweatshop children in Asia. I find it darkly humorous that Kitsilano Beach, one of the stereotypical Vancouver bastions of "white" culture, is named for Chief Khatsahlano, who was forcibly removed, along with his people, from the area that is now Stanley Park. A park, named for a Chief, who was displaced by a park.

The reality is, I have used dance since at least my mid-twenties as a way of finding community and challenging the cultural norms that surround me. As Richardson (2016) writes,

The third, Metis space, represents a Metis psychological homeland and cultural space in a country where the geographical homeland has been usurped by the colonizer (p. 56)

I have constantly sought out my own psychological homeland long before I even knew of the term "third space". Before the Sun Dance, there was my traditional Metis dancing at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre in Vancouver. Before the Metis dancing, I operated an independent, free, zero-income, internet-based radio music station that catered especially to fans of science fiction and horror. Before all that, in the mid-2000s, I was a regular at Vancouver's few Goth & Industrial night clubs. Vancouver's Goth scene is tiny, and has always felt a lot like an underground movement. Society has shifted enough now that many "creepy" and "unusual" people are able to express themselves openly, but for most of my life, the only place many

people could do that comfortably was either at home or out at one of the few little-known establishments that welcomed them. People in that community value creativity, difference, and individuality. I used to go out dancing every weekend, partly for the exercise, but more to be in one of the only places I could socialise and not feel displaced. The few times I have been able to attend heavy metal concerts, I found a different community with a very similar feeling and value system. I believe that these fringe musical-cultural communities foster attitudes of inclusiveness, acceptance, and mutual support largely because they exist in opposition to the mainstream. They are antithetical to popular culture, and self-alienating from society because of it, but also welcoming of anyone who is seeking to join in so long as that person is not a danger to others and does not bring too much hostility. From an interpersonal perspective, it is akin to what I found at both the Metis nights and at the Sun Dance. Everyone there was seeking a way to reconnect with themselves and realign their medicine wheels. Self-care takes many forms, and exists across many cultures, and, for many people, spirit, prayer, and healing, come from dance.

Indigenous and European, Christian and Pagan, Goth, Industrial, Metal, Geek, Gamer, in all aspects of my life, the more I look at who I am, what I value, where I come from, and how I navigate the world, the more examples of cultural hybridity and third space I find. As a post-colonial person, my life was always a search for place, and a fight against hegemonic norms that I felt contained no value. Before I was ready to explore my Indigenous heritage and embrace its spirituality, the only time I felt any sort of out-of-body-yet-physical experience in any way was when I allowed myself to become lost in music that I felt a connection to on a deep emotional level. I know not everyone has that relationship with music, but whenever I heard the right song and hit the dance floor, I did not care if anyone watched me, and I did not care that I was fat, and

I did not care that I was tired. The music flowed through me and I would dance sometimes for up to five hours. I wonder now if perhaps those were moments when my spirit companions had come to dance with me and lend me energy. I did not understand the world in those ways, but that is not to say it was not the case. A life lived in the third space requires constant reinterpretation and assessment if one hopes to fully navigate the place one occupies. I do not believe that all subcultures or minorities are equally oppressed, they are not, but similarities and overlap can exist, especially when a person strongly identifies with multiple communities.

### **5.10 Sacred Pain**

Sacred pain removes suffering by granting healing, insight, meaning, salvation, or self-empowerment. Through pain and sacrifice, the person strives to overcome emotional, spiritual, mental, or physical illness, resulting in feelings of greater strength and being more in control of one's life (Owen, 2013). The pain endured by Sun Dancers is done for betterment of both the self and the community. The sacrifices of the Sun Dancers – fasting, piercing – are done so that their prayers will be received and answered by the creator. These sacrifices could help heal an addiction, a disease, a family, a community, a society, or even the entire world. I recall someone at the Sun Dance saying that if you are doing it selfishly or to simply prove how tough you are, you will not be able to endure the three days of dancing and the piercings. It is the transformative properties of the Sun Dance – using prayer and hardship as energizing, motivating factors to transcend pain and suffering – that allows Sun Dancers, from young adults to the elderly, to last until the end of the ceremony.

There is a common idea in much of Western culture that pain and suffering are intrinsically linked. Western medicine has been devoted to blocking or alleviating pain and suffering (Ahenakew, in press). Historically this mentality might have been present in medical circles, but now doctors understand that perceptions of pain vary, and may have nothing to do with one's suffering. Put simply, pain may coincide with, or be an aspect of, suffering, but the two are separate entities and it is entirely possible to suffer without pain, or to have chronic pain without suffering (Owen, 2013). Suffering is a psychological condition, pain is physical. While at the Sun Dance, I did witness people enduring hardships and experiencing pain, but I never felt I ever witnessed someone suffering. The pain of sacrifice at the Sun Dance is typically done to alleviate some form of suffering (Ahenakew, in press, Owen, 2013; Shrubsole, 2011).

The term "suffer" was used at times, but I do not believe it was used in the same manner as is commonly meant. Some of the Elders described the fasting and the sweat lodge as "suffering"; however, what was being described was the physical hardship. These hardships are intended to help separate the mental from the physical. To overcome the hardship, the participants must remove themselves mentally from the physical discomfort, effectively feeling and processing it differently. This helps lead to a detachment of the individual self, in order to connect with the communal self – the shared connection with the group and detachment from the comfort seeking ego (Ahenakew, in press, Shrubsole, 2011). As some of the Elders would often tell people who were struggling, "pray harder" or "dance harder". The harder the person focussed on prayer (dancing being a form of prayer), the easier it became, and the less suffering was endured.



Prior to my research for this thesis, and perhaps more so before the Sun Dance, I had a completely different concept of suffering. I understood suffering as being any sort of prolonged pain or discomfort that persisted over hours, days, or even years. In my mind, any sort of chronic pain was suffering. After the Sun Dance, I understood that not all suffering was inherently bad. It was only after speaking with people who worked with medicine, and reading definitions of suffering, that I finally understood my original definition to be incorrect. I now realize that what I understood as suffering could, more accurately, be described as hardship or a challenge. By facing the hardship and overcoming the challenges, the Sun Dancers work to alleviate suffering: not just their own, but everyone's. The Sun Dance is about renewal through prayer, sacrifice, pain, and what can look like suffering to an outsider. The focus is on people and their interrelationship with the world (Hallowell, 2010).

Many Indigenous ways of knowing conceptualize pain as something that is not individualized and that can have many meanings; for example, it can be an important messenger, a visitor, a teacher, an offering, a test. From this perspective, well-being does not require the elimination of pain. Most importantly, suffering is related to turning one's back to the message of the pain (Ahenakew, in press)

The reasons one becomes a Sun Dancer are personal, and typically not shared openly with others. While I was at the Sun Dance, it never occurred to me to ask why people became Sun Dancers. Their reasons were their own, and I was there to help support them, that is all that mattered to me.

### **5.10.1 Warrior Dancers**

There is a type of Sun Dancer that stands out from the rest – the warrior dancer. Most Sun Dancers are pierced and break their piercing on the same day. They dance, they are pierced – on the chest for men, upper arms for women – and then the piercings are ripped out. The warrior dancers are men and women who are pierced the first day of dancing. The men are connected by rope to the tree as usual, but they do not break; instead, they remain in the arbour, attached to the tree, until the last day, when, finally, they are allowed to break their piercings. The women are not physically connected to the tree, but they do wear their arm piercings for the four days. The warrior dancers' sacrifice is physically more difficult than that of other Sun Dancers. The male warrior dancers sleep on the grass of the arbour, and have only the shade of the tree in the centre which requires them to keep moving to be in it. Because of the piercings and rope, they cannot lay however they like; I have heard warrior dancers at the feast saying that never being able to sleep comfortably was almost as bad at times as the fasting. The piercings on the women also make laying down and resting difficult. A warrior's piercings often are harder to break. Being attached for four days gives the piercings time to start healing, and it is possible for some of the warriors to develop some scar tissue that can make breaking the piercings from the skin more difficult and painful.

Being a warrior dancer is not about being tougher than other Sun Dancers, it is about making a bigger commitment to the creator and a larger sacrifice of oneself. They are exposed more than others, with a literal connection to the sacred tree. They go without food, water, or shelter from the start of the Sun Dance until the end. Remembering what one Elder told me, the warrior dancers must exist in a state of near constant prayer or else they would never be able to endure

the ordeal. The greater the sacrifice, and the greater the prayers, the more likely they are to reach the creator and be answered (Elk, 1989).

### **5.10.2 Piercing & Skulls**

Enduring an intense physical ordeal during a ceremony can be a way of expressing or expunging past suffering. Although this might make this activity appear to be a culturally acceptable form of self-harming, its beneficial effects are far reaching and all of those who spoke about their experiences of these forms of prayer say that they have gained strength and healing from them. Prayer with pain in a ceremonial context linking the individual with community, and its traditions, can offer a way to transform personal suffering into the empowerment gained through a shared healing experience, undertaken for the greater good of the people (Owen, 2013, p. 140)

The day I first saw piercings being done was like most others at the Sun Dance: hot, sunny, and surprisingly humid. I was cheering and dancing in the shade of the arbour praying for more wind, or even some rain. Many supporters were there; the piercings tend to draw a crowd. The people singing, dancing, and cheering in the audience provide mental and emotional support for the Sun Dancers, giving them strength to push through their ordeals. The piercing is always done at the base of the tree in the middle of the arbour (Elk, 1989). An animal skin is put down, I believe it was a bear's, along with the necessary tools: gloves, disinfectant, a scalpel, and wooden pegs. The Elder doing the piercing wears gloves and disinfects the area before cutting the flesh with the scalpel. The wounds are not terribly deep, just enough to slide the pegs under the flesh so that loops at the ends of ropes can be attached. When the person is being cut, the crowd cheers them

on. The Sun Dancer will blow their bone whistle and pray for their sacrifice to not be too difficult.

The standard chest piercing for men and upper arm piercing for women are not the only types of piercings that are possible to see at the Sun Dance. Another common type is the buffalo skull pull. The buffalo is a sacred animal for many plains nations (Cajete, 2000). It was the source of food, clothing, and various useful items for most of knowable history. It was also revered for its strength, and features prominently in many traditional stories. The buffalo is represented at the Sun Dance by the presence of buffalo skulls. A large buffalo skull stuffed with sage leads the morning and evening procession, and on one of the days of dancing, some Sun Dancers pull a train of ten to fifteen buffalo skulls. The skulls are not small; buffalos are huge animals. Each dry skull is about 3.5 to 4.5 kilograms (8 to 10 pounds). For the buffalo skull pull, the person doing it is pierced by a wooden peg on the back, through the skin over (or near) the shoulder blades. The length of skulls is attached by two ropes from the lead skull to the two pegs. When the pull starts, everyone cheers and the puller makes a lap around the arbour. Everyone watching hopes for a quick break, but sometimes the weight and friction of the skulls is not enough. If the first attempt fails, blankets are thrown over the skulls to add more weight and resistance. If that fails to break the piercings, then a handful of fellow Sun Dancers will come out to squat on the blanket-covered skulls. At that point, the piercing is sure to break. During one skull pull I witnessed, the rope attaching the peg to the skulls broke before the piercing. The pull was reset, the rope was retied, and the puller tried again. Another time, I saw one of the piercings rip the first round but the other stayed until the following round.

At both Sun Dances, one of the Elders who led the class performed a skull pull, partly to honour his ancestors. The entire class gathered from all over the site to be there to support him. I remember how concerned many of us were for him. We knew the skull pull was not easy, and we had agreed days before hand that we wanted to all be there to cheer him on. When the time came, the women who were in charge of the pots of burning sage got those of us who were in/near the arbour and brought us to the east gate. Some of us, and a few of the other younger supporters, ran around the site gathering members of our group to come. No matter what any of us were doing, we stopped to come support our Elder. The east gate was next to the big drum and is where the skull pull starts. It is normally kept clear, but when a dancer is doing the buffalo skull pull, their supporters are allowed to watch from the gate so the puller can see and hear them cheering him on. Community support is important, it gives the dancers strength. His pull finally broke on the third round, and I could tell he was exhausted. For some of his family members watching, the act brought them to tears. The sacrifices of those in the arbour can be an emotional release for the witnesses as well.

### **5.10.3 Painful Writing**

I am not a stranger to pain. I spent a great deal of my early life in hospital being pierced by needles, having blood taken from me, and undergoing medical procedures. I know it was for the betterment of my health, but to this day I am strongly averse to having my skin pierced. The piercings and pain undertaken by the Sun Dancers are different though. Medical pain is a side effect of physical treatment; sacred pain is the path by which one treats that which doctors cannot. Medical pain can often cause suffering, while sacred pain relieves suffering. I doubt I would ever become a Sun Dancer myself, but it is not due to the piercing. Being a Sun Dancer is

a commitment to a way of life, and it is a path I am not certain is right for me at this time.

However, I respect and honour those who choose it, and part of honouring that is honouring the pain and sacrifice they undergo for the wellbeing of themselves and others.

To write about the ceremony in detail may well disrupt the transformative aspects of ceremony by taking us back to the intellectual realm when we are really talking about the spiritual realm. Remaining in the spiritual realm as much as possible allows one to be free of the colonial impositions and the illusions it creates (Iseke, 2013, p.49)

I understand that, to an outsider that has never witnessed a piercing Sun Dance, the flesh sacrifices made may seem strange and could be assumed to be the most prominent aspect of the ceremony. From my perspective, that is simply not the case. The piercing ceremony is an intrinsic part of the Sun Dance, unable to be analysed in isolation or removed in conversation. The problem with spiritual aspects, is they lose both potency and focus the more they are intellectualized and analysed. The energy and emotionality of the event was incredibly powerful. My mind was disengaged, and I was rapt in the moment. To understand the Sun Dance, one must experience the Sun Dance, and become a part of that community. Through interactions with others in my life, I learned long before the Sun Dance that pain can have positive applications, and it can be utilized to overcome suffering, but there is a spirituality to the Sun Dance – a sacred pain that I had no real concept of – that has given me a new way of looking at pain and personal sacrifice from a spiritual, communal, and decolonial point of view.

