

BURRIED UNDERNEATH:  
UNCOVERING MY FIRST NATIONS IDENTITY

by

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B.A., University of Victoria, 2003

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

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate Studies

(Counselling Psychology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

April 2009

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## **ABSTRACT**

This self study documents the author's journey into the tensions, struggles and an ultimately deepening awareness of his First Nations identity. Using autoethnography as the methodological vehicle for this journey, the goal was to evocatively convey to the reader the tensions that exist between the author's internal knowing of self and the external forces that impact this way of knowing. Autoethnography is an appropriate methodology to assist this highly personal, subjective and ultimately painful attempt to narrate the author's experience to the reader. Through this study, the author comes to understand that he has carried feelings of shame in his body that has impacted his First Nations identity. As a result of being witnessed uncovering and addressing these feelings in this study, the author has gained new confidence and a strengthened sense of identity. The reader is invited along on this journey and asked to draw their own conclusions and consider their own stake in how this study may apply to their understanding of Aboriginal identity.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Thank you to Dr. Marvin Westwood for your skill, encouragement and commitment in guiding me on my journey from start to finish. Thank you to Dr. Marla Buchanan for your expertise and your open door. Thank you to Dr. Rod McCormick for your understanding and flexibility. Thank you to Dr. Ishu Ishiyama for your thoughtful suggestions and your kindness.

Thank you to my parents, Bruce and Dolly Lansdowne, and to my wife's parents, Gib and Jane McLean, for your endless generosity and support. Being away from the kids was difficult but it made it easier knowing how safe and loved they were while I was gone. Thank you to my sister Carmen, and my friends Joan, Daniel and Liz for all of your editing help. I would also like to acknowledge my Heiltsuk community and the Bella Bella Community School Society for their support.

Last but not least I would like to thank my wife Susan and my children Blake and Devan. Thank you for all of the joy and richness you bring into my life. Thank you for your support in every sense of the word. You mean everything to me and I love you.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Walter Ludwig Larsen.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### How I Got Here

I am sitting in the office of the peer admissions advisor for the counselling psychology department at the University of British Columbia. I am on the outside looking in. I have spent two years lining up ducks: upgrading pre-requisite courses in counselling and psychology, and gaining volunteer and work experience in order to get into this program. I want to be a counsellor. I want it badly. I have spent years of searching, doubting, and questioning: Am I smart enough? Will I be any good? Can I do this? These questions have been answered: I am here. I am ready. Let me in! I know this is a competitive program. I have been to the information sessions, and discussed hopes and fears with other students trying to get in. I am on the outside looking in. Let me in!

The peer admissions advisor is bringing up my grades on her computer. I am sitting nervously in my chair. It comes up that I am First Nations. . . . I still want to write it that way... It comes up... I intentionally tell her that I am First Nations. Translation: *I am First Nations so is there any way this will help me get into this program?* Should I be embarrassed to write this? I know that it must be stated somewhere in the philosophy and values of this program that they value diversity. I am First Nations and I want to work with Aboriginal people. I have been trying to think of how I can be of service to the Aboriginal community for most of my life and I know I can be of service as a counsellor. If it helps that I am First Nations, I'm going to use it. LET ME IN!

Reader, do you judge me? What would you do if you were in my shoes? I can hear the voice of a white friend, "You'll get in, being First Nations should help." But I

walk with doubt and hesitancy, the voices of critics booming in my head. Mihesuah (1998) states:

Individuals who are mixed Indian and white and Caucasian in appearance, who have not been taught any aspects of Indian culture, may not experience or only minimally experience negative feelings about being Indian. This may be because neither they nor anyone else perceives themselves to be Indian. They can “pass” as white and can “stay white” if they so choose. (p. 202)

You don't know my heart. You don't know my mom. You don't know the love I have for my family. You don't know how seriously I have considered my position. I come to you on my knees. I want you to see that I am not a taker. I am here to be of service and to connect to my culture as best as I can. Search my heart before you judge me. You may be thinking I have a choice.

“You're First Nations?” the peer advisor says, “Did you know there is a First Nations professor in our department? I think he is here right now. You should meet him.”

Of course I know there is a First Nations professor in the department. I know he has been on sabbatical for the last year. I have walked passed his office door, looked at his name, and imagined him in my mind. What does a First Nations professor look like? I see two long braids of greying black hair. I imagine he is from eastern Canada or the United States; he wears glasses; and his skin is wrinkled. Is this what an Aboriginal academic looks like? Does he burn sweet grass in his office? “C'mon, let's see if he is in his office.”

What is he going to think of me? I am so white. I wonder what he must have gone through to get to where he is. He must be political. He'd have to be. Will he think I am just a paper Indian? A Wannabe? I am scared.

The peer advisor knocks on his office door. He comes into the hallway. Introductions are made; he invites me into his office. He is not how I pictured him, but this does not concern me. What will he think of me? I am vigilant, watching, and waiting. What does he think of me? He is friendly and inviting. My fine tuned radar is not picking up any signs of judgment. I begin to relax and let my guard down. We talk for a little while. I talked about myself: where I come from and why I want to be a counsellor. He listens. He is supportive. He says, "Have you met the head of the admissions committee? I think he is here right now I'll introduce you." Here we go again. I am not as nervous now though. I have an ally.

He knocks on the office door of the head of the admissions committee. The door opens -- another door opens. "This is Robb Lansdowne. He is a First Nations student who wants to apply to our program." Introductions are made. I am invited into the office.

What does he think of me? I look so white. What does he think about other First Nations students? I wouldn't have been brought here if he wasn't supportive, would I have? The head of the admissions committee seems friendly and genuine. I sit down. My face doesn't give away much, but my mind is working hard. I talk about myself. He asks questions and listens to me. "My mom is First Nations and my dad is white." I wonder if it is easier for him that I am so white. Is it more comfortable? Is he resentful underneath it all? The radar is always in overdrive. What is his position on First Nations people?

He asks me how I position myself coming from two cultures: "I ask because other students have sometimes struggled with this experience in the past." Not me. I am clear. I have invested a lot of time focusing on how I position my identity between being

First Nations and being white. I answer him, "I know that I come from two worlds. In the past, this has sometimes felt like a lonely place, but I know that it gives me a unique perspective that I believe will serve me well as a counsellor."

*...I know my position. I have made all the arguments as to what is and what is not appropriate... I know I can not take too much. This suggests I feel that I am taking something, but that it is appropriate as long as I don't take advantage of my position. I can use it to make good -- to be of service. I am not entirely the same, and not entirely Other'. I am in two worlds. I see myself as a First Nations man who is free to speak and act with the power and privilege of a white voice. This can be a useful position to be of service to the Aboriginal community. I will make my mom proud. I am very aware that this is not a position I can abuse. Too many people take advantage and I am not one of them. It will be ok as long as my heart is in the right place, as long as I don't step on anyone's toes, as long as I am not pretending to be what I am not. As long as I keep myself at an appropriate distance. I can use this position to be a part of, if not as a member, then at least as an advocate. I feel like a double agent playing for the Indian team and I can use my position as long as I don't take advantage of the deal I am striking. I will take the status of a First Nations student in this university. I will use my education to be of service. Status for service.*

It is May 2006, and my family and I have moved into family housing at UBC. This is shortly after the acceptance letter to counselling psychology program arrived. I got in! I am going to be counsellor! I wish I could have been a fly on the wall in that admissions committee meeting. What did they discuss when my application got put into the 'yes' pile. Was it questioned? Was there a heated debate? Green lights all the

way? If so, how were they feeling underneath? What's beneath the lip service? I am always wondering what people are thinking underneath. Looking white and hearing what people say from underneath. When they think I am on board with them it always makes me question what goes unsaid; what are the assumptions they make about me to make them think I'm on board?

My family has been invited for dinner at my wife's relatives. They live close to the university. My wife's uncle is a distinguished academic and over dinner I am telling him about being accepted to my program. He passes on this advice to me on the writing of a thesis. "Just get it done. You'll have plenty of other opportunities to write books and publish articles if you are inclined to do so. It doesn't have to be perfect. I've seen too many students that wind up drawing it out or not finishing it because they thought it had to define them."

I am nervous about being in grad school. I can't imagine what it takes to actually write a thesis but I will take his advice to heart. I am not going to get caught. If I hurry I can finish this degree before my 31<sup>st</sup> birthday. I have made mistakes getting here, wasted much time, but having a master's degree by age 30, give or take a year, isn't so bad, is it?... but I need to hurry. I have people counting on me.

Here is my plan - I am First Nations and I will be using my thesis to conduct First Nations research. I have wanted to be of service for so long and, besides, I owe at least that much. Remember that the only reason I am even in this program is because I am First Nations. Remember the deal. Status for service. Don't misunderstand me, I care very deeply and want to make a contribution to my community. The Aboriginal community as a whole and the Heiltsuk people of Bella Bella specifically. I have a

responsibility. It feels like my whole life I have been trying to figure out how to make my contribution. After much slipping, struggling, and searching, I know I have the potential to contribute as a counsellor. I am going to make an impact... *But remember to play it smart.* Write every paper in every course on some aspect of Aboriginal mental health. Get familiar with the research literature. You are not going to get caught up with writing your thesis. You can do this. Ready! Set! Go!

It is now the summer of 2007, I have been in the program for a year and I am playing it smart. I am flying through this program. It is the right fit for me. I love counselling, everything about it feels right. This is what I am supposed to be doing with my life. The coursework is close to being finished and it is almost thesis time. I am ready. I have executed my plan. I have collected stacks of journal articles and books. I am ready. I have my committee. I have a topic. I even audited a methods course in qualitative research. I am ready, but I can't write. I'm frozen. Why? Maybe I am just feeling burnt out. Maybe I have been working too hard. Maybe I had should take a little break. I hear the words again: "Get it done. A thesis doesn't have to define you." C'mon be smart, don't get caught up. Why am I freezing?

I am scared. This is my first chance to make a contribution to the Aboriginal community. My chance to repay my debts. Status for service. Do I care too much? Is it too personal? I can't write. Maybe I will take a little break.

Now it is the Spring of 2008. Wow, where did that year go? "*Just get it done, a thesis doesn't have to define you.*" Yeah I know. Shut up. I've been trying. *By trying do you mean playing computer scrabble and surfing the internet when you leave your family to go work on your thesis?* I don't know why I can't write anything. *Yes you do,*

*you're scared. I'm scared? Scared of sitting with Aboriginal research participants. What's going to happen when you can't play Indian in the university anymore? It's not like that. Yeah, but that's what they're going to think. You are scared of putting your name out there as a First Nations researcher. Scared of sitting down in the counselling chair with Aboriginal clients. What about that grant you got to conduct Aboriginal research? You weren't scared when you were applying for that, were you? You'll take the money but you won't even send them your picture to put on their website. You are scared because you are a fraud. I'm not a fraud. I know where my heart is, I know who I am. You can't worry so much about what people will think about you. Just get over it and get your work done...*

## **The Catalyst**

Reader we have come to the place in my story, May 2008, where I participate in a five-day training in leading therapeutic enactment. I engaged in this training seeking knowledge about a counselling intervention. I left with a profoundly unexpected, new, and disturbing understanding of myself. This is the starting point of a journey I would like to share with you. This is the site where I broke open, unravelled, and came face to face with a part of myself which I have been too afraid to claim. I discovered a large well of shame carried in my body, which over my life has prevented me from knowing my First Nations identity. There is a difference between thinking about being First Nations and feeling it. I have thought of myself as First Nations. I discovered at this training that I was disconnected from feeling First Nations. Before therapeutic

enactment I was not aware of the depth of this disconnect and the rift it had created in my sense of identity. It is this newly developed understanding of myself that provided the invocation of this thesis.

You will continue to read a story fraught with painful questionings of who I am. Before I participated in my own therapeutic enactment I would not have been able to share these self doubts and insecurities about my identity. I pride myself on being a truthful and authentic human being and it is painful to admit that I could have denied everything I have shared with you so far. Not so painful that I could have denied it to you, but that I have denied it to myself. This is a story of my journey. But before we continue, let me provide some background on therapeutic enactment. It is important to have a sense of the method that was the catalyst for this journey.

### **Therapeutic Enactment**

Therapeutic Enactment is a group based therapy in which the leader engages the client in interpersonal and action-orientation processes (Westwood & Wilensky, 2005). The goal of therapeutic enactment is to assist clients in addressing experiences of trauma or psychological injury. Areas in which therapeutic enactment has been used successfully with clients are “personal and group trauma, grief and loss, professional secondary traumatisation, interpersonal conflict, family of origin issues, institutional violence, work or employment events, workplace burnout, and team building for a variety of groups experiencing barriers to personal and professional communication” (Westwood, Keats & Wilensky 2005, p 124). Therapeutic enactment is an intervention

which draws from theories in group counselling, self-psychology, object relations, schema, script theory, and gestalt theory (Westwood, Keats & Wilensky 2005).

My interest in acquiring training in therapeutic enactment stemmed from my participation as a group member in several therapeutic enactments. These groups were conducted on and off of UBC campus and offered by a variety of trained professionals. I was impressed by the ability of the facilitators of these groups to lead their client to a previously agreed on time of psychological injury. Rather than re-enacting the events, the client, with the support of the leaders and the support and involvement of the group, is able to re-construct the event in a way that 'feels right' for the client. The therapeutic enactment process addresses the client on cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual levels which is an advantage over many therapies. I was impressed by how deeply and quickly participants in therapeutic enactment seemed to shift. The results appeared to be substantial. I was interested in therapeutic enactment as a potential intervention that I could learn and use as a counsellor. Specifically, I was interested in determining if therapeutic enactment might be an appropriate intervention to use with Aboriginal clients. I did not intend to use myself as an initial case study, but this is what happened....

After coming to an awareness of my disconnection to my First Nations identity in therapeutic enactment I became unravelled. Reflecting back on the experiences through my life with this new lens is painful. Perhaps not a 'new' lens, because I can see how it has been there since I was a little boy. I can feel it clearly now. I am aware of often holding myself out, afraid to engage, afraid to participate, paralysed. I have a new awareness of myself. It has forced me to acknowledge the position I find myself in.

I have placed myself as a First Nations student and a First Nations researcher. I have aspirations of working as a counsellor in the Aboriginal community. How can I reconcile my new felt awareness of myself with my professional goals? Status for service. Status for service. Status for service. Who am I?

I am at a crossroads. The deal I made is not going to work anymore. I have realized that I can't hold myself at a distance, terrified of how I will be viewed. This is going to hold me back personally and professionally if I do not address it. How will I be able to sit and face Aboriginal clients knowing that I am carrying this shame inside of me? How will this harm them? How will it harm me? I will either become what I detest, a charlatan who appropriates First Nations identity for his own justifications and personal gains, or I will have to turn my back and walk away. Despite the struggles I am now experiencing with my own sense of identity, I remain adamant that my heart still stands in the right place. I am my mother's son, I have family and friends who love and care for me. This venture has always been about my heart. I am not ashamed to be First Nations. I am ashamed that I am not good enough to belong. This is in direct conflict with my personal and professional goals. The previous construction of my First Nations identity that I entered into the Counselling program with: my understanding myself as straddling locations between two worlds dissolved after coming into contact with the new awareness of the shame I carried in my body. I don't want to walk away or disengage. I still want to be of service. This hasn't changed. I don't want to make any more deals. Who said I had to make a deal? The shame did: the shame in my body. I don't want it anymore. I want to be engaging with my community. I want to know this part of me that has been hidden for so long.

## The Research Problem

I am the research problem. Specifically I am interested in exploring and conveying to the reader the tensions that exist between my internal knowing of self and the external forces in my world that grind against this knowing. It is my belief that I have carried a deep sense of shame unconsciously in my body that has affected how I participate in life as a First Nations person. It is this shame that I am interested in addressing. There are elements in my external world over which I have no control, but I do have control over how to address this shame that I feel., Given the professional field I have chosen and my personal value system, I consider it an ethical responsibility.

Carolyn Ellis (1999) states:

...autoethnography is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness. Back and forth autoethnographies gaze, first through an ethnographic wide angle lens, then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations. (p. 673)

This thesis will be a journey into myself. I use autoethnography as the methodological vehicle for this journey. I request your presence as the reader of my journey not only as a witness to my shame, but as a participant in a new and intimate way of knowing me. As you come to know me through your own lens you might see me as First Nations. You might see me as bicultural. You might see me as white. You might see me as a human being. You might see me as a counsellor, a student, or a researcher. You might see me as all or none of the above. What I will ask of you over and over again is what is your stake? Who else do you see? Where do you see yourself? Why are you here? What motivated you to read this? How does my story influence who you are and what you know? This is not a requirement, but a

consideration. Using autoethnography is a journey into the unknown and I will not be arriving at a destination during our time together. My journey will continue. My commitment to you is that I keep you in my mind as I write this journey and I strive to be as honest as I can. I thank you for walking with me for a while.

### **Rationale for the Study**

Carolyn Ellis (1999) explains the challenge of using autoethnography:

The self-questioning autoethnography demands is extremely difficult. So is confronting things about yourself that are less than flattering. Believe me, honest autoethnographic exploration generates a lot of fears and self doubts and emotional pain. Just when you think you can't stand the pain anymore, well that's when the real work has only begun. (Ellis, p. 672)

Why would I put myself through this? What purpose does it serve? What contribution will a study like this make to the field of counselling psychology or the field of Aboriginal mental health?

Autoethnography as a methodology in the social sciences has been criticized as self-indulgent and even narcissistic (Wall, 2006). Through the writing process, especially in periods of self doubt, I too have levelled these criticisms against myself. After walking through the fire and coming out the other side I can say with a clear conscience that I do not believe that sharing my journey with you is an act of self-indulgence. I will, however, claim that some of my reasons for doing this study are personal. Let me address these first before I explain how my study contributes to the field.

## **Personal Reasons**

My first reason for doing this study is that I believe I had no other choice. That isn't entirely true. The other option would have been to walk away entirely. Walk away from the field of counselling psychology and walk away from my connection to my First Nations culture. Once I had come to the awareness of the shame I carried in my body, I knew I had to begin to address it or choose to disengage completely. I chose and continue to choose to address it. I will not disengage from my First Nations culture and I will not disengage from my goal of working as a professional in the Aboriginal community. These are not options to me as both my culture and my goal are tied to my heart.

With the knowledge that I must enter this journey, I am faced with an ethical dilemma. How can I conduct Aboriginal related research for my thesis when I am experiencing a crisis of identity? I can't imagine counselling Aboriginal clients knowing what was eating me up inside. I would be no better off trying to do continue with my original research project. I believe that my professional emergence into the Aboriginal community was creating an internal identity crisis within me. This was contributing to my block in engaging in a previous idea for my thesis project. As I had made a decision to stay committed to my goals of staying engaged, and I was faced with the realities of needing to complete a master's thesis in order to graduate, I felt I had no other option but to go inside. Before I could conduct ethical research in the Aboriginal community I needed to conduct it on myself.

The second reason for doing an autoethnographic study was for the therapeutic benefit (Ellis, 1999). This is a journey. I am not the same man who began this project.

I am in a process of flux. I make no claims to have reached any conclusions, but I will say I know myself in a deeper way as a result. Claims that I feel comfortable making at this juncture are: a) I have a strong desire to know my First Nations history and become an active, as opposed to passive, participant in my culture -- something I have never given myself permission to do; b) I will feel comfortable sitting with clients, Aboriginal and not, knowing that I have questioned myself -- I will be better able to disseminate if I am being triggered by my own issues.; c) I will feel comfortable engaging in Aboriginal research projects with a reflexive awareness for how I am locating myself as researcher; and d) I am no longer willing to make deals. I will no longer feel required to pay for my status as a First Nations man with service to my First Nations community. Instead my service will come from my heart.

While the catalyst for this self exploration was my experience in therapeutic enactment, the focus of this thesis is my journey, not the intervention. The journey, not the intervention. The journey not the intervention.

## **Potential Contributions**

I believe taking this approach produces an appropriate contribution to the fields of counselling psychology and Aboriginal health research. I have been taught in university to justify research by pointing to gaps in the literature. Perhaps because of this expectation and my naivety or lack of experience, I have began much of my academic writing by stating that counselling related literature on Aboriginals is limited. I recognize now that this is not true. In his book, *Revenge of the Windigo: The*

*Construction of the Mind and Mental Health of North American Aboriginal Peoples*, James Waldram (2004) suggests that “Aboriginal mental health is nothing short of a major scholarly industry” (p. 7). He also comments that “the sheer volume of the material is mind-boggling, even more so when one realizes that, in the end, it seems to add up to so little” (p. 7). While Waldram’s critique of Aboriginal mental health is directed primarily at the fields of anthropology, psychology, and psychiatry, it seems intuitive that counselling psychology should be included. According to Ponterotto & Park-Taylor (2007): “Racial and ethnic identity development have been major areas of focus in counseling psychology for three decades” (p 283). A product of this focus has been the expansions of theoretical models and subsequent development of assessments related to Aboriginal identity. My reading (Duran & Duran, 1995; Waldram, 2004) has led me to question the historical and present day contexts of how knowledge is produced in the field of Aboriginal mental health and who it serves. I am not suggesting that traditional theoretical models and assessments be abandoned, but I do believe that qualitative research of the lived experience of Aboriginal people is needed in order to hold a mirror against the reams of traditional quantitative literature in this field. My study provides an example of a lived Aboriginal experience. I thus offer my study as a contribution as the lived experience of an Aboriginal person.

I have stated my personal reasons for conducting this study. I am also motivated by how my experience might apply to other Aboriginals. The main rationale for suggesting that my study may contribute to the fields of Counselling Psychology and Aboriginal mental health is that other Aboriginal people are also struggling with questions of identity. It is called many different things, examined through different

lenses, but one common characteristic I share with all Aboriginal people is that there are historical and present day external forces beyond our control dictating who we are supposed to be. One view of Aboriginal mental health is that sickness in Aboriginal populations can be linked as a direct reaction to colonization (Duran & Duran, 1995). A major part of my journey is coming to terms with my relationship to these external forces. One lens I could use to view these external forces is through the lens of colonization. I have never before claimed my experience of being colonized until I engaged in writing this thesis. I am not as concerned with coming to resolution with where I situate or qualify myself in relations to my culture. I am more concerned with identifying the source of carried shame that I feel in my body. My study is a journey into the tensions and struggles of external forces on the internal world. Rather than focusing on comparing experiences or levels of acculturation, I am interested in how Aboriginals come to carry feelings in their bodies. I do not think it matters if someone is trying to get away from their culture or trying to discover it. The carried feelings are similar.

As a counsellor, experienced working with Aboriginal clients in crisis, I am aware that not fitting in and not belonging were major themes in clinical work. I recall the words of a residential school survivor I spoke to one evening on the telephone: “They took my culture and language and ripped it right out of my heart and now they expect me to go back home and beat on a drum to make everything better?” This was his response to being directed to seek healing on the reserve he had not lived on since he was taken away to residential school.

In addition to my personal experience, the effects of colonization have been widely discussed in First Nations counselling literature: “Broken treaties, unwarranted

violence, and attempted genocide has clearly fostered a good deal of mistrust” (LaFromboise et al., 1990, p. 632); “Historically, White institutions such as government bureaucracies, schools and churches deliberately have tried to destroy Native American cultural institutions” (Heinrich, Corbine, & Thomas, 1990, p. 129); “The removal of Native Americans from reservations to urban areas, the removal of children from Native American homes, and the sterilization of Native American women exemplify movement toward this goal (assimilation)” (Herring, 1992, p. 2); “Characterized by institutional racism and discrimination, dominant culture has a long history of opposition to Native cultures, and the attempt to assimilate Native people” (Garrett & Pichette, 2000, p. 4); and “The racial genocide that the American Indian people have endured has contributed to their identity as a population and has created mistrust of white professionals” (Bruckner & Perry, 2000, p. 312). While the literature clearly acknowledges the historical impacts of colonization, most often it is in reference to why Aboriginal clients may mistrust white professionals. Who is the literature for?

If not already, you will soon see the emotional tensions produced in me which results from the complexities of my experience of my identity. My First Nations identity has been defined for me and by me in so many ways. I do not need counsellors to do it too. The complexities of defining Aboriginal identity are widely acknowledged in literature across multiple disciplines. See for example (Duran & Duran, 1995; Fleras & Elliot, 1999; Garrouette, 2003; Lawrence, 2004; Mihesuah, 1998; Waldram, 2004). Different disciplines approach this challenge in different ways. The positivist, scientific orientation of psychology and related fields has predominately been concerned with classification, constructs, and the production of assessments (Waldram, 2004).

Waldram (2004) also points out the influence of anthropological theories on the psychological and psychiatric approaches applied to Aboriginal mental health. If our histories in psychology and counselling psychology can be connected to social sciences like anthropology then why can we not continue to evolve in our disciplines as they do (Waldram, 2004) In the light of this argument I find the next citations I have included ironic to say the least. Wall (2006) cites Atkinson's (1997) critique of personal narratives in the fields of anthropology and sociology: "A focus on a single, subjective subject lacks genuinely thick description and threatens to substitute a psychotherapeutic for a sociological view of life" (p. 8). If any discipline should be making the argument for a psychotherapeutic view, I believe it should be counselling psychology. I bring this argument back to the lens used in counselling psychology to view the complexities of Aboriginal identity. The drive to empirically know, to categorize, to sort, to define something as complex as Aboriginal identity seems foolish. Shouldn't we take some time to listen to and understand the ways people are hurting? With this in mind, I invite you to take my story, walk with me for a little while on my journey into uncovering my First Nations identity.

## **Assumptions**

This is a journey that YOU have a stake in. What are YOUR assumptions?

## **A Word on Voice**

An unexpected product of engaging in this autoethnographic journey has been my developing awareness that I am using different voices, at different times, and in different sections through my study. My journey. My study. My journey. My study. My journey.

This is a self-exploration into my identity. This is also an academic requirement in which I must demonstrate a skill set. This is a project I am engaged in that I find hard to let go of. This is also a project that has kept me away from my children. I am passionate about my study, but I also want to finish it -- get it over with and go home to my family.

These voices can disagree with each other and I have often found them in direct confrontation with each other during the writing process. Some voices have been stronger at times than others. One example of this is the voice of my journey, the voice of the deepening understanding of myself, coming into conflict with my student voice. Areas in this study/journey where this particular conflict have played out are in the methodology chapter and the literature review. I have worked hard to be true to myself while trying to balance the requirements of this study. The result has been to sometimes deviate from the traditional structure and writing prose of a master's thesis.

## Definition of Terms

Definitions provide clarity. Clarity reduces tensions. Tension is a goal of the study. Journey. Study. Journey. Study. Journey. A definition of terms on a thesis about First Nations identity seems ironic. I would prefer to address these definitions through the stories I have written. One area that I believe is important to clarify before we continue is my reference to the shame I carry in my body. I acknowledge that the definition of shame is contextual. I assume you will bring with you your own understanding of what shame means. With this in mind, I will state my position a little more clearly. When I refer to shame, I do not mean it in the clinical sense of the emotion. I am using the word shame to describe something that has been held in my body. This feeling keeps me from engaging and participating in life through my First Nations identity. Now I am aware of this feeling in my body, but I do not know what to call it, so I refer to as shame. I did consider referring it to as my “soul wound” (Duran & Duran, 1995; Duran, 2006), but decided I was not ready to appropriate that language. Even as I’m writing this to you I am still challenging myself. *Why not. It is true. You know it.* More tensions -- I could write another story. But it is time for me to let things be. Consider Duran’s (2006) description of the soul wound:

If one accepts the terms soul, psyche, myth, dream, and culture as part of the same continuum that makes people’s experience of being in the world their particular reality, then one can begin to understand the soul wound. The notion of soul wound is one which is at the core of much suffering that indigenous peoples have undergone for several centuries. This notion needs to be understood in a historical context in order to be useful to the modern therapist providing therapeutic services and consultation to the Native American community. (p. 24)

At the risk of defining myself I will tell you when I read this that it spoke my truth. This is what I call the shame I hold in my body. This is the wail from my throat that was not mine.

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

### Conversations of Autoethnography as Methodology

I present my methodology chapter mostly as a dialogue between Carolyn Ellis, Arthur Bochner, and me. Through this chapter I speak in three voices:

- *1<sup>st</sup> Voice – Voice of my journey (Robb)*
- *2<sup>nd</sup> Voice – Voice of my critic*
- *3<sup>rd</sup> Voice – Voice of the student*

I also bring in the voices of my wife and two children. My son is three and my daughter is one.

**Robb:** Carolyn, I need your help. I am using Autoethnography as my methodology for my master's thesis. I have read a lot of articles about it, I believe I have used it appropriately in writing my stories, but I am finding it hard to define. I have written stories about myself with the intention of showing my reader the tensions I experience. My thesis is about revealing very intimate private details about my identity. Using autoethnography has been challenging in many ways but something I am having particular difficulty with right now is trying to maintain my voice to the reader while I engage in the academic requirements of my thesis. Every time I sit down and try to synthesize the literature for my methodology chapter or my literature review I feel like I am losing my reason for writing this thesis. I feel I will lose my reader. I don't know what to do right now, so I am hoping to enter a conversation with you and Art about autoethnography.

**Carolyn:** Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn't be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing. (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 433)

**Robb:** This is exactly what I want my thesis to be -- the struggles, the tensions. Trying to show meaning to my reader without having to define it. I trust my reader to get it. I have been working so hard to stay vulnerable and

intimate that I don't know how to claim my voice in this section. I don't feel like I can pull myself out of it and maintain my integrity.

**Critic:** What are you doing? This is not writing your methods chapter. You have lost the plot. You can't just steal a quote from Carolyn Ellis and pretend that you are having a conversation with her.

**Robb:** Why not? Think of all the articles we have read about autoethnography. It all seems to lead back to her and her partner Arthur Bochner (Anderson, 2006; Berger, 2001; Ellis, 1999; Foster, et al., 2006; Mcilveen, 2008; Muncey, 2005; Strong, et al., 2008; Wall 2006). Why can't we have a conversation with them and show the reader how we understand autoethnography?

**Critic:** Well for one thing, this is not academic. You can't use your imagination to create a conversation

**Susan:** What are you doing babe? Quit making your thesis complicated and just get it done. It doesn't have to be perfect.

**Blake:** I miss you and I love you daddy. When are you coming home?

**Devan:** Dada.

**Robb:** What am I going to do?

**Critic:** See this isn't going to work. You already have practically written your entire methodology chapter. It's sitting right there on your laptop. Don't do this. You don't have time and it's not going to come off the way you think it will.

**Robb:** I don't feel like I have another choice. I don't know how else to do it.

**Student:** What about the reader? Shouldn't we explain to the reader what is going on here?

**Critic:** We are going off the deep end that's what's going on.

**Student:** Seriously, We need to start this methodology chapter with a blanket statement about qualitative literature. That's what we were taught to do. Maybe something from Creswell (1998) or Denzin (2000)?

**Robb:** Why do I have to throw names everywhere to say what is obvious? It feels so fake.

**Susan:** Babe, stop it. Just get it done please.

**Robb:** No this is what we're going to do. I'm going to copy and paste in parts of a dialogue between Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner from their article "Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography an Autopsy" (2006). I am going to engage in with them on a personal level in order to demonstrate to our reader why autoethnography is appropriate for this thesis.

**Critic:** The reader doesn't care about your methodology. How many times have you actually read the methodology chapter in a thesis? This is an academic exercise, a requirement of the university and you are blowing this big time. How can you justify copying and pasting large chunks of text into your thesis? You can't steal Ellis' and Bochner's ideas like that. This is not academic. This is plagiarism!

**Robb:** I don't know how else to do this and still feel authentic. When I first read an article by Carolyn Ellis (Ellis, 1999) I felt so drawn in. I felt like I was getting to know her. Getting to sense how passionate she is about autoethnography. This has impacted the way I have tried to write my thesis. Pushed me to dig deeper, strive for more honesty. I have been impacted by her writing and I am trying to figure out how to impact my readers in the same way. I don't believe autoethnography is for the feint of heart. I am scared that it won't work, I'm scared that it will be rejected, but I feel strongly that it needs to be this way. The way Carolyn and Art have written their article makes it feel so intimate and it is so clear. Why can't I include myself in their conversation? If I'm going to try to use autoethnography I feel like I have to do it justice.

**Critic:** Well is this thesis about how you feel about Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner or is this a thesis about your struggles with knowing your First Nations identity?

**Robb:** I'm just trying to convey the method. I don't want it to impact my stories. I don't know how to write from my First Nations identity in this section.

**Student:** Speaking of voice what about the reader? I really think we need to get back to the task at hand.

## Autoethnography

The goal of this study is exploratory in nature and is best addressed using a qualitative methodology – Autoethnography (Ellis, 2002). According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), qualitative research is the best way to explore complex dynamic processes where questions of context, understanding, and meaning are most important. This thesis is a journey into my tensions, struggles, and deepening awareness of my First Nations identity. In their book *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*, Duran & Duran (1995) recount their experience of three decades of graduate training, clinical practice, and research in cross-cultural psychology:

Early on, we began to realize that much of the study of cross-cultural issues and the resultant literature was primarily an exercise that had to be validated by the rules of the academy. It did not take a great revelation to discover that the people who made up the rules of this academy were predominantly white males. In this sense knowledge from a cross-cultural perspective must become a caricature of the culture in order to be validated as science or knowledge. (p. 4)

The landscape is changing but I find myself in a similar location to Duran & Duran (1995). My thesis demonstrates some of the internal tensions I feel in negotiating my First Nations identity. One external element that has impacted my internal self has been my experience of locating myself as a First Nations student in university. Even now when I am locating my position through Duran & Duran (2006) I find myself questioning if it is appropriate. Am I speaking with my white voice? Am I trying to “fool genocide” by claiming the position of the Victor and the Vanquished (Lawrence, 2004)? This is an example of the struggles I will try to describe in this thesis.

I choose to use autobiographical autoethnography in this thesis because of the highly personal, subjective, and ultimately painful attempt I make to narrate my

struggles in understanding my own identity. There is evidence in the literature that suggests using autobiographical inquiry is an appropriate and recently acceptable method of understanding topics connected to the researchers lived experience (Wall, 2006). I have searched for and found a qualitative methodology where I can understand myself “reflexively as a person writing from particular positions at specific time... free from trying to write a single text in which everything is said at once to everyone” (Richardson, 2000, p. 9).

**Robb:** Ok, that went better than I thought it would but it is still pretty contrived. You have to admit you were trying to pad your reference stats (especially towards the end).

**Student:** That is what we are supposed to do!

**Critic:** She’s right.

**Robb:** When did the student become a she?

**Susan:** Focus.

**Robb:** Ok we have explained why we have chosen autoethnography and why we think it is appropriate but how do we say how it works? I really want to go back to a conversation with Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner.

**Critic:** You mean a fake conversation with Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner. I don’t like the direction this is going and I don’t like the voice you are using. It is taking us away from what this thesis is about.

**Robb:** Look, it’s important for me to try this. Here is your disclaimer: All quotations from “Art” and “Carolyn” have been taken from a storied conversation between Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis (2006) about autoethnography. Some quotes may be taken out of context but I am attempting to enter their conversation because I consider them experts on autoethnography. Now let’s continue.

**Robb:** Why is autoethnography important to you?

- Art** “Our enthusiasm for autoethnography was instigated by a desire to move ethnography away from the gaze of the distanced and detached observer and toward the embrace of intimate involvement, engagement, and embodied participation.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 433-435)
- Carolyn:** “I want to demonstrate my passion for autoethnography through a story or a conversation that shows multiple voices and positions. I want people to feel the story in their guts, not just know the ‘facts’ in their heads.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 435)
- Robb:** This is why autoethnography appeals to me. I feel the journey I have taken in this thesis is a story about what is deep in my guts. I want the reader to feel that. I don’t want to control what the reader feels but I want them to have a sense of the tensions I am grappling with. I was caught off guard by the first autoethnographies that I read (Ronai, 1995; Keats, 2000). I found myself absorbed in their stories. I was brought to tears on several occasions. I had not experienced depth like that in any academic writing. I was not absorbed in a voyeuristic way. I was personally invested. My understanding of the subjects these authors wrote on was impacted from my different locations -- as a father, as a counsellor, as a man. I knew at this point that this was the methodology that I needed to use on my own journey. I can’t see how a detached observation could ever penetrate what I have tried to express in my thesis. There is so much I didn’t even know about myself that has been uncovered through the writing process.
- Robb:** What is the relation between evocation and autoethnography?
- Art:** “Evocation is a goal, not a type of autoethnography. I wouldn’t think of applying the term ‘autoethnography’ to texts that are not evocative.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 435)
- “...the term ‘evocative’ appeared because readers of autoethnography recognized that its evocative quality was one of the characteristics that made autoethnography a distinctive genre of ethnographic writing.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 436)
- Robb:** I feel like I have the opportunity to speak my truth using autoethnography. I feel like it is an appropriate methodology to help explore my First Nations Identity. I have often written about my First Nations identity academically, but in the past it always felt at least partially contrived.
- Carolyn:** “As a woman and a feminist, I think it’s important not to lose sight of the politics of autoethnography. Analysis and theorizing on the pages of social science journals is the preserve of an elite class of professionals who wittingly or unwittingly divide the world into those who see the light

and those kept in the dark. Autoethnography helps undercut conventions of writing that foster hierarchy and division.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 436)

**Robb:** Yes, I feel I can speak my truth with this methodology in ways that I would not be able to with traditional methods. But how do I explain to the reader how I am going to attempt to analyze my stories?

**Art:** “We use stories to do the work of analysis and theorizing.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 436)

**Robb:** Can you explain that?

**Art:** “The difference between stories and traditional analysis is the mode of explanation and its effects on the reader. Traditional analysis is about transferring information, whereas narrative inquiry emphasizes communication. It’s the difference between monologue and dialogue, between closing down interpretation and staying open to other meanings, between having the last word and sharing the platform.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 438)

**Robb:** I have a sense of relief hearing you say that. Part of what has been so hard about trying to share who I am in my thesis is my fear of how the readers will apply the experiences I share to with them to other Aboriginal people. Even using this methodology, it has been hard to give up control of how my experience might be applied. Aboriginal people have been marginalized enough without me providing academics with another microscope. I feel more comfortable with the idea of having a dialogue with my readers where I don’t feel the pressure to explicitly define myself or other Aboriginal people. Many times in writing my stories I have struggled through doubt and guilt questioning the reality of the story. I have often had to step away and return to it and try to dig deeper. I have tried to be as honest as possible. I feel like that has been my connection to the reader. Still often times I feel like the closest I could come to the truth in writing some of my stories was an impression. What do you have to say about writing stories?

**Art:** “If we employed the elements of good storytelling in writing *about*, I think our articles would be more persuasive.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 439)

**Carolyn:** “We want to protect the integrity of the story and not close off conversation and engagement with it.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 440)

**Art:** “In our graduate program we include writing as a methodological requirement and ask our students to think of themselves as writers and of the work they do as good storytelling.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 400)

“There’s the whole issues of writing well enough to pull this off.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 442)

**Robb:** Oh God this is a tough one. I could almost hear my brakes screeching. When I first read about the importance of writing well (Ellis, 1999). I started comparing myself to the Keats and Ronai and I didn’t know how my experience could be considered evocative compared to theirs. It is so hard to let go of the writing. I have so much self-doubt. What I have written about has been so personal that many times I have told myself just to hammer away even if my writing was shit and then go back and edit it later. Many times I have broke down crying and I have thought about quitting and abandoning my thesis. This has happened almost everyday that I have written. I don’t think now that I will be doing much editing. It is what it is. I just hope that I can convey to the reader the tensions I feel. All I can say is that I have tried to think about who the reader is, what the reader’s stake might be, and I have pushed myself to be as honest as I could about how I was feeling through the writing. This engagement provided me with a richer therapeutic experience as the struggling produced a deeper understanding of myself. I feel a lot freer as a result of writing this thesis. I am still working through letting it go. I know that you have already discussed traditional analysis but I did include some in my thesis.

**Student:** Well what else were we supposed to put in the discussion chapter?

**Robb:** Sssshhhh!

**Carolyn:** “It is not necessary to eschew traditional analysis in what we do. You know good analysis can be evocative.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 443)

“Most of our students include traditional analysis in their dissertations and papers thought we try to help them make it a component that is interesting... Analysis and story also can work together. There is no reason to preclude adding traditional analysis to what we do, as long as it’s not treated as necessary to legitimize our stories.” (Bochner & Ellis, 2006, p. 444)

**Robb:** I have struggled here. Sometimes I find myself trying to wrap a bow around the package. After writing my stories I reviewed all of them looking for themes. I tried to stand outside my stories and read them objectively as if I hadn’t written them. I found this difficult, as I knew what the themes were when I was writing the stories. The themes are implicit in the stories and I trusted that my reader could pick up on them. That being said, I found writing about the themes led me further down my path. I don’t feel like the autoethnography stopped with my analysis, I just went deeper.

**Robb:** I want to thank you Carolyn and Art for your knowledge and the intimate way in which you share it. I hope I haven't overstepped my bounds by including myself in your conversation, but this feels more honest to me. Having a conversation feels so much more real.

**Critic:** Well that didn't go as badly as I thought it would. That is if they will let us get away with this.

**Robb:** It felt more honest to me.

**Student:** Hey we aren't done yet. We still need to talk about data collection, Reliability, and validity. What about ethics? This is still a methodology chapter.

**Robb:** Go ahead then, keep it short.

**Student:** Thank you.

Using autoethnography has provided me with a way to look at the tensions and uncertainties I carry about my identity without having to explain or convince the reader what I did not know for myself. To repeat the well used metaphor this has truly been about the journey, not the destination. My goal was to search for a way to articulate what was going on inside of me. My path has felt in many ways to be a journey filled with fear and self-doubt into the unknown.

The rationale for this study is based in identity research. Autoethnography as a method has allowed me to do self-exploration and uncover identity issues that may be informative to the field of counselling psychology. This thesis is a collection of stories that I have used to tell a collective story. Ellis (1999) suggests "A story's generalisability is constantly being tested by readers as they ask if it speaks to them about their experience or about the lives of others they know. Likewise does it tell them about unfamiliar people or lives?" ( 674). This is the goal of the journey.

## **Data Collection**

In autoethnography the sample is the self. However, there can be several creative data sources that I left myself open to in the writing process (Ellis ,1999; Muncey, 2005). I feel most comfortable expressing myself through writing and I honour that. I tell my story in the form of 33 written vignettes. These vignettes speak to a variety of subjects recounting past experiences or responses to items I have previously read and wrote, as well as stories of how I feel as I am writing. A major component of my data source is writing about my experience in therapeutic enactment (Westwood & Wilensky, 2005). I include video clips of relevant moments of my therapeutic enactments during my thesis defense and I write about these experiences as truthfully as possible in my thesis. I also include a drawing of my sculpture constructed during my second therapeutic enactment (see Figure 1).

## **Data Analysis**

The form of analysis used in this study is a self-analysis using critical reflection on all the data sources. I consider this analysis to be a continuation of the autoethnographic process and do not attempt to generalize my experience in any specific way. My goal is not to come to a defined way of knowing or explaining what my stories should mean to you the reader. My goal was to step away, review my stories, and then to deepen the autoethnographic experience. I ask you to continue with me on my journey in this way.

### **Criteria for Validation**

I consider ways in which I might evoke in my readers feelings that the experiences I described are “lifelike, believable and possible” (Ellis, 1999, p. 674). I am guided by the following questions: Can I make a legitimate claim to my stories? Am I learning anything new about myself? Will my stories help others better understand their worlds? (Wall, 2006).

### **Criteria for Reliability**

I provide samples of my writing to my thesis committee, family, and peers in order to check if my writing evokes a sense of the tensions I try to highlight through my stories (Ellis, 1999).

### **Limitations of the Study**

I am aware of the potential for third party exposure in my narratives especially in consideration of my mother. I received verbal and written consent from my mother to include my impressions of our conversations. I did not conduct any formal interviews with any members of my family. I made every effort to conceal the identity of people in my narratives in order to protect their identities. In the case of family members who are related to, but not the focus on my stories, I received verbal consent. I acknowledge the limitations of a self- study and I provided arguments for why I believe self-study is appropriate in the introduction section.

## **Ethical Considerations**

As this is a self-study my primary ethical concern is me. At times my journey has been extremely emotional and involved periods of shame, pain, anger, and self-doubt. I have made sure to seek appropriate resources in order to take care of myself. I was in phone contact with my thesis supervisor, a trained psychologist, as I needed. I also accessed support from my family and peers as needed. I would recommend to anyone considering engaging in this sort of study that they first secure appropriate support resources. As I have made every attempt to make my narrative evocative, I would also encourage the reader consider appropriate self-care resources before engaging with my stories.

## CHAPTER 3: STORIES

### Definition of Terms

How do I identify myself in this thesis? I know myself through multiple locations. It depends on the context of the situation I am in. I am a man. I am a student. I am a husband, a father, a son, and a brother. Some of the ways that I locate myself are clearly defined. My ethnicity, however, is not clear.

How do I label myself as First Nations, white, mixed raced? These definitions are less clear to me. The parameters are blurred; I do not always know where to find myself when using these terms. I do not always know what is comfortable for me or comfortable for others. When I look in the mirror, I am not sure about my ethnicity. It is confusing. I recognize my tendency to define myself through the ethnicity of my parents. This is usually to explain what I think people are thinking about me if I have been identified as First Nations. I wonder if this is to make them comfortable or to make me comfortable? Either way it says to me that I am self-conscious about what other people are thinking about me. In these situations I tell people, "I am First Nations," and then add, "My mother is First Nations and my father is white." I feel a need to qualify how I can look so white and call myself First Nations. I don't say that I am part First Nations partly because the Government of Canada says that I am a Status Indian, which makes me something other than a half-breed. But I would never identify myself only as a Status Indian, because wouldn't that be saying that the only reason I identify myself as an Aboriginal is because the Government says

that I am one? These are examples of how labelling my ethnicity can get confusing.

I have been asked many times if I am Métis. A white person has actually told me that I am Métis, even after trying to explain to him that I wasn't. "No, you're Métis. You are half Indian and half white and that is what a Métis person is."

I spent the first thirteen years of my life as a Caucasian...or is it a Canadian? It is something that I never even considered until I became a Status Indian. Sometimes I wonder what it does to the statistics when they change someone like me? Doesn't it throw out the numbers when they create Indians and make white people disappear? Poof! One day a letter came in the mail that changed the legal definition of my identity. Who is to say that this won't happen again? This is not something I can be sure of. My experience with the tax department has taught me that when I am a Status Indian, rules and regulations can change.

My mom's biological parents are both First Nations. I have met both of them, seen them with my own two eyes. They both look First Nations, whatever that means. But my biological grandmother was not always a Status Indian and my biological grandfather did not marry her. So when my mother was born she was not a Status Indian. In fact my mother, my grandmother, and my great grandfather were all non-status Indians. My great-great grandfather was Norwegian and when he married my great-great grandmother she became a non-status Indian and that started the dominos falling. My mother was born

in 1945 as a non-Status Indian and would remain as one until Bill C-31. My mother was “othered” from birth, and I became “othered” at the age of fifteen when my mother hired a lawyer and claimed her Indian Status. A mother and her three children became Indians in 1992. Poof!

I do not intend to explain the Indian Act or Bill-C-31, as I want to keep what I am writing personal. I get tired of playing the educator. I refer you, the reader, to Bonita Lawrence’s book *“Real” Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood*, for further reading on these subjects. She has explained in more detail this part of my story. Lawrence (2004) writes:

Urban mixed-blood Native people are *not* extraneous to Indigenous communities...they represent the other half of a history of colonization, the children and grandchildren of people removed, dispersed, and continuously bled off from native communities as a result of ongoing colonization policies- residential schooling, termination and relocation, the theft of Native children into the child welfare system, and a century of removing Indian status from Native women and their descendents. (p. 14)

I have recounted a little piece of my family history and our relationship to a Government that currently recognizes me as a Status Indian. My children however, do not have the blood quotient to be like me. How can a First Nations man have Caucasian children? If you find it confusing, so do I. This, of course, is in official terms, legal definitions, what is written on paper, but I know first-hand the emotional and spiritual impact of being told what you are and what you are not. It pains me that my kids have become involved in it. I fell in love with a white woman, my high school sweetheart. We currently have two wonderful children who are not Status Indians. I am not saying that I want them to be

Status Indians or that I don't want them to be Status Indians, I only want you to understand that it is confusing and painful to be told you are something different than your children. I sometimes wonder what it would be like if the mother of my children was First Nations? My children would then meet the criteria to be Status Indians like me. So I guess if I had been thinking and was really committed to being a real Indian, I should have married a First Nations woman so that my children could have all of the "special privileges" that white people keep complaining about. I am being facetious but this is my life. It feels like being put through a wringer. It hurts me and I often do not know where I stand. I do not want my children to go through this.

The government actually made a mistake with my son and listed him as a Status Indian for the first year and a half of his life. We only discovered it when my wife was preparing to go on maternity leave, shortly before our daughter was born. Our son had been on her medical plan and when we were gathering the necessary information to switch him onto my plan, we were informed that he was not being billed for MSP. My wife contacted her health plan provider and was informed that our son was not billed because he was a Status Indian. I looked up the rules on the Health Canada website which say who is and who isn't a Status Indian and I was fairly sure my son was not, according to their rules. So I was faced with a choice. I could leave things as they were, let the government determine the status of my son, and let them contact us if there was a mistake, or I could contact them and try to find out what was going on. I decided to contact them. Part of me wanted my son to have Indian Status but after my mom's

experience and my own experience of being told who we are and who we are not, I was not willing to wait and find out. I did want my son to get a letter when he was thirteen telling him he was no longer a Status Indian.

I called and left a message with an office somewhere in Ontario and after about a week someone called me back. I explained the situation about my son and asked for clarification. I could hear the fingers of the woman clacking on a keyboard and then she said, "Your son does not qualify for Indian Status". I felt a mixture of sadness, relief and anger. Why are you fucking with my family? I asked her why he had been listed as a Status Indian? She told me "it was a mistake, this actually happens quite often." A couple of strokes on the keyboard and POOF! Another Indian magically disappears.

You might think I was disappointed that my son lost his Indian Status but I was relieved. What about the free education, free medical, discount gas and smokes, the right to hunt or fish wherever you want, never having to pay taxes, all of the "special privileges" that are so resentfully "bestowed" on Aboriginals in Canada? But these are the labels I hear so often by white people who expect that I understand because of the colour of my skin. I don't want my son to be First Nations any more then I don't want him to be white but I most importantly I don't want him to feel judged. I feel the judgment, the hatred, and the racism that is extended towards Aboriginal people in this Country. I also know that it is painful to live in ambiguity. I want my son to be proud of, embrace, his First Nations heritage. Being First Nations means so much more to me than whether or not I carry a Status card. I hope I can work through my own self-doubt and

issues of identity so that I can teach him how to embrace this part of himself. I want it to resonate in my children and for them to be able to know themselves on their own terms without the Government having such a large stake in their identity. This is what I am also searching for in myself. So in this way I am relieved that my son is no longer a computer mistake Status Indian. I wonder if they recognize the impact these “mistakes” have on real people’s lives?

I have been trying to give a picture of how complex and confusing it is to label my ethnicity and I have spent longer than I intended writing about being a Status Indian. I do not believe the Government of Canada determines who is really an Aboriginal person even when they have the power to manufacture and obliterate Indians out of and into thin air. POOF!