### **5.11 Sun Dance Teachings**

The Sun Dance relies on a small army of supporters to operate as smoothly as it does, and the supporters rely on the guidance and knowledge of the Elders to ensure that what is done, is done properly. The English term “Elder” is far too simplistic for the reality of what Elders are and what they do. “Elders are respected as carriers of Native knowledge, wisdom, and experience. Therefore, they are utilized as the first line of teachers, facilitators, and guides” (Cajete, 2000, p. 71). Throughout history, Elders have been “the ultimate repositories and teachers of cultural knowledge, which was transmitted through a strong oral tradition from one generation to the next” (Pettipas, 1994, p. 60). Survival of the society relied on the Elders’ teachings. The learning of the belief system and knowledge was through observation, listening, and participation (Iseke, 2013; Cajete, 2010).

The Elders at the Sun Dance were leaders, not due to holding some office of authority, but by being more experienced with the order and operation of the event. Speaking with Elders always felt like speaking with a social equal. Unlike many knowledge keepers in the Western hegemony, the Elders at the Sun Dance conducted themselves in a friendly, humble, and respectful way when dealing with others. They did not care about a person’s gender, experience, age, or nationality, and they always made time to talk when we had questions, or would find someone who could talk with us if they lacked time or answers. Whenever someone spoke with the Elders, the Elders had a habit of lowering their heads slightly and tilting an ear towards the speaker. In this way, they let the person know they were actively listening as they sat quietly and waited for the person to finish whatever they were saying. Sometimes questions had quick and simple answers; other times, the Elder would take time to think and reflect before speaking. Generally,

there was no sense of urgency in providing an answer, nor in ending a conversation. The only exception was when a ceremony was to begin and the Elder being spoken to had an active role to play. Supporters were encouraged to work, learn, and participate at our own pace, this extended to asking for help as well. I never felt as if I had to do tasks alone. The Elders frequently thanked us for our help with the Sun Dance, and encouraged us to come to them with any questions. We were there to learn, and to help the Elders run the Sun Dance; the Elders were there to teach us, and to help ensure the ceremony was done in the right way.

Just as people from all sociocultural and ethnic backgrounds were welcome at that Sun Dance, so too were the Elders people of many different backgrounds and origins. Elders shared few intimate details about their lives – such things had no relevance at the Sun Dance – but from what I gathered, I believe some of the Sun Dance Elders may not even have any Indigenous ancestry. This fact does not delegitimise the Sun Dance in any way, to the contrary, it reinforces the core value of inclusivity and speaks to the Sun Dance Keeper's original vision of people from all parts of the world coming together.

#### **5.11.1 Tobacco**

Some plants have special, sacred meaning to Indigenous peoples; to the people of the northern plains, the most commonly recognised are tobacco, sage, sweet grass, and cedar (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1996). Tobacco is used as an intermediary between the mortal world and the spirit world, which is possibly why it is traditionally used as an offering when asking a favour of a person or when thanking them for helping (McCabe, 2008). It fills prayer ties, it is put down



when things are taken from the Earth, and it fills the ceremonial pipes of the Elders and Sun Dancers.

The tobacco is the medium of exchange that man has and with which he is able to procure the power of plants and animals; it is the vehicle of communication between men and all spiritual powers (Cajete, 2000, p. 111)

One of the first lessons I remember being given at the Sun Dance, was how to properly give tobacco. There is a certain gesture that should be done in order to both hand over the gift, while at the same time acting like the gift is too valuable a thing to give up. This tradition appears to reinforce the respect one should give the plant, as well as the value one should place on the person to whom the gift is being given. The way the Elders at the Sun Dance taught us is to hold the pouch of tobacco you are giving with both hands and to offer it three times. The receiver will put their hands out to take the gift. The first three times you move to offer the tobacco, you take it back: the gesture indicating its value and your hesitation to part with it. The fourth time, you place the tobacco in the person's hands and they should accept it gladly and with humility. This exchange of tobacco is done whenever you wish something from an Elder, or to thank them for something they have already done for you. For example, I gave tobacco when I learned how to put up a teepee. I also gave tobacco to an Elder after he had received a vision with a name for me. Even though the spirits had already come to him and told him to gift me a new name, custom dictated that I offer him tobacco before he could perform the naming ceremony.

Besides gifting to Elders, the main use of tobacco was in the pipe ceremony. I first learned about the pipe ceremony at UBC before going to the Sun Dance. The professor showed and explained

to the class how to pray with the pipe and wash the smoke over ourselves as if we were smudging. He also explained that it was fine if we did not want to smoke the pipe, and could simply hold it, pray, and pass it along. It was because of the pipe ceremony that giving gifts of good tobacco was appreciated. The pipe ceremony was a communal and spiritual exercise like nothing I had ever experienced. I grew up going to church every week, but I was more connected to a handful of strangers I shared the pipe with after a round of dancing, than I had been with anyone at my family's church. I felt a spiritual presence in the arbour, and a connection to others around me. In retrospect, Christianity never provided those to me. Even my own family, who have been Anglicans for generations, acknowledge that it is not a welcoming community. Intellectually, the concept of the Christian god has never made sense to me, while the idea of an abstract creator as was presented to me in Indigenous spirituality is much easier for me to connect with.

Each round of dancing in the arbour ended with a pipe ceremony. A number of Sun Dancers would hand out their pipes to members of the audience who had been given long pieces of sage during the dance. The sage, in this case, was used for more practical than spiritual purposes. While being smoked and passed around the circles, the pipes would often become jammed by ash. The sage stalks were both a good stiffness and size for clearing out the body of the pipes. At least one Elder that I shared a pipe with achieved similar results with a piece of dry grass.

The purpose of the pipe ceremony is to send thoughts and prayers to the creator and the spirits. It gives witnesses a chance to offer their prayers and to connect with each other. The tobacco smoke is sacred and helps the spirits to hear one's prayers (University of Ottawa, 2009; Cajete,

2000; Elk, 1986). The Sun Dancers give their energy and, eventually, flesh to gain the recognition and favour of higher powers. The witnesses who participate in the pipe ceremony make the offering of the smoke. It is not as powerful as what the Sun Dancers offer, but it still pleases the spirits.

### **5.11.2 Sage Girls**

The Sun Dance is an all-ages affair, and the supporters who help run the site are no exception. There was a small group of about two to four children, who helped with the pots of smouldering sage, that I came to know as the “sage girls”. Most of them did not speak much, at least not when I was around to hear, but they would dutifully carry pots of sage, made from old paint cans on the end of sturdy sticks, around the arbour to smudge people when the dancing was happening. They also stood at the arbour gates and smudged the dancers and leaders as they entered and exited. They were not the only ones on sage smudging duty, but they did stand out as the youngest supporters on the site, and very dedicated ones.

Experiential learning for children alongside adults is an important aspect of the Sun Dance; it provides opportunities to observe proper behaviour, learn to take responsibility, and understand the effort that goes into operating the site.

It was through ceremony such as the Sun Dance that the children were most dramatically introduced to their cosmos and heard teachings explaining their role as humans in a world where all elements were interrelated (Pettipas, 1994, p. 57)

The sage girls, from what I could see, enjoyed helping in such an important task. Running pots of smoking sage is not easy. Washing oneself in the smoke is absolutely necessary for everyone

when entering the arbour, which makes these girls a highly valued addition to the Sun Dance support staff.

The sage is powerful medicine that drives away negative energies and confers strengths, wisdom, and clarity of purpose (University of Ottawa, 2009). At the Sun Dance I attended, dancers wear red cloth wrapped wreaths of sage on their head, wrists, and ankles. They do this because, while in the arbour dancing for the three days, their minds and hearts are open and close to the spirits and creator (Elk, 1989). Entering the arbour opens people to spirits, and opens the arbour to whatever spirits they have already. This is why people smudge when they enter, and why the smudge girls are taught to take great care when going around the audience with their smudge pots. The pots are also very hot because of the burning charcoal that causes the sage to smoulder. When near the fire, the girls must be taught to be cautious while having their pots refilled with new glowing embers.

The times in my life when I most enjoyed learning were the times that I was physically engaged with the subject matter. Simply reading or hearing about a subject will never be as good as interacting with it in some way. As a teacher, observing the sage girls was a first hand lesson in how important it is to engage children. These young girls were not simply being given work to keep them occupied, they were being taught important cultural lessons. They will grow up with memories of the Sun Dance and connections to an Indigenous heritage that took me thirty years to find. Perhaps if I had been able to engage in the Sun Dance at a young age like the sage girls, I would have grown up with a stronger spiritual life, as well as a greater connection to the natural

world and those who inhabit it. Perhaps also, if educators could engage their students to a similar degree, there would be fewer classroom management problems.

### **5.11.3 Learning Teepee**

Among the small cluster of teepees in which my group was housed, there was a large empty one that was called the “learning teepee”. The point of the learning teepee was to provide a sort of classroom-like space for the group and Elders to gather for lessons. The “classes” tended to be structured as semi-formal talking circles. Like most things at the Sun Dance, people could come and go as necessary. Like other talking circles, when one person spoke, it was the job of the rest to listen. Questions and collaboration were encouraged (McCabe, 2008; Running Wolf & Rickard, 2003). If someone was successful in a task before the others to either side of them, it naturally became that person’s role to help their struggling neighbours. The learning teepee was only used by the class a handful of times, and crafts were only made once, but it represented an important aspect of the Sun Dance that often goes understated. Ceremonies are about education as much as they are about spirituality and community bonding. Indigenous ways of knowing and being are holistic: the parts cannot be separated without grievously detracting from each (Simpson, 2014; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Cajete, 2000).

Most of the gatherings in the learning teepee were semi-formal affairs. Typically, the class would be told during the day to meet in the teepee at a certain time that evening to hear a talk by one of the Elders. This happened a handful of times over the course of the week. The Elders would share stories, and try to answer questions about why things at the Sun Dance happened the way they did.

At my second Sun Dance, the learning teepee took on a new life as a sort of informal drop-in centre. There was an Elder who would often come to visit the class' camp site in the afternoons and he would set up his chair in the learning teepee to keep out of the sun. The site was fairly quiet that time of day as most of us were busy elsewhere. A few people, like myself, would drop by the campsite for a couple of hours when the relentless afternoon sun became too much to bear. I have never had much tolerance for heat, something I blame my non-Cree heritage for, and the Sun Dance tested my endurance. It was one such afternoon that I found the Elder sitting in the teepee watching some children play. Some of the class members were mothers, and the children could often be found playing around the camp site. The Elder told me how he liked to come up to the camp to see the teepees and how much he enjoyed being around young people (Ermine, 2007). I was carrying the buffalo skull in the processions that year, and he complemented me on my ability to carry and dance with the skull. "It takes a powerful man to carry the skull" he would say, "there's a lot of weight, spiritual weight, makes it so heavy". He asked me if I was carrying the skull the rest of the Sun Dance, and when I told him yes, he promised me he would be there every day to cheer me on. We would go down to the harbour together for the evening procession; I would help by carrying his chair and getting him set up in his favourite spot before joining the other staff bearers. Afterwards, if I saw him packing up, I would help carry his things back to his truck and tell him that I would see him in the morning. He may have needed a cane, and help carrying his bag and chair, but whenever I was in the harbour with the skull, I would see him, standing right at the edge, singing and cheering me on as I went past.

That Elder came every day to the learning teepee the whole week of my second Sun Dance, and I did my best to visit with him every afternoon. He told me stories about his life, as well as some of the myths of his people. He talked at length about the pipe, and the Sun Dance society he was part of. He talked about his drum, and how he got it. It was square and did not sound like other hand drums. Sometimes the children would stop to listen to the music when he played and sang for us, but much of the time, I recall being the only person in the teepee with him. In a way, he reminded me of a First Nations version of my English grandfather. They were a similar height, and build, and dressed in a similar fashion. They also both loved to tell stories, were wonderful with children, and were good listeners. I know from my parents that my grandfather had his faults, but the man I knew was very kind, soft spoken, supportive, and went out of his way to spend time with me. The Elder at the Sun Dance gave me a similar feeling. I do not feel I can share what he said to me. What I remember were his stories, not mine.

There were other lessons, and other Elders, that made use of the learning teepee – especially for specific things like teaching the class to make prayer ties – but for me it is that one Elder I will always remember and associate with the teepee. He enjoyed hearing about my spirits, and told me stories about them. He was especially interested in the bear, saying it is an important spirit and it suits me. He told me I should ask it for help when dancing with the skull to make it easier to carry the weight. He also thought my name, “vision quest messenger” was interesting. It made him smile, but I was never certain why. It did, however, make me reflect on the name more.

English was not his first language, and there were times he would stumble over words or thoughts, but he managed well enough. Towards the end of the Sun Dance, I heard that his health had been in decline, and I wondered if that was the last year I would see him. I do not know if I

will ever get to thank him, or hear his stories again, but I hope the next time I am at the Sun Dance I can carry the skull again and he will be there cheering me on.

Dr. Andreotti oversaw the class during the Sun Dance, and she was the one who invited Elders to the learning teepee to speak with the class. Although she was our Elder, she had other Elders from the Sun Dance speak with us while she positioned herself as part of the class. This behaviour had two results: first, it modelled behaviour on how to listen and act when an Elder was speaking, and second, it acknowledged that these Elders, many of whom were not academics, were knowledge keepers in their own right and just as worthy of our time, patience, and respect (Corntassel, 2012). Modelling lessons was an integral part of the Sun Dance.

Whenever an Elder taught us to do anything, they would give explicit instructions and demonstrate while we followed along. Questions were always encouraged, and we could always ask to be shown again afterwards. There was never a sense of being rushed, which was wonderful as it let us concentrate on the task without feeling pressured. This allowed us to enjoy whatever it was, without being concerned about getting it exactly right the first time.

I recall when we were in the learning teepee making prayer ties. Most of the class had never heard of or made prayer ties prior to the class. The Elder that was invited to teach us was a Sun Dancer, and she took her time showing each step of the tie providing the class an opportunity to ask if they were doing it correctly. When we arrived for the lesson, we were first handed the materials for the ties so we could follow along with the instructions and demonstration. Dr. Andreotti again positioned herself as part of the class and helped those that needed it. For that lesson we all sat in a circle, and Dr. Andreotti was opposite the circle from the Elder. We were



shown how to rip (or cut) our square of broadcloth to create two attached strips that almost met at one corner. The intact corner covered the palm of one hand and we scooped tobacco into it. The tobacco was then balled up and tied tightly shut by the two strips we ripped earlier. The result is a tie that reminded me of a little ghost one might make as a Halloween decoration in school: a round head with two trailing arms and a long flagging body. I pointed this out to my classmates and a number of people laughed, including the Elder. Humour was part of nearly every lesson and story. Before the tobacco was sealed up inside the tie, we had to hold it and offer a silent prayer, which could be for anything or anyone. The Elder told us that the tobacco would hold the message and deliver it from the tree up to the creator. We had to be careful not to tie the prayer too tightly though, otherwise it would be hard for the prayer to get out. Four ties meant four prayers, one for each colour of the medicine wheel, which would create a very colourful sacred tree once it was raised in the middle of the Sun Dance arbour a day or so before the dance itself was to begin. For the days between making the ties and putting up the tree, the prayer ties hung in bundles from the support struts of the learning teepee. For those days, the light inside the learning teepee was slightly tinged with colour, and the air had the rich, earthy scent of tobacco.