So in a legal sense, in a biological sense, in a social sense, my ethnicity is complex and confusing and comes with many labels that do not help to clarify who I am. So here are my definitions of terms:

I will use the terms: First Nations, Indian, Status Indian, Aboriginal, Native, Native American, and Indigenous interchangeably. I will also use the terms white and Caucasian interchangeably. I may refer to myself as a half-breed, mixed-race, biracial, bicultural, multiracial, mixed blood, or half blood. I may speak of dual identity, dual ethnicity, mixed ethnicity or others ways to slice and dice ethnicity that I haven’t thought of yet. Generally but not always I will refer to my culture as “First Nations” and “Heiltsuk”. I will refer to all Native people in Canada most likely using the term “Aboriginal” in an attempt to be inclusive to Inuit, Métis, and other Native people who might not feel represented by the term

“First Nations”. I will also probably, but not for certain, be referring to American Indians and Alaskan Indians in some circumstances when I use the term “Aboriginal”. I will use the term “Indian” which is no longer political correct but reflects the language and culture I was raised in. This is a term that many friends and relatives still frequently use.

I acknowledge that some of the terms I use through this thesis may be confusing or offensive to some. This is not my specific intention but I do believe the abundance of terms is a metaphor for my identity journey. Words and labels are powerful. I request your permission to engage you in my confusion.

### **Skin Colour**

I ask you, the reader, to picture me in your mind when I tell you that I am First Nations. What do I look like? I am thirty-one years old, I am a man, and I am First Nations. Do you have a picture of me in your mind? Do you see me with copper skin, dark thick hair, and brown eyes? What does a First Nations person look like to you?

What if I told you I that I am mixed-raced, bi-cultural, a half-breed? My mom is First Nations and my father is Caucasian. How does your picture of me change? I am considered First Nations by the government, the university and the tax department. Friends, family and colleagues are aware of my mixed ethnicity. Still, others would assume I am as white as my father. Has this changed the image of what I look like in your mind? Has my skin become lighter? Maybe the colour of my eyes has changed?

What if I told you that I was Caucasian? This is not something I would ever tell you, but if my ethnicity wasn't stated explicitly, if you saw me on the street and were asked to identify me, you would probably say that I am white.

Of all the people I have encountered in my life to date, only one person that I can recall has ever asked me if I was First Nations based on a face-to-face encounter. He was an English instructor at college and I can remember feeling surprised when he asked me, "Are you First Nations?" I also remember feeling suspicious of his question. What was his angle? On the outside, I smiled and politely replied, "Yes, what made you ask that?" But I can still recall the feelings of vulnerability that his simple question elicited in me. No one had ever asked me that before. Had he read it somewhere in my school records, and if so how was it relevant? There must be some reason for him wanting to know more about my First Nations background and he must have had some previous knowledge about it because he would not see it in my face.

He responded to my question by telling me he saw it in my facial structure, and that was the end of it. No segue, no additional queries about my background, he had just been curious. What had made me so defensive over an innocent question and why is this meaningless exchange still meaningful to me thirteen years later? I have to admit that in spite of evidence to the contrary, I still have my doubts about that instructor's intentions. On some level, I feel he was patronizing me; he must have known beforehand that I was First Nations and just said the facial structure thing to cover up his slip...

I want to delete what I just wrote because I think it sounds paranoid and stupid and I am embarrassed to acknowledge that it is true. I still have my doubts. This is a mess. I am uncomfortable and I want to bring in some rational and already this section on skin color is getting off track and I am frustrated. So here is my rationale...

I was 18 when this incident occurred. It was my first semester of post-secondary education. It was my first experience of being a "First Nations" student. I had been considered a First Nations student at other times in school but only when I had self-identified. In going to college I had ticked the box, applied for funding from my band, and entered my niche in the Aboriginal statistics. I say this with some cynicism because Aboriginal issues are so often viewed through statistics that are so far removed from personal experience. I think of my brother, who made his contribution as a suicide statistic. I think of my cousin, who grew up in my family as my brother, and his representation through incarceration statistics. I think of my own statistical representation of Aboriginals in post-secondary education. We contribute to these statistics but these statistics contribute nothing to our personal experience. They tell a story but they do not tell our stories. They do not speak to how we are connected or disconnected to our culture. What it means to be Aboriginals, First Nations peoples, Indians.

Being a funded student was a challenge for me. I was grateful for receiving funding from my band to go to college but I was not sure if I deserved it. I felt guilty, beholden, and inauthentic. I felt inauthentic in the sense of not knowing who the person was that this funding was supposed to represent. I

have always being proud of my First Nations heritage, yet despite being accepted by the Heiltsuk School Board as a worthy candidate for funding, I was struggling with how to accept my place. I had never lived in Bella Bella, I grew up in a wealthy white neighbourhood, and I looked so white. I feared how I might be perceived by First Nations and non First Nations people who knew I was receiving financial support for my education. As someone who looked white and grew up in the city, I had many unanswered questions about my First Nations identity and I was afraid of being judged. I was struggling with feelings of how I would be perceived as inauthentic; perceived as taking advantage of my ethnicity in order to have my education paid for.

This process of developing a First Nations identity via post-secondary education made me sensitive to how others saw me as a First Nations person. So when this instructor asked me if I was First Nations, my reaction to him was one of suspicion. The story I told myself was that this instructor read somewhere in my records that I was a First Nations student and that my appearance surprised him. I told myself he was curious about how someone who looked so white could be called First Nations? I felt surprised when he asked me if I was First Nations not only because no one had ever asked me that before, but because I had all of these doubts and insecurities floating around in my mind. I didn't know what his intentions were when he asked me if I was First Nations, but the result was that I felt judged.

## **Mother's Mirror**

Many times when I was a young boy, especially in the summer or when we were travelling somewhere warm, my mother would hold her forearm against mine and reflect on the difference of our skin. "Look at how dark I am" she would say. My arms, sometimes red or pink with sunburn, but almost never tanned, would emphasize her brown skin against my whiteness. As a child I never felt shamed or less than my mother for being lighter. Her comparisons were never meant as a put down. I can't say that I internalized messages from her like "I am more Indian than you" or that I told myself "You are not Indian enough" as a result of these exchanges. Even as I grew older, when my paleness ironically became the subject of teasing amongst my white peers, "Robby look at your legs, you're blinding me", I can't say I ever wished I had been born in a darker skin. To live in this world as white, to pass as white, I'm not about to tell you that I suffered in some way because of my skin colour. So why is important for me to write this story now? What is the significance of being my mother's mirror?

Looking back, I see these exchanges as a form of me caretaking for my mom. This was a role I played often growing up. I was happy to make her feel good. These exchanges were about my mom and her experience, not mine. But I realize now that I carry them with me. Feelings were transferred. If it made my mom feel good to be brown against my whiteness, then I know it must have been painful for her at some point when she was on the other end of this contrast. Even in her smiles during these exchanges, when our arms were against each

other's, I could often sense her pain seeping into me through our skin contact. I felt her insecurities, her not feeling good enough, her feelings of rejection, her experience of being othered.

My mom has shared with me some of her experiences growing up. All I seem to be able to hear are stories of rejection, abuse and chaos. I don't know if this is fair but the pain drowns out my ability to hear anything else. I still find it overwhelming. As a son it hurts me to know what she went through as a child. My mom is a survivor. I believe she is strong because being strong was her only option. I know she grew up as a misfit, both in her home of Bella Bella, and later as a teenager and as a woman living off of the reservation.

I understand my mother through a story of being beat up by other Indian kids because of her grey eyes. I understand her through a story of being slapped in the face by a white boy in Naramata. A white boy who could slap her without fear of being challenged or reprimanded because she was only an Indian girl. I feel and understand the complexities of her pain when she tells me how a supportive teacher in high school took her aside and told her she could pass for Portuguese or Italian. I have a felt sense of how demoralizing these experiences were for my mom. Her story speaks over and over again of being told who you are by the wrong people for the wrong reasons. I can't claim ownership of her story and yet I know that it has a life inside of me. It lives in my guts.

These are a few of the examples my mother has shared with me of her experiences of not fitting in. This is not cause and effect. A sum of stories does not add up to some tangible experience passed on to me that I can describe. I

am struggling to articulate a felt sense that in these moments where I sat with my mother and she compared our skins that I became a conduit to a painfully felt sense of what it is like not to belong. I see our arms side by side. I hear her voice so clearly “Look at how dark I am”. Her pain lives inside of me, even if it isn’t my own story. I carry this for my mother and I would guess it has been passed down to her through past generations just like her grey eyes. I am crying.

### **Indian Dancing in Alert bay**

I am seven year’s old living in my father’s hometown of Alert Bay. The community is divided between reservation and non-reservation land. When I was living in Alert Bay this was referred to respectively as the Indian and white sides of town. Despite the racial division that may be inferred from “sides” of town, I experienced Alert Bay as a racial integrated community. While I am sure that racism was perpetuated between individuals, I can’t recall community divisions based on race. As far as I remember, not much attention was given to where you lived or if you were Native or non-Native. As children we went to school together, we played together, and it didn’t really matter what side of town someone lived in. I think of Alert Bay as the ideal sort of a community for a half breed kid to grow up in.

I lived on the white side of town. I didn’t think of myself as white because I happened to live on the white side of town or because my father was white. I didn’t think that I was Indian either. I don’t remember thinking much about my

ethnicity at all when I lived in Alert Bay. Like me, many children my age came from families with one Native and one Non-Native parent. I should mention that I do remember being aware that my mom was from Bella Bella, not Alert Bay. My history and sense of belonging to the community came through my father. So even though we were Native through my mom, and we had many Native friends, I was not connected to First Nations culture in Alert Bay.

I seem to feel a need to explain my sense of Alert Bay in relation to the construction of my own identity. I am recognizing in writing this that my memory of Alert Bay metaphorically represents how I would like to portray my identity. There is a white side and an Indian side and everybody basically gets along. Writing this out seems silly. I recognize that this is not THE story of Alert Bay it is MY story of Alert Bay. My vision is what I want to believe about the community and what I want to believe about myself.

In 1984 I was seven years old. Optional Indian art and Indian dancing classes were available at the Alert Bay community school. I was one of a small group of students who regularly attended the Indian dancing classes. My mother encouraged me to take part. I knew that it made her proud for me to take part in Indian dancing. I wanted to make her proud.

At the age of seven I was not hesitant to take part in the dancing. I enjoyed it. This would change for me very severely in a short time. I remember feeling esteemed that my mother knew the women teaching us and they knew who I was. Those ladies were good to me. They were encouraging. It was only

a small group of students and I have happy memories of dancing in the little gym beside the primary school. I still think about it anytime I see that gym.

At some point Indian dancing became mandatory for all of the children in the school. I can't recall the details of practicing with this larger group. What I do remember is that all of the children from our school were invited to dance in the Big House. I don't remember what the event was but I know that community members were there to watch us and we were expected to dance.

I had been to the Big House before and spent a lot of time playing near it. It was a familiar place to me and not a place where I felt unwelcome or scared. It was a warm sunny day, probably near the end of the school year. I remember the contrast from bright sun and warm air to the coolness and dark inside of the big house. There was a sand floor, wooden bleachers along the sides of the walls, and the log at the front for the drummers to use. I remember the fire was burning in the middle floor. We were there to dance. We were taken to the back of the Big House to get ready for the dances. The first dance I was in was a boy's dance. I remember feeling nervous in the back before the dance. We were wearing shorts and given regalia to put on. I remember being bare foot and wearing a red stained cedar skirt and red stained cedar bands across my shoulders. I was scared.

The drumming and singing started and we were ushered out onto the floor. I remember my feet feeling cold on the sand floor. I could not remember when to turn or what to do with my hands. I was having trouble keeping the beat with my feet. I could see faces in the bleachers, but neither of my parents was

there. I started to freeze. Making the first turn around the fire blazing in the centre of the floor I looked up and saw that the boy in front of me wasn't dancing. He was a white boy and I can still see his blonde hair. I kept my eyes focused on his back, and then suddenly I was walking like him. I remember feeling the dead weight of my arms, my shoulders were slouched and I followed this other little boy like I was in a trance. I remember two women standing in their seats yelling at us to dance. "Dance, c'mon dance"! I can still see their stern angry faces. It was a look I have seen on my mom's face and I have seen it in others. I felt so defeated, I didn't know what I was doing and somehow I should have known better.

When I started walking it felt like I was choosing to be white like the other boy. I got scared and I quit. I felt like I was betraying my mom. I wanted so badly for it to be over, I didn't feel worthy, I should have known better. Finally it was over and I remember being safe in the back of the house. I would not go back out on the floor again for any other dances that day. I had failed.

### **Indian Dancing in Victoria**

The next time I remember Indian dancing was in Victoria at the Mungo Martin Big House. I must have been around fifteen years old. My sister was graduating from high school and the dancing was part of the Native Grad. The Native Grad was a city-wide ceremony for all graduating Aboriginal high school students. Recently when I was talking to my parents, they talked about how they were so proud that I volunteered to dance at my sister's Native Grad. I don't

remember ever volunteering and I can't imagine it was something I felt comfortable doing. I was most likely responding to pressure from my mom because she wanted me to take part in things like that. I wanted to make her proud. Regardless, I believe I was asked to dance in one of those situations where it wouldn't have been ok to refuse. As when I was younger, I was scared, but the context was somewhat different this time. I was older, and for some reason it felt like I had more support.

We spent the day before practicing in the big house. I remember walking in with my dad that day and being greeted by one of the elders who was leading the ceremony. This man, a family friend of my parents, acknowledged me and said I was welcome there. He spoke to me about one of my white Lansdowne relatives from Kingcome who used to take part in the First Nations culture. My father explained to me that this relative took part in ceremonies and that he could speak the local language.

I appreciated being welcomed in this way and I was impressed that one of my white relatives had actively taken part in cultural activities. Being welcomed helped to relieve some of my anxiety about performing in the ceremony. I also thought that it was ironic that I was acknowledged based on the actions of someone from the white side of my family. In a way I felt welcomed as a white person and I was honoured to take part. It feels so strange still to be writing these words. It seems so twisted.

A First Nations man who I looked up to and respected spent time with me giving me pointers on how to dance. He showed me how to move my arms and

how to keep the beat with my feet. He was very encouraging. It felt good to have support. Even though I was still scared and doubted that someone like me should be allowed to participate, the support I received from this man helped to increase my confidence.

On the afternoon of the performance, the Big House was busy with activity. The cooks were reading the salmon and stew that was to be served, someone was checking the wood for the fire pit, and people were coming and going on various errands. Tourists in Tilly hats with big expensive cameras hanging around their necks kept sticking their heads into the big house to see what was going on. They were invited to come view the performance. I'm sure they couldn't believe their luck on having stumbled on this authentic First Nations experience and I wondered how they would view me from their seats in the bleachers. "I wonder why they have that white boy dancing, he looks so nervous and out of place".

As evening came I once again found myself in the back of a Big House wearing borrowed cedar bark regalia and waiting to be ushered onto the floor. I could have been seven years old again in all of my fear, but I had been invited, I was responsible, I told myself to get over it. When I took the floor my bare skin felt cold and clammy but it was still trying to sweat. The rich smoke rolled up past cedar beams escaping into a fading twilight. Trying to ignore the faces in the bleachers who were witness to me, I danced. It was hell, 'Am I doing this right', 'I shouldn't be doing this', 'I feel out of place'. My arms moved and my legs kept the beat as instructed. I danced, but it felt like I was on auto pilot. I didn't quit, I

did what was expected of me and finally it was over. I could go back to being a spectator and enjoy the rest of the evening from a safe distance in the bleachers.

It is painful for me to describe my inability to enjoy or celebrate the opportunity and honour I had been given to take part in this cultural event. This is something that I have always wanted and I acknowledge how much I hold myself back. I wanted to take part, I wanted to celebrate and be a part of, but I still felt so unworthy.

### **Indian Dancing in Bella Bella**

The last time I danced I was nineteen, maybe twenty years old. A high ranking member from my mom's family was having a feast in Bella Bella and I was asked to dance with him and his sons. Once again, despite my mounting apprehension, it was an honour, which could not be declined. I would be dancing in my own button blanket, one that my mother had sewn for me for my high school graduation. During this particular dance we would stay in one place rather moving in a circle. Feet bouncing to the drum, knees bent, arms on hips, head bowing and bending with the music. I was instructed that my head should be moving in such a way as to scatter the eagle down that was lodged in my headdress. I was afraid that my headdress was going to fall off.

I remember taking the floor with apprehension, but in a way that felt different than previous times I had danced. I was still nervous, I was afraid of making a mistake and not doing it right, but I had been invited to stand and dance with my family. I still didn't feel like I was connected, to my culture or my

community, I was still as white skinned as ever. But an invitation to dance with the head of the family made me feel like I belonged somewhere.

This past year I move to Bella Bella with my wife and our two children. During our first month we were invited to a feast in the community hall. Food was served, we sat with extended family, and we listened to the speakers, and enjoyed watching the dancers. Near the end of the feast all of the young children were asked to come forward with their regalia and dance. I watched my three year old son get swept up by my parents and taken to the front of the hall. I fought back a voice in my head that said to me, "he's too little, he doesn't have regalia, and he doesn't know what's going on."

One of my aunties took him behind the curtain with the other children. I didn't want to put my fears, my shame, or my insecurities onto my son. I wanted to let him go, I wanted him to take part. If I'm being honest I also didn't want to be seen holding him back, keeping my white son out of the dancing in front of community members. So I sat with my wife and watched my parents take him away.

The music started, and all of the children came out onto the floor. There was my son, not quite three years old, holding hands with his cousin who is the same age. They looked so cute and I was proud of him. Then it happened, my wife saw it first. "Babe, he's not sure", "Babe, he's not ok, go get him".

I sat there frozen, I didn't move. I watched him break off into the middle of the circle, looking around for a familiar face. I watched him start to cry, I saw him trying to get through the ring of dancing kids and run off of the floor. I watched

my parents scoop him up and comfort him, I watched my wife get out of her seat to go to him. I sat in my seat and did not move.

I can't imagine many situations where I would leave my son like that. It all happened quickly and I knew that my parents could get to him before me. Still, I know I need to address the insecurities I feel about my connection to my First Nations identity. I don't want to pass these feelings on to my children. I need to address this shame I feel about not being good enough. If my children are to understand where they come from, I need to find out where I come from. I am not going to put this on them.

### **Fashion Show**

I am fifteen or sixteen years old and I have somehow been coerced by my mom to take part in a First Nations fashion show at the Empress hotel in my hometown of Victoria. Coerced is a strong word and I can't remember the discussion that led me to agreeing to do it. I imagine that most of the argument was actually in my head and probably not voiced. "People will wonder why I am in a First Nations fashion show". They will be thinking "Couldn't they get any real Indians to model?" "The organizers would prefer not to have you but they don't want to offend your mom." "If you don't do it you will let mom down. You don't want her to think you aren't proud of being First Nations". These are the thoughts I would not have felt comfortable telling her.

It isn't fair to suggest that this memory is entirely about being publicly viewed as First Nations. Some of it reflects an awkward teenage kid with bad

acne who would not feel comfortable on any catwalk. But I do know that the part that stands out most to me in this memory is how terrified I was of being witnessed as a “First Nations” model.

I don’t remember many details of the fashion show. I see myself standing behind white curtains on a white platform. I can’t recall exactly what I am wearing. Perhaps it is either a traditional black and red button blanket or a tunic with a modern design. I remember the feelings more clearly. I feel hot, anxious terror. I am on the verge of sweating. I see no faces in the crowd, and I can’t recall anything said to me before or after I went out onto the catwalk. All I am left with when I reflect on my experience of volunteering to take part in a First Nations fashion show is a deep sense of embarrassment. A self imposed felt sense of not belonging. It makes me uncomfortable now to think of what people who witnessed me might have been thinking. I feel judged. I am surprised by my own insecurity.

### **Rediscovery Commercial**

I am fifteen years old. I have been asked to travel to Vancouver to take part in a commercial that will advertise Rediscovery camps in British Columbia. I am told that the commercial will be shown on the Knowledge Network. I do not want to be in this commercial. I have agreed out of a sense of responsibility, but I can’t figure out why they would want someone like me. Didn’t anyone mention that I look white?

The Rediscovery program offers both Native and non-Native youth authentically Indigenous camping experiences in sites across British Columbia and Internationally. I had the opportunity to attend the Heiltsuk rediscovery program as a participant in 1991. It was one of the best experiences of my life.

My experiences at the Heiltsuk Rediscovery camp represent the only meaningful connections I have made toward understanding and learning my own Heiltsuk culture. They are treasured experiences for me that have impacted my development as a human being. I still feel a strong sense of loyalty to the Rediscovery program and I would generally be willing to involve myself in any way that might influence other kids to attend a rediscovery camp. But I did not want to be seen in a commercial. I said no. Why would they want me?

I was told the director was looking for someone who possessed authentic experiences in a Rediscovery camp. My experiences were authentic, but I did not want to do it. I should clarify that it wasn't that I didn't want to do it but I thought I shouldn't do it. I was worried that I was not dark enough to be the authentic person they were looking for. Why hadn't anyone considered this? You can't stop and explain to people in the middle of a commercial that the white looking boy's mom is actually First Nations. He is "authentic".

The person asking me to be in the commercial was a family friend and they explained to me that something had fallen through and that they needed someone who was able to get to Vancouver right away. I felt torn. I didn't want to say no to a friend. I wanted to support a program that I really believed in, but I was sure that I was not Indian enough to star in this commercial. Duty

outweighed doubt and I found myself saying yes despite my fears that I was not what they were looking for. I could say yes as a favour, as a last minute replacement, but I could not believe they would be happy with how I looked. I made the assumption that whoever was in charge of the commercial was looking for a First Nations participant from a local rediscovery camp. My fear was that when it was confirmed that a local boy Heiltsuk was willing to do the commercial it would be assumed that I looked the part. I knew that when I arrived for the commercial and they saw me, they would be surprised and disappointed.

When I think about it now, I don't even know if the producers of the commercial had requested someone white or First Nations. In all probability it did not matter. Rediscovery camps are not exclusively for Indigenous peoples. The founder of Rediscovery, Thom Henley is actually a white man from Lansing, Michigan. This didn't stop the stories I made up about it in my head.

I arrived in Vancouver for the commercial, which was shot at the UBC museum of Anthropology. The filming crew were all friendly and no one seemed to openly object to me being in the commercial. I was waiting for it. I was waiting for the director to shout at someone, "I thought you said we got a Native kid?" But he didn't. No one seemed to make any note of how I looked. I still felt apprehensive.

Looking at the totem poles and trees outside the museum, which were to be the backdrop of the commercial, I made another observation. There were no visibly Aboriginal people on the commercial crew. The director looked white, the camera man looked white, and all of the production assistants looked white. I

began to question what I was a part of. This is a commercial for a program founded by a white man, shot with a white film crew who are using me as their “authentic” actor. I did not feel right to be filmed in front of those totem poles. It did not feel authentic. I had been asked to come here by a First Nations friend, but what was I being asked to represent?

The commercial shoot began and I could tell they were going for a spiritual awakening type of a feel. Nature and harmony, connection to Mother Earth. While I believe that these types of experiences can be gained in an actual Rediscovery camp, the commercial felt very contrived. We were in a city pretending to be in Nature. I am from the city, are we pretending I’m an Indian?

People are buzzing around me using different equipment to check the quality of light. The director is asking me to raise my hands towards the sun. I am standing in front of a totem pole behind the museum. We move and I am asked to raise my hands the same way in front of Gage towers. The theme is a cliché. Concrete to forest, city to nature, watch the boy as he is transformed by returning to the ways of the past. I do not like the ways this feels. I do not like how I am being used. I do not want to be a part of this story that we are creating together. I am 15 years old and I have already heard this lie too many times. I say nothing. When it is over they take me to the student union building and buy me a piece of pizza. I have never seen the commercial.

## **My Button Blanket**

My mother made me a button blanket for my high school graduation. She tells me that this is what I asked for when she asked me what I wanted for a graduation present. I don't remember this. All I seem to be able to feel right now is her pushing me to claim who I am. Not for her sake but for mine. These expectations were rarely stated but I felt them. It's funny what I don't remember. No, it is not funny, it is important. I must remember to search for truth and the truth is I have wanted to be a part of my culture. The truth is I have always wanted my place. Now I can see how I would have asked for a button blanket and I feel sad that this shame I feel prevents me from celebrating and enjoying who I am.

My button blanket is made of black and red felt. These are the traditional colours of the Heiltsuk. The design depicts an eagle holding a whale, which is the crest of the Chief of our family through my mother's biological dad. My mother added little white fish buttons down the sides of my button blanket. This acknowledges our ties to the salmon. There is also a small gold crucifix at the top which sits on a patch of Scottish clan tartan. The cross and the tartan are to acknowledge our ties to Christianity and to my adopted grandparents. But let me back up....

The salmon and the cross are symbols that are woven into the complex history of many First Nations peoples on our Coast. These histories are cultural and personal. I will explain my relationships to salmon and Christianity and how they represent some of the complexities of my identity, but first, let me get back

to how I use “voice”. I would feel uncomfortable speaking of the Heiltsuk as “we”, “our”, or “my” people. They are “my” people, but I will not use a possessive voice to educate or inform you, it is not my place to do so. I would fear, as I constantly do, that I would be overstepping my bounds, presenting things as they are not. When I speak of salmon and the cross and I say “our” and “we”, I refer to my immediate family as opposed to me speaking on behalf of the Heiltsuk people.

“Our ties to the salmon” refers to my immediate family and our connection to the ocean that has sustained our livelihood as commercial fishermen. My grandfather, my dad’s father, was a commercial fisherman. My father, my uncle, my cousins and many relatives on my father’s side have all been fishermen. My brother, my sister, my mother and I have all worked as commercial fishermen. I am no longer a fisherman, but it is still a part of who I am. I have a strong connection to the ocean that my children will probably never experience for themselves. This makes me sad. Commercial fishing is part of my culture, it is part of my identity that is interwoven between my First Nations and white selves.

To point out my connection to the ocean through my father’s family does not tell the entire story. It may not even be the most significant story. Don’t ask me to choose. My mother’s grandfather and her father were also commercial fishermen. My great-grandfather was a fisherman who also built fishing boats. His father, my great, great-grandfather was a Norwegian immigrant who worked for a cannery in Port Essington. I wonder if my Norwegian ancestors made their living on the sea? Many of my relatives and friends from Bella Bella have worked and still make their livings from the ocean. But this connection is different. Here

we have to move past the culture of commercial fishing and into the cultural of the Heiltsuk people. There is a connection to the salmon, to the herring, to the ocean that is deeply imbedded into the culture of who the Heiltsuk people are. This isn't something I have allowed myself to claim but it is something I feel. The more I think about it, the salmon buttons on my blanket are an excellent representation of the complexities of my identity. Let me provide an example to explain this.

I have been on the fishing grounds during a commercial herring fishery that was being protested by the Heiltsuk people. Members of the Heiltsuk community were out in force demanding that the seine boat fleet leave the traditional waters of the Heiltsuk people. Who do the herring belong to? What about my history? What about MY history? Am I a commercial fisherman or am I a Heiltsuk? This is my family, this is my father, this is our seine boat. These are my people... Who am I? This is complicated. This is my world. I am not alone in my position. There are Heiltsuk protestors on the grounds. There are also Heiltsuk commercial fisherman on a few of the seine boats. There are seine boats owned and run by First Nations skippers with First Nations crews. Is our connection to the ocean commercial or cultural? The crews I have fished with have always been First Nations. What do you do when this is how you make your living?

In a town hall meeting before the fishery and protest I heard a First Nations commercial fisherman from another territory speak. "Our people are hurting too." Is this a First Nations issue or a fishing issue? It is both. A Chief

from another community who was working on one of the seine boats reminded the community members of the historical connections between the Heiltsuk and his people. Is he speaking as a commercial fisherman or a Chief? He is both. This is hard. I listened to these men speak and then watched the Heiltsuk band member who was running the meeting drop a gavel and proclaim, "The herring fishery is closed". This hurts.

If you asked me to choose I would side with the Heiltsuk people. This to me is the greater good. But I don't have to worry about making a living from the ocean anymore like the other commercial fisherman, so how valid can my claims be? I would rather you ask me not to choose. I don't want to make a choice, the answers are usually not clear. I only mention this to let you know that my connection to the ocean is important, it is complicated and it hurts. This is what I see represented in the little white salmon buttons sewn to my blanket. Now on to the cross.

The cross that is sewn to the neck of my button blanket represents "Our ties to Christianity". The cross reflects the faith of my parents. This is the faith of my First Nations mother. It is a faith I cautiously share. A faith I understand, or don't understand in my own way. It is a faith in which I am constantly watching and waiting to see if Christianity will be wielded as a weapon. I have developed strict rules. You must not use my faith to condemn, to judge, to take, to steal. I am hyper alert and reminded of what was taken from Aboriginal peoples in the name of God. It is hard to let go of. You must accept people as they are before you can pray for them. All of them. I have zero tolerance for judgment in my

judgment. I have strict rules. There is no price of admission in my faith. My faith reminds me that Jesus loved, not that he died. My faith will not turn anyone away. My faith is quiet and personal. My faith is not a weapon and if you use it to judge anyone then we do not share the same faith. I am cautious in my faith and I recognized a few years ago how my strict rules about other people were costing me my own relationship with God. I built my rules based on my own judgments but it is still hard to know who to trust. So I tip-toe cautiously, quietly in my faith, wanting to learn, but often I can't shake what has been destroyed in the name of God. This is the cross on the back of my button blanket.

This cross also reflects a connection to my mother's adopted parents. These are my grandparents who still send me birthday cards and letters. They have taken me on trips, invited me into their home and their lives; they have shared their love and wisdom with me. They have been family in the way that my mother's biological parents have never been but don't ask me to make that comparison. I love them for being my grandparents. But I need to be very clear when I say that they did not save my mother, she saved herself. This has never been a feel good story where the little Indian girl gets rescued by the caring white Christian folk who provide her with a chance for a better life. There are layers and layers of complexities which tug at the set of strings that weave the fabric of who I am. I am grateful for my grandparents love. I wear my grandparents' Scottish tartan across the shoulders on my button blanket.

This is my button blanket. This is part of who I am. The eagle and the whale, the salmon buttons and a Scottish tartan with a cross.

## **High School Graduation**

I wore my button blanket to high school graduation in 1995. I went to high school in a wealthy and predominantly white neighbourhood. Aside from the usual complications of teenage awkwardness I had no problems fitting into the culture of my high school. I had good friends, played sports did enough in my classes to get by. I didn't think a lot about my identity in high school. There was a part of my life, my connection to fishing and the communities of the Coast that seemed so removed from my life in high school. Even my closest friends, people I am still close with today have no real understanding of my connection to being First Nations. They know I am First Nations, but they do not know what it means to me. I wonder how I am portraying myself to you as I write this? I have never changed how I felt about being First Nations. I am proud of it. I have only denied myself once when I was a boy. I did not like how it felt and I have not done it since but this is another story.

I wore my button blanket to high school graduation. This was an act of pride, this was a way I could acknowledge my family in Bella Bella and honour my mother. I am thinking about the difference between being visible wearing my button blanket at graduation and my experiences of Indian dancing. In both circumstances I was intentionally making myself visible but I guess in high school I really wanted my peers to know this part of myself that was not seen. Writing this makes me reflect on how much control other people have on how I am seen. If I am seen as white, if I am seen as Aboriginal, if I am seen as in between. I had my chance in high school to let my peers see a different side of who I am.

On graduation day I remember getting out of the car with my girlfriend in front of the building where the ceremony was being held. It was a warm sunny day at the end of June and all of the students and families were congregating outside on a set of stairs. It was exciting, all of the boys in rented tuxedos including me. I was wearing one with a red bow tie and cummerbund to match my blanket. When we got out of the car I put my button blanket on.

I felt proud wearing my button blanket on those stairs. Many of my friends knew that I was part First Nations but I don't think people really understand how important it is to me. It was not something seen. When I wore my button blanket to high school graduation I felt proud because my culture was seen. It wasn't a novelty; I wasn't showing off, I didn't feel I was using my culture to get attention. It felt respectful.

When the ceremony started we were directed into the wings of the auditorium and instructed to wait until our names were called. Students were introduced by their home room teachers who provided some information or an anecdote about each student as they crossed the stage.

I remember my name being called. As I walked up the stairs and across the stage ready to receive my diploma from the principal, I can clearly remember the words of my home room teacher who was introducing me. "Ok, fashion show time". Of course it was a comment meant with respect and appreciation of my button blanket, but in that moment I felt I was reduced to a novelty. I did not wear my button blanket to make a fashion statement. I wasn't looking for attention. I wore my blanket to honour my mother and my family. Thinking back

maybe it was my fault. I had given my homeroom teacher information about my button blanket. A note with the name of my family crest and the name of my band. These details were as important to me as wearing it. I had very little access to my First Nations roots growing up and graduating from a predominantly white high school. This was a way for me to be able to bring in a part of my life, a part of my self, into the world I lived in. And now it was “fashion show time”. I felt angry, and patronized. During the 30 seconds between receiving my diploma and taking my seat, my teacher spoke about my button blanket. I had been in her home room since grade eight, but she gave no cute anecdotes revealing the type of person or student that I was. I was co-president of the student council, played on almost every sports team, but no mention of my interests or activities. Instead, it was fashion show time. She read the note I had given her about my button blanket word for word and that was it. In thirty seconds I felt that who I was as a high school student had been reconstructed. I was proud to wear my blanket, but I felt like it had taken over my identity. It did not feel authentic in that context. The control of who I am was taken out of my hands when I choose to make myself visible. This is one way I have learned to be cautious of how I represent myself.

Wearing my button blanket had impacted how people saw me. Here are two comments taken from my high school yearbook, which were written by fellow students a few days after our graduation ceremony. “Rob, *good luck in the future, I love your cape*”. “Robb, *continue pot latching – Keep the wealth in the family*”. It always seems to come back to racism or reverence. I felt so

misrepresented. This is not why I wore my button blanket to high school graduation. You do not know me and you do not know how I feel. Who gave you permission to “joke” with me like this? I feel shame to admit that I gave people permission to joke with me like that. It just never seemed worth it to say anything. But now, when I am here in this place, I need you to know that I am more than a racist joke or a fashion show. These comments in my yearbook reflect many of my experiences of being seen as First Nations through the eyes of white people. Admiration of culture as aesthetic, and joking veiled racism. I don't mean to be harsh to those who appreciate Aboriginal culture, but my experience is that so often there is no middle ground.

### **First Nations Student 101**

When I engage in the role of student, I become vulnerable to interpretations of my ethnicity from others. As a First Nations student in the classroom I have experienced a myriad of judgments ranging from subtle disdain and racism to outpourings of admiration and respect. When I say that I have experienced judgment, it is not to say that these judgments have always necessarily been directed at me personally, but if the topic is First Nations related, I have no choice but to take a personal stake in what is being said. In no other context as a student does any topic of discussion automatically become so personalized for me. Only as a First Nations student do I feel this intense pressure to inform, defend and educate. I feel I have a sense of duty and responsibility for how I represent First Nations people as a First Nations student.

I often find myself in a unique position of determining how and when I identify myself as a First Nations student. I constantly have to ask myself if it is appropriate to speak from a First Nations location? How am I representing myself? Will what I say about my experience of being First Nations be used by non-Aboriginals in a way that is harmful or discriminating to other Aboriginals? Defining myself as a First Nations student can create pressure and cause internal struggle. Fellow students or an instructor, may request my "First Nations' perspective", but for the most part I feel it is a choice I make on my own. If the topic is general, I am one of many students in the classroom. I may have knowledge or personal experience of any given topic that I choose or choose not to add to. As soon as it is a First Nations topic it becomes personal and I become vulnerable. Do I self disclose my background? And if so will this elevate my status or diminish it? How will it impact others? Pressure. Losing that precious security of sameness, shouldering the weight of otherness. I can speak to the oppression of otherness with passion, truly from deep in my heart. But I feel shame about my own lack of real connection to my First Nations identity. I don't feel like it is appropriate for me to speak with any authority. Am I First Nations or am I a representation of a First Nations person that can walk away at the end of the day? How would my experience measure in comparison to other Aboriginal students? Would they judge me if they were in the same classroom. Would they tell me not to speak or not to call myself a First Nations student because no one as white as me should ever try to pass themselves off as an Indian?

Will non-Aboriginal students and teachers judge me? Will they use me to legitimize their own position, or to appease their own guilt? Do they prefer having someone white like me as a First Nations student? Is this why no one ever seems to challenge what I say?

These are the kinds of questions I ask myself when I am located as a First Nations student. I feel so much pressure of how I represent myself. Here is a story about the first time I became “The” First Nations student.

I was ten years old when my parents decided to move our family from Alert Bay to Victoria. This transition from a small coastal fishing community to the City was difficult for me in many ways. I was actually born in Victoria and we lived there until I was six, but despite only living in Alert bay for 3 ½ years it was very much my hometown. On reflection I still consider Alert Bay my hometown in many ways. It is the birthplace of my father and my grandfather; it is one of the main sources of my connection to the coast of British Columbia. Alert Bay, for good and bad, is integral to my identity formation in a way that a community can be more about who you are than where you from.

My memories of Alert Bay are of playing in the forest and running along the rocky beaches. I had many close friends growing up there. I remember going out jigging for cod, community festivals and soccer tournaments. I remember feeling a sense of pride and status knowing that my father was a successful salmon and herring fisherman. I remember trips on the boat and sitting in the net loft, watching the crew mend the net on a hot summer day.

As I am turning these memories to written story, I realize that I am painting

too idealistic a picture of my life growing up in Alert Bay. It's not intentional in a dishonest way. My intention is to glean some essence of my experience in Alert Bay in order to emphasize the culture shock I experienced in the fourth grade when we moved to Victoria. What you as the reader really need to know is that when I began grade four in the city, I was behind academically and my whole world had been changed. My community status, and the feelings of inclusion and safety that went with it, were lost and I was searching for how to re-create myself. But maybe I should provide some of the less the idyllic stuff for context about my transition from a small town to the city.

In Alert Bay I remember my parents fighting, screaming, my mom raging, my dad being away fishing. I remember walking into the living room late at night, asking my mom if she was drunk, listening to her telling me she wasn't, and wanting to believe her. I remember watching my dad naked in the kitchen, early in the morning, making Spanish coffee, and stumbling back to bed. I remember my mom finding my brother's hash, and the hole he punched in the wall when he left. He would eventually move back to Vancouver and years would go by before I would see him again. My parents were struggling to stay together and they tried to run away from themselves and moved us to Victoria for a fresh start.

Maybe the hardest part for me in this transition to the city was how far behind I was in school. I remember that first year in grade four sitting at my desk alone after all the other kids had finished a math test and I was crying because I couldn't answer any of the questions. I could not answer one question on the

test. I was put in learning assistance and It was embarrassing having to leave class with the other “slow kids” to get the extra help. There was a challenge program that the smart and creative kids got to leave class to go to. The difference between these groups was not lost on me. It was a hard transition. I am aware that I have written a lot of back story about how difficult a transition it was for me to move to Victoria. I need to own that I am still trying to explain, trying to justify, the reason for flaunting my status as a First Nations student way back in grade four. Even in grade four it didn't feel right, but I just wanted to be good at something, to know about something so I took it, and I am still ashamed. Let me explain.

In grade four we studied the Native Indians of British Columbia as part of the social studies curriculum in the second half of the school year. I remember activities involved making Indian masks out of paper mache and we were tested on things like how the Coastal Indians made dug out canoes. By this part of the school year I was starting to catch up in my class and I had made friends but I was still desperate to fit in.

I remember being so excited that we were studying Indians because my mom was Indian. I was half Indian and this was a topic that I finally knew more about than anyone in my class. I remember once my teacher intentionally made a joke out of how he pronounced the name of one of the First Nations groups we were discussing. All of the kids in our class were laughing. I knew how to properly say the name and I corrected the teacher. He was no longer able to make that joke. It made me feel powerful. I brought carved masks from home

for show and tell and I was willing to let the whole class know that I was proud to be First Nations. Finally I wasn't the kid who was behind, I was the expert. I cringe to think of how I must have showed off. That expert status was given to me in grade four social studies without a fight but what I am ashamed of was how badly I wanted it. There was no resistance, I was the closet thing to an Indian that they had and I was given free reign. I took it but it didn't feel right. I felt patronized. The reality was this was just another subject in a grade four curriculum and there were lots of things I didn't know about First Nations people of British Columbia. Especially the things they were teaching in a grade four class about Indians in 1986. But I wanted to be the expert and I felt pressure to know all of the answers. I remember the teacher teasing me after a test in front of our class because of an incorrect answer I had given about how Indians traditionally made canoes. I was not singled out, this teacher made fun of all of his students, but I felt like I should have known all of the answers. And when I didn't know something I felt for the first time the weight of an underlying expectation that I should have. This was an early experience of struggling with how to represent myself as a student.

This memory, my experience of being the First Nations expert in grade four still feels yucky to me. I was so desperate and needy and I wanted to be accepted so badly that I was willing to play this role. I have been much more cautious since.

In my first year in college, I took a history course about British Columbia. The first class was about First Nations people. It was like being in grade four

again. I thought the information was inappropriate and I found the instructor patronizing. At the end of the class I approached her and for some reason I told her that I was First Nations. I felt the need to qualify myself in some way. She put her hand on my shoulder, looked me in the eyes and said, "Good, you are so needed." I turned and walked away and immediately dropped her course. Through the years I have grown increasingly cautious about when and where I choose to identify myself as a First Nations student. It is a political position, an emotional position, and it impacts my identity.

### **Subtle Judgment**

"Oh you'll get in, you have nothing to worry about." "You are so lucky because you have so many opportunities." "Don't they keep a number of seats open for First Nations students"? "You get funding don't you? There must be a lot of funding for someone in your position."

(Tell me what you're really thinking)

I am talking with a fellow student. We have become friends. We are talking about the things students talk about. Grades, what it takes to get into the doctorate program, which professors might be helpful to work with. We share fears, concerns, and hopes. I have doubts; that I have what it takes. When I share these doubts, she replies "I am pretty sure you will not have a problem getting in, Robb." She gives me a knowing smile. Why am I not allowed to be

doubtful? Why does she always bring up how lucky I am, how she wishes she had a concentration like I do with Aboriginal research? We are two students talking about fears and hopes and once again I have become an “othered” student. Whether it is special, different, lucky, unique, important, privileged, vital, or necessary, I am other. Regardless of how she means it, regardless of how nice she is, or the fact that we are friends, I hear her subtle judgment.

### **What Keeps Me From Writing**

My writing journey has been difficult so far. I have spent months waiting to write this thesis. I have wasted hour after hour thinking about how to write it without ever typing a word. I sit down at the computer, open a document, stare at the computer screen, stand up and walk away.

Now that I am writing, I tell myself almost everyday that I can't do it, that I won't write this thesis. I tell myself that I shouldn't write this thesis. I tell myself that writing these stories is pathetic. I know what this voice is and I don't want it to win. So I will give this voice one story, give it control for a page or two and then I will keep going.

*Your thesis is complete bullshit. It is not a real thesis. All you have done is open up a can of worms, your personal worms, and randomly scattered them through these pages. You make it sound like you want to be an Indian. You make it sound like things have been hard for you because you aren't an Indian. This is ridiculous. You don't want to be an Indian, all you care about is getting this done. You are only trying to justify what you want to do in your career. You*

*are trying to justify being a First Nations student and it is pathetic. You are trying to write a place for yourself that might fool someone in the university but it isn't going to fool an Indian person. You have never suffered or struggled. You have had a spoiled easy life with all kinds of advantages. You do not feel Native because you aren't. Anyone who is Native will think this whole thing is bullshit, and they will be right. What do you know about being Indian? You grew up in the city, you have white friends, a white wife, white children, but now suddenly you think you can try to write your way into being more First Nations. You are just like every other half-breed taking advantage in the university. You are wasting your time. I can not believe how self-indulgent you are. You have every advantage of being white yet you whine in here about wanting to be Indian. You are trying to tell them that it is hard to be put in a position of having to represent First Nations people as a student, how it is hard to take the money when you don't feel like it was meant for you, but you always take the money. Sixteen thousand dollars in grant money for a thesis you could not even write. Instead you write this garbage. Oh it's so hard, taking the money and fucking up, poor me. You can't be serious. You better hope no one ever reads this thesis. They will see how fake and phony you are. There is no point in trying to belong. Quit being so weak and go and get on with your life. You pretend you are meek and shy but really you are just trying to justify your way in, write your way, cheat your way in...but they will all know. You have had thirty-one years to get involved with your culture and you haven't done shit. Why now? You are gutless. Don't bother*

*writing this, you'll never finish it anyway. You make me sick when you prostitute yourself.*

### **The Drunken Indian**

I am in grade five, living in Victoria, playing in the park with two of my friends. After a full school year in the city, I am still trying to fit in. I want to be cool and popular like every kid wants to be cool and popular. I am writing this part about wanting to fit in because I am trying to rationalize what I did. I still feel so guilty. I made a joke about drunken Indians. Even now I feel sick writing it. I want to hide it, I want to change the title, I want to delete this story.

I was making up a song to the tune of jingle bells and suddenly it just came out of my mouth. One friend turned to me and said "But I thought you were an Indian, Robb?" and I said, "Yeah, I'm a racist Indian". And then they laughed at my joke.

Why did I say it? I don't know what came over me. I know I wanted to fit in, but this was unprovoked. It came out of my mouth and I felt sick about it. Was I trying to decide who I was? After saying it I knew how wrong it felt in my body and I have never said anything like that again.

The summer before my parents had taken us on a family trip through California and Arizona. I remember standing with my mom in a parking lot somewhere in Arizona. Or maybe we were in the car looking out into the parking lot. I remember it being very hot. I am picturing the parking lot paved with black doughy asphalt. There was an old Indian man sitting near the front door of a convenience store. I remember his leathery wrinkled face, I remember him

slumped up against the wall. I remember my mom saying out loud but not to me  
“It doesn’t matter where you go in the world, there is always a drunken Indian”.  
I knew from the way she said it that it wasn’t a judgment. She said it with great  
sadness. I felt her deep sense of pain. I knew this pain was her own and I knew  
the world was unfair and I knew where my mom stood. I watched her go to him  
to give him some money.

I knew what my mom meant when she said it and I held on to it. I took  
what she said, and I used it. I used what she said about drunken Indians in order  
to get a cheap laugh and impress my new friends and I hated myself for it. I felt  
disgusted with myself. I can’t tell you the reason I said it, I only know it came out  
of my mouth. But I knew after I said it that I would never say it again, I knew that  
if a day came where someone drew a line in the sand and asked me to choose a  
side that I would be standing with my mom. I swore to myself that I would never  
betray her again. I made a terrible mistake that day and it still makes me feel  
sick to acknowledge it. This guilt is still inside of me and I want to let it go.

### **I’m Only Joking**

“Hey Robbie, do you buy H. Groceries with your status card?” A couple of  
people laugh. “No”, I reply. I want to rip his face off. This friend of a friend. He  
is standing there in my own house directly insulting me. It’s after a night at the  
bar and everyone is drunk, including me. I could tell him what he just said is not  
ok with me, I could ask him to leave my house, I could rip his face off. I turn and  
walk away, I will never acknowledge him again, and he is not my friend.

“Robb, I bought this boat down in Florida and sold it up here at a profit. Is it true you don’t pay tax across the border? We could go into business together.” This time he is a friend and he is ignorant. He will never know how reproachable I find what he has just said. First Nations peoples are not exempt from all tax laws. Those exemptions that do exist are constantly being challenged and eroded. To me the message is clear, First Nations people get special treatment and how we can partner up to take advantage of it. Maybe this is only the mind of business man seeing the angles and knowing how to make money. But he doesn’t understand the history, the judgment, the persecution that comes with “special rights” and he doesn’t know he has hurt me. We will remain friends. I will gently try to explain to him my position without pushing it too far.

“You ever count Indians on the bridge in Duncan? I swear to God ever time you drive across there is at least one on there”. This person doesn’t know me. I enjoy watching the people who do know me in these situations. The awkwardness, the embarrassed half apology when one of them sticks up for me and tells this person I am First Nations. “Sorry man, I didn’t know”...I do.

I have scored two tries in a rugby game in high school. My coach later congratulates me for using my “drunken Indian side-step”. Did I give him permission to talk to me like this? What did I do? Should I feel guilty because I let other guys on the rugby team call me “North of 60”? There is a context to this story.

We were playing a rugby game earlier that season against a team from Courtenay. A player on the other team called a player on our team a “gook”.

The effect was that our team got into a fight defending our player. We rallied around him. After this game one of the guys on our team started calling a play designed for that player “the gook crash”. I was the other player who the play was used for. When it was my turn he called it “the north of 60 crash”. I was not offended. In one of those twisted ways where joking becomes a form of support, I felt like this joke was permissible.

The coach was aware of the context of the joking but what he said to me went beyond joking. It is one example of racism I have often experienced as a veiled joke. The expectation is on me that the person giving the joke has some insider status with me which makes it ok to make reference to my ethnicity. When my coach said this to me I probably smiled at him and said nothing. As a grown man I have not forgotten what he said and I no longer respect him. I don't want to be responsible for giving people I know permission to be racist.

### **Stag Party**

I have been invited to a friend's stag party. We travel in a rented R.V. across the border. The R.V. doesn't take long to smell of beer, fast food and sweat. Not many of my friends have been married yet so a stag party is new and exciting to me and I am happy to be along. Men revert back to being boys and I enjoy the fun. I share some mutual friends with the guy getting married and I am happy they are along on the stag. There are many guys I have never met. The trip is full of posturing, goofing off, macho energy, and I laugh along. It has been over six years since the last time I had a drink and even though I no longer make

myself part of the spectacle, I am not offended. I am happy to be there for my friend. We make stops for burgers, we stop for beers, we stop at a gun range. This stag party is what I would imagine a stag party to be. In the afternoon, we arrive at the cabin where we will be spending the next couple of days. Everyone hauls in their gear, claims their territory and settles in. The guy who organized the stag has hired a stripper for tonight's entertainment. We cook barbeque, guys explore around the cabin, guys continue to drink.

Of the few times I have been present when someone has hired a stripper, the anticipation of what is supposed to happen has always overshadowed what actually takes place. I have watched disinterested men, acting as they think they are supposed to act. Some sit quietly, some hoot and holler. At stag parties, I have watched the groom-to-be embarrassingly go through the motions with the stripper, doing his best to put on a good show for his buddies. More than finding it offensive or morally reproachable, I have found watching a woman dancing naked in front of private groups of men awkward.

We are sitting in the living room in a circle. The anticipation is building to a crescendo as we wait for the stripper to arrive. The doorbell rings. The guy who hired her meets her at the door and walks her up the stairs. The event becomes real, fantasy crumbles, and I can feel the disappointment in the room. She is First Nations. Maybe it wouldn't matter if she were prettier; if her front teeth weren't rotten and missing. My experience working on Vancouver's downtown east side lead me to believe her teeth are damaged from smoking crack. She looks like a junkie. I hear collective snickering in the room, heads

shaking in disappointment. More than disappointment, anger. They have been cheated. It's too late to get anyone else and it's her fault. She feels it too. The energy has become hostile. I anticipate the comments that will follow. How her ethnicity will first become implicated, and then determined, as the reason for her failure to meet their expectations. I am thinking this while I am sucking in the feelings of the room and then one of my friends looks at me. He knows I am First Nations.