I have been analysing myself and how I learn for the better part of eighteen years. I know that experiential, interactive learning produces better results than simply listening to a lecture and copying notes from a blackboard.

It is well documented in the literature that experiential learning is more compelling and influential on behavior than our traditional modes of educational instruction (Running Wolf & Rickard, 2003, p. 40)

The model of listen, observe, and participate is everywhere at the Sun Dance. It created an environment where learning happened easily and naturally, and I enjoyed doing it. Looking back, I have come to realize that type of learning promoted strong community building while at the same time teaching us how things are done and why. The Sun Dance is a spiritual, social, and educational ceremony; those three qualities are interwoven at all levels and are reflected in the people who participate in the event.

Being in the third space, I feel I have some appreciation for how difficult mainstream education must be to many Indigenous learners.

[...] the restricted opportunity for experiential learning (which accounts for the personal nature of Aboriginal epistemologies) in favor of content-centered pedagogies in the school system completely distorts and marginalizes a way of teaching valued by Aboriginal peoples and interferes with genuine cultural understanding among both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Kanu, 2011, p. 131)

I was raised in a hegemony that respects education over knowledge, and expects learners to either figure out things on their own or absorb information through passive instruction. Reading a book or listening to a lecture without performing the task oneself will never be as effective as an interactive methodology, yet the non-interactive method and content based curriculum is still the norm in much of the Western world. Explicit teaching can provide the foundation, and explain the task, but performing the task is what will concrete it as memory. Experiential learning also implicitly necessitates a connection between the knowledge keeper and the learner that, by its nature, conveys a greater understanding of cultural values and norms (Cajete & Pueblo, 2010). For example, at the Sun Dance, we were often told how the spirits were around

us, and how the people were part of the land. By participating in the Sun Dance, we gave back to the world and became part of the land ourselves.

We were told that everything in nature has lessons if we are open to the opportunities, and, from what I experienced, anywhere two or more people gathered could become a classroom. Outside my teepee was a circle of chairs where we would sit and talk in the evenings before going to bed. During my first Sun Dance, I would often be sitting there soaking wet after having spent time in the stream watching the sun set. I would light my smudge bowl and turn on an electric lantern, then Elders would often come by to visit and share stories.

Families, communities, places and ceremonies, nurture the spirit in informal learning environments and in more formal environments [...]. Our Elders and families share their knowledge of place in their daily personal and communal adventures on the land, in traditional tales, timed with the seasons, and in the context of everyday life (Battiste, 2013, p. 14)

A number of the Elders said they preferred to sit at what I affectionately started to call the “student lounge”, rather than inside the learning teepee. I think the Elder’s enjoyed being under the stars, and perhaps the student lounge reminded them of sitting around a campfire. We heard many stories, and received many lessons about life that I continue to reflect on to this day (Marker, 2015).

## **5.12 Two-Spirits**

A critical complex ontology insists that individuals live in specific places with particular types of relationships. They operate or are placed in the web of reality at various points of

race, class, gender, sexual, religious, physical ability, geographical place, and other continua. Where individuals find themselves in this complex web holds dramatic power consequences (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>2</sup>, p. 208-209)

It was after my first Sun Dance that I started to identify as “Two-Spirit”. I knew around twelve years old that I was not, in the strictest sense, heterosexual. It confused me at first, as my knowledge of sexuality and gender had been limited by the cultural hegemony to only recognise binary values: male/female, and homosexual/heterosexual. I had a penis, so I knew I had to be male. I was sexually interested in women therefore I had to be heterosexual, except for the times I was also interested in men. That last part caused me to struggle with myself early on, but also prompted me to seek out answers. Being introverted, shy, and not at all comfortable with myself, I never considered trying to talk with anyone in person about what I was going through. Fortunately, I had the internet, and I had been navigating chat rooms, online forums, and newsgroups since I was eleven. I learned enough in my teen years that, when I was about twenty-one I started to think of myself as bisexual. At about twenty-two, I started classes at Langara College in Vancouver. I discovered the school had a room/group with a ridiculously long title that was shortened to an unmemorable acronym which all attendees simply referred to as the “The Queer Room” – the group who operated it was informally named “The Langara Queer Collective”. My visits to the Queer Room were my first forays into non-heterosexual society, and was a wonderful way to start exploring myself and learning more about what humans were really like. I never made any romantic or sexual connections there, but I did have many wonderful conversations with people covering a variety of identities and from many different backgrounds. Some people were of African heritage, some Asian, some European, and some from the

Americas (Indigenous). The majority of regular visitors were gay or lesbian. There was one person who was transgendered and lesbian, which means she was often mistaken as a heterosexual man. Another was a person who was asexual and primarily identified as female although often questioned if she should more accurately describe herself as something else. Like myself, she was new to much of the non-heteronormative world and still coming to understand herself. Looking back, I wonder if it is right to refer to her with female pronouns at all, but that is what she used when I knew her so that is how it has stayed in my memories.

Armed with a handful of resources and a growing lexicon of terminology, my efforts to self-educate on the counter-hegemonic realities of human gender and sexuality advanced at an ever-increasing pace through my twenties and into my thirties. By the time I attended my first Sun Dance, I was identifying as a cis-gendered, pansexual, polyamorous male. Being there, though, brought me to question the idea of the label “Two-Spirit”. It was a label I had heard before but did not understand much about. I knew there was a sociocultural history attached to the term that predated European contact with North America, but I was not versed in that history. I had read Two-Spirited people were not outcasts among many of the various First Nations, but their exact role in society varied from one nation to the next. I had the impression it could apply to sexuality, gender, or both, and, above all, I knew that it only ever applied to Indigenous peoples.

At the start of my first Sun Dance, I identified as Metis, and I was not certain if a non-status Metis could be Two-Spirited. This is the problem with self-education in a third space. Having to do my own research and create my own models and frameworks for gender and sexuality has necessitated the creation of criteria by which to apply the terms I now know, and an awareness

that my criteria may be wrong. For this reason, I am loathe to identify anyone as anything, and much prefer them to self-identify first. Self-identification provides a means by which my mental model can be either confirmed, or disproven, and then reformulated as necessary. This way of understanding people had produced two side effects. First, I never assume anyone's gender, sexuality, or preferred pronouns, and will attempt to treat all three as neutrally as possible until I am given an indication as to what they prefer/accept. Second, I view my own gender and sexuality labels as being highly flexible and open to change, as well as entirely acceptable matters of discussion and debate. If a person made a sound, rational argument against my use of a particular identifier, I like to think I would agree with them and proceed to re-identify myself in new terms. The terms do not define myself or my behaviours; it is my behaviours and identity that cause me to gravitate towards one label or another. In my late twenties, labels provided me with community, affirmation, support, and means of further research. Now, in my mid-thirties, I feel I have moved past labels to understand that everyone is different in their own way and labels only provide loose umbrella terms by which one can start a conversation (Wilson, 1996). At the Sun Dance, I was having that conversation, although I never realised it until I was flying back home, and ultimately researching and reflecting on my experiences.

My teepee-mates and I shared many wonderful conversations at the Sun Dance, most of which I can never repeat out of respect for them and their privacy, but some of them did include discussion of my self-identity renaissance. There was one person who arrived on site near the end of the week who identified as Two-Spirited. I did not encounter them until a day or two later, but one of my teepee-mates had spent some time with them and wanted to talk to me about the experience. The Two-Spirited person was from a plains nation, and I recall being told they were

a drummer and powwow dancer. My colleague told me that the person had decided to take on a female role at the Sun Dance after their arrival. The Sun Dance I attended had segregated sweat lodges, and a fairly simple dress code: men wear shorts or trousers, women wear long skirts or dresses. Beyond those differences, separation of men and women is minimal. Day to day tasks are not segregated at all. Deciding to embody their female spirit meant the Two-Spirited person would have to wear a skirt, and could attend the women's sweat lodge but not the men's. I am uncertain why, but it seems they had a change of heart over the following day or so. When I encountered the person, they were presenting in a male manner and attending the men's lodge. I did not have much opportunity to speak with the person, but it was the way in which they were accepted and welcomed that struck me. I am always cautious of how I present myself to strangers out of a desire to minimize tensions. There were times during the Sun Dance that I wished I could be wearing a skirt like the women and exploring that aspect of myself more. I understand I have a strong masculine presentation though and feel that it could make many people uncomfortable if I were to attempt to present in a more feminine fashion, or express a more strongly feminine persona.

I did not alter my manner or presentation at all, but over the last few days of the Sun Dance, I spent a great deal of time reflecting on who I am. It was on my last day that I started to realize something about my bear and owl spirits – they reflected aspects of myself. The bear loves music and dance, but is also strong, silly, and very much male. The owl is analytical, reflective, nocturnal, tends to observe from a distance, and is definitely female. On the last day of the Sun Dance, after receiving my name, “Vision Quest Messenger”, one Elder asked me if I had ever had any visions or had encounters with a spirit animal. I told her about how the bear and owl are

always with me. She was surprised but said it made sense with the name that had been dreamed for me. She told me it was a special name that suggested a strong tie to the spirits, and that while it was rare to have even a single companion spirit, I had somehow managed to end up with two. I reflected on her words the entire trip home. As I was sitting on the plane looking down again on the rolling foothills of southern Alberta, it dawned on me that my two spirit guides were not only companions, but reflections of my male and female spirit. I have two spirits because I am Two-Spirited – male and female living in one body. It is not a question of sexuality or biology, but of gender and identity. Since then, I have identified as Two-Spirited, not because of some sociocultural or historical legacy, nor as an anti-colonial act, but because it is the term that most closely reflects how I view myself and my lived reality. Months later I messaged one Elder that I had kept in touch with and told her about being Two-Spirited and why I took that identity on. She was happy that I had discovered this about myself and said it was obvious to her from the moment she first met me. We do not speak often, but she has always been available for a kind word and helpful advice when I needed it. She has told me how everyone has masculine and feminine qualities in them, it is just that Two-Spirited people have a deeper connection to both halves and feel both sides more strongly than most. According to her and others I have since spoken with, being Two-Spirited is a special gift, and something to be celebrated.

The term “Two-Spirit” is a complex one with more ties to culture than to sexuality, and has become overused in many Queer communities. While I agree that Two-Spirit belongs in the seemingly ever-growing Queer umbrella abbreviation LGBTTIQQ2SA+ – the “2S”, also sometimes written “TS”, stands for “Two-Spirit” – it belongs there as a matter of gender, not sexuality. Two-Spirit, like Trans\*, is a gender identity. Many forget that the Queer umbrella has



grown to cover so many identities because of its intention to unify everyone who is not both cis-gendered and heterosexual. I recognise that “queer” is itself a contested term with some shifting modern definitions, but “queer theory” and “queer studies” are academically recognised fields, and so I have decided to use it in this thesis. Understand that my usage of “queer” is in the most general sense; I define it as a term for anyone whose sexual and gender identities do not conform to the binary-gendered, heterosexual hegemony. Two-Spirit is probably the least conforming identity of all. It shares some superficial similarities to being Genderqueer, but goes beyond that in its relationship to place.

Two-Spirit is not synonymous with bi, or gay, or lesbian, or being “Other”. Two-Spirited people were traditionally part of many (not all) Indigenous cultures, in which they filled various social roles, often as valued members of the community (Robinson, 2017; Mayo Jr. & Sheppard, 2012; Cameron, 2005; Wilson, 1996).

[...] two-spirit refers to Indigenous people whose sexual and/or gender identity is different from others. While not all Indigenous sexual or gender minority people identify as two-spirit, the label connects people across Indigenous nations and offers a common name for what were distinct identities or even distinct systems of sexuality (Robinson, 2017, p. 9)

Prior to contact with Europeans, Two-Spirited people were seen as just one of many genders within a cultural system of multiple genders (as many as 3-6) (Cameron, 2005). Gender orientation is not based on physical sex characteristics but on the role the person aligns with. Therefore, prior to colonisation, they were not the “Other” at all. This is very different from European culture where the invention of the term “homosexual” was used to make non-

heterosexuals social outcasts. “Traditional western discourse is not an adequate framework for the complexities involved in Two-Spiritness” (Cameron, 2005, p.124). It is only since colonisation and the rise of Christianity, and the subsequent systemic racism, that Two-Spirited people have become pariahs among many of their own people. Residential schools erased the history of Two-Spirits. Christian missionaries saw Two-Spirited people as sinners and the Indian Act institutionalised heterosexual marriage as the only way to pass on Indian status (Anderson, 2016; Cameron, 2005). Internalized bigotry eventually gave rise to Elders who spoke with the voice of the hegemony (Cameron, 2005). “Two-Spirit connects us to our past by offering a link that had previously been severed by government policy and actions” (Wilson, 1996, P. 305). It is argued that hegemonic gay & lesbians lack the ability to understand the loss suffered by Indigenous peoples (Driskill, 2010). Homosexuals may not always be treated well socially, but most have not had to suffer the persecution and attempted destruction of their nations, cultures, and peoples on top of persecution for their sexuality.

Two-Spirited people were known by many names in many nations; the term itself did not rise to prominence until it was adopted in 1990 by the Third Native American/First Nations Gay & Lesbian Conference. They chose the Algonquin term “Two-Spirit” in order to distance themselves from non-native gays and lesbians. It was chosen as a term of resistance and intended to be non-transferable to other cultures which had already appropriated and devalued many aspects of the Indigenous cultures (Robinson, 2017; Mayo Jr. & Sheppard, 2012; Cameron, 2005).

While most people do not see their gender and/or sexual identity as having an intrinsically spiritual component, the same cannot be said for those who are Two-Spirited. It is predominantly a spiritual identity with roots in Indigenous spiritual traditions. The term locates one firmly as part of an Indigenous nation and signals that the meaning of their gender or sexuality is to be found there, not in colonial systems with claims to universality (Robinson, 2012). “Two-Spirit critiques see Two-Spirit identities in relationship with spirituality and medicine” (Driskill, 2010, p. 85).