I can see two things in his eyes, compassion and embarrassment. Embarrassment for me and embarrassment on my behalf. He asks me if I'm okay. I tell him that I'm fine. I want to leave but I don't. What would that say about me if I left? Would I leave if she wasn't First Nations? I want to ask him why I am somehow implicated, just because I am First Nations and she is First Nations? I want to tell him that being First Nations has nothing to do with what is happening here. But I can't help being drawn in. Implicated. I am witness to these men, and their growing hostility, and I know it won't be long before what goes unsaid will be stated by someone. "We", this group of collected friends and strangers, have been cheated and wronged. "We", demand satisfaction. I am not consulted if I want to be a part of this group or not. It is assumed. Perhaps if I were darker, or if more of these strangers knew me, knew my background, they would feel a need to caution themselves.

No one is satisfied, but she isn't asked to leave. The show must go on. "We" will get our money's worth, and all actors must play their parts. Except now the story isn't going to be about the sexy stripper at the stag party. This will be a

story of degradation. *"She was terrible. She was a nasty chug. You should have seen her teeth. It was hilarious."* She is uncomfortable when she starts to dance. My friend, the groom to be, is tied to a chair in the middle of the room. Someone hands her a magnum of champagne and she practically downs it in one swallow. I watch their faces and I guess at their thoughts. *"Indians can sure drink."* One guy paws at her every time she circles around him. He pulls her onto his knee and tugs at her panties. She doesn't like it. A few guys get bolder, start chastising her, telling her she isn't good enough. I can see that she is feeling the champagne now. I am guessing she feels scared of being in this cabin with these jeering men. How would she know that no one here would ever actually do anything to her? How do I know that someone wouldn't? I feel awful.

One of the loudest men is now trying to get in her into the bedroom with the groom. He is organizing the troops, trying to get money together to make it happen. My friend doesn't want this, he has given his performance for his buddies' sake but he is not going to the bedroom with anyone. The woman doesn't want this either; she tells him that she's a dancer. She is openly laughed at. I feel sick to my stomach and I want to leave.

Finally it is over, she leaves and the drinking continues. Some of the guys are still laughing about it. I hear the guy who had been pawing at her talking about "Chugs". At this point in the night, at this stage of drunkenness, I don't know what he would say if I confronted him. I don't want to cause a scene at my friend's stag party. What I want to do is leave, but I have nowhere to go. I get up and go outside to get some fresh air.

Some of the guys want to drive into town and find a bar, and most of them are guys that I know. I volunteer to drive the van to the town. There are eight guys in the van including me. I know two of the guys really well, one of whom is my friend who is getting married. Three other guys in the van I would consider friends from University. We are more acquaintances than friends, but I like them. The three other men in the van I have only met for the first time that day.

I am feeling better as I pull the van out onto a dark gravel road moving away from the cabin. I needed to get out of there. But I haven't got away.

It starts, the stripper debrief. At first the guys are teasing my friend who is getting married about suffering through the stripper's performance. The talk escalates; there is more laughter now about her appearance. Her rotten teeth, how drunk she got. Now they are laughing about the guy who hired the stripper.

Some of the guys in the van know I am First Nations. The ones who don't are doing most of the talking. The joking shifts from laughing to an entitled sense of being wronged. Some of them still feel cheated. One in particular, the guy who tried to get the woman into the bedroom, speaks with a sense of entitlement. He is ranting now. He doesn't know me. *I don't want to ruin my friend's stag party.* He is into a full rant now. He isn't talking about her anymore,, he is talking about Indians. He is yelling now, saying how we should go down to the reservation and start some shit. No one is saying anything. *I don't want to ruin my friend's stag party. I don't want to ruin my friend's stag party.* I feel the rage boiling up inside of me.

I slam on the brakes and the van skids to a stop on the gravel road. Everyone lurches forward in their seats. I turn in my seat to face this man. This man who is more like a boy than a man, and I shout at him “I’m First Nations and if you don’t stop it right now I’m turning this van around!” Awkward tension. I didn’t want to ruin my friend’s stag party. Awkward silence. I start driving.

I hear him whispering in the back, “I didn’t know. I didn’t know”. Here it comes. I have heard this many times before in my life. Another friend of mine is telling him to shut up. Now he is apologizing to me. “I’m sorry, Robb. I didn’t know.” Awkward tension. Am I supposed to make it better? I have finally stepped away from being implicated. I have separated myself. The rest of the van feels shame as I become other. My two friends who know me support me, in fact so does everyone in the van. I feel their shame. Regardless of what they believe, racist or tolerant, drunk or sober, it had gone too far.

I feel like I have taken a pin, popped a bubble, and brought everything crashing back to reality. There is no argument, no excuse for what has occurred. I am sad for ruining my friend’s stag party. I continue to drive.

We find the little bar we are looking for and the night continues. The party isn’t ruined. One by one, they get me alone and make their amends. Coming to confession. Why is this about me? My friends apologize. My friends who have said nothing to offend me apologize on behalf of the ones who have. Maybe they apologize for not saying anything at all. The one who has said most of the hurtful racist things offer the most apologies.

Again he comes to me in the bar, drunk, hands on my shoulders. Repeating himself that he is not that kind of person. Who is this apology for? I don't want to be apologized to. Another guy tells me his grandfather was half Mohawk! "Who gives a shit," I think to myself, as I tell him that things are fine. *I don't want to ruin the stag party.*

The last one approaches me when we are back at the cabin. He corners me off and we go for a quick walk in the yard. He tells me that, yes, it was wrong, but if the girl wasn't First Nations everyone would still be calling her down for being ugly. He challenges me, "You know that it's true". He reminds me that this is what guys do. I have heard him say nothing offensive or derogatory the whole night. He usually keeps quiet and maybe this is part of the reason I have always liked him. He is letting me know in a subtle way that I shouldn't have said anything. He is reminding me that the degradation of a woman isn't justification for ruining a stag party. I think about what he says. If the dancer wasn't First Nations, if she was merely a woman to be made fun of, maybe I would have gone along with it. I know I wouldn't have called her down, but maybe I wouldn't have put my foot on the break, and told them it was wrong. Maybe I would have been one of the ones quietly laughing along, playing a role while thinking it was disgusting. Not willing to rock the boat, not wanting to ruin the stag party. But she was First Nations, and they weren't just talking about her, they were talking about Indians and Chugs. Even if they weren't doing that I didn't want any part of it. It is not my character that is in question right now. He is drawing me back in. I am thinking about my silence; the other times in my life when I haven't spoken

when I knew better. I feel shame for not being brave enough to stick up for her sooner and I feel shame to know in another situation I might not say anything at all. I know this is wrong and this is not “what guys do”. It makes me feel sick. He is trying to implicate me, trying to share his load with me but I don’t want anything to do with his shame. I have my own. I am sad to think of the respect I have lost for him and I don’t want to be one of the guys right now. I just want to get home.

I wake up the next morning wishing there was some way to get home as the stag party is continuing for the rest of the weekend. I wish I had a car. When I hear that someone has to leave that day to get back to Victoria I ask him if I can catch a ride with him. I know that my friend who invited me to his stag party will be sad to see me go and I don’t want to ruin the stag party but the stag party is ruined for me. I can’t gut it out. As we are getting our stuff packed to leave, the groom-to-be pulls me aside and tells me he is sorry for what happened. I believe him. I tell him he doesn’t have to apologize to me for anything. I tell him that I didn’t see him say or do anything. I tell him that he shouldn’t have to apologize for other people. Then he explains to me that he is embarrassed because the company he keeps is a reflection of himself. This is an honest apology which I accept. But why am I the one to be apologized to?

I see all of the men again at the wedding, wearing their shirts and ties, sitting politely through a totally different kind of social ceremony than we engaged in together at the stag party. I see these men with their arms around girlfriends and wives. I don’t judge them as men. I am a man also, but I feel different. I feel

other. Later at the reception, I watch the man who was pawing at the dancer, the one who called her a chug. He is on the dance floor holding his partner. He is kissing her and they look happy together. And this is my Canada. Not always, but too often to ignore. It hurts that I can't always say I am proud to be Canadian. Being invisible provides so many opportunities to see what goes on underneath the surface and so often I don't like what I see under it.

### **Social Problems**

I am at a Christmas party making small talk with a white man. He is a doctor, he knows I am part First Nations and he has a patient who is First Nations. So hey, we have something in common! Now, apparently, he has permission to give his opinions via his First Nations patient. He recounts to me how this patient had complained to him that the youth in his community don't want to work. He tells me that his patient comes from a fishing community and that the youth aren't interested in learning how to work on fish. And, as I stand there nodding my head, listening to him appropriate a story told to him in confidence by his patient, I remember that this is the exact same thing we talked about last year at the Christmas party. To be fair, I don't offer a lot up in the way of Christmas party small talk, but why does he feel it is appropriate to update me on the work ethic of First Nations youth? I could tell him that it sounds like he is using this patient's story to confirm beliefs that he probably already had. I could explain to him that communities like the one he is talking about are desperately hurting with the decline of the commercial fishing industry. I could tell him that I

can guess a lot of reasons why First Nations youth in this community might not want to work on fish. I could suggest to him that maybe it is ok for his older patient to express his frustrations about the younger generation without it being used to explain Aboriginal social problems. I could ask him why he thinks this is any of his business? I could tell him he is being judgmental. I could tell him that I think he is racist. I could tell him I don't really like him or the way he talks to me. But it is Christmas, and this is small talk, and it isn't worth the confrontation.

### **Grandfather**

I was sitting with my grandpa listening to him tell a story. My grandpa told amazing stories. As a kid I would sit fascinated while he told me about growing up on the Nimpkish River. I loved his stories about hunting and fishing. My favourite stories were about his pet ox named Tony. It is hard to recount the details now but these stories usually involved my grandpa figuring out some ingenious way to get Tony to do some job only to have Tony outsmart him in the end. My grandpa was a story teller and I loved sitting and listening to him.

I was older when he was telling me this particular story. I only remember two details. One, it was related to a trip he had taken long ago to Barbados. Two, he was providing some social commentary about work ethic. Hard work was important to my grandpa. It was always a standard he measured people by. All I remember him saying was "It's always hard to get niggers to work, it's the same as with the Indians." I loved my grandpa. I loved his stories. But I remember this one like a slap in the face.

I know my lens is different from my grandpa's. He saw what he saw and I see what I see. My grandpa was in his late eighties or early nineties when he told me this story. Part of me knows that he was raised in another time. I don't want to judge him by the standards of my generation. I don't know the whole story and I don't know what things were like for him growing up. I know he was a self-made man, I know that he ran his own logging outfits and later his own fishing boats. I know that he worked hard all of his life and that having a strong work ethic was one of the most important qualities he valued. I know that during his lifetime he hired Native men to work for him and I know that he had Native friends. But I won't forget how it felt when he said this to me. How he could so causally deny who I am without even considering it. How he could insult my mother and my family. What about my work ethic grandpa? It didn't all come from you. Or can the times when I slack off be attributed to my Indian blood? This is an emotional reaction that doesn't seem to be fair. But it is how I feel. I don't mean to drag my grandpa over the coals. He was a good man and I loved him. I feel guilty for writing my grandpa into my stories out of context and I find myself wanting to defend him. But this isn't about my grandpa's character. This is about how his words impacted my heart. I loved my grandpa and I loved his stories. I can easily forgive him for what he said, but I won't forget this reminder of who I am.

## **Invisible**

I am sitting on the hatch of my family's commercial fishing boat. I am thirteen or fourteen years old. I am not on the crew yet, but I help out where I can. I clean the hatches after openings and clear the salmon off the decks when we are fishing. Our boat is tied up in Bella Bella on a warm clear summer evening. There are other fishing boats tied up beside us at the fuel dock. A few fishermen from the other boats are standing around the hatches of our boat bullshitting with the guys on our crew. I am sitting quietly, listening to them talk. A few of the guys are complaining about being stuck in Bella Bella for the night, how there is nothing to do in the town. One of the men makes a comment about how heavy the women are in Bella Bella. Another one laughs and says "Yeah maybe we should go uptown and get a 300 hundred pounder down here. We can hoist her on the boat with the single fall." They both laugh. I am listening. I am not laughing. They know me. They must remember that my mom is from Bella Bella. They must remember that I have family here. Maybe they forgot. Maybe they think it doesn't matter because they are talking about women, and not Indians. Why would I even think to qualify that? Is it possible to feel like someone is insulting the people of your hometown when you've never even lived there? More than anything they probably didn't notice me there, sitting quietly on the hatch, listening to them talk.

## White Teeth

I am sixteen years old and I am working at the Heiltsuk Rediscovery camp. One of my peers and I are talking about our teeth. His mouth is full of fillings and I have never had a cavity. He tells me his theory on why this is. "I've heard that white people get their gums rubbed when they are babies, that's probably why you have never had a cavity". I tell him that I don't think my mom ever rubbed my gums. Looking back I don't know why I didn't remind him that my mom was Indian. This is a point I have never pressed with First Nations people, who am I to complain? Maybe I felt guilty for being so lucky. Is there such thing as white teeth and if so is this another reason I am less of an Indian? Years later when my mom was telling me a story about her life growing up, I thought back to this conversation I had had with him about our teeth.

My mom has always taken great care with her teeth. I can picture her flossing and brushing. I see the crowns of gold that line the back of her mouth. I remember many times when she had to go for root canals. I have never had a cavity. Dentists still tell me what nice teeth I have.

I remember as a little boy having my teeth inspected by my mom after brushing. How could she tell that my teeth were clean? One time I ran water on my finger and swished it around in my mouth just to see if I could pass her inspection. When I passed, I smartly told her what I had done, and she was not impressed. "Get back in the bathroom and brush your teeth!"

My mom told me a story about her teeth. When she was a teenager and she first lived with my adopted grandparents, my grandmother would pack her

wonderful lunches to take to school. These lunches were full of things that my mom was not used to eating like crunchy apples and carrots. As a girl in Bella Bella, she remembers getting a quarter everyday that she would use to buy a bag of chips and a pop. She was not used to carrots and apples. When my mom brought these foods home instead of eating them at school, my grandmother was upset and wanted to know why? My mom couldn't eat apples and carrots because her teeth were rotten.

My mom painfully explained to me how she didn't know how to take care of her teeth, she was never taught. This isn't a story about being Indian, it's a story about care. She told me how my grandparents could not afford to pay to get her teeth fixed and that the government wouldn't pay because she was not a Status Indian. My grandmother fought and fought until my mom was made a ward of the state and was finally able to see a dentist.

I think about my mom, how she always takes such good care of her teeth. I can see her carefully flossing and brushing them. I can see the gold crowns that line the back of her mouth. I think about my mom when I sit in a dentist chair and I am told what nice straight teeth I have. They tell me that I am lucky and that the reason my gums are puffy is because I need to floss. I know I should floss. Why have I never had a cavity? I think of my mom flossing, brushing, the meticulous way she cleans her teeth. I think of my mom inspecting my teeth when I was a little boy.

This is not a story about teeth. This is not a story about being Indian or white. My dad has false teeth. He had his rotten teeth removed when he was a

teenager. No one showed him how to take care of his teeth either. I know my parent's dental histories runs deeper than rubbed gums. I think about this sometimes when I brush my children's teeth.

## **Welcome Home**

I have been a Heiltsuk band member for over half of my life but I have never actually lived in my community until very recently. I still feel like I am imposing somehow even by writing the words "My community". My connection to Bella Bella has always been through commercial fishing. My memories are of summers tying up at the fuel dock; heading to an aunt and uncles to do laundry and have a shower; being invited to large family dinners. As a teenager, I would go to the community hall every night to play pick up basketball.

My relationship with Bella Bella is similar to how I feel about my First Nations identity. It is like a half relationship. I am connected, but I still feel like an outsider. I value the community very much, but this has always been from the outside looking in. I find myself tentative and unsure of who I am in this context.

I remember one summer evening playing basketball in the community hall. A guy called for me to pass him the ball and I threw it to him. He was on the other team. Everyone on the court and everyone in the bleachers started laughing as he raced down the court for a lay up. The joke was on me. It was funny and I could laugh about it but I also remember feeling embarrassed because I knew I was an outsider. I think this story is a good metaphor for my relationship to Bella Bella and my First Nations culture. I can get hyper-sensitive

about who I pass the ball to because I don't want to risk making any mistakes. I am very cautious about how I represent myself and I hold myself back from taking part because I don't want to be exposed as an outsider. I feel shame about not being good enough and my reaction has been to withdraw.

I was nervous about moving to Bella Bella. I have to admit I was wondering about how I would be accepted, how my wife and children would be accepted. I was wondering if I would be seen as a white person?

It turns out that moving back to Bella Bella has been good for my soul. I do not want to paint too idyllic a picture as I am still on my journey, but it feels like a puzzle piece that has fit into my life at a time when I needed it to. People I have stopped to talk with have welcomed me home. Hearing the words "welcome home" sometimes from people I hardly know, has meant so much to me. I feel accepted.

My experience of moving to Bella Bella has been positive. My fears have not matched the reality of the experience. People have been supportive and welcoming. This lets me know that my fears and doubts about how I will be seen and how I will be treated are about me, not the community. I want to let go of this shame I hold that keeps me from participating. It isn't my community that holds me back, I hold myself back.

## **Comparison**

What makes him more Indian than me? He isn't much darker than me. His dad is white, like mine. His mother is First Nations, like mine. We are close

to the same age, our children are almost the same age. There is much to compare. What makes him more Indian than me?

He grew up in the village and has lived here most of his life. I have grown up in the city and lived in the village for only a few months. He speaks our language, teaches it to others. I choke on the few words I know, embarrassed because I can't make the right sounds to say the words properly. His wife is First Nations. My wife is White. I love to listen to him sing. I love to watch him dance. I wish that I knew how. When I see him as an Indian, I see myself as a wannabe. Not that I want to be more than I am. This journey isn't about trying to find out how to be more Indian, but I am terrified of being seen as a wannabe.

If he is and I'm not, then it isn't blood. If it isn't blood, then is it commitment? Is it where you were raised or how you were raised? What does he have that I don't? Family. His family is strong culturally. His grandparents are strong together, culturally intact. This isn't to idealize their family or minimize the challenges I know they have faced. I don't know his experience, how he feels about being a half-breed, but I see strength in his family.

My family history has been split apart. My biological grandparents were never together. My mother left the village as a young girl and has only recently moved back. I am continually embarrassed when I still meet relatives who I do not know. *We are cousins. She is your auntie.* I hold my head in shame and I can't even hear their names to remember for next time. I do not know my place. I do not know my history. I do not know my family. When I am in the village, I do not know who I am.

## **Myth of Two Worlds**

*I am comfortable with my position living in two worlds. It has given me a unique perspective. I know that I have had a lot of advantages growing up in the city and looking white. I have been able to hear the things that people say about First Nations people. I have listened to the racism and judgment and this let's me know where my heart is.*

*I would never try to claim to be First Nations in a traditional sense; I would be afraid of overstepping my bounds. But I have always been proud of my heritage. I want to be of service to my First Nations community. I know I am in a unique position to use my position between two worlds to work as a counsellor to bridge the gaps that exist between the First Nations and mainstream cultures.*

This is the myth of two worlds. It is my lie. Not a lie to the outside world, but a lie that I have told myself. It is something that I honestly believed before I became aware of the feelings I was holding in my body. I can see now that my myth of two worlds was an intellectual justification for my mixed ethnicity that I used to justify my disconnection to my First Nations identity.

In an article titled *To Walk in Two Worlds - Or More? Challenging a Common Metaphor of Native Education*, Henze & Vanett (1993) deconstruct the metaphor of “walking in two worlds” for students living in an Alaskan Indian community. These authors ask the reader to consider another metaphor:

Picture an individual struggling to walk with one foot on one side of a river bank and the other foot on the other side, with a raging torrent in the middle. It would be an impossible task to continue walking without being thrown off balance by the psychological and physical force of the torrent. This is the image that comes to our minds when we consider what the metaphor asks student to do. (p. 130)

I am moved by the image of a raging river. I am only so recently aware of the power of the emotions I have been holding in my body. I have realized that I have never walked in two worlds. My feet have never straddled the torrent of a raging river. I have walked on the banks of my white identity for so long, only appreciating my First Nations culture from a distance. I want more than this myth of two worlds. I want to be in a relationship with my First Nations identity. I am more complex than a simple metaphor and I will continue on my journey to find out who I am.

### **My Whiteness**

I graduated with a B.A. from the University of Victoria with a major in sociology. I enjoyed sociology classes where I could learn about deconstructing power relations, and social justice issues. These courses aligned with my belief, which I had gained from my experience as a non-visible minority, that racism and discrimination are prevalent in Canada.

When I was growing up I heard many racist, judgmental and derogatory comments made about Aboriginal people. I feel like my whiteness has permitted me a view into the underbelly of actual race relations in Canada compared to the friendly, tolerant image most Canadians feel represents them. The difference between what is stated publicly and what I have heard expressed privately suggests to me a high level of covert racism.

My education in sociology courses helped me to see that the colonization and oppression of Aboriginal peoples is still occurring; these acts are not

relegated to history. My education in sociology has also provided me with the opportunity to explore how my own whiteness, gender, and socioeconomic status put me in a position of power and privilege in our society. Filtered through the lens of my invisible minority status, I saw the difference between my position and the position of other First Nations people.

For example, I thought of a First Nations cousin of mine who was put in jail for violating the conditions of his parole. This violation occurred because he was caught in the “red zone”, a prohibited area encompassing the downtown city core of Victoria. I assume that the goal of this “red zone” was to push “criminal activity” out of Victoria’s tourist rich downtown area. My cousin was caught in the “red zone” while leaving the Native Friendship Centre. That this friendship center is located within the perimeter of the “red zone” was probably never considered by the planners who came up with the idea. My cousin frequently visited the Native Friendship Center to socialize and to access support services.

My cousin was stopped on the street by the police and questioned. When the police determined that he was not supposed to be in the “red zone” they proceeded to handcuff him. At the point when they touched him my cousin told me that he went limp. He couldn’t explain to me why he went limp, but I imagine he was scared and was not able to respond to the police quickly enough. The police must have decided that he was he was resisting arrest when he went limp. My cousin told me that he was tasered and the next thing he remembered was waking up in a jail cell without his shoes on. At the time of this incident he was still a teenager.

I am still outraged that my cousin was treated like this in the city I grew up in. It is not acceptable and I can't imagine the police treating me in that manner. I could not even imagine being questioned by the police on the street out of the blue. I would be indignant. What right would they have to question me when I had done nothing wrong? I am aware that I do not live in a world where I have to worry about being tasered and thrown in a jail cell without my shoes.

This incident is one example of many which demonstrate to me that I am treated differently than other First Nations. It is also through incidents like this that I have learned to distance myself from my First Nations identity. In developing an awareness of my power and privilege as a seemingly visible white man, I also have become aware of being exempt from experiencing the racism and discrimination that darker First Nations people face. This affects my First Nations identity because I feel guilty for not being treated this way. Here is an excerpt from an essay I wrote from a sociology class in 2002 which reflects the intellectual position I was taking around this time:

*I have always carried my whiteness with me. I remember a day back in 1995 when I was still in high school. I was having a conversation with a friend of mine about applying for scholarships to universities. My friend, like most of my peers in high school, was white. I clearly remember him saying, "It's unfair. All of these scholarships are for women and minorities." For him, it was just one white guy making a comment to another white guy. No big deal. Sure, most people knew I had some Native blood in me, but I was never a "real" Indian to them. How could I be? I was white. I tried to explain to my friend that the reason there weren't a lot of scholarships for white men was because "we" were already so privileged to be in that group. "We" had more support than anyone else in the world. He did not understand my point. Born to a Heiltsuk First Nations Woman and a white father of English decent has been both a blessing and painful for me. My skin is white, bright,*

*bright white. Ironically my peers have made fun of me my whole life because my skin is whiter than their own skin. They laugh at me because I do not tan. I have carried my whiteness with me my whole life and I have become very aware of what an advantage that is in our society. I see it everywhere I go. It is not something that I am thankful or happy about but it is who I am. I hurt so deeply every time someone makes a racist comment towards First Nations people. Even some of my closest friends assume they are not talking about me but they are.*

While I still agree with the sentiment of what I wrote in this essay, it is a reality of my experience. I am currently focused on the impact that this type of thinking has had on my First Nations identity.

My writing in 2002 shows I am speaking with a voice that is aware of my own white privilege. Unlike some white authors who have written about their own transformations from racist to non-racist attitudes by critically challenging their own positions of power and privilege, see (Croteau, 1999; D'Andrea, 1999), my self-analysis of white privilege stems from how I have witnessed white people engage in racist and discriminatory behaviour from the location of my white skin. This is the view of white privilege from an invisible minority. This is excellent for critically challenging the status quo, but where is my voice as a First Nations person in this writing?

I am aware that I have represented ways in which Aboriginal people are marginalized by claiming a First Nations perspective spoken with a white voice. In doing so, I have separated myself from being included in the marginalization of First Nations people. In a sense, this is similar to the function of "white guilt". My impression of white guilt, which is based on experience and not an academic understanding, is that it provides protection in the form of distance for the white

person expressing it. I have often been in academic and therapeutic situations where the expression of a person's white guilt has functioned in changing the focus of a discussion from the topic at hand to the feelings of the white person. I am not saying this is intentional, but I believe it is one way that white guilt is used.

Rather than speaking about what white people do, I should be analyzing my own experience. By focusing on how visibly First Nations people experience racism and discrimination, I have felt a sense of guilt because I do not suffer the same injustice. Because I do not suffer the same injustice, I can't truly consider myself First Nations. It keeps me at a distance. It keeps me outside of the racism and discrimination I experience. I don't own the personal impact this has on my own identity, but instead I focus on how my family and friends who "really are" First Nations are treated. I end up engaging in deal making. I say: I haven't had the experience, I don't know what it means to be First Nations, but I will fight for you with all that I have...I will use my position of power and privilege, I will use my white voice to advocate for First Nations people... If I can't truly be a part of your experience, then at least I can dedicate myself to being of service... In this way I am now aware of how I have intellectualized my white privilege in mainstream society and I have cut myself off from understanding my First Nations identity.