It is the spiritual aspect of Two-Spirit that eventually led me to take on the label, although I know doing so could be seen as inappropriate by some. I agree that Two-Spirit is an identity anchored to place, but that place cannot be defined simply as a geographical location when so many Indigenous people have been displaced and disconnected from their homelands due to the socially destructive colonial legacy. My ancestral homeland was taken by the settler government, and my family’s Indian status was lost. Some generations between then and now could have reclaimed status, but Indigenous people were second class citizens for much of Canadian history. If my ancestors were able to live a moderately simpler and easier life by “passing” as non-Indigenous, it makes sense most would do that rather than seek to build ties with the relocated remnants of their former nation. Like many Metis and other persons of mixed colonial ancestry, I am a person with no place on the map to point to and say, “I am from here”. My third space is my anchoring point, one I have and continue to piece together from various components of the cultures to which I have connections. Two-Spirit is one of those connections. The Sun Dance helped me connect with the land, and the spirits that were already with me. I realized that I was not just a bisexual male, I was not male at all. I am both man and woman in one. I may present in

a mostly masculine fashion, and refer to myself with male pronouns, but saying I am a man is inaccurate.

Although I did not consider my identifying as Two-Spirited a decolonial act at first, from my academic research I now understand colonial resistance is a major component of it. “Aboriginal Two-Spirited people are in the midst of reclaiming their stolen history and identity within their communities” (Cameron, 2005, p. 125). Part of my problem, and my hesitation in initially claiming the label of being Two-Spirited, is my lack of community. Or, seen another way, my existence in a post-colonial third space necessitates that I form my own communities of acceptance from those around me who accept my unique position connected to, but apart from, a number of different sociocultural groups. I knew before the Sun Dance that Two-Spirit referred to Indigenous people, but I always questioned if I was “Indigenous enough” to claim the label, and, if I did, how would that shape others’ reaction to me (Robinson, 2017). I also did not know how open the people at the Sun Dance would be to a non-heterosexual male in their midst. I decided not to speak about my gender or sexuality except in private, and only if it came up directly in conversation. I would not hide it, but I would not advertise it either. What I eventually found at the Sun Dance was a community willing to support anyone who came looking for support. Ceremonies such as the Sun Dance are about healing, and healing cannot happen if a person is persecuted. It is far too easy to forget at times how often the colonial legacy and heteronormative hegemony have shaped and poisoned many traditions and communities’ ways of being.

The category ‘Aboriginal,’ for example, is a term defined by the colonial Government of Canada to include three very distinct types of peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Metis),

and does not reflect Indigenous self-understanding. The term 'First Nations' is itself an artificial construct, grouping together distinct nations as if we are essentially the same.

(Robinson, 2012, p. 23)

It was the Elders' teachings of the Medicine Wheel, and the importance of listening to all parts of ourselves, respecting those parts, and caring for them, that allowed me, as it has others, to find an acceptance of being which implicitly defies hegemonic dualism (Wilson, 1996). I am proud to claim Two-Spirit as an identity now, and will defend that choice if necessary. It is not a misappropriation by a member of another culture, but a reclamation by a third space Indigenous person whose traditional culture was taken away from them generations before they were born.

### **5.13 A Journey of Reflection**

Attendance at the Sun Dance gave me the tools to understand the reality of myself and why I was there. Prior to the Sun Dance, I did not fully realize my positionality as a person in the third space, nor did I recognise that I use a critical ontological approach when evaluating and interpreting the world. I see now that attending the Sun Dance ceremony was an act of resistance against the hegemony and Western academic institution: both things that regularly called into question the legitimacy of my being. Participation in this ceremony helped to provide an Indigenous way of seeing and understanding the world, which is inclusive, respectful, supportive, and holistic. My participation in ceremony granted me an appreciation and understanding that relationality gives meaning, and spirit is inherently tied to knowledge. When one is able to consider the spirit of an object, understand how it relates to place and those in that place, as well as appreciate it via a Western paradigm, then one is using Indigenous Two-Eyed Seeing. When one is able to see with both eyes concurrently, and divine meaning and details

beyond those offered by either perspective alone, then one is using critical ontology. Either approach is inherently more socially just than adherence to universalistic hegemonic norms, especially if it leads to the promotion of a more holistic, culturally inclusive, and/or diverse way of seeing and understanding. Participation in ceremony may help to provide a multifaceted way of knowing that allows a person to understand and truly appreciate the unique perspectives offered by individuals who occupy third spaces.

The Sun Dance had such a strong impact on me because it resulted in a culmination of events both great and small which granted insight into my way of being and helped me understand the life path upon which I travel. I entered the world a scion of Canada's colonial legacy; a living testament of British rule, Indigenous persistence, and cultural dilution. Amidst coming to terms with my learning disabilities, connecting to a vague Indigenous heritage, and realising I was not a member of the hegemonic norm, I forged a path that led through classrooms, museums, sweat lodges, and pow wows, each providing pieces to the puzzle I called my identity. I learned about the Sun Dance not long after I learned I was Cree. It was not a Cree Sun Dance, but that did not matter to me. It was a means to build connections to plains cultures, something to which I had previously very limited exposure. What I found at the Sun Dance though, was more than a simple sociocultural lesson. I came to question, and gain deeper understanding of, my being, and consequently refined my sense of self. For one of the few times in my life, I did not feel like an outsider.

Participation in the Sun Dance increased my knowledge and understanding of Indigenous cultures, specifically plains nations cultures, by exposing me to the stories, traditions, and

cultural practices common in the region. I understand that every Indigenous nation is unique, but I also know there are commonalities among the peoples, a point that was reinforced when I spoke to a few participating Cree. The Sun Dance I went to does tend to draw people from many places and backgrounds, which only serves to enhance the potential learning experience, provided one is ready to learn.

My participation in the Sun Dance ceremony gave me a better understanding of some things I was already aware of, and revealed to me other things to which I was not. I knew Elders were important, but I feel I lacked an appreciation of just how important they were. Their knowledge, stories, and guidance were central and essential to the ceremony. I also came to truly understand for the first time how ceremony can be utilized for education while at the same time helping people to achieve a fuller sense of well-being. Community never seemed of major significance for most of my life, but my Sun Dance experiences changed my mind. I saw how the whole can sometimes be greater than the sum of the parts. I saw the power of experiential learning with a patient and knowledgeable guide. Success increased when the pressure to succeed decreased, and the person was simply encouraged to do their best at their own pace. I reflected on myself and my way of being which led me to understand my own Two-Spired nature, as well as the third space I have made for myself.

As a product of cultural blending, I had little sense of identity prior to my participation in Indigenous ceremony, most notably the Sun Dance. My identity used to be defined by my lack of identity. This was an interpretation based on a simple surface understanding. The Sun Dance, and then this thesis, demanded greater reflection which has led me to a much deeper and more

detailed understanding of myself. It was the Sun Dance that made me realise my Two-Spirited nature, and my thesis on the Sun Dance that made me understand the complexity of my third space. Finally, it was my reflection and revision to the thesis that allowed me to realize the degree to which I had internalised Kincheloe's idea of critical ontology. These ways of being and understanding the world were with me before the Sun Dance, but it is only because of the Sun Dance that I am now able to look back on my life and see their influences guiding me to this point.

Kinana'skomitina'wa'w

(Thank you all)



## **Chapter 6: Conclusion**

### **6.1 Return to Purpose**

I began this thesis with questioning how participating in cultural ceremonies impacts people on both individual and professional levels. As a person in the third space, I find myself in the odd position of belonging nowhere, yet able to understand many different cultures (Meredith, 1998; Bhabha, 1997; Rutherford, 1990). Understanding my position and embracing it has been a lifelong journey. As an educator, my need to question and accept my own unique being has helped to shape my approach to teaching, specifically in how I relate to students. I believe the reason I gravitated towards critical ontology so strongly is that it presents a multifaceted mental model reflecting the philosophical, sociological, and cultural bricolage which forms my third space reality. My inward journey of discovery would likely never have been so successful, nor so productive, were it not for the tools and opportunities afforded me by my participation in the Sun Dance ceremony.

How does one understand culture when one is between cultures? In modern multicultural society, it is not only the post-colonialist that is struggling with matters of self-identity, but also the immigrant and displaced who are finding themselves having to deal with a culture that could be drastically different from that in which they are most comfortable (Morawski, 2016; Rutherford, 1990). A new arrival to the country could have been happily part of the hegemony where they came from, but now feel lost and discomforted by the seemingly endless barrage of cultural differences. For understanding to occur, new hegemonies must be forged from that which existed before (Anderson, 2016; Meredith, 1998; Bhabha, 1997; Rutherford, 1990). An acknowledgement and embracing of third space practices, such as inclusive ceremonies, could

help entire generations grow more culturally aware in their lives. The underlying need is to adequately prepare a person prior to their exposure to ceremony. A basic knowledge of a culture's history and cosmology is essential as well as a willingness to learn and listen respectfully when building understanding. From an educational perspective, this means understanding that children learn in different ways, have different needs, and different values (Morawski, 2016; Harrington & CHiXapkaid, 2013; Cajete & Pueblo, 2010; Moran, 2001; Derman-Sparks, 1995). I believe, based on my participation in ceremonies, that it is unethical for educators to perpetuate hegemonic values and structures among their students; instead, learners must be taught to be critical thinkers that question cultural norms, evaluate cultural differences, and embrace multiple ways of being (Bailey et al., 2011). My time in ceremony gave me a language by which I can better relate to other Indigenous people, and also helped me to understand that a person can have multiple ways of understanding the world which may or may not be compatible in all situations. Belief in others' ways of being is not necessary, but respect for those ways of being is mandatory (Ermine, 2007; Deloria Jr., 2003).

For teachers, ethical practice requires a culturally inclusive classroom which necessitates that one take into account the differences between the home cultures of each individual student (Ermine, 2007; Chizhik & Chizhik, 2002; Moran, 2001; Goodman, 2000; Derman-Sparks, 1995; Connell, 1993). Participation in another culture's practices, including but not limited to ceremony, helps provide a lens by which one can judge their own sociocultural belief systems and determine which parts are socially unjust. Being able to actively use multiple perspectives – Indigenous and Western – allows for what Elder Albert Marshall calls "Two-Eyed Seeing" (Bartlett et al., 2012; Hatcher et al., 2009). Each "eye" sees the world a different way, using the

best of both methods to approach a given situation. To me, this Two-Eyed Seeing is the first step of adopting a fully critical ontological approach. Critical ontology not only allows one an understanding of both Indigenous and Western knowledge, but insists that both views be used together at the same time in order to assess information in a multifaced manner which allows one to perceive greater detail than either view alone.

When teachers possess such understandings they are better prepared to support or critique what schools are doing, the goals they are promoting. In this context teachers become political agents who research their own practices and their own belief systems (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>2</sup>, p. 206-207)

This is how a third space classroom comes to be. Different voices, thoughts, and ways of being come together to create a hybrid educational space, which may not always be limited to a physical classroom. Participation in a third space environment can help non-hegemonic students discover and/or develop their own personal third spaces. Experiential and holistic learning, such as at the Sun Dance, can create a third space classroom beyond the constrictions of the hegemony. Being outside an institutionalised classroom, where multiple ways of being and understanding are respected, provides an educational environment which may benefit some students more than a formalised school ever could (Ahenakew, in press; Calderon, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>1</sup>, 2011<sup>2</sup>; Kanu, 2011; Cajete, 2000).

For most of my life, I have lacked a clearly defined, anchored identity, which has made it both easier and harder to relate to others, depending on the situation. I knew I was Indigenous, but I was not raised in an Indigenous culture. I knew I had a connection with spirits, but it never dawned on me I was Two-Spirited. The Medicine Wheel, like a car wheel, sometimes needs

realignment. Western society provides little opportunity to work out the problems in one's wheel and really get in touch with the self (Iseke, 2013; Andreotti et al., 2011<sup>2</sup>; University of Ottawa, 2009; McCabe, 2008; Coyhis & Simonelli, 2005; Deloria Jr., 2003; Cajete, 2000; Roberts et al., 1998; Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1996). Ceremony can help that. Ceremony provides space for the emotions and spirit, and often body as well depending on the ceremony. Modern education is a feast for the mind, but too often sacrifices three parts of the wheel for the one. It could be argued that, due to this imbalance, attempts at identity formation under these conditions is inherently self-destructive. It was not until the Sun Dance that I began to realise the degree to which my spiritual and emotional aspects had been neglected. My sense of being gained clarity only after I was able to think with my emotions and spirit over my mind. I came to the conclusion that ceremony and cultural participation provide a safe space for one to reflect on themselves, where they currently are in life, and the direction they need to go in order to achieve a balanced, content, and healthy way of being. Not everyone is going to exist in a third space, but for those of us who do, coming to terms with it is no small task. It is not easy being the perpetual outsider. The perpetual outsider, though, can see the world through multiple perspectives, naturally using a variation of Two-Eyed Seeing. With time and reflection, this can perhaps provide an advantage when one adopts a critical ontological approach, allowing one to internalise and naturally use multiple viewpoints which permits them to better connect with others in ways that most cannot. Navigating third space realities requires anti and post-colonial ways of thinking so as not to become perceptually anchored to hegemony. The third space is unbounded, unconfined, with freedom to form new hegemonies and realities where everyone can be included.

## **6.2 Reflection**

### **6.2.1 My Story**

Those well-versed in qualitative research methods will confirm that story is not unique to Indigenous knowledge systems. Story is practised within methodologies valuing contextualized knowledge such as feminism, autoethnography, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry. [...] It is recognized that story as both form and method crosses cultural divides (Kovach, 2012, p. 96)

During the writing of the conclusion I came to the realization that I had, in fact, taken an Indigenous approach to the methodology. At first, I had thought, based on my lack of tribal connection, that my autoethnography did not sufficiently meet the requirements to be classified as “Indigenous” (Kovach, 2012; Ellis et al., 2011). After reviewing the work of Richardson (2016), though, I believe my thesis does indeed meet the definition of Indigenous methodology. The problem before was my lack of connection to tribe and place. I was not raised as part of an Indigenous community, and all definitions of Indigenous methodology seem to require that. Richardson (2016) makes a strong point that the generations of those displaced by colonial powers must find non-traditional places upon which to build their sense of being:

The third, Metis space represents a Metis psychological homeland and cultural space in a country where the geographical homeland has been usurped by the colonizer. The third-space homeland experience is a moveable feast and can be invoked wherever Metis people gather (p. 56)

By this definition, anywhere that I am able to gather with similarly displaced and/or post-colonial persons seeking to understand their own identities becomes a tribe of sorts. The land that

I am connected to, my place, is not a land but a road. My journey is my place, and my community is with others like myself who continue to rediscover and redefine themselves and the space in the world in which they belong. This autoethnography is my story, and like many good Indigenous stories, it contains lessons. Both the teller and the audience may be changed by them, if they are ready to.

The basis of any autoethnography is essentially a story: the writer's story. The key to whether or not the work can be considered an Indigenous methodology seems to be where the story comes from and what purpose it serves. I did not believe that I met Ellis et al.'s requirement for Indigenous (auto)ethnography as I do not feel I have a strong connection to any particular Indigenous community. However, I believe that requirement may be too limiting when one takes into account the reality of the post-colonial person. I am Indigenous in that I am a person unique to this land. My Irish ancestry came from overseas, but my Cree is part of this land. I would have likely had an Indigenous community, and culture, and upbringing if not for the government removing my ancestors from their land (See Appendix A.9), and in disenfranchising Indigenous women who married outside their race. As well, colonial society took great pains to make Indigenous people unwelcome and inferior in their own lands. Many modern Indigenous people are displaced, some have a community, some lack community, some seek community, and some are somewhere in between. A large part of what it means to be Indigenous is resistance. The Indian Act sought to assimilate and destroy Indigenous people, and Indigenous people have been finding ways to resist and exist to this day. Stories can be a powerful tool of that resistance. Stories generate interest and focus people's attention (Kovach, 2012, Kanu, 2011). "Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships" (Kovach, 2012, p. 94).

I expect many people will feel discomforted as they read this thesis because I have not adhered to the limitations of Western academic knowledge. “No doubt, this narrative structure creates discomfort born of unfamiliarity, for those new to it” (Kovach, 2012, p. 96). Spirit animals and ceremony, as well as fluidity of both sex and gender, do not fit nicely with the hegemony, but they are my reality. As a third space person, I do not fit well into any hegemony, nor do I have any desire to. As a person between worlds, I take a limited yet holistic approach to identity and personal space. I am a being of forever liminal epistemology. Personal narrative is a portal for holistic ways of knowing and transgressive ways of being.

Indigenous ways of knowing come from countless generations of oral traditions; stories are the vessels of knowledge, education, and how one relates to the world. Kovach (2012) identifies two kinds of stories: ones with mythical elements, and ones with personal narratives of place, happenings, and experiences (such as those in this thesis). One recognized source of knowledge widely accepted by Indigenous people is revelation. Revelations come from places such as dreams, visions, cellular memory, and intuition (Kovach, 2012). I have identified most, if not all, of these sources in my reflections on the Sun Dance. On top of that, during the writing of this thesis, I was in constant dialogue with two of my Elders, both from strong academic backgrounds who counselled me on my work. It was through telling them the stories that I often started to realize what it was about the story that made it so memorable. Some of my stories were not easy for them as they provided revelations for them as well as myself. The power of personal narrative is in its ability to reveal knowledge to both reader and writer even while it is being written, as I have seen.

### **6.2.2 My Space**

I did not grow up on a reservation or in an Indigenous culture, but I also do not fit in with the Eurocentric cultural hegemony. As a product of colonization who is without a historically or culturally anchored homeland, I feel it would be wrong to simply co-opt the philosophies or methodologies of many Indigenous scholars such as Bryan Brayboy (2014), Marie Battiste (2013), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), Margaret Kovach (2009), Gregory Cajete (2000), and James Youngblood Henderson (2000); however, their work does inspire me and much of what I do is based upon their research.

People produced by clashing cultures via colonization such as myself often struggle with their identity due to lacking a single geographically anchored history and people. We are part of the land, yet not, and how we relate to others may be inconsistent. Each new interaction comes with the initial question of how one is seen and understood. How one is viewed by others shapes their relationship, and for the post-colonial person, there is always the question of if they will be accepted, or seen as an outsider, by both the colonised and the colonisers.

When I was a young child, my English grandfather lived on land leased from the Musqueam Nation. Less than a block away was the Musqueam cemetery where my grandfather and I used to walk. He taught me to be respectful and not upset the spirits of the people buried there by touching things left on the graves or stepping on where the body was buried. Those were some of my favourite memories of my grandfather. When I was about thirteen years old, my family moved to the same neighbourhood that my grandfather had lived in. The first week I was there I



was excited to show some of my friends the cemetery where I used to walk, but as soon as we got near the gates, a group of young men from Musqueam, possibly in their late teens or very early twenties, stopped us. They yelled at us to get off their land and threatened us with baseball bats. My friends and I were so scared that we ran home and I have never tried to go back to pay my respects at the cemetery again. Around the same time, I had started going to a private school for learning disabled children. At that time, it was too far for me to walk home because of my visual-spatial disability, which also made taking the bus very difficult. I have also never had much of a sense of clock-time; hours and minutes and fixed schedules based on evenly spaced chronological fragments do not really hold much value to me. For these reasons, taking public transit has always been an adventure, and one I was not prepared to face when I was thirteen. So my working parents decided they could afford a taxi to take me home after school, but this too became difficult. Although I knew exactly what streets to go down and what turns to make, I could never remember any of the street names, nor would I have my house number memorized for many years yet. A number of the taxi drivers became notably upset at me when I could not give them an exact address to go to and instead would direct them by saying things like “Go to the end of this street and turn right. Now, keep going all the way past the second traffic light and make a left at the stop sign”. One driver, a pale man in his late twenties or early thirties, and seemingly of European descent with a shaved head, became so agitated at my incapacity to remember street names and my house’s number, that he yelled in a very angry and aggressive manner at me for a good portion of the ride home. After that, I was too frightened and traumatised to use a taxi service again until my early twenties, and even then, I did so with much hesitation. In both the taxi and cemetery cases I was physically threatened and emotionally

assaulted in a manner that made it obvious something was wrong with me: one for not looking “Indian” enough, and the other for being cognitively different.

Being a by-product of cultures in conflict, and my inability to be at home in any of them, I identified strongly with the concept of Third Space when I encountered it. I believe that my own identity, formed from fragments of dominant cultures as well as subcultures to which I feel varying degrees of attachment, has located me as a third space individual. Rather than be part of a third space community, I exist as an unanchored third space entity who connects and disconnects from identifiable cultural groups as I feel is necessary.

The purpose of this thesis was to use the Sun Dance as an anchoring point for an analysis of the sociocultural space I have created for myself, how it came to be, and how it solidifies and changes over time. I use the term “third space” (Richardson 2016, Rutherford 1990), to describe a personal and cultural identity that is formed from parts of multiple other cultures, and often able to connect to them, but is wholly different and never fully accepted by any one of them. The point of this analysis is to help the reader consider how some people, who might be mistaken as part of a hegemony, may in fact not identify with it at all, nor with any culture except that which they have consciously and unconsciously built for themselves. This third space directly impacts my relations to others in both my personal and professional lives. It is reflected in my teaching practice, and, I believe, allows me to be more aware of students who may themselves be struggling to create, discover, and understand their own unique third spaces.

## 6.3 Significance & Contributions

### 6.3.1 Significance

The significance of autoethnography is its ability to present a story into academic dialogue so that it can bridge diverse cultural and scholastic communities. “Stories remind us of who we are and of our belonging” (Kovach, 2012, p. 94). In the case of this autoethnography, the story is centred on the Sun Dance and the positive impacts that ceremony can have on a person.

Experiencing, reflecting upon, and discussing my Sun Dance experiences helped me to develop and strengthen my critical ontological way of interpreting the world and third space way of relating to people. I believe it provided tools to develop what Mi’kmaq Nation Elder, Albert Marshall, calls “Two-Eyed Seeing”.

Albert indicates that Two-Eyed Seeing is the gift of multiple perspective treasured by many aboriginal peoples and explains that it refers to learning to see from one eye with the *strengths* of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing, and from the other eye with the *strengths* of Western knowledge and ways of knowing, and to using both these eyes together for the benefit of all (Bartlett et al., 2012, p. 335)

Two-Eyed Seeing is very similar to critical ontology as both allow disparate viewpoints to be brought together to create a greater understanding of the whole. Such multifaceted mentality can naturally manifest in third spaces and allow people dwelling within those spaces to connect with, interpret, and utilise multiple, sometimes conflicting, ways of knowing and being. Doing so effectively, though, requires both reflection upon one’s understanding and positionality, and a realization that conflicting knowledge systems can exist in the same person without them being overwhelmed by cognitive dissonance. For teachers, this inward reflection is the first step towards an understanding that allows for outward creations and recognitions of new third spaces.

[...] critical ontology demands that teacher scholars who research the worlds of students, schools, and communities also research themselves. In this context teachers explore what it means to be human and to negotiate the social and ideological forces that shape their pedagogical consciousness. In light of a critical knowledge of power, we are pursuing a key dimension of critical ontology – a way of being that is aware of the ways power shapes us, the ways we see the world, and the ways we perceive our role as teachers (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>2</sup>, 206)

Without reflection, a third space, or Two-Eyed, person may naturally utilize their multiple lenses without realizing they are doing so, but it would be difficult to then take it a step further and develop a fully critical ontological approach.

During the creation of my thesis, I utilized critical ontology, but I had internalised it to the point that I was no longer aware when I was doing so. I studied critical ontology some years ago, months or a year before I knew about the Sun Dance. It resonated with me on a level few philosophies had ever come close to. It made sense and felt as if it was describing my own perspective in many ways. I worked with it over time, and soon it was a part of me indecipherable from the whole, which made the identification of it later difficult. When it came to writing my thesis, I knew I was going to be using some postcolonial and/or decolonial theories and methodologies. Over time my work underwent many revisions, but through it all there was a common element of seeing the world in different ways. I eventually realized just how much I did not fit in with “traditional”, “mainstream” society. In this current work, I hope to live up to the name I was gifted at my first Sun Dance, Natoo ain nis soo (Vision Quest Messenger), and help guide readers to a new way of thinking about the world and those who inhabit it around us. I

have realized, through my reflection on third space and critical ontology that if one is going to attempt to make their classroom a welcoming environment for all learners, one must first understand that there is no one way of being that works for everyone. A multifaceted consciousness is required for meaningful collaboration (Bartlett et al., 2012).

### **6.3.2 Contribution**

Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist (Lorde, 2007, p. 112)

The story of my journey contributes to literature on third-space Indigenous children and the struggles they undergo in order to find their place in the world. My stories and reflections illustrate an opening of the mind and realization of being that is both unique to myself, and undergone by countless others. My third space is not the same as others' third spaces, but each is equally valid and important. Education has been used historically to erode students' sense of being (Hare 2003). A "Two-Eyed" approach (Bartlett et al., 2012) would help to end the tradition of emotional, spiritual, and intellectual colonisation students are subjected to. New holistic and experiential methods of knowing, being, and learning, created by and for the classroom, could help learners of multiple heritages and skill levels learn in a way that is meaningful to them. As a person who has learning difficulties and is a by-product of colonisation, I have found that holistic and experiential learning speaks to me in ways other approaches do not.

Another part of this study's societal contribution is its inclusion of spirit animals and Two-Spirited identity. These are aspects of many traditional Indigenous lived realities that have often been glossed over in academia. I believed it was important to include these not only to further illustrate my position as cultural Other, but to demonstrate that they do not detract from my position as a scholar. Being a third space educator, operating a third space classroom, and being aware of potentially third space learners is wonderful, but I feel it is important that, in order to understand my story, one has to also keep in mind my position as a third space academic. My research, autoethnographic or not, will always be shaped by the multiple lenses through which I perceive the world (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>1</sup>, 2011<sup>2</sup>). Part of that perception comes from my position on the margins. I may be perceived as male, and white, and gain privileges from that, which I acknowledge, but those are simple interpretations based on how I present myself and do not reflect my thoughts, feelings, identity, and, consequently does not accurately reflect my lived reality. It is my hope that people like myself could read this and be inspired to step forward and share their own lived experiences and realities. It is no simple task to find academic literature on either spirit animals/companions or being Two-Spirited and what that means to the individual. Without speaking out and stepping into the light, the marginalised will continue to exist without a society, even within a society that has learned to see with two different eyes at once.

#### **6.4 Strengths & Limitations**

The following section aims to discuss the pros and cons of autoethnography. In preparation for this summary I reviewed work by Dentshire (2014), Mendez (2013), Ellis et al., (2011), Wall (2006), Holt (2003), Rutherford (1990), and Foucault (1977).

One aspect of autoethnography that writers may enjoy is not having to invest large amounts of time in acquiring data from the field. The downside of this is the lack of generalizability due to having only a single subject. It is the job of the autoethnographer to place themselves in a social context; however, opening oneself up can leave the autoethnographer vulnerable to personal attacks, or draw unwanted attention to associated parties such as family members. Although little can be done to reduce the vulnerability of the author, I have made efforts to anonymise others involved with the work to protect their identities.

The personal and often narrative aspects of autoethnography make it much more accessible to the ordinary reader than many other academic styles. This accessibility hinges on the writer's ability to clearly express themselves in an evocative and compelling manner. A lack of observable data and rigorous evaluation can make the reliability and/or validity of autoethnography questionable. I have attempted to overcome this by including both medical and psychological reports in the appendix, as well as other primary sources of information. Assuming the reader trusts the writer to be a credible representative of the culture in question, the results in individuals can be astounding.

Autoethnographies have the potential to open one's eyes to a larger world view and thereby increase reader's empathy towards the marginalized and/or socioculturally invisible. Of course, such growth and change does not come easily for many. One may be made just as uncomfortable in the reading of an autoethnographic work, as the writer was made in the creation of it due to both the personal content and the emotionality inherent to the style. Rethinking, resisting, and rebuilding power relations is seldom a simple or painless task. Autoethnography is a weapon of

the silenced and counterhegemonic; one that, when done well, can make a strong and lasting impact. In this way, it is a method of inquiry that can have great influence on educators, administrators, and other sociocultural gatekeepers and power brokers.