My identity involves strange twists and contradictions. I am a First Nations man who experiences something similar to white guilt. I am a white man who knows what it feels like to be colonized. This journey into deepening my

understanding of my own identity involves complex challenges and contradictions. The impact of intellectualizing my whiteness is one of them.

### **White Admiration Of Aboriginal Culture**

My reaction towards white people who appreciate First Nations culture is generally bitter. Why? Where do these feelings come from? Is bitter too strong a word? Maybe I am more suspicious. I should clarify that I don't feel bitter when someone seems to genuinely appreciate First Nations culture; it is when the culture is romanticized by white people that I start to get angry.

I have mentioned in another story my experiences at the Heiltsuk Rediscovery camp. This camp did have an impact on my First Nations identity and represents most of the little contact I have had with my traditional culture. I was leafing through a book I own about the Rediscovery program, looking for a description of the program and I happened to re-read the introduction. I will share with you part of this introduction and then explain the feelings it aroused in me. Thom Henley (1989), the president and founder of Rediscovery International writes:

It wasn't until I left Michigan at the age of twenty and first set eyes on British Columbia, Alaska, and the Yukon that I finally understood the true meaning of wilderness, and came to know deep in my heart that I am home. I met Indians here, nations of people maintaining distinct languages, customs, and identity in spite of all efforts to assimilate them. (p. 15-16)

Thom Henley is showing his appreciation for First Nations culture and recounting his personal journey which brought him to the West Coast. He is a white man from Lansing, Michigan. My initial reaction to what he has written is

bitterness and judgment. I am embarrassed to admit this; it doesn't seem fair. There is a voice in my head that says, "Why is this white American pretending to be an Indian?" This man does not deserve my harsh judgment. I do not know him. He is responsible for developing a program that brought immense wealth and joy into my life. This also makes me bitter and again I feel embarrassed to say it. This is not a personal attack on Thom Henley; it has very little to do with him at all. This is about me. I am only using his story because it was conveniently in front of me when I wanted to write about this. It could have been any white person; any kayaker who comes to Heiltsuk territory in search of a primordial experience; any new age seeker of traditional indigenous healing methods.

Enough hedging, I want to step away from right and wrong, what is or is not appropriate, so that I can explore my feelings. When I listen to the story of an American white man who has always been fascinated with Aboriginal culture, and who eventually comes to this part of the world, seeks First Nations cultural experiences on the West Coast, and considers himself home....I feel bitter! This is a man who obviously shows respect and admiration for First Nations people and their culture, yet my reaction is to judge him. I tell myself he is romanticizing First Nation people and using their culture to find something in himself. This is probably true and this kind of romanticism happens often but what is wrong with a white person admiring First Nations culture?

Part of me feels jealous, but I think it runs deeper than that. In my judgment I think: "Who is he to waltz in here and take over? Who is he to engage

in a culture I know nothing about?" What does this say about me? I wish I was free of the shame and self doubt, free of this uncertainty about who I am and where I belong. I wish I was free of inhibitions like he is, free to come and engage, free to appreciate. I wish my slate was this clean so that I could move back home to my community without having to feel so out of place. I could learn to sing and dance, learn to speak my language, learn to take my place. But I sit on the sidelines, watching the white admirers of First Nations culture graciously accept what is offered to them, uninhibited in their appreciation of what I have never had.

Here are some more examples: I am planning to complete another therapeutic enactment in order to address the feelings about my First Nations identity that I uncovered in my first therapeutic enactment. One of the group members who participated in the first therapeutic enactment but will not be able to attend the second one sent me an email that wished me well on my journey. He wrote "All my relations" at the end of his email. He is a sweet person, gentle, kind, supportive. I trusted him enough to invite him to support me in my healing work. I know that he said "All my relations" in an attempt to respect me and my culture. All that I could think when I read it was, "Fuck you. You are so fucking ignorant." Bitterness. How is he supposed to know how dislocated I am from my own culture? How is he supposed to know that I would never say "All my relations" to anyone because I would feel like I was being fake? I have attended the University of British Columbia for almost four years and I have only been inside the longhouse there once. I have never been to the sweat lodge. I don't

feel worthy enough to participate in anything traditional from my own Heiltsuk culture let alone engage in activities from other Aboriginal cultures.

I will say again that this isn't because I don't want to participate; it's because I feel shame about not being good enough. Because I don't feel like a real Indian and because I am aware that First Nations people are sensitive to having their culture appropriated. Rightly so. The last thing that real Indians need is another white person pretending to be an Indian. I don't think I am white, I just don't think there is anyway to avoid it looking like I am.

So here I am in university calling myself a First Nations student and I do not know who I am and I am scared so please do not say "all my relations" to me or ask me about mystical spiritual things because I do not have all the answers just because I tell you that I am First Nations.

I attended a group personal awareness seminar six or seven years ago. Many of the participants were Aboriginal, probably over 50%. Mostly cognitive behavioural interventions were used in the seminar. The group bound tightly together while individuals worked on themselves. The blend of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants often provides the opportunity for a deepened cross-cultural understanding as the group comes to know each other.

Near the end of this seminar a man wanted to do some Indian dancing. He was a white man, a doctor, who was interested in First Nations culture. He wanted to do an Indian dance to express his admiration for the bonds that he had developed with First Nations people in this program. As he began to dance I could feel the tension in the room. After he finished many of the First Nations

participants expressed that they were offended by his dancing. I felt his dance was inappropriate also. Because we were already a tightly bonded group, led by a facilitator, we had a unique opportunity to discuss the incident as a group.

Some of the First Nations participants let this man know that they did not think his dancing was appropriate. They felt he was engaging in something he did not know about, something sacred and special, and that he was making a mockery of their culture. I felt the same. "Who does he think he is?"

At the same time, I had compassion for this man, as I have compassion for the other two men white men I have used in this story. I listened to him explain to the group that he admired First Nations culture and he meant his dance as a gesture of respect. The facilitator tried to bring the group back together by saying: "Remember that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," and her words seemed to re-direct the energy of the group. The group was able to move past the incident and continue with the training.

What is important to me about this particular incident is that my offense to this white man Indian dancing was echoed by other First Nations participants. My first reaction was to feel angry and anger was the feeling shared by other First Nations group members. I wonder what feelings were underneath the anger? I felt anger, but on a deeper level I believe this man's attempt at Indian dancing triggered my own feelings of shame. I have felt shame when I have tried to Indian dance. When I have danced I felt like it was not appropriate. I felt I shouldn't be doing it. I know these thoughts are derived from the shame I carry

about not knowing my First Nations identity. I would guess that this white man's dance triggered carried feelings in the other First Nations participants.

First Nations cultural practices were still illegal in Canada when my mom was born. History is not really history; this is not something from the past. To see a white man Indian dancing, in admiration or not, was a reminder to me of what had been taken and stripped away. Similar to the other examples I have shared in this story, this man was very kind, seemed like a good person, seemed like he was genuine in his appreciation of First Nations people. Someone who did not understand the context would probably not be able to understand the intense emotional reaction many of the First Nations participants experienced in watching this man's dance. But as I watched him dance I thought, "Who are you to Indian dance?" "Why are you free to express your admiration for a culture I don't even know how to connect to?" I felt like I was being robbed.

It is incidents like the ones I have shared in this stories that put me on eggshells in relation to my First Nations culture. I don't want to be seen as a taker because our history is full of takers. I am not ignorant like these other white men to the history of First Nations people. I am not saying that white people can't be aware of and sympathetic to the historical and present day impacts of colonization, but it is one thing to know it and another thing to feel it on a gut level. My knowledge is inside of me, it has been carried through the generations of my family. I don't want to be a taker. I try so hard to be respectful of my First Nations culture. Who am I to take when so much has been taken? But I fail to participate. I fail to take my place. I am culturally paralyzed.

## **Family History**

I am First Nations and I am White. This is the simple view. Through my mother I have Heiltsuk, Tshimshan, Norwegian and Scottish ancestry that we know about. Through my father I have English, Irish and American ancestry that has been identified.

Recently, when discussing a new family dog for the White House, Barrack Obama indicated his preference for a shelter dog. "Obviously, a lot of shelter dogs are mutts like me" (Obama, 2009, as cited in Fram, 2009).

I can relate to Obama referring to himself as a mutt. I have done it myself many times and felt empowered in saying it. Right now I feel a need to go back into my roots. To know who I am I must begin to learn where I come from. I am carrying too much inside of me to avoid looking at it any longer. To move forward I need to look at my history.

I see my family history woven into the fabric of Canadian culture. One side of my history tells a story about the growth of Canada. The other side of my history tells a story about the colonization of people who have been here since the beginning of time. Not for 10,000 years and not since the land bridge, but since the beginning of time.

These stories are not my creation. They have been told to me in many different ways and it is hard to know what is true -- what is real. What is important is that these stories exist, not that they are true. I am on a journey to find out what I carry inside of me through my family history. This is a journey back into my roots.

## **A Story of Growth**

The story I carry with me through my fathers is a story of growth and prosperity. My great grandfather moved to Canada from England and carved out a homestead for his family in the Nimpkish valley on the north end of Vancouver Island. He died in 1914, when my grandfather was two years old. He died of a pneumonia caused by mustard gas poisoning that he suffered in WWI. Even in this loss, my great-grandfather is honoured and remembered for his contributions to his country. His was a story of growth.

My great-grandfather's death meant my grandfather had to learn to be a provider at a very early age. I remember hearing stories of him waiting to shoot two birds out of the air with one shot to save bullets during the great depression. He must have experienced hard times in his youth, not having a father and having to take care his family, but the story that has been passed down to me is of his strength and perseverance. Hard times shaped his independence, gave him drive, and taught him to how to work hard. He was a successful logger, ran his own outfit and employed men. When the logging prospects petered out during his midlife, he switched to commercial fishing and prospered again. My grandfather continued what my great grandfather had started.

My father's story is also a story of growth. He claims that since the age of twelve all he ever wanted to be was a fisherman. He dropped out of high school and by his early twenties he was running his own boat. My dad loves to tell the story of the first day running his own fishing boat. He went out with a beat up, broken down seiner with a short-handed crew, including one man, who had just

gotten out of prison, who he picked up off the dock. Everything that could go wrong that first day went wrong. The equipment on the boat broke, poor decisions were made and chaos ensued. The day ended with him getting hit by a broken line and splitting his face open. My dad loves to explain that after surviving a day like that, he knew he had it beat. If he could get through that day, he knew he could make it as a commercial fishermen.

Fishing is a tough business. My father sunk boats, worked around the clock and left my mother for months for at a time when my sister and I were still babies, but he prospered. He became a Highline fisherman. He made more money than he ever dreamed of or wanted and moved his children to the city so they could prosper. This is a story of growth.

These growth stories are not real. They ignore many realities, especially involving the women in my family history. My father's growth story ignores the contributions and sacrifices of my own mother. I write these stories as growth stories to mirror the development of Canada as a country. These are stories I have been told about Canada. These are stories of independent men carving their destinies out of the rich resources of the land.

### **A Story of Loss**

If the story of my family through my father is one of growth, then the story of my family through my mother is one of loss. Before I tell this story, I need to put out a disclaimer: as a First Nations person I would assess the general

Canadian public as having failed to acknowledge, with some leaning toward outright denial, the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal peoples. Right or wrong, part of me considers Canada a hostile environment. My experience has taught me that when the colonization of aboriginal peoples is brought up it is often quickly dismissed and relegated to the past. I have heard many times that it was something that happened hundreds of years ago. I bear witness to the washing of hands. I am aware of the omissions in high school history textbooks. I have close friends, university educated friends, who have only recently found out about the existence of residential schools through newspaper stories about compensation packages. This does not surprise me. *What are residential schools? I never knew. Why would you?*

I don't know why I feel the need to produce the above disclaimer in the section about my mother's family history. I am aware that when I wrote my father's family history I simply wrote about the generations of men in my family leading to me. When I write my mother's family history, I immediately get lost trying to speak on behalf of all Aboriginal people in Canada. I get confused in the historical and the political. I want to explain that my mother's story, my First Nations family history, and ultimately my own story of First Nations identity, represent a story of loss. But I am afraid of how it will be viewed when I take it in this direction of a collective loss. And I don't feel connected to a sense of personal loss in terms of what I have experienced as a First Nations man. As a First Nations man, I feel disconnected. I feel removed. I judge myself. Who am I to say what other Aboriginal people have been through? I want to be careful of

what I will represent to non-Aboriginals who might read this. What if my experience is appropriated and used to try and understand other Aboriginal peoples? What if I am part of the problem instead of being part of the solution? Who am I to speak with any authority on an experience I have felt but I have not lived?

While I am afraid of how I am choosing to represent myself while speaking of a collective loss which graces the introduction of almost every piece of academic literature I have read about Aboriginals, I start to get angry at how often mainstream non-Aboriginal Canadians appear ignorant of the link between the challenges Aboriginals face today and the ONGOING effects of colonization in Canada. Then I feel anger towards those who do understand or those that want to understand -- those who can sympathize with all that was lost. When I get angry with them, I get angry with myself, because I am one of them. I still don't know where I fit in or how I belong. And maybe I feel like I have a right to these judgments because I am really just another sympathizer. And I know from experience that this sympathy can be self-serving, that it creates distance, removes you, removes me, from being a part of it. The oppressor, the oppressed: I feel nothing but sympathy when I sympathize.

So I want to say that this is a story of loss. But if you aren't Aboriginal then I want to tell you not to dare and pretend to understand, because I don't even know how to do that. And if you are Aboriginal, I want to apologize for how I might be representing you when I write the words "collective loss". Who am I to trespass on how you have suffered, lost, or mourned in your personal and

familial experiences? Who I am to paint a picture that says your story is a story of loss? Like the stories of growth, these stories of loss are not truths and they ignore many important details. What is important is that these stories exist.

I am failing in my ability to clearly articulate what I want to say. I need to use someone else's words. I can't say the words myself right now. I can't claim them, so I will take a quotation from the introduction of a journal article on the top of my pile of journal articles about Indians and counselling to articulate what I am having trouble claiming. I don't know what the quote will be, but it will frame the current state of Aboriginal people in a story of collective loss. I am sure I could find what I am looking for in almost any one of the articles I pick up here on this cluttered desk. Here is one that works. Shepard, O'Neil, & Gunette (2006) state:

The disruption and attempted annihilation of First Nations culture through colonization is a process that began over five hundred years ago in Canada. The erosion of cultural identity and the accompanying loss of self-worth brought about in part through assimilationist policies have played a central role in the social strife now faced by many families and communities. (p. 227)

This is the story of loss that I want to speak about. This is what I mean when I say that my mother's story, my First Nations family history, is a story of loss. But I feel removed from it. How do I connect it to me? Is this all that there is? Why is this all I can see? I feel shame that the story I know about being First Nations is a story of loss. I find this story so painful and overwhelming that I do not know how to connect to it. I want to move past these feelings because I know there is so much more to my mother's family history than loss, as I know that my father's family history is about so much more than growth.

## **My Mother's Story**

My mother's story is a story of loss. It hurts that I can't even write this story because I don't know what it is. Nothing has been handed down to me to write about. I know that my mother suffered and struggled growing up. I know she was abandoned, neglected and abused. I know that it hurts her to talk about it but, at the same time, I know that she is willing. Who wants to see their mom go through that? How am I to know who I am or where I come from without asking about my family history, without dragging up these deep old wounds? I need to know who I am, so I will ask her where I come from. I am aware of how quickly she can become overwhelmed and it kills me to watch this happen.

My mother tells me that she doesn't know that much about her family history. I see the tears welling up in her eyes. She explains to me, "I just know that what I lived in my 63 years is not very thrilling and it is a miracle that I turned out as well as I did because I was so worthless." This is what my mom said to me a couple of hours into a conversation that I had requested with her about our family history. There are already many things that I did not know about my history that I have learned from sitting and listening to her. It is a pain-filled story. It is not my story, but I know in hearing it that I share in it. I have carried her pain and her shame. I believe now that the uncertainties about who I am have been passed along through my family history. Now, as I write this section it hurts to recall our conversation. It hurts to write it down. I am struggling with how to express what I have learned from listening to my mom's story.

My mother's maiden name is Larsen. It came from her maternal great-grandfather. Though she knew from an early age who her father was, she was not acknowledged as a daughter and did not share his name. John Larsen, my great-great-grandfather was an immigrant from Norway. He worked for a salmon cannery in Port Essington and captained a schooner, which towed small fishing boats to and from the fishing grounds on the Skeena River.

John Larsen married a Native woman, Isabel Bevin, who ceased being a Native under the Indian Act as a result of her marriage to a white man. Their children were not considered Indians either. So like me, my great-grandfather, the son of John Larsen, was mixed raced. He was a half-breed.

While I live in a time where the government tells me I'm a Status Indian, he lived in a time when the government said he wasn't. Together we are living examples of how the Indian Act addressed half-breeds before and after Bill C-31.

I think of the juxtaposition between my great-grandfather and myself, two half breeds struggling through the same issues at different times and in opposite directions. I am a Status Indian; he wasn't. I am light skinned and he was dark skinned. I feel ashamed for not being Indian enough; he felt ashamed for being too Indian. This is my family history and after speaking with my mom I am beginning to connect my place in my family's collective history. My juxtaposition with my great-grandfather reminds me of this quote: "Along this journey, Aboriginal people have gone from trying hard NOT to be Native, to trying hard TO be Native, even though this is just two sides of the same cultural genocide coin" (Anderson, 2007, p. 27).

My mother was raised by my great-grandfather. She tells me my great-grandfather was dark skinned. He looked like an Indian. He married an Indian woman. He lived and worked in Indian communities. His best friend was Indian. But he was raised to be ashamed of his Indian blood. My mother can't tell me much about my great-great-grandfather, but she believes that he must have had some disdain for Indians. She remembers that her grandfather spoke of his father's contempt toward Indians. She believes her grandfather carried his father's anger, mistrust and hatred towards Indians. She grew up listening to my great-grandfather refer to Indians as savages.

For a moment I am concerned with what I am writing. With so much lost and broken through these five generations, what if I haven't got the facts straight? What if I am unfairly slandering the name of John Larsen, my own great-great-grandfather? I only have impressions, which are my mom's impressions, which came from her grandfather. So much is unknown. Is this fair? Am I condemning my family? No, I am trying to understand and uncover my self. I grew up watching my mother go into blind fits of rage that transported her into someone else. I most often experienced her in these rages as a little girl. Who is the source of this rage? Is it my great-grandfather? Is it my great-great-grandfather? I want to put the blame for this destruction where it belongs, on the colonizer. But I don't know who that is. This is not cause and effect. The feelings I carry came from somewhere and they are imprinted in my blood. Forgive me if I am stabbing blindly in the dark. I need to go back to telling this

story and worry about making connections later. This is how my mother described her grandfather:

You know how when you throw a rock in a lake or in the ocean it ripples out? My grandfather would be steaming a plank that he made himself, he cut lumber to repair a boat, and he would steam it and get it to fit into the bow and if it broke or anything, all the men ran. They just ran like little girls away from a bogey man because my grandfather's rage was so huge.

I am listening to my mom tell me about her grandfather. I see the tears in her eyes as she goes back to these painful memories. I know she also feels guilty for all the times this rage she is describing has splashed onto me. I now have a better understanding of where her rage came from. I ask her where she thinks his anger came from. She believes his anger was the result of not fitting in, of never being good enough. She believes it was because he couldn't be white and he couldn't be Indian. She tells me he had so much self-hatred and denial of who he was. My mother shares her history with me and I feel connected to her; I feel connected to my great-grandfather. I don't know if I can forgive him for the ways he hurt my mother, but I can have more compassion for him. I don't feel self-hatred, but I feel paralyzed by how I should take my place in my culture. I know what it is to feel the shame of not being good enough. Is there really that much difference between acting out and acting in? This is my history.

My great-grandfather, in spite of his apparent self-hatred for being Native, married an Indian woman from Port Simpson. Because my great-grandfather was born without status and his Native wife lost her status in her marriage to him my biological grandmother was also born as a non-status. This is a piece of my

history I did not know before I sat down to talk with my mother. I also found out that my First Nations roots are not only Heiltsuk. My mom tells me that we have Tshimshian blood in us that we don't know really know anything about.

I have mixed feelings about this information. I feel more disconnected from knowing my place as a Heiltsuk. I know nothing of my Tshimshian heritage. I feel more lost. Again I feel shame. It is the same shame I feel when I am introduced to aunties and uncles and I can't remember who they are or how we are related. *You're my mom's sister? You are my cousin? Who is my family? Where do I come from?*

My great-grandfather's marriage, his first marriage ended and my biological grandmother and her siblings were sent to live with my great-grandfather's mother. At this time she was bedridden and blind. My grandmother and her siblings were eventually sent to live with relatives in Bella Bella. This is how my family arrived in Bella Bella.

My grandmother and her siblings were sent to live with my great-grandfather's brother and his wife. His wife was from Bella Bella. My great-grandfather left Port Simpson and also moved to Bella Bella. My great-grandfather and his brother worked in the fishing industry. My great-grandfather was a boat builder.

My mother told me that she lived with her great-grandfather. They lived off the reserve because they did not have Indian Status. They lived in a small shack on an island close to Bella Bella. I saw the shack many times when I visited Bella Bella. It is almost completely gone now. This is part of how my

mom was born disconnected from her own community. She says that they were allowed to live as squatters on Martin's Island, because of my great grandfather's skills as a boat builder. I think of the land my white great-grandfather was given on the Nimpkish River without consultation of the Namgis people and my First Nations great-grandfather who lived as a squatter because he was not a Status Indian and not allowed to live on the reservation. This is what I mean when I talk about stories of growth and loss.

My mother told me stories about what it was like to feel like an outsider in her own community. She recounted walking home from the reserve in the evening and looking at all the warm houses with amber lights showing in the front window. She saw herself on the outside looking in. The house she returned to was violent, abusive and chaotic and she never knew what was going to happen.

Lateral violence is a term used to describe the social problems faced in today in many First Nations communities. I have never been abused. I have had a very fortunate upbringing, but without knowing how to describe it, I pack the feelings for what happened to my mother. Although I have never experienced it first hand, I know what lateral violence is. I believe I have experienced it intergenerationally. I have had dreams of returning to the shack where my mother lived so that I could protect her from her grandfather.

My biological grandmother also lived in the shack with my mom, her grandfather, and two of my mom's younger siblings. My grandmother married a man from another village and moved away from Bella Bella when my mom was six years old. My mom painfully explained how she was given the choice to go

with her mother or stay with her grandfather. She feared she would be abused by her mother's new husband and knew she would continue to be abused if she stayed with her grandfather, but she made the decision to stay in Bella Bella. She never had a close relationship with her mother and she explained to me that although they stayed in contact with her on and off through her life, her mother never let her forget that she made the choice not to go with her. My mother was six years old when she was given this choice.

My mom also told me what it was like to grow up knowing who her father was but never being acknowledged by him. She remembers walking to school and seeing her father standing against the wall of the fire hall with a group of men. Some of the men would nudge her father in the ribs as she would walk past. She knew they were teasing him because she was his daughter and she had to walk past them all of the time without saying anything. Her father was Heiltsuk and this is where my genetic connection to the Heiltsuk comes from. There were members of his family who supported my mother, showed her love, and looked out for her. It was known who she was, but it wasn't explicitly stated.

My mom left Bella Bella when she was fourteen years old. Her friends were being taken away to residential school and she wanted to go with them. This is when she found out she was not a Status Indian. She was shocked that she was a different kind of Indian than her friends and it was another painful reminder of how she was not the same. She was encouraged to leave Bella Bella by a local teacher and she moved to Vancouver and became a foster kid.

When she left, my great-grandfather went into a rage and tried to kill her. He was choking her when another man intervened and helped her escape.

I asked my mom if she had any connection the Heiltsuk culture growing up. She told me that cultural practices had only become legal again when she was a little girl. She was not taught about her culture or language. She recalled asking older community members about the language but they would not teach her. This is another example of her disconnection.

These are some parts of my First Nations family history and this is a story of loss. Loss of Status, loss of land, loss of family, loss of culture, loss of language, loss of safety, and loss of self. I carry my mother's story inside of me. I have not experienced it firsthand but it lives in me. My mother's experience has been so painful, so embedded with shame, that any connection to my culture that might exist has been overwhelmed by her feelings.

This is part of the secret that I have been so afraid of sharing. What I know about my First Nations culture is broken and fragmented. I only know my connection to my community through pain, shame and chaos. I don't know who I am and I don't know where I fit in. These feelings did not start with me. These feelings have been in my family for generations. I know that there is so much more beautiful richness to being First Nations than pain and suffering. If I continue to hold onto this pain and suffering I will never really be able to connect to who I am as a First Nations man. This is the journey that I am now on.

## **First Therapeutic Enactment**

I first participated in Therapeutic Enactment as a counselling psychology student, not as a client. I was eager to soak in a new educational experience, which I may be able to use in future practice, so I began to volunteer to be a part of therapeutic enactment groups. I approached therapeutic enactment with a curious scepticism. I wondered how acting out new outcomes of traumatic events in the company of relative, all be it supportive, strangers could be helpful? Would the effects last? Would it actually do more harm than good? I did my best to keep an open mind and let my experience determine the answers to these questions. Westwood & Wilensky (2005) state:

Therapeutic Enactment allows participants to enact and reprocess a traumatic event in a safe group setting free from criticism and judgment. Safety within the group is of the utmost importance. Individuals choose a traumatic event from the past, one that troubles them to the present day, a childhood event or a more recent adult wound. Assisted by two therapists, they select and plan together a specific scenario attached to the event as a basis for the enactment. (p. x)

I was impressed by the seriousness with which therapeutic enactment facilitators worked towards creating a safe supportive environment in the groups I took part in. I was also amazed by how quickly participants were able to move into past traumatic events and restructure these events in the ways they wanted to. It seemed like an empowering and authentic intervention. Taking part as a group member I was able to witness participants move quickly and deeply into addressing psychic wounds from their past. It did not take long for me to become a believer in therapeutic enactment. Always, in the back of my mind, I thought of the potential for using this group intervention with Aboriginal clients. I began to

dream dreams of how I might one day be skilled enough to lead therapeutic enactment groups.

After participating as a group member in five enactments, I had the opportunity to attend a four-day professional training on facilitating therapeutic enactment. In order to provide real experiences in leading, each person taking part in this training was asked to come up with a possible enactment scenario that they would be willing to address with the training group. The goal was to take turns leading each other through real supervised enactments. Trusting in the process and the instructors, I was completely open to participating in my own enactment. What I found challenging was I could not think of an issue that I felt I needed to address at this time. I laugh at myself now writing that last sentence. But at the time I really believed it was true.

As a counsellor, I believe in my ethical responsibility to be vigilant of my own mental health. I work hard to stay open to the possibility that I may have areas of my life to grow in. I would not feel comfortable working with clients if I was not willing to work on myself. That would be hypocritical. I have had my share of personal struggles and I have worked hard at challenging myself to face them. I have challenged myself to heal and grow. I would like to believe that if something was affecting me personally or professionally that I would seek support and deal with it head on.

It is humbling for me to admit now the size of my blind spot that I had regarding my First Nations identity. That isn't honest enough. I was in denial about my identity and it was eating me up inside. Part of me wants to beat

myself up for not seeing it before because it is so obvious to me now. A bigger part of me is grateful that I am now on this identity journey.

When I was asked to select a meaningful event in my life to address in an enactment, I drew a blank. I did not know what I could address. I didn't give it much more thought because a scheduling conflict came up and I was not going to be able to attend the four-day training. Regretfully, I put the training and my thoughts of an enactment out of my mind. As it turned out, the scheduling conflict resolved itself and I was able to attend the training on short notice. As a late addition, I had not prepared myself to think of a possible enactment scenario. The numbers of the training group were already set and it was not necessary for me to complete an enactment, however, the training instructor offered to lead me in an enactment if there was time on the last day. I agreed to this. I was not opposed to doing an enactment, I could see the value in it, but I did not know what I could enact that would feel authentic. I went home the first night of the training, sat at my computer and thought about what I could do for my enactment. Here is the first story that came into my head:

*I am seven years old. I am Indian dancing in the Big House in Alert Bay. All of the children from the community school, Native and non-Native are taking part in the dancing. There are community members sitting in the bleachers to watch us dance. I can't remember why but I know my parents aren't there. I am scared. I enjoy Indian dancing but I am scared to dance in the Big House. When it is my turn to come out on the floor with the other boys I am terrified. I am trying to dance but my arms and feet can't do it. As I am making the first turn I look up*

*and see the boy in front of me and he is not dancing. He is walking. He is white and he has blond hair. Now I am walking like him. As I am rounding the fire I see two Indian women standing in the bleachers yelling at us to dance. I am terrified and I feel ashamed. I keep walking.*

Westwood and Wilensky (2005) state: "The witnessing circle of the group symbolically embodies the community at large, which can be particularly healing in shame-based enactments when the trauma is shared" (p. x).

I did not realize when this story came to me that it would be the catalyst for an experience that would shake the foundation of what I knew about my own identity. I never would have imagined the magnitude of emotion that was to come out of me in addressing this incident. It was through this enactment that I was able to connect with the deep feelings of shame I have been carrying my whole life about not knowing who I am as a First Nations person.

I don't remember feeling overly apprehensive when I discussed my plans for my enactment with the pair who would be leading me, but the significance of my memory of Indian dancing in Alert Bay had grown on me through the training week. Maybe going back to this place in my memory would help me to be less shy? I might get the chance to speak to the women who yelled at me to dance. I might get the chance to tell them that the reason that I froze wasn't because I didn't want to dance, it was because I didn't want to do it wrong and I got scared. Maybe they would forgive me? These were the thoughts I was having before I did my enactment. The time arrived for my enactment to begin:

The leader stands and asks me to join him in the middle of the circle. I stand and suddenly I am very nervous. I am rubbing my hands on my jeans and I am blowing out my breath. I get up and move slowly to him. I am aware that I am here to be witnessed again. Witnessed like I was that day in the Big House when I was seven years old. I tell myself that this time things are different. This is my choice, the outcome is controlled and I am not seven years old. But as we begin to walk I am aware of the tension bolting my arms to my sides. I am hiding my eyes in the carpet and my forehead feels especially heavy, it feels like it is pulling me down. I feel a hot weight in my stomach and I am telling myself: "You are a grown man now. You trust the leader. You trust this group. You know better than to close yourself off." If I'm not willing to be in this circle, then how could I ever expect a client to do it? I feel genuine surprise at how much resistance I have to stepping into the circle. And this is why I need to be lead.

I am following him and he is telling me that we are going to go back now. He is going to lead me back, back to age seven, back to Alert Bay and the Big House. I catch myself reflecting how this group of graduate students and professionals is so far removed from anything to do with Alert Bay and the Big House. I am imagining what it would be like to do this enactment with a group of Aboriginals. Would they be supportive? Am I making a big deal over nothing? Worse yet am I using this whole experience in some way to legitimize myself? The hot weight in my guts is shame and it is moving into my chest. I feel frozen.

The second leader senses that I am locking up and she steps in and asks me to identify what I am aware of in my body. Part of me wants to recoil deeper

into my shame because she can see it. I feel weak and the enactment hasn't even started yet. I tell her I feel shame, it feels hot, it is in my chest to the right of my heart. I hold my hand against my chest and it feels good to press against it. She then asks me to look each group member in the eyes and ask for their support in witnessing me. I don't want to take my eyes off the carpet, but I comply. One by one I stand in front of each group member, make eye contact, and ask for support in being witnessed. It is difficult to ask for this support when I feel so embarrassed, but after doing it I feel every member's presence and I believe they are willing to support me. I still feel shame but I am willing to continue.

I walk around the circle with leader and he gently draws out the story we have come to enact. I am talking about growing up in Alert Bay and Indian dancing in the Big House. We are going back. He tells me that we are going to make a sculpture of the event I am describing to him. I begin selecting group members who will support me by playing roles in my enactment.

I ask a man to play the role of me at seven years old. I know I will soon be watching him walking around the fire in the Big House and I am wondering if I will be able to connect with this experience at all? Will I see myself at seven years old in this man? Will it feel artificial? I tell myself to focus and to stop hiding in my head.

Next, I select a man to play the role of my double. I pick this person for their strength and confidence. I tell him this is what I will need from him to support me on this journey. In saying these words I am aware of how weak and

little I am feeling. What has happened to my strength and confidence? I am falling apart and it is embarrassing and humbling.

The stage is set and we are heading to go back to the Big House now. Another man has been chosen to play the role of the white boy with blond hair. Four women have been asked to play women watching the dance. Two of them are Aboriginal and I have asked these women to be the ones that will yell at me. The leader instructs the enactment to begin.

*The drumming and singing start and I am watching myself on the Big House floor. I remember my feet in the cold sand, I look awkward and out of place. I don't know what I am doing. I'm so scared.*

The man playing the role of me at seven years old is asked to make one lap of the circle on his own so I can watch him try to dance and then the leader calls the white boy with blonde hair into the circle.

*I watch myself making the first turn around the fire blazing in the centre of the floor. I see myself looking at the white boy with blond hair realizing that he is not dancing. He is walking. Now I am walking. I am copying the white boy with blonde hair. I am a white boy like him.*

I am standing with the leader and the man playing my double on the outside watching this scene. I feel shame welling up inside of me. The leader asks me to explain what my seven year old is doing? "He is walking", I tell him. "I saw him walking and I just started walking". My voice is trailing off to a whisper like the power is going off inside of me. I feel frozen. I am crying. The leader asks me what I am feeling. I tell him that when I stopped dancing and started

walking that I made a decision to quit. I made a decision to be like that boy walking in front of me. I feel intense shame. The shame is now locked in my throat.

Next the women who are watching the dance and the two Aboriginal women who will be yelling at me are asked to step into the circle. The leader helps to instruct them on their roles. The leader asks them to look at me in a way that I have tried to explain. It is an angry look, a cold look. One woman's eyes grow hard and the tone of her voice is perfect. "C'mon dance. Don't just stand there. Dance!" She knows the look and the voice that I am talking about. She has grown up with it and seen it on many faces. The other woman is not so sure. I sense her nervousness when the leader assumes that she knows what to do. I am connected to her and I can sense her own fears and insecurities about her cultural identity. I guess she is disconnected from her culture like I am. She is exposed as I am exposing myself, yet she does not close herself off from me. I feel her commitment and support and know it must be painful for her to witness this. I need both these women more than anyone else in the room because they understand. They understand in different ways but they understand more than anyone else in the room. I am aware of them and they are aware of me.

*I am walking around the fire. My shoulders are slouched and I can feel the dead weight of my arms dragging me towards the floor. Making the turn around the fire pit, my eyes shift off the back of the white boy in front of me and I look out into the bleachers. I see two women standing up their seats yelling at*

*me to dance. "Dance, c'mon Dance!" I watch them violently gesture their arms, I see judgment in their cold angry faces. "C'mon, dance!"*

She plays the role perfectly, her face, the quality of her voice. It sounds angry but I can hear the depth of pain in it. Years and years of pain. She has a right to be angry with me. She feels judged by me walking and I feel so guilty. I am seven years old again. I am scared, guilty, and embarrassed. My head is down and I am constricting myself with my arms trying to hold it in. My throat is tight and I feel shame.

The leader is now putting me behind the women in the bleachers so I can watch my seven-year-old self react to them. I know I am supposed to see that I was only a little boy and that it wasn't my fault. This is why the leader has placed me here. But all I can feel is deep shame for quitting in front of these women. I am exposed through their eyes and I do not measure up. I want so badly to explain to them how much I care, that I want to do it right, that I'm not just another white person who doesn't give a shit. "I am so sorry that I quit in front of you, please don't judge me." And then it comes. From the bottom of my stomach, up and out my throat it starts to push out like steam. I think of the sound a kettle makes when coming to a boil. From almost a whisper of air, this low moaning is building in one long push of breath and it has turned into deep wail. I am wailing like an old woman would wail. I have never cried like this. What is coming out of my body? It feels old and I am not sure if it is mine. I did not expect this and I don't know where it is coming from. How is this coming out of my body? My face is buried into the shoulders of the women in front of me.

They don't move away and through their presence they comfort me and let me tell this story.

My throat isn't big enough to let whatever it is inside of me out. There is not enough space for it all to come out at once. My throat seals itself off and the wail loses power. I know that the rest is not coming on this day.

I am frozen again. Locked. I feel the intensity of my shame. I feel engulfed. The group and the leader are supporting me to move. They are giving me words to keep me from shutting down. The second lead wants me to confront the women in the Big House who yelled at me. She wants me to stand up for my little boy. She doesn't understand that this is not about these women. This is about how I feel about myself. When questioned I try to explain. "I am supposed to be proud and I don't know how. My mother has always wanted me to know who I am as a First Nations person. She has wanted me to be proud of who I am." The leader and the group members are working with me to draw it out, but I am locked up trying to process what I am feeling and I can't explain it. Then she says it. One of the two Aboriginal women in the group leans in and whispers in my ear "because if I was a real Indian, I'd no how to do this." She has given words to what I couldn't say and I am crying again. I nod my head and repeat the words, "If I was a real Indian, I'd know how to do this." This statement touches the roots of my shame. Who am I to pretend I am an Indian? I am sobbing and I feel so defeated. I tell the group, "It's so easy to be white." I am aware for the first time that I have been hiding this part of myself as a white person. These feelings have been buried deep down in my guts stirring

confusion, doubt and insecurity about who I am. I am terrified of being rejected as a first Nations person. I feel safe in my whiteness where I won't be challenged at the expense of my First Nations identity. It feels so lonely.

The leader uses my double to represent my white identity. This is appropriate. I realize for the first time that I have understood my First Nations ethnicity only through the eyes of a white man. It still feels like a betrayal, in some way, to write those words down even now. The leader asks me to select someone who can represent the role of my First Nations identity. I am aware that there are no First Nations men in our group to choose from, so I select the only man in the group who is not Caucasian. I trust him. I trust the others too, but right now, I can't bare the thought of having to use a white man to play the role of my First Nations identity.

The leader places me between my two selves and asks me to situate myself. I am looking at my First Nations self and I am crying again. I look him in the face and speak to him, "I don't know who you are!" This is a painful admission. I am crying. The leader keeps me present by saying, "and that's what hurts, isn't it?" Yes, this is what hurts. If I don't know my First Nations identity then I can't truly know who I am. I am claiming to be someone I don't know and my shame and fear of rejection keep me from opening myself to him. I have a new painful awareness of myself.

On reflection, the enactment was over for me in this moment of pain filled awareness. I was not expecting to uncover these feelings and I needed time to digest them. This was the catalyst that started my journey.

## **Identity Dream**

I am in the basement of a house that is familiar to me but it isn't mine. The room is carpeted and everything is moist, but it is so dark that I can't see what color the carpet is. It reminds me of an unfinished open playroom. There are other people in the room, but I don't know who they are. I don't know how many people are in the room because it is dark. There is movement in the room, but I am not aware of what is happening. There is only one person I can see in the room and I am touching her. She is one of the Aboriginal women who took part in my enactment. We are in the counselling psychology program together and she is a friend of mine. She is standing and I know that she is pregnant. I know that I am here to deliver her babies. I know that these are my babies, but I have no knowledge of my relationship with this woman. The babies are coming from her body, but I know that they are for me and I must deliver them. I am scared. There are other people in the room and I don't know what I am doing. It feels chaotic. I am suddenly aware that my father is one of the people in the room. He wants to come and take over for me. He is not speaking to me, but I can tell from the way that he is pacing that he wants to take over. I feel angry with him. He is distracted me from what I have to do. I don't say anything to him, but he stays over in the corner of the room like he has listened to what I have said. I can see his face in the little bit of light that shines across the corner. The last thing I remember is that I am delivering the babies. She is standing up and I am on my knees collecting them. There are four or five babies and they do not make a sound when I take them in my arms but they are alive and well.

## **Second Therapeutic Enactment**

It has been ten months since I completed my first enactment and a lot has changed since then. I left the first enactment with an awareness of the shame I carry in my body about my First Nations identity. In the last ten months I have felt like everything I know about being First Nations or more correctly everything I don't know about being First Nations has come undone. I feel unravelled. My first enactment was a discovery of shame. My second enactment will be an attempt to address my shame. This is what I experienced in my second enactment:

I am on my knees and I can feel them pushing me into the ground. I am weak and helpless against them. If I stand up I will destroy them. This is not an option. My great-grandfather has his arms on my shoulders driving me into the dirt. My mother is watching and will do anything to keep me from getting hurt. I feel all of my great-grandfather's rage and hatred in the strength of his arms. I feel his rage boiling in my stomach. I am aware now that it has always been there. My mother fed it to me in little spoonfuls of pain and chaos when I was a little boy.

I know how guilty she feels, how painful this is for her to see, so I cover my mouth with my own hands by telling her that I am ok. I will do what she wants, be what she wants, and I will make her proud. I am going to be good mom. I won't drink mom. I will stay with you in this storm because I know what they did to you and I won't abandon you. Always whispering in my ear is a voice that reminds me I have never suffered. It tells me that you can't be an Indian

unless you suffer. This voice tells me to look at my mom, “Look at what she went through. Look at how they treated her. When has anyone ever treated you like that? You are not an Indian, because you have never been hurt.”

Standing over my great-grandfather is the government. The government’s arms are on my great-grandfather’s shoulders, driving him down on top of me. I am under all of this weight and I am remembering being five years old and I am beating my little black dog Sally. I am smacking her in the face so I can watch her cower. This is what the government is doing to my great-grandfather, smacking him around, pushing him down. And this is what he did to my mom and now it is inside of me. And this is the only story I have ever been told about being First Nations. This is my culture.

I have to stand up. I can’t take this pressure anymore. Now I am standing and I have my great-grandfather by the throat. It scares me how much is inside of me. This is not who I am, this rage is not mine. I don’t want to beat my great-grandfather; there has been enough destruction in my family history. He has been beat enough. I want more than a history of violence and chaos. I know there is more.

The whole time I have my hands on my own great-grandfather’s throat, the government stands there behind him, just out of reach. I say the word, “Government.” I say the word, “Canada.” and “I HATE you! Leave me alone! Pushed and pulled and pressed and I am so sick of this garbage that you spread. Get out! Fuck you! I hate you!” I want to rage, but I don’t want to lose who I am.

## **Healing Dream**

I am watching the man who has led me through both of my enactments. He is alone on a white sandy beach. I can see the ocean behind him and the surf is breaking. He is alone and he is on his knees in the sand. I am watching this man pounding both fists onto the surface of a couple of large smooth black rocks. His fist raise up and they come down like the waves crashing on the beach. Crack! He is breaking the large black rocks with his fists. He is sweating under a hot sun, knees in the white sand, breaking these smooth black rocks to pieces.

## CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

I have taken some time to step away from the stories I have written and I have tried to return to them looking for themes and connections. I consider this analysis to be a continuation of the autoethnographic process and I have made no attempt to generalize my experience in any specific way. My goal is not to come to a defined way of knowing or explaining what my stories should mean to you the reader. My goal in the discussion chapter was to step away, review my stories, and then to deepen the autoethnographic experience. I ask you to continue with me on my journey in this way.

In this chapter I will discuss five themes that I have connected with after re-reading my stories. These themes are: visibility, invisibility, external forces, intergenerational shame, and expectations. After describing these themes I will reflect on my experience in therapeutic enactment and the dreams I had related to each of my enactments.

Rather than providing a more traditional section on implications for future practice and research, I will instead write about my hopes and fears for the future as a student, researcher, and practitioner. It is my intention to present my possible futures to you in this way in the hope of stimulating your own conclusions about the potential implications of others engaging in a journey similar to mine. I will conclude this chapter by suggesting what my personal intentions are for future practice and research and will, once again, leave you the reader to take from that what you will.

## Visibility

The first theme, which I drew from my stories is the effect that being visibly First Nations has had on my sense of identity. Being visible means being witnessed in public ways where I have identified myself, or I am participating as, a First Nations person. Some examples of being visible are addressed in these stories: *Indian Dancing*, *Fashion Show*, *Rediscovery Commercial*, and *High School Graduation*.

Being visible, being witnessed, has generally had the affect of producing feelings of shame in me. I have written about becoming concerned of what people who see me as First Nations think about me representing myself as First Nations. Specifically I am concerned with what other Aboriginal peoples will think of me when I engage in visible ways of being First Nations.

Feelings of shame evoked through being visible have produced thoughts in me such as, “You are not a real Indian”, and “You have no right to participate”. Acts of being visible have further alienated me from a sense of my own First Nations identity. This seems counter intuitive. I would assume that the more acts I engaged in where I am seen as First Nations would help to build my sense of First Nations identity. Instead, the feelings of shame I carry in my body are triggered when I am visible and my instinct is to avoid and withdraw. Generally I feel like I don’t belong and I feel inauthentic.

I do not believe that the acts of being visible themselves are shame producing but instead that my carried shame is triggered when I am engaged in a visible act. One function of carrying this shame is that I have had a tendency to avoid situations where I will be witnessed as a First Nations person. This is not the same as rejecting my culture

or not wanting to take part in my culture. To the contrary, I very much want to take part but I do not feel good enough to participate. In situations where I have felt a sense of responsibility to participate, feelings of shame have generally been evoked.

My hope for the future is now that I have had the opportunity to develop an awareness of how my shame impacts my participation in acts where I am visibly First Nations; I will be able to find ways to address this shame. It has not been for a lack of wanting that has prevented me from participating in events where I am seen as First Nations. My shame has dictated that I am less than, unworthy and that I should not participate. My hope is that I will find ways to address my feelings of shame so that I will be free to participate as I have always longed to do. I feel that my experiences in Therapeutic Enactments as well as the process of writing this thesis have given me insight into how to unpack the shame I have carried regarding my First Nations identity.

### **Invisibility**

The second theme I have taken from my stories involves my experience of being invisibly First Nations. I am often coded as “white” based on the visible colour of my skin. In most circumstances in my life, I have not been seen as First Nations unless I self-identify. I wrote of my experience of surprise and suspicion when a college instructor asked me if I was First Nations based on my physical appearance. The impact that being an invisible First Nations person has made on me has mostly centered on racism and discrimination toward Aboriginal people that has taken place in my presence. I have experienced racism by people who do not see me as First Nations and speak their minds in my presence. An example of a story where I have been

invisible and experienced racism is: *Stag Party*. I would also include racism I have experienced from people who know I am First Nations, or who know I am part First Nations, but whom I believe still do not see me as First Nations. This can be read in stories such as: *Subtle Judgment*, *Invisible*, and *Social Problems*.

Being invisible while being exposed to racism directed towards Aboriginal peoples has seemed to strengthen my sense of First Nations identity. However, I recognize now that this has been only on an intellectual level. I am aware now that racism I have experienced while invisible has actually served to alienate me further from a felt sense of First Nations identity.

When I experience racism that is directed towards First Nations peoples, it makes it very clear to me where my heart is and where my allegiances lie. In essence, if a line was to be drawn in the sand and I was asked to make a choice, I have no doubt I would stand on the First Nations side. I acknowledge here and understand now that my resolve is an intellectualization on a political or social justice level. This action produces a sense of responsibility that I must fight for First Nations rights from the position of ally or advocate. But what is the impact that this form of racism has on me personally?

I believe experiencing racism while invisible has actually further alienated me from my own felt sense of First Nations identity. I have not let it come inside. I have not owned that the racism I have experienced was directed at me, or that it impacts me on a personal level. When a racist comment is made, I feel anger that the perpetrator is speaking about my mother, about my family, about my community, but I have not felt they are speaking about me. I do not claim that experience. Another way to say this is

that I hide in my whiteness when I experience racism. This has not been on a conscious level. I see it as a product of being invisible. I explore this phenomena in my stories: *Myth of Two Worlds* and *My Whiteness*.

Another product of being invisible means that it is my responsibility of how, when and where I choose to identify myself as First Nations. Examples from my stories include: *First Nations Student 101*; where I make conscious decisions to state my ethnicity or in *Stag Party*; where I feel I have no choice but to state my ethnicity. The result of having this option, this responsibility, is that I experience feelings of shame when I identify myself. Shame in the sense that I may not feel I am representing my First Nations ethnicity in an accurate or appropriate manner. This questioning and self-doubt leads to a sense of hyper-vigilance around how I choose to identify myself. Am I taking advantage? Am I being used? Can I trust these people? If I did choose to identify myself was it appropriate? If I didn't choose to identify myself was it appropriate? This kind of self-doubt and constant questioning requires a lot of psychic energy and it prevents me from being free to enjoy and know my sense of being First Nations.

### **External Forces**

The third theme focuses on the external forces that influence my sense of First Nations identity. Part of what I would consider external forces are the everyday interactions with people in my life. This would include all social circles, Native or non-native. How I am seen influences how I see myself. However, when I speak of external forces in this context, I am referring to some of the institutional external forces that in

many ways seem to be beyond my control. Examples of institutional external forces highlighted in my stories are the government and the university.

My experience of coming to terms with being a Status Indian is an example of the government's influence in my identity. The government has been responsible for determining who is and who isn't a Status Indian in my family for at least for at least five generations. The government continues to influence control over my family and me by imposing a system that determines that my children are not Status Indians. I write about the internal impact that being a Status Indian has had on my identity in the story, *Definition of Terms*. My mother wasn't and now is Status; I wasn't and now am Status; my son was Status by mistake and now he is not Status. This is an example of an external force that has impacted the shaping of my identity. I acknowledge that I have experienced being First Nations in a legal sense, but not necessarily in a cultural or even a familial sense. It still hurts me to write this. This context has triggered feelings of shame in me that in some way I am not who I claim to represent. It is important to point out, to remind myself, that this shame I carry is not mine. It is the product of a colonial system. I did not ask to be a Status Indian. I did not set up this system. The external force of the government continues to and will continue to impact my sense of identity. I do not have control of this external force but I do have control over the internal messages and feelings I hold in my body.

The university is an external force that I have more control over than I do with the government. It is my choice to engage with the university, it is my choice to disclose that I am First Nations student or that I am not a First Nations student. That being said, regardless if it is my choice, I can't help but feel defined by the university when I engage

as a First Nations student. I am pondering what it would mean, how I would feel, if I did not identify myself as First Nations in the university. What would this choice reflect in the construction of my identity?

I write about boxes to be checked, funding and grants to be applied for, spaces to be held in programs. I have written about what it feels like to be a First Nations statistic of post-secondary education. It is one of the few places in my life where I have had the experience of being “othered”. At this time, given the political climate of the university, it is often viewed as advantageous to be in possession of this “othered” status.

My experience of being a First Nations student in university is the catalyst that has brought me to the place from where I am writing this thesis. Always, the university is there posing questions to me about how I choose to define myself. This is what I mean when I say that the university is an external force. I have not written extensively on other external forces but any body, organization, institution, which understands its members, employees, and participants through an “othered” lens would produce a similar effect.

### **Intergenerational Shame**

It is difficult to write about intergenerational shame in an objective way. Until I completed my first therapeutic enactment, I was not aware that I have carried emotions in my body that have been passed down to me through my mother. The stories I have written in this thesis reflect my developing awareness of what has been passed down to me through my family history. These stories were written after I completed my first

enactment. I am curious what kind of stories I might have written if I had attempted to do this writing without this new insight into myself. I imagine I would have denied how I have been impacted by feelings of shame and self-doubt. It would have been too overwhelming. I have begun to be able to separate myself from this shame through writing my stories and engaging in Therapeutic Enactment.