## **6.5 Potential Applications**

Colonisation, in effect, continues to this day at all levels of education, including the tertiary level. The impacts can be mitigated if people are willing to accept a multi-ontological, non-Cartesian, model of being that acknowledges and respects the emergent, shifting, and unique realities of post-colonial persons. Even if one is a genetic by-product of colonialism, without sociocultural support that acknowledges, accepts, and honours the person's multifaceted being, they may become as absorbed into the hegemony as a person of singular heritage. I am an educator who exists within a third space of my own ongoing creation, but for the majority of my life I did not realize the full extent nor implications of it and I often fell into the trap of trying to recreate societal norms that, at my core, I did not agree with. While continually pursuing anti-racist and counter-colonial ways of being, I passively accepted the cultural marginalization of the neurodiverse, non-monogamous, and the gender non-binary. These social prejudices were realized, evaluated, and changed over time, but it was not a simple process. Finding resources which called into question the hegemony was not simple. I believe that, had I been able to access a document such as this one – which states unapologetically and explicitly that there are multiple, valid ways of being – my journey would have been a simpler one. Being a third space educator may grant one an appreciation for difference, but it does not automatically make navigating and embracing those differences any simpler. Unless one is careful, the third space learning environment can be just as oppressive, restrictive, and damaging, as any culturally



hegemonic classroom. Third Space provides a strong theoretical basis, but educators must still be aware of power dynamics and consciously avoid casting some students as the Saidian “Other” (Said, 1979).

[...] the epistemology at work here involves more than simply knowing about something. It involves tuning oneself in to other’s mode of being – its ontological presence – and entering into a life generating relationship with it (Apffel-Marglin, 1995). Critical ontologists take from this an understanding of a new dimension of the inseparable relationship between knowing and being (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>1</sup>, p. 340)

Third space people require safe spaces where they can embrace their multifaceted beings in a holistic manner. If one desires classrooms to be safe spaces for learners, then Two-Eyed Seeing and conversations about third space individuals must be included and modeled at the tertiary level, especially in teacher training. As stated by Kanu (2011), “Aboriginal perspectives must be integrated into every course throughout the teacher education program” (p. 215). Lessons on critical ontology would be useful as well, although it could be argued that it would be simpler for a member of the hegemony to adopt Two-Eyed Seeing than to fully embrace and properly utilise critical ontology.

A critical and complex teacher education encourages desocialization via ideological disembedding. Critical complex professional education coursework and practicum experiences focus on the ways in which the values of power-driven, information-saturated hyperreality of the twenty-first century shape the consciousness of both students and teachers (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>2</sup>, p. 206)

At the very least, students should have one or two courses just on Indigenous history and culture, in order to provide a base of knowledge currently underserved in mainstream education. But

beyond this, Indigenous teaching methodologies need to be integrated into every discipline and class in order to model holistic, experiential, post-colonial learning. Instruction needs to focus on the strengths of Indigenous people, culture, and knowledge, in order to help balance out the sociocultural needs and negative realities of the colonial legacy so that Indigenous learners are not simply made to appear as victims to which educators are providing a form of charity.

The rigorous study of cultural and historical context alerts prospective teachers to the ways dominant myths, behavior, and language shape their view of the teacher role and the curriculum without conscious filtering (Kincheloe, 2011<sup>2</sup>, p. 206)

Teachers, and teacher candidates, must be made explicitly aware that cultural inclusion must be more than token gestures; propagation of too little information can ultimately be more harmful than ignorance (Kanu, 2011).

Teacher education curricula would benefit from the addition of holistic, experiential methodology and land-based education that includes Indigenous knowledge systems and the opportunity to participate in ceremonies. This would lead to greater understanding of the true impacts of colonisation, the existence of third space, and the reality of non-Cartesian ways of being. There is also the reality of what Marker (2015) calls “the power of landscapes to transform mindscapes” (p. 237). Western education as it currently exists is often removed from location and focusses entirely on either abstract or compartmentalised knowledge. Indigenous ways of knowing are place-based and require an appreciation for the land that influenced their development. Traditional knowledge requires a respect for the sacredness of where one lives and how one exists there.

To suggest that education leaders learn the spiritual sense of place is not to propose bringing religious tradition and ceremonies into classrooms. It is more to recognize sacredness in the ecology of a people's territory (Marker, 2015, p. 249)

This fundamental principle – that knowledge and location share an inherent connection – is currently missing in most classrooms at all education levels, and does not appear to the extent it needs to in teacher training to make a real impact. What constitutes a teacher in mainstream schooling may require redefinition to achieve this. For example, Elders could be asked to share knowledge, and be given the same pay, benefits, and respect as any other teacher for doing so.

Perpetuating the current cultural norm violates my sense of a just society and care for my students, and is counter to my critical ontological standing. My motivations as an educator are both justice and care oriented. As Goodman (2000) explains, a person who is justice oriented is “focussed on rights and fairness. [They are] concerned with upholding principles or standards that are rooted in a sense of equality and reciprocity” (p. 1081), and a person who is care oriented is “focussed on relationships and responsiveness. [They are] concerned with promoting the welfare of others, preventing harm, and relieving physical or psychological suffering” (p. 1081). I agree strongly with the ideas of Paulo Freire (2012):

Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education (p. 92)

Like many Freireian educators, I reject what education has become in much of the world where students are expected to simply copy and memorize whatever they are presented by the teacher. If we care for both the education and well-being of those we teach, then we

have an obligation to change the system to be more inclusive, holistic, experiential, and multifaceted than the one that is currently in place. If what I have suggested here is accomplished, it would help to achieve the goals of the BC Ministry of Education as outlined in their document, *Aboriginal Worldviews and Perspectives in the Classroom: Moving Forward* (2015).

## **6.6 Future Research**

There are several different studies that could logically follow this thesis. The most immediate is a collaborative, ethnographic study of the other participants in the UBC Sun Dance courses analyzing their experiences, and perhaps comparing them to my own. Given the Indigenous ceremonial setting of the experience (the Sun Dance), a decolonial methodological framework – such as those set out by Smith (2012) or Kovach (2010) – would likely be appropriate. It would also be of interest to investigate the impact of ceremony on other Two-Spirited people, their sense of identity, and their sense of community. Research on Two-Spirited people is a relatively new field. A careful and respectful academic study, in Canada, that gives voice to Two-Spirited people, could help facilitate more open discussion around what their life experiences and lived realities are like.

This thesis also brings into consideration questions about the success of the marginalised in large university settings such as UBC. In my experience, the few spaces tailored for marginalised people can be difficult to access, especially when coupled with a busy class schedule. Also, for people existing in a third space, easy access to multiple spaces may be beneficial. Is it then necessary for campuses to create multiple safe spaces for the marginalized to find/build

community? What are the current safe spaces and how are they utilized? Perhaps a quantitative survey of minority students whom these rooms are intended to serve would help shed light on this, or perhaps a more qualitative approach is needed. Identifying whom to question could itself be a difficult task. It may be useful to see how safe spaces are advertised around campus and are students aware they exist? A study in this area could help to make for more inclusive university settings that would allow more students a greater degree of academic success.

If classrooms themselves are going to be safe spaces that create educational third spaces, then current teachers are going to have to be taught about Two-Eyed Seeing, physical third space, and the challenges of third space people. How can current educators, from kindergarten to post-doctoral levels, be motivated to learn and utilize non-European ways of learning, being, and knowing? Then there is the matter of what exactly current educators would be required to learn in order to start making effective changes in their classrooms. These are complicated questions, but breaking them down into smaller topics for further study could prove useful for both educators and learners at multiple levels.

## **Who I Am**

A learning disabled queer adoptee  
told in school he would never read  
now holding an English and Teaching degree.  
Irish and Cree, with no status to claim,  
my grandfather, dubbed Metis,  
no longer grants my blood sufficient degree of bureaucratic purity,  
unless I provide an unbroken and unquestionable pedigree linking me  
to full blooded, and documented, ancestry.  
Loving parents, one Welsh the other from the prairies,  
neither with any history of Turtle Island Indigeneity,  
instilled a pride for a lost past even with no known Nation to claim.  
Through ceremony, community, and UBC I came to find a homeland  
defined not by geographical bounds but by heart and mind.  
I stand here now, the end of one journey, the start of another.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### A.1 Letter From my Birth Mother

##### 1. Reasons for Relinquishment

- birth mother thought she was too young
- wanted other goals in life
- wanted the best for the child
- financially unstable
- deserted by father

##### 2. Racial & Ethnic Origin

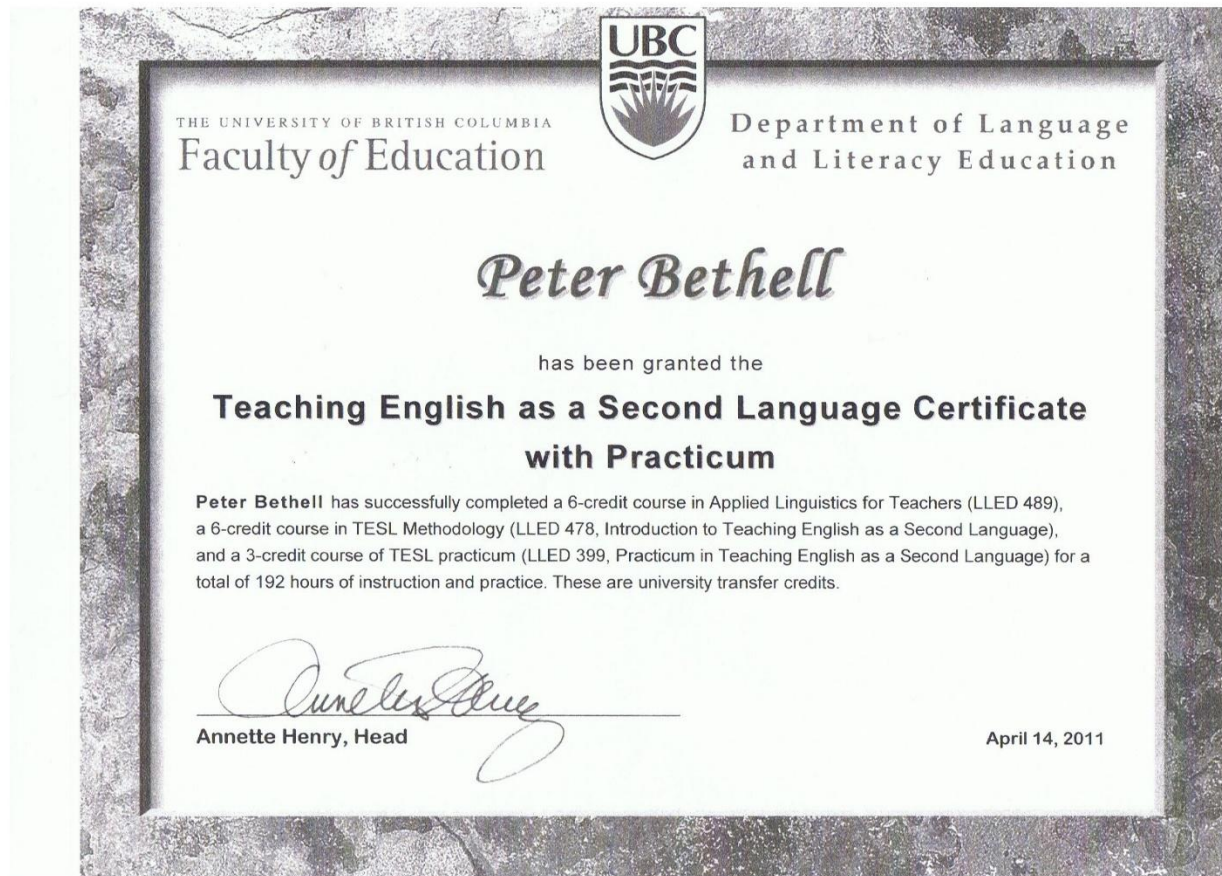
birth mother - English - 30%  
Irish - 10%  
Scottish - 10%  
Indian (Cree) - 30%  
American - 20%

##### 3. Personal Aspects of the Mother

a) Physical Appearance

I find this letter odd after meeting my biological mother. She told me the family is primarily Cree & Irish, not Cree and English.

## A.2 TESL Certificate



### A.3 Letter of Rejection

#### THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA



**Teacher Education Office**

Faculty of Education  
2125 Main Mall  
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z4  
Tel: (604) 822-5242 Fax: (604) 822-8227

May 26, 2011

Peter Arthur Bethell  
4305 Staulo Cres.  
Vancouver, BC  
V6N 3S1

Dear Mr. Bethell,

I am writing concerning your application for admission to the Bachelor of Education (Teacher Education) program at the Faculty of Education, UBC. We at the Faculty have carefully reviewed your application. I regret to inform you that we are unable to offer you admission at this time.

You have applied for admission to the Secondary program with a Major in English and a Concentration in Teaching English as a Second Language. Admissions evaluators reviewed your summary of experience, essay and references. The evaluators concluded that you have insufficient experience working with youth (ages 13-18) in a group setting within the last two years. You must submit new reference reports for consideration in the future.

A Concentration in Teaching English as a Second Language requires an additional 6 credits of courses in language/cultural study.

If you plan to re-apply for a future session, please review the reason(s) stated above. I suggest that you also review the detailed admission requirements for your chosen option (specialization) at <http://www.teach.educ.ubc.ca>. Academic advising is available from the Teacher Education Office. The application information for 2012 admission will be posted at the above web site in December.

I recognize that this decision is a disappointment. I would like to take this opportunity to wish you well and thank you for your interest in the UBC Teacher Education program.

Sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]  
Admissions Officer, Middle Years and Secondary Programs  
Faculty of Education  
The University of British Columbia  
[Redacted Address]

## A.4 Access & Diversity



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

Access and Diversity  
Student Development and Services  
1203 – 1874 East Mall  
Vancouver, BC Canada V6T 1Z1  
[students.ubc.ca/access](http://students.ubc.ca/access)

Date: Sept. 25, 2007

To: UBC Instructors

Re: Academic Accommodations for Peter Bethell (#46059077)  
Valid to August 31, 2008

This student is registered with the Disability Resource Centre and is eligible for the academic accommodations listed below. Decisions regarding accommodations are based on the functional impacts of the student's disability as outlined in the submitted documentation. These decisions are in keeping with the University's Policy on Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities (Policy #73).

### Exam Accommodations

- Extended time (1.5x) for all exams
- Computer with spell and grammar check where does not compromise the course academic standards

According to University Policy, students with disabilities seeking accommodations should discuss their requests with you, ideally, within the first two weeks of the term. Please ensure that the meeting takes place in a confidential setting such as your office.

We are pleased to collaborate with you and students to enhance the accessibility of their post-secondary experience. If you have any questions or concerns about the accommodations recommended above, please contact me. For information about academic accommodations please go to [www.students.ubc.ca/access](http://www.students.ubc.ca/access) then click on to Disability Resource Centre, then to information for instructors.

Sincerely Yours,

[Redacted Signature]

Senior Diversity Advisor - Disability  
Disability Resource Centre  
Phone [Redacted]  
E-mail [Redacted]

cc. Faculty Liaison – Arts



To Whom It May Concern,

My reason for applying for a language exemption is fairly simple. It took me years to master my own language, English. That is to say, to be able to both read and write, as well as speak it fluently. The difficulties I faced in learning English would be nothing compared to the difficulties learning a new, secondary, language pose. I apologize for the length of this letter; I am sure it is more than most would submit. I felt it was imperative though that I tell you, the reader(s), about myself, where I come from, and what I have done to get where I am. My academic history and the difficulties I have faced are what have led me here to ask for a language exemption. If you only read part of this letter, please make it the final paragraph. I think it, of all of them, sums up the best what I wanted to say whereas the paragraphs preceding it are more about me as a student and how I came to be here.

To achieve a mastery of English, I started attending private schools for learning disabled children when I was in grade three. This was following a meeting between my grade <sup>one</sup>~~two~~ teacher and my parents where the teacher stated that I would never be able to read or write. Fortunately, my parents were both teachers and recognized that first, any child can be taught if given enough time and commitment to teach them, and second that to say a child can never learn is a self fulfilling prophecy: it was the equivalent of the teacher saying that she refused to put any effort into teaching me from that point onward. So I ended up in a school called Kenneth Gordon. Through its program, based on the Orton Gillingham system of teaching through phonics, I eventually came to read and write at, and then beyond, grade level. I left Kenneth Gordon at the end of grade seven. Nervous about being tossed into public school, especially public high school, I and my family decided it was best I go to another school that was focused on students with



learning disabilities. Doing so ensured ongoing teaching in a manner that was tailored, at least in part, to my learning disability, rather than a public school where I would be taught in a manner that I was not only unaccustomed to, but would ultimately hinder my overall education as it would completely ignore my learning differences. In this way, I found myself at Fraser Academy. I graduated grade twelve there in the year two thousand. Both Fraser Academy and Kenneth Gordon held the belief that their students spent enough time fighting with their disabilities when it came to English that it was ludicrous to then force a second language upon them. For that reason, neither school offered any sort of second language classes.

I took some certificate programs at what is now The Arts Institute Vancouver – Burnaby after my graduation. Upon completion though I found my lack of a proper university diploma prevented me from applying to many of the jobs I wanted. Deciding that the only course of action to remedy the problem was to get a bachelors degree, I enrolled at Langara College, and eventually transferred to UBC. While at Langara I decided to try taking an introductory language class. I believe it was called French 100. I had always wanted to be able to speak another language. My hope was that if I could get my head around French, then I could perhaps learn other languages. I had dreamed once of being one of those people who could converse easily in four or five different languages. Unfortunately that dream was crushed when I found that everything the teacher said made no sense to me at all. It wasn't an immediate realization. The first few days I felt I was doing fine, but then suddenly I noticed the rest of the class was getting it, and I was still going over the first few lessons trying to get a solid grasp of the foundations. Through my usual undying determination and stubbornness I stuck with the class for a few weeks. I do not recall how many. I think it was two or three perhaps. Eventually though I had to admit defeat. I am not a person who gives up easily. I would rather fight to the end than

surrender, but the language class was simply beyond me. No amount of help from my French Canadian friends would ever have been able to save me from failing that class miserably. That became one of the few classes I ever withdrew from. I have not looked at my Langara transcript in some time, but one should be able to find on there the French class with a “W” for the mark.

Overall I feel I am a good student. I usually keep close to an “A -“ average. Not long ago I was invited to join the Golden Key International Honour Society due to my academic achievements at UBC. I feel these are great accomplishments for a student who was once told they would never read or write. One important thing I have learned over my years as a student is that nothing comes easy. A learning disability is not something that goes away over time. Regardless of how many strategies I use to help compensate for, and attempt to overcome, my disability, it will always be something I have to struggle with. I have always asked for extra time on tests and the option of using a computer, with a spelling and grammar checker, to write with. I do not ask these things to give myself an advantage, but because compensations level the playing field and help me to perform in a similar manner as those who do not have a learning disability hindering them. I have got as far as I have in life, academically and personally, because I hate to give up on anything. I fight for what I want, and I refuse to let anything, especially myself and my disabilities to get in my way. But there are times where I have to accept that I’m not the same as every other student. I do have a disability and sometimes that means there are things I cannot do. Sitting in a classroom and learning a second language appears to be one of those things. I spent ten years with daily one on one tutoring learning to speak, and write, English. To learn a new language now would be the same as asking me to start that journey all over again, only this time I have the additional disability of having no home exposure to the language and not being a child learning it for the first time, as well as lacking the ten years of daily personalized tutoring.

There have been numbers of studies done showing that language is easiest to learn the younger the person is when they are introduced to it. I'm twenty seven, almost twenty eight, and I have a learning disability. For this reason, I am asking for a language exemption.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Peter Bethell". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid.

Peter Bethell

DR. [REDACTED] M.A., PH.D. PSYCHOLOGIST  
[REDACTED] WEST BROADWAY, VANCOUVER, B.C. [REDACTED]

August 12, 2010

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

**Re: Peter Bethell- d.o.b. 21/8/82**

Peter Bethell has been my patient. He has had a particularly challenging clinical and academic history over many years.

He was diagnosed with symptomatic autism and as a young child did not want to be touched and had no interaction with people or things.

He was also diagnosed with epilepsy and symptomatic hypoglycemia, and required anticonvulsant medication to control his symptoms. In addition he underwent surgery and was hospitalized for anal fissure repair.

He attended UBC early childhood preschool where he was found to be developmentally delayed and showed significant memory problems.

His entire primary and secondary school years were spent in the Kenneth Gordon and Fraser Academy Schools, as he required specialized education assistance.

He was found to present with a significant disability in terms of a Auditory/Verbal Processing Disorder, where auditory memory, and learning and recalling auditory verbal material was a serious problem, especially with learning and recalling semantically unrelated material.

At very early stages in his education, it was recognized that Peter could not manage any second language material and he was withdrawn from second language education. He required significant overall assistance to complete Grade 12.

Peter has now at the age of 28 attended UBC and through remarkable tenacity and resilience is close to graduation. Given his issues of many years duration, in my opinion he has never been capable of undertaking a language, other than English, and he will not be able to learn a second language at this point.

Peter is highly capable now of achieving the remarkable feat for him of a university degree, but will require to be second language exempt

[REDACTED]  
Consultant Psychologist (BC)  
Diplomate American Board of Forensic Examiners



## A.6 My Linguistic Journey

1

Peter Bethell

LLED 489A

July 12, 2010

### Fighting for a First Language: My Linguistic Autobiography

Unlike what I suspect the experiences of my peers pursuing their TESL certification to be, a linguistic autobiography of my life is not able to draw on first-hand accounts of teaching English to others. Instead, I am only able to discuss myself and the difficulties I went through learning my own language. Most of my biography must draw on the memories of my family members and what few reports I still have from various analysts. This is largely due to the fact that I have retained little in the way of memories from my life prior to my teen years; primarily because of the heavy medications I was prescribed as a child. In many ways, I believe I went through many of the same challenges as a student learning a second language.

Prior to the age of three, a number of issues in my life were already working together to hinder my ability to learn and use language. First, prior to being adopted at less than a year of age, I was abused by my foster father. This appeared to have resulted in my sustaining of minor brain damage and severe mental and emotional trauma. The brain damage caused me to be epileptic, and I had to take a “toxic” dosage of medication to prevent the seizures. In other words, my epilepsy was so severe that the doctors were forced to give me a significantly higher than normal dose of the drug. The many negative side effects included a slowing of my brain functions; inserting items into, and later accessing, my long term memory was exceptionally difficult. My short term memory could not hold more than one thing at a time. By the time I did start to speak, expressing my needs was difficult as I had a form of aphasia, that is, my ability to recall words and express myself was hindered in a manner similar to that of a stroke victim. This

was all the more upsetting due to the fact that I had knowledge of the words I wanted, but was unable to retrieve them when I wanted.

In order to help overcome the hindrances placed upon me by the medication, my mother and grandmother would constantly, repeatedly, point to objects and say what they were slowly and clearly. My mother and father made me watch their faces and mouths as they spoke in order to demonstrate how to form the words. Constant praise when I said something correctly and quietly correcting, but otherwise ignoring, errors helped to encourage my attempts at learning words. My language was limited to concrete objects; abstracts were far beyond my reach. At this point, my speech lacked any emphasis or intonation; all my words came out flat and void of any emotion.

From three to six years of age, my medication dosage was increased. The aphasia worsened. I had pronunciation problems: I could not say "nt". Consequently, I would not use contractions. To help learn to say the sound, my family would say something like "was not" or "did not" and then follow it with the contraction. My family also continued to act out concrete and abstract words to teach me, such as smiling and saying "happy". Eye contact was insisted on during such exercises. "Field trips" were common; I would go to the park, or beach, or any number of places to learn language in context. For example, at the beach, I would turn over a rock to find crabs. My mother would point at the crabs and say "crabs", "many crabs", "many crabs scurrying", "crab frightened?", "are the crabs frightened?" and so on. As I learned more words and concepts, my speech finally began to include stress on some words and I would use some contractions. At five and a half, my doctors started to "wean" me off the anticonvulsants. My speech went from slow and clear to fast and slurred with incorrect pronunciation and mouth movements. Two hypothesis as to why this change happened emerged. First, the speeding up of

synapses formerly slowed by the medication was confusing my thought patterns and interfering with proper mouth, lip, and tongue movements. Second, the drugs had made me subject to state dependant learning so that when the drugs were removed I lost access to what I had learned while in that state. The truth may be any combination of these two possibilities or perhaps something else we have never thought of.

Eventually I managed to form complete sentences, although the words came out very slowly, but clearly, with pauses between each word. My mother and grandmother slowed their speech and put pauses between each word to match me. I became noticeably agitated when confronted with “fast” speech. If people talked quickly, I was unable to understand them; my mother compared it to being like “white noise”. Mother started teaching me multisyllabic words by clapping the syllables while saying them both in and out of context. The last syllable would be given first, then the first syllable would be added: “-ple” (one clap), “apple” (two claps). The same was done with compound words: “apple” (two claps), “pineapple” (three claps). This exercise was even extended to whole sentences: “go to store”, “Peter and mommy go to store”. When learning words, phrases, and sentences, chunking parts together helped to increase my understanding and allowed the information to eventually reach my long term memory. My mother continued to “act out” actions, i.e. say what was happening as she did it: walking to the door with her purse she might say “go to store”, and then she would take my hand and say “Peter and mommy go to store”. My family tried to ensure there were no surprises to confuse me. This was done by having lots of “front end loading”, i.e. explaining what is going to happen before it does. This was done by a combination of the acting out, as well as providing slow and simple explanations.

From six to thirteen I was extremely delayed in my understanding of things, but being taken off the drugs did result in a swift increase of my mental functioning. My IQ test scores jumped 40 points almost immediately. My family continued to teach me language and speech concepts. In the car we would play games that involved identifying and saying various sounds, such as changing the vowel sound in "sit" to make new words ("sat", "set", etc.). These games were accompanied by explanations of what the words meant, and typically used humour to keep it entertaining. Rhyme games were also popular. We would start with small words and build to larger ones: "all", "ball", "wall" would eventually lead to words like "install". These games lead to a lot of acting out of meanings and some discussion about differences in spelling. All sounds that my family taught me were accompanied by teaching me the proper way to form the sounds. For example, using a candle when teaching me "wh" showed me that the sound was aspirated as the candle would be blown out when the sound was properly pronounced. Another example would be squeezing my nose to show where nasal sounds come from.

In grade one, my teacher told my parents that I would never be able to read or write. Starting grade three, I was removed from the public school system and placed into a private school for learning disabled children. Kenneth Gordon, as the school is called, uses the Orton Gillingham approach to teaching children English. It is a phonics based system that incorporated audio, visual, and kinaesthetic methods of teaching. Personalized one on one tutoring for an hour each day was provided to all the students, and is the core of Orton Gillingham. The system emphasizes patterns in English and uses mnemonics in order to help students learn and remember both how to spell and how to read. Proper positioning of the mouth and tongue was also taught along with each sound. For example, one lesson was "E" consonant "E" (which was written "e - e") says "E" like "These are here, Pete!". The mnemonic was accompanied by a



picture of a boy (Pete) looking surprised. After saying “E” consonant “E” says “E” as in “These are here, Pete!” five times, the tutor would then write “e – e” on my palm with his/her finger while repeating “E” consonant “E” says “E”. Then I would have to use my finger to write it five times on a square of carpet while repeating “E” consonant “E” says “E”. Next we would both stand and repeat the phrase five more times as we used our whole arms to write “e – e” in the air. After that we sat down again and I used a crayon to write “e – e” while repeating the phrase and the mnemonic on a piece of paper that was laid over a square of cork board (or some similarly rough surface). The board was removed and the paper laid on the table, the resulting writing on the paper had the same rough texture as the material that the paper was placed on. I would then trace these characters with my index finger, again while repeating “E” consonant “E” says “E”, five times. Next, the tutor would dictate a number of words which I had to then identifying as having “E” consonant “E” in them. After saying whether or not the word was an “E” consonant “E” word, I would then write the word down. Finally I had to write my own sentence that included an “E” consonant “E” word, along with other words comprised of previously learned sounds. Words that did not follow the “rules” were called “sight words”, as they had to be recognized by sight and could not be sounded out phonetically. Sight words were learned by rote. Suffixes, prefixes, roots, syllabification, grammatical rules, and irregular verbs were all part of the standard curriculum, although presented in a simplified manner; for instance, we did not have to learn non-English (i.e. Latin, Greek, etc.) roots. When analysing a word such as unlikable, we would identify “like” as the root, “un” as the prefix, and “able” as the suffix; the word “morpheme” was never mentioned.

My speech was still suffering from being taken off the drugs, but thanks to my schooling and the help of my family, I did improve over time. My vocabulary increased exponentially

during this time, and my family would continue to encourage me to speak by stopping and listening every time I talked. Eventually my speech got to a point where it was clear and fairly complex, and contained proper emphasis and stresses, but still slow with some pauses between words.

Kenneth Gordon only went up to grade seven, so after I left there I continued on to Fraser Academy in Vancouver. It is another school for learning disabled children that goes from grade three to twelve, and is also based on the Orton Gillingham system. I continued with daily tutoring through most of my high school life. As my skills advanced, the lessons and tasks I was presented with became more complex. At seventeen I graduated grade twelve with a high enough GPA to apply to any university I wanted.

My first choice was a computer college called CDIS (the Center for Digital Imaging and Sound), which later became The Arts Institute of Vancouver – Burnaby. I earned certificates in both introductory computer programming and video game design. During my time at CDIS, I took a summer course to gain Orton Gillingham certification. After finishing my time at the college I eventually decided to pursue a bachelor's degree, and enrolled at Langara College, eventually transferring to UBC where I decided on declaring an English Literature major.

Learning English for me has been a completely different experience than that of most other people who are raised in English speaking cultures. Through organization, repetition, patience, a clear knowledge of my goals, a sense of humour, and a feeling that my teachers really cared about me and my education, I was able to overcome the obstacles placed before me. Having to constantly fight my own disabilities made me a stubborn and determined student who would not, and could not, ever give up on my goals. Currently I am one semester away from graduating UBC, and along with my BA, I also plan to complete my TESL certification at the

same time. Not long ago I was invited to the Golden Key International Honour Society for my undergraduate academic achievements. My success at University has not been easy though. I typically write tests through the disability resource center (DRC) which provides me with extra time and use of a computer. At home, my family continues to help me out by reading texts aloud for me, as well as helping with study drills and learning exercises. It is not so much that I am unable to read texts myself, but my education focussed on reading comprehension and accuracy over speed. As it is, a one hour exam could take up to a week of studying for no less than five or six hours a day. If I had to do it all on my own, it would likely take three times that or more. Compensation for my disabilities does not provide me with an advantage; it merely levels the playing field by allowing me to perform at a similar level as I would be able to if I did not have difficulties with processing and memory. Because of my need for a structured teaching of English, I feel I can relate in many ways to students who are learning it as a second language.

How my own experiences would translate to my approach in a classroom setting is something as unique as my life as been. I understand that English is not an easy language, and certainly not something that comes naturally to many people. I would be patient with my students, as my family was patient with me. If students were falling behind, or needed extra help, perhaps I could offer them some assistance by either giving them some tricks to understand and remember the material better, or help them to find outside of class tutoring that would supplement my own lessons. The most important thing I bring is an understanding that every child is different and learns in their own way. My method of teaching would speak to multiple learning styles. Orton Gillingham would certainly provide a cornerstone to my approach, but the way I combine it with what I have learned while attending linguistic and teaching classes at UBC, as well as my own way of thinking and approaching tasks, would make for a unique

classroom experience. The public school system gave up on me, but my family never did. In turn, I never gave up on my own goals and dreams. The same applies to the classroom; I am determined that I would never give up on my students. I would do whatever it took to be the teacher that my students deserve, and that means being a teacher who does what it takes to make English understandable. My life experiences made me who I am, and have made me into the dedicated teacher I will one day become.

## A.7 Social Justice Course Outline

FACULTY OF EDUCATION  
UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

EDST 314 [REDACTED]  
SOCIAL JUSTICE IN EDUCATION  
WINTER TERM 1, 2011

Instructor: [REDACTED]  
E-mail: [REDACTED]  
Telephone: [REDACTED]  
Office Hours: By appointment

Term 1 (Sep 06, 2011 to Dec 02, 2011)  
Monday 13:30 to 15:00 and Wednesday 13:00 to 15:00  
Building: Neville Scafe, Room 1003

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will examine issues of social justice in the classroom such as antiracism, multiculturalism, First Nations' issues, stereotypes, gender issues, special needs and poverty. This course aims to encourage students to improve their analytical and critical thinking skills, challenging them to reflect upon their own personal assumptions and to reconsider stereotypes and varying theoretical perspectives in the field of education. The course objective is to stimulate students' examination of their beliefs about education, and to help students develop the conceptual background and the language to evaluate public discourse and to communicate their views effectively as professionals and scholars.

### COURSE OBJECTIVES

A theme that will run throughout the course is the understanding of broader forces influencing policy and practice, and the theory and ideology originating from a variety of individuals and organizations. Students will be introduced to the theory and methods of research in an effort to address some of the methodological concerns in the process of inquiry and study. This course will aim to prepare students who are knowledgeable, skillful, flexible, and compassionate in their professional and scholarly practice, and who will be guided by a sense of social and ethical responsibility in relation to their peers and the wider society.

### REQUIRED READINGS

You will be required to read selections from the EDST 314 Course Reading Package, which is available at the UBC Bookstore. Additional readings may be assigned throughout the semester. The course is expected to evolve according to students' interests, backgrounds and emerging learning. ***A photocopy fee will be determined during the semester.***

### COURSE EVALUATION

This is a pass/fail course. You will need to meet a minimum of 76% in order to pass EDST 314.





## **ASSIGNMENTS**

### **Class Participation (15%)**

Each student is expected to be on time and to attend all classes, to be prepared to engage in class discussions involving the critical analysis of assigned readings and class resources, and engage in constructive interactions with peers offering insightful feedback to their contributions.

### **Group Presentation (15%) Written Component (10%)**

In groups of three, choose an issue that the group finds particularly important to address. The group is to facilitate a stimulating and lively exchange of ideas based on a review of an assigned article, video and/or film viewed in class. The group should provide a list of questions or considerations they wish to discuss with the class. A 1-2 page written component (i.e. summary) of the group presentation is to be submitted on the day of the group presentation. The groups will have 30 minutes to present and discuss their work with the class. The group presentation is worth 15 %, and the written component is worth 10% of the final mark.

### **2 Journal Entries (25%)**

Each student is required to submit 2 journal entries (2-3 pages). The journal entries should demonstrate your critical reflections related to the course topics, assigned readings and class resources. Each entry can be different, depending on the selected topic and/or ideas you want to express. You may also discuss your personal experiences.

### **Final Essay (30%)**

The final essay should be related to one of the course topics discussed in class. The final essay should explore an educational issue you feel strongly about. Discuss why this topic is important to you, what questions have been raised through your analysis of the topic, how has your inquiry helped you to better understand education. Your ideas should be well developed with evidence of careful thought. Quality of writing related to grammar and punctuation, as well as proper use of vocabulary, structure and style are required. The final essay should be between 10-12 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12 pt font, typed. Cite any published works using standard APA reference format (UBC Library web page offers various resources, references and guidelines). Students should discuss their essay topic with me for approval.

## **NOTES**

Students in all Faculty of Education courses are encouraged to review policies pertaining to academic integrity available on the Undergraduate Programs website:

[http://www.educ.sfu.ca/ugradprogs/student\\_resources/index.html](http://www.educ.sfu.ca/ugradprogs/student_resources/index.html)

### **UBC Attainment of Standards Report**

This course offers you ways to understand, interrogate, and meet many of the professional standards endorsed by the BC College of Teachers:

1. Professional educators value and care for all children, acting at all times in the best interests of the children.
2. Professional educators demonstrate an understanding of the role of parents and the



- home in the life of students.
- 3. Professional educators have a broad knowledge base as well as an in-depth understanding about the subject areas they teach.
- 6. Professional educators understand children's growth and development.

Source: UBC Faculty of Education. Attainment of Standards Report (June 2007).

### **IMPORTANT SEMESTER DATES AND COURSE TOPICS**

#### **Education, Schools and Schooling**

Week 1 (September 7): Course Overview and Introduction  
Group Presentation Schedule

Week 2 (September 12): Rethinking social justice?  
Film and Discussion, *Schooling the World - The White Man's Last Burden*  
(65 min)

Week 3 (September 19): Group Presentations

Week 4 (September 26): Group Presentations  
September 28 – Database Session 13:00-14:00)

Week 5 (October 3): ***Journal Entry #1***  
Group Presentations

#### **Students, Learners and Learning**

Week 6 (October 10 – Thanksgiving – One class this week): Film and Discussion, *We Are the People We Have Been Waiting For* (77 min)

Week 7 & 8 (October 17 - 28): PRACTICUM – NO CLASSES

Week 9 (October 31): ***Journal Entry #2***  
Group Presentations

#### **Teachers, Teaching and Reflective Practice**

Week 10 (November 7): Film and Discussion, *Special Presentation on First Nations*: Dr.  
Jo-Arn Archibald, UBC Faculty of Education

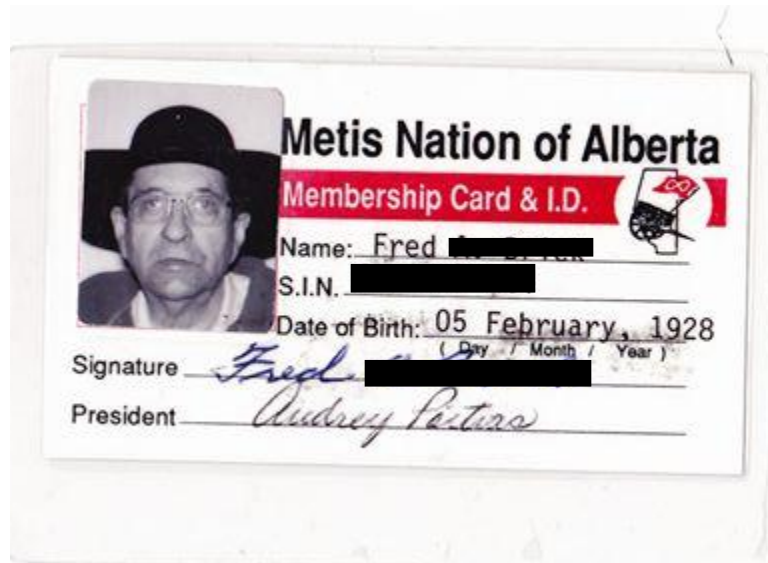
Week 11 (November 14): Group Presentations

Week 12 (November 21): Group Presentations

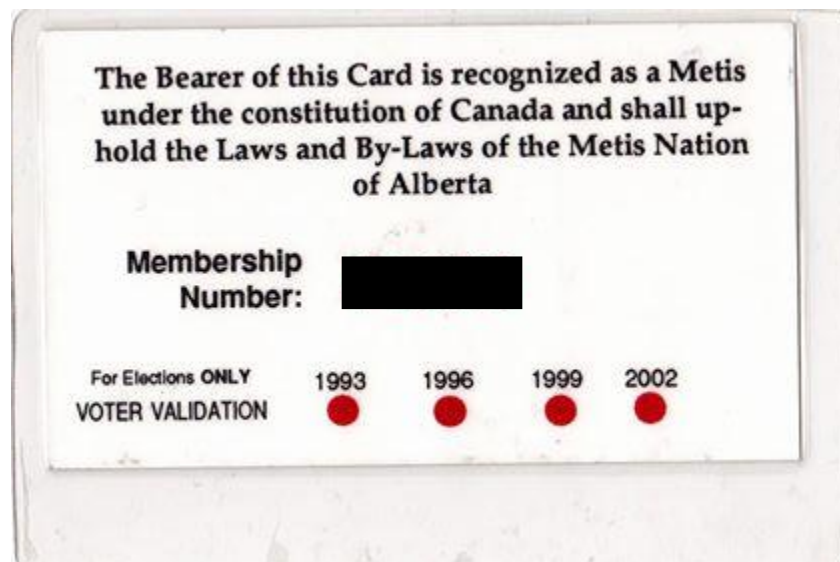
Week 13 (November 28): ***Final Essay Due***



A.8 Grandfather's Metis Status Card



My biological maternal grandfather's Metis card - Front



My biological maternal grandfather's Metis card – Back



*Nancy Jane Smith ne Grey* ... within named,  
make oath (or declare) and say that the within answers given by me are true in every particular. So help  
me God.

Sworn (or declared) before me, at *Peace River Landing* this *22*  
day of *July* A. D. 1899  
having been first read over and explained in the  
*Cre* language to the deponent, who  
seemed perfectly to understand the same, and in my  
presence

*James Walker*  
HBC Commissioner

*Nancy Jane Smith* of *Peace River Landing*  
make oath (or declare) and say that I know *Nancy Jane Smith*, who has  
made oath to the correctness of the within answers, and so far as his answers to questions numbered  
*1 to 25* are concerned, I know them  
to be correct, and so far as the remainder are concerned, I believe them to be true and correct in every  
particular.

Sworn (or declared) before me, at *Peace River Landing* this *22*  
day of *July* A. D. 1899  
having been first read over and explained in the  
*English* language to the deponent, who  
seemed perfectly to understand the same, and in my  
presence

*James Walker*  
HBC Commissioner

*John Charles Smith* of *Peace River Landing*  
make oath (or declare) and say that I know *Nancy Jane Smith*, who has  
made oath to the correctness of the within answers, and so far as his answers to questions numbered  
*1 to 25* are concerned, I know them  
to be correct, and so far as the remainder are concerned, I believe them to be true and correct in every  
particular.

Sworn (or declared) before me, at *Peace River Landing* this *22*  
day of *July* A. D. 1899  
having been first read over and explained in the  
*English* language to the deponent, who  
seemed perfectly to understand the same, and in my  
presence

*James Walker*  
HBC Commissioner

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10. How many children had you who died?

11. What are the dates and place of birth and death of those who died, respectively?

15. Can you produce certificates of the birth and baptism of your children? If so, produce them, if not, state reasons?

16. Of those dead can you produce burial certificates? If so, please produce them, if not state why not?

17. Have you ever had a homestead entry?

18. If so what became of it?

19. Have you ever had any land claims in Manitoba or the North-West? If so, state their date, when and how you acquired them and what disposal you made of them?

20. Do you consider the value of all your property, land, implements, buildings, horses, cattle, &c.?

21. Do you own any land or claim in Manitoba or the N. W. Territories in connection with the Half-Breed rights?

22. Mention the names of which you have been called, other than your name given above?

23. Do you receive any money as an Indian, or in any way, in relation to grants to Indians?

24. State anything bearing on your claim that you may wish.

25. At what time of year did you want to get?

26. For all

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