The story *Mother's Mirror* highlights the impact that my mother's experience has had on my understanding of my own identity. As a child I picked up on my mother's pain of being rejected and abandoned. I was witness to the feelings of rage that were passed down to her from her grandfather. Through my work in therapeutic enactment I have come to understand that I carry a felt sense of shame; shame in the sense of not fitting in; and shame that I will be rejected. I have addressed my connection to my family history in my stories contrasting growth and loss. I believe I have internalized feelings of shame from at least as far back as my great-grandfather. When I say shame I do not even know if that is what it is, it is hard to describe. I am also aware of my attempt to draw conclusions about something that I do not yet understand. I can only say for certain that something is there and it has impacted my identity.

I believe intergenerational shame passed on to my mother, and now carried by me, have affected how my mother and I interact with our First Nations identity, but in different ways. My mother's story is a story of survival. Her response to being rejected and abused is to assert her First Nations identity. She has had to fight to survive and fight for her place. To my knowledge she has never rejected her sense of Indianness, she strove to possess what has been denied to her.

My feelings of carried shame have produced the opposite effect in me. My feelings of shame keep me from asserting myself. I have strong messages where I tell myself how I don't belong. My story, *What Keeps Me From Writing*, contains examples of some of the messages that I produce as a result of feeling shame. I often feel I have no place, no right to claim my First Nations identity. This stems from a deeper place in me than what I could attribute to the colour of skin or where I grew up.

The dynamic that exists between my mother and me is of her pushing me to claim my own First Nations identity, which in turn has triggered feelings of shame in me. This dynamic is present in the stories: *Fashion Show*, *Rediscovery Commercial*, and *Indian Dancing*. Even when it has not been stated explicitly, I have felt the expectation from my mother that it is important to be proud of being First Nations. I also want this for myself and I am proud of being First Nations, the focus here is on how expectations are transferred intergenerationally. It is my belief that my mother wanted desperately for me to be able to claim who I am in the ways in which she herself was denied. I believe that she has acted this way because she has not wanted her children to hurt in the same ways that she has hurt. Ironically, I believe I have carried her feelings of shame, intergenerational feelings of shame passed to her, which have in turn created in me a sense of not belonging, a sense of not fitting in. My mother's story is a survival story. It is a story of action, a story of overcoming. My story, with regards to my First Nations identity, is a story of inaction, of not taking part, of hiding. The key is that I have wanted to be a part of, but I have never felt like I deserved to take part. I am aware now that these feelings did not originate entirely from my own experience.

## Expectations

The fifth theme that stood out in reviewing my stories addresses expectations. Expectations were not always explicit in the stories but often at the root of tensions in almost every story I can uncover are external or internal expectations. Examples again are in *Fashion Show*, *Rediscovery Commercial* and the *Indian Dancing* stories. I discuss in these stories the expectations from my mother that I should be engaging in these acts of being visibly First Nations. I don't know if this was my mother's intention, or if she ever explicitly stated how I should or should not act, but the internalized message I told myself growing up was "take part, be proud of who you are". Trying to meet expectations like this has put me into shame producing situations. Likewise if I failed to meet the expectation I have also felt shame.

Another example of external expectations is the pressure to represent all First Nations people. I explore this dynamic in *First Nations Student 101*. Part of the way I have justified receiving funding for my education is that I would be paving the way, keeping the channels open for other First Nations students to follow. The expectation I internalized is that if I make mistakes, I will be letting others down. In situations where I have made mistakes, I have felt shame because I feel like my actions did not only effect me, they reflected negatively on other Aboriginal people. I will share here an exchange that is not included in my stories that I had recently with an extended family member. She was asking me about writing my thesis and I confessed to her that I felt it was getting in the way and that I felt guilty for not putting my education to use in the community. "I wish that I was working right now", I told her. She looked at me and replied, "The credentials are important though". I can't be sure of what she meant by

the statement but the story I make up about it, the expectation that I create is, your degree represents the community. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it does create pressure and produce feelings of shame when expectations are not met.

My expectations come from external forces and internal forces. They come from Natives and from non-Natives. While I have only given a few examples in this section, expectations about how to be and who to be, permeate my experience of trying to understand my First Nations identity.

### **Summary of Themes**

The five themes I have listed: visibility, invisibility, external forces, intergenerational shame; and expectations stand out to me as areas that highlight the tensions of my struggle with my identity. It is challenging to try and separate them from one another. I should also stress I am still in the process of untangling these areas and my awareness of them is still quite new. This is a work in progress. The best way I can describe the tensions in my struggle for identity is that there are external forces in my life, how I am seen and defined by others, conflicting with internal forces that are the product of what I call intergenerational shame. External forces that impact my First Nations identity trigger feelings of shame in me. The consequence being that I get frozen, do not engage, become overwhelmed with fear when I am placed, or I place myself in situations that expose my First Nations identity.

## **Awareness of Shame**

The first therapeutic enactment I completed brought to my consciousness that I have carried shame in body that did not belong to me. The shame I refer to as intergenerational shame. I was not aware of the depth of emotion I had stored in my body until it began to come out in my enactment of Indian dancing in Alert Bay when I was seven years old. I have written extensively in my results section of the process of therapeutic enactment and I will not repeat myself here. However there are two key areas in my 1<sup>st</sup> therapeutic enactment that I would like to point out which have had a significant impact on my understanding of my identity.

The first point involves the wailing cry that came out of my throat during this enactment. I was surprised by the way it sounded, it did not feel like mine. I don't know how I can demonstrate to the reader the impact that hearing this cry had on me. I have since watched it on videotape but I distinctly remember hearing it as it was happening and being surprised by it. I have cried many times. I have cried in many different ways. Silent cries, blubbering cries, can't catch a breath cries. But this cry was a wail and it didn't feel like it was mine.

This cry occurred while I was standing behind the women who had told me to dance. I was standing behind the women and watching myself as a boy when it came out of me. It caught me off guard. I know it came from my body but I can only describe the cry that came from my throat as old. It was too deep for the scene I was enacting. Some members of the group described the cry that came from me as having an ancient quality. As I am writing this I am starting to feel self-conscious in trying to describe it to you. I am aware that I do not want to make more of it than it was. I want to be honest.

But I can honestly say to you that this cry that came out of my body had been there for a long time and that I don't believe it belonged to me. That's as truthful as I can be.

I have made a story up about this cry. The story I tell myself is that the cry that started to break free, the wail that was too big for my throat and wouldn't come out all the way, was a cry of carried shame rising from deep in my body.

The second key point from this enactment that I would like to discuss involved me addressing my First Nations identity. Towards the second half of the enactment the leader encouraged me to stand between my white identity and my First Nations identity in order to explore how I positioned myself. This was made possible by selecting members of the group to represent my two identities. I had not considered splitting myself into a First Nations identity and a white identity before in my life. As I wrote about in the story, *Myth of Two Worlds*, I saw myself existing somewhere between two worlds, not two identities. Up until this moment in the enactment, I had only considered my identity as a whole. I was Robb, one person, with one identity. I was First Nations and white, I had access to two worlds, but I was one person. In my enactment I found myself face to face with my First Nations identity for the first time and it was with a deep amount of pain and shame that I came to the realization that I did not know anything about him. I looked at my First Nations identity and cried out "I do not know who you are"!

I feel shame stirring in me as I write the words now. The thoughts start to kick in, even though I have already written about this event. Even though I have already written all of these stories. "You can't tell them you don't know your First Nations identity". The difference for me now is that I know where those messages come from. I have had the

opportunity to address my shame, to confront it. Writing this thesis is about being witnessed and I have nothing to hide from now.

The theme from my first therapeutic enactment is awareness. I developed the awareness of what I carry in my body. I also developed the awareness that I have not been connected to my First Nations identity. These were painful realizations for me and for someone who had felt quite together in his life, it marked a period in my life of coming unravelled. The first therapeutic enactment became the catalyst for me writing this thesis because I didn't feel like I had another option. Once I had received this gift of awareness, I knew I needed to follow through.

### **Addressing the Shame**

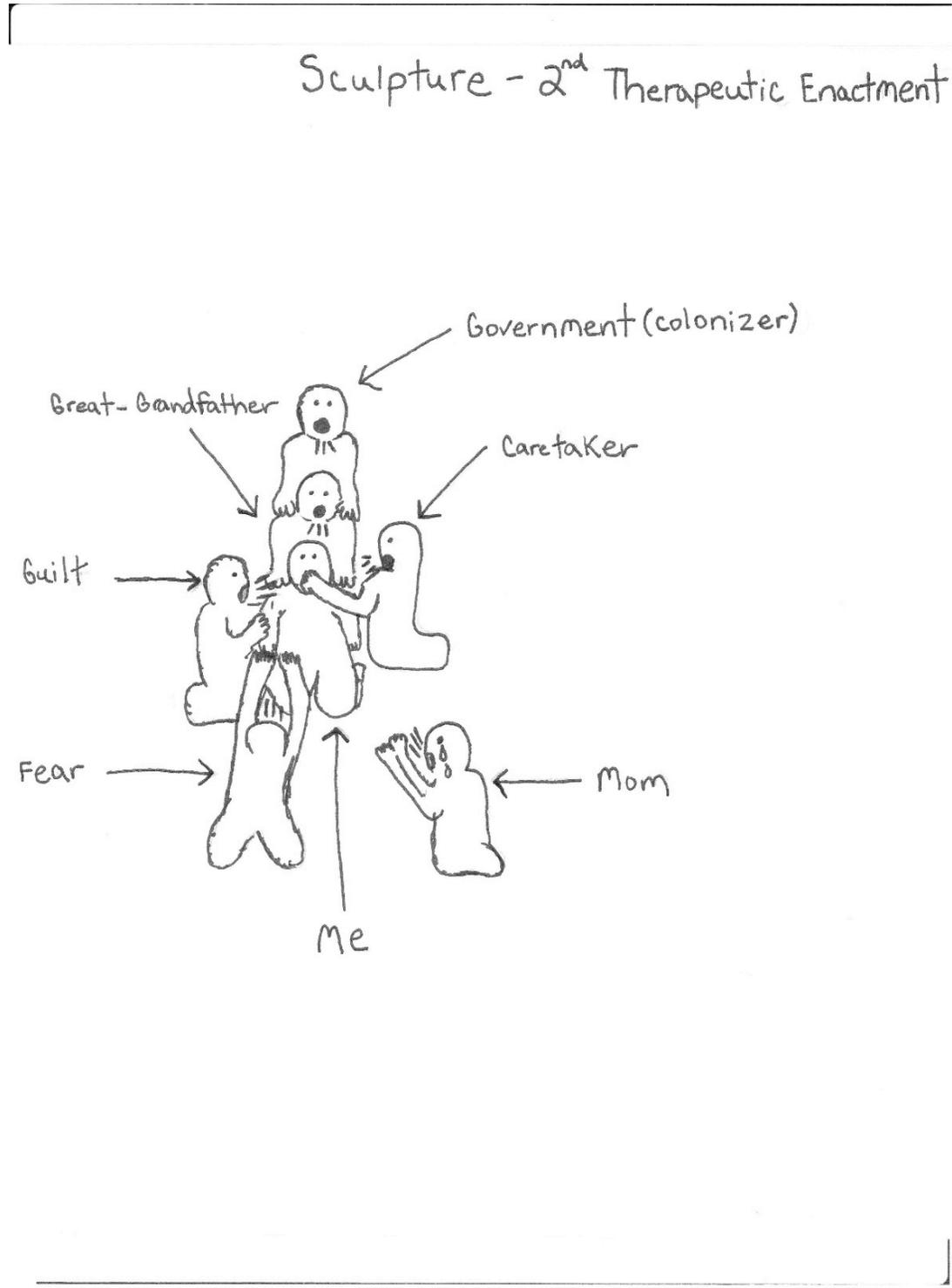
My second therapeutic enactment was much more specific than the first experience. The first enactment was part of a professional training and I did not expect the outcome to have such a profound one on me. The first enactment was exploratory and I was not looking for a specific outcome by engaging in it. My second enactment did have a specific goal. I was looking for an opportunity to expunge the feelings that had remained in my body. During the first enactment the feelings had come up, but I did not feel that they had come out. I was hoping to have the opportunity to address those feelings.

The story about my second enactment is short and abstract. I did this for two reasons. First, I had already written a longer version of my first enactment in order to give a sense of the enactment process. I did not feel the need to repeat this. Second, the next enactment involved the construction of a human sculpture representing the

elements that keep me locked in my shame. Because this process was about addressing these different elements, I allowed myself to be more abstract in exploring my reflection of the process. I was aware of emotions coming out in writing the second enactment story. I was especially aware of my anger towards the government. I must stress that the goal of my second enactment was not to reach catharsis in the resolution of my identity. Catharsis is not the goal of writing this thesis either. This is a work in process, I am on a journey. It is challenging to write about these experiences as if they are in the past tense when this is a process that is still ongoing for me. I feel like I am changing with every line that I write. Every line is eating experience and turning it into story and I am doing my best to stay with the process. But back to the second enactment...

My story of the second enactment is abstract. I have included a picture I drew of the sculpture that I constructed with the support of the group and the enactment facilitators (see Figure 1). I made the decision to include my drawing in this section rather than with my story *Second Enactment* because I was working through emotions while writing that story and I did not want to define the experience with my drawing. It may be helpful to view my drawing while reading that story. I will now discuss the significance of my sculpture.

**Figure 1**  
*Sculpture – Second Therapeutic Enactment*



## **Sculpture Overview**

The drawn people in the sculpture are representations of the elements that keep me shut down. I refer to this as being in my shame. Actual group members, who were physically touching me and speaking to me, represented these elements in the sculpture. This sculpture obviously is not a precise representation of what I feel, but it provides a useful tool for me in being able to separate and explore where my feelings come from. Having the opportunity to be able to name, address, interact, feel and witness these elements has thus been helpful for me. These elements have been given titles, and I will briefly describe each of them; however, I would like to stress that I have been able to incorporate other aspects, themes, and labels into these general elements. Some of the titles, "Guilt" "Fear" "Caretaker" represent more than these labels imply. I will now describe the elements of the sculpture as seen in Figure 1.

### **Government (Colonizer)**

This element represents the external institutional force I have written about earlier in the discussion. This element represents the historical, present and future colonization of Aboriginal peoples. The group member who I asked to play this role for me embodied in person the man who was responsible for chaos, turmoil and upheaval through multiple generations in my family. The embodiment of this element represents a man who decided and continues to decide who is and who isn't an Indian through my family history. This man has his arms on my great grandfather. He is pushing my great grandfather beating him down. He represents the source, the root of the turmoil and

destruction which has affected my family history. I see him standing over my entire sculpture, ever present.

For the first time in my life I am claiming the personal effect this element has had on me, what this element has taken from me. I am crying as I write this. I am angry. I am angry at what this element has done to my family. I have been angry before but only standing on the outside looking in. I have been angry as a sympathizer, angry as an advocate, angry at the colonization and oppression of Aboriginal peoples without including myself. I have never been open to my anger for what has been personally taken from me. I am in it now, and I am angry and I am still getting used to feeling this way.

### **Great Grandfather**

Underneath the weight of the government is my great grandfather. He is pushing me into the ground as he is being pushed from above. I have written about my great grandfather in *Story of Loss*. When I was writing about my great grandfather in the second enactment story I recalled an image of me beating my dog as a young child. I am ashamed to admit I did this. I connect this image to my great grandfather. I believe I experienced his rage through my mom. I believe somewhere as a young boy I made a decision that to act in anger equalled chaos and I shut a part of myself down. I believe I have carried his feelings of shame, which he acted out with rage and abuse and inflicted on my mom. I see him as a spreader of violence, chaos and abuse. I experience him as a self-loather. When I finally broke free of these elements in my enactment I found

my hands around my great grandfather's throat. I never met him but he was the man who hurt my mom and for years I wished I could go back and fix it for her. Protect her.

I feel I was able to give him back his rage in my enactment. I do not need to carry his shame anymore. I feel love for my great grandfather. I know my mom loved him deeply. As she grows and I grow I would like the opportunity to know some of the good things about him because all I have been able to feel is my mother's overwhelming pain. In bottling my great grandfather's shame inside of me, I have cut myself off from learning about my family history, where I come from, and who I am. When I am free of this shame I have hope that I will be able to know this part of myself that I have shut out. I am aware in writing this that I am drawing a strong connection between my great grandfather and myself. In reality, my family history is much more complex and attributing all of this emotion to my mother's grandfather may not be fair. I want to be clear when I say that I believe my great grandfather represents something that I am in the process of trying to understand. My analysis is not to be taken literally.

## **Guilt**

I am still not sure about the labelling of guilt. This element represented for me the message that I could not feel because I have never suffered. Up until this enactment I had been focused on how good my childhood was. I had been focused on how many opportunities I have had. I had been focused on how I didn't have to suffer like my mother. Again it is hard for me to admit that on an unconscious level I have equated being First Nations with suffering. How could I be First Nations if I have never suffered? I cannot think of making this statement to someone "Being First nations is

equal to suffering". I would be the first to say how inappropriate that is. How there is so much more to being First Nations than suffering. Yet my experience through my mom, and many of the feelings I have picked up and stored have been about suffering. I have told myself that I can't be a part of First Nations experience because I haven't suffered and in doing so I recognize now that I have cut myself off from knowing any of the good parts of who I am as a First Nations man. When I am able to face and confront this element I have labelled guilt, I am able to start to connect with a new part of who I am.

### **Fear**

The element labelled fear represents how I see myself and how others see me as a mixed race person. Half in, half out, half-breed. What will people think of me? The person playing this element as seen in the sculpture is further away than the other elements. Half in, half out. This element is pulling at my arms inducing confusion and creating fear. Fear that I don't really belong. Fear that I will be judged. This element represents hesitation, and immobility. I am still confused in some ways by the label of fear because this element, like the others is a function of shame. It is a representation of not feeling like I belong, not knowing my place.

### **Caretaker**

The caretaker is a representation of the role I played with my mom. Similar to guilt giving me messages, the caretaker wants to protect my mom at all costs. When my mother acted out in anger when I was a child, the caretaker learned how to stay quiet, learned how not to rock the boat. When my mom was triggered in her shame or

pain, the caretaker learned how to take those feelings in. When the person who embodied my caretaker knelt beside me, I placed their hands over my mouth. Being the caretaker for my mom has denied the vocalization of my own experience. I have not been able to claim my own First Nations identity because I am overwhelmed by my mom's experience. Through this second enactment I have been able to see the effect that my caretaker has had on me. I see how I have stifled my own growth because I could not see past my mother's wounds.

## **Mom**

Mom was part of my sculpture as a witness. I needed to see her there in order to be able to push through and focus on myself. Through the enactment mom was there in her pain and her tears because she was seeing how I was hurting. She was there to feel guilty. She was there to tell me she was a bad mother. My mom is not a bad mother. I know the last thing my mom ever wanted to do was hurt me. I know she wanted desperately to protect me from all of the deep wounds she experienced. My mom wanted desperately to provide my siblings and I with a life and opportunities she never had. She wants me to be proud of who I am, she wants me to be confident in myself. I see from this sculpture how my caretaker has held onto all of those messages from my mom so tightly because the caretaker did not want her to feel guilty. The caretaker did not want to see her in any more pain. This dynamic between me and my mom, this need for separation is not specific to a First Nations context. It does however represent an element that has been woven into how I understand my First Nations identity.

## **Sculpture in Action**

After the sculpture was created piece by piece, I was placed into the sculpture and it was brought to life. All of the elements were pushing in on me, pushing me into the ground. All of them were shouting at me at once and I couldn't hear myself think. I couldn't push back against the weight, I felt completely immobilized. The leader helped to guide me through this part until I was finally able to break free and confront each element. This breaking free was both symbolic and physical. I experienced a physical sense of breaking free and separating the elements.

## **Sculpture Metaphor**

The sculpture is imprinted in my mind. I have found it to be a very useful tool to be able to locate when I have been triggered by feelings of shame. Being able to separate and untangle the different elements is the key for me in being able to move out of a state of paralysis. The goal of the sculpture was not catharsis. I am still working through these elements. My goal is participation. I want to participate in my First Nations culture and community, on my own terms. I want to participation uninhibited by shame. When shame is triggered I now have some tools to address it.

## **Therapeutic Enactment Dreams**

If interested, the reader can guess as to the significance of the dreams I had after completing each of my therapeutic enactments. I would not feel comfortable breaking these dreams down. I can however say that each of these dreams has left me with a meaningful impression. I will share with you what each dream represents to me.

The first dream is meaningful to me because it represents a journey of coming to understand my First Nations identity. The second dream is meaningful to me because it represents working through the shame that holds me back.

### **Implications for My Future in Education, Research and Practice**

The stories I have written for this thesis, the stories you have read, could be taken as just that. Stories. They are not complete, they are subjective, and they do not explain or define who I am. Through the process of writing these stories, in moments of self-doubt, I have often considered how they could be considered anything more than rambling thoughts entered in a journal or diary. I can say that it has been therapeutic for me to have written these stories. I have gained a deeper understanding of my identity as I have poured myself onto these pages. Many times I had to stop, wipe away tears, and force myself to return to something I did not want to face. In a sense the person who is writing to you now is not the same person who sat down and wrote the first story. You have served as a witness to my struggle, and in being witnessed I have been able to let go of some of the things that have been holding me back. I have found value in the process of writing about my experience and struggle with identity issues. The question I am left with is what am I providing for you the reader? I am taking something away, but what is my contribution?

I think about what your stake is? What were you hoping to gain by engaging in my writing? We have come to the place in the thesis where it is my job to highlight any implications for future practice and research. How can I step away far enough from my stories to suggest how they might be useful to others? Who am I to generalize my

experience into anything other than my experience? I feel the self-doubt creeping up on me again but I am going to continue to push through.

So rather than shift away from the personal I would like you to consider the implications for counselling psychology from my point of view. I have a stake in counselling psychology with a focus on how counselling psychology relates to First Nations peoples. I claim the roles of First Nations student, First Nations researcher and First Nations practitioner. You as the reader now have a sense of how I have struggled in these roles, the tensions and inner-conflict that have festered as a result of my claims. Yet still I claim them. These roles are not to be given to me or taken away. I am working at how to own them in a way that is authentic. I have claimed my struggle with how I have come, and how I will come, to define myself. I have engaged in this thesis, researcher as subject, because I did not know where else to go. I have felt compelled to address my struggle with my identity before I sit down with clients and interview participants. The potential consequences, the risk to destroy or be destroyed, are too high. I feel a strong desire to achieve clarity on the internal and external forces that have led me to the place and to this point in time. The best way I can describe these internal and external forces is to say I have felt like a wet cloth being wrung out by someone else's hands. So as we continue into the implications for future practice and research, come with me while I imagine my future. Think of your stake, and how my imagination might touch, might inform your understanding in a new way. I now will imagine my future in education, research and practice through lenses of fear and hope.

### **Fear of the Future (First Nations Student)**

I have decided to continue with my education in counselling psychology. The university is currently pushing for an increase in First Nations students and I know this has to have been a factor in my acceptance to this program. I have gained access under a specific context. I am other, but who am I to complain? I wonder what the other students think about me? I wonder what the instructors think about me? What was the discussion in the admission meeting when my application came out? What went unsaid and how will what went unsaid influence my time here in this program? Am I being paranoid? Screw them anyways. I'm here. I have a job to do and I have responsibilities. I owe my mother. I owe my band. I am creating space for the next First Nations student to come after me. I have an agenda to push forward. I am not the best person for the job but I'm here and a lot is expected of me. I need to focus on First Nations issues and make an impact.

Should I get involved with more aboriginal organizations on campus? What will it look like if I don't become involved? But what will happen when I show up and they find out I am not really connected to my culture? I'll be the whitest one there. I should be learning more about my culture. It is my responsibility. No one is going to challenge anything I say in my program. There won't be any First Nations content. They will be looking to me to educate them. I have to figure this out on my own.

### **Hope for the Future (First Nations Student)**

I am continuing my education in counselling psychology. I acknowledge that I am here because I am First Nations. This isn't the only reason but that in and of itself

has merit. The university wants something from me and I am here to get something from the university. I deserve to be here. I can't control what other students or the instructors think about me. The level of involvement I have with my culture, the percentage of my blood that is First Nations are non-issues. I will seek support in making sure I am clear on these points.

I want to get more involved in Aboriginal organizations on campus. I want to interact with other First Nations students. I will remain respectful of others, but not at the expense of my own voice. I will no longer be passive. I will not let my fear of what other's think of me determine my level of involvement. I want to learn about who I am without having to prove who I am.

I am not responsible to educate non-Aboriginal students and instructors on what it means to be First Nations. I am not going to waste my energy being hyper-vigilant about how I decide how to present my identity.

I acknowledge that I cannot remove myself from the political agenda I represent in being a First Nations student. I give myself permission to feel a sense of responsibility to my family and my community. I will not however let this sense of responsibility overwhelm my sense of self. I need to practice self-care and remind myself that I will not be everything to everyone.

### **Fear of the Future (First Nations Researcher)**

I have selected a research topic that will focus on a counselling related Aboriginal issue. I am nervous about actually engaging with First Nations communities and research participants. What will they think when they are informed that a First Nations

researcher will be working with them and then they see how white I am? How will it affect them, what will they think of me? Will they accept me? It will be expected that I will conduct appropriate research because I am First Nations myself but I don't really know anything. It will be assumed that I have access to the community but what if I am rejected?

I will unconsciously avoid or dismiss counselling psychology research literature that examines and supports traditional healing methods because these methods are not applicable to my own experience of being First Nations. I am not connected to my culture so how can I understand counselling from a traditional perspective? If I involve myself in learning about any of healing practices that are traditional I will be misrepresenting myself. It is not my place to learn or understand so I will take my research in another direction. Or maybe I should throw myself into learning about traditional healing practices in order to legitimize myself. Maybe I should start going to the sweat lodge at the longhouse. I need to learn how to sing and drum. But what will they think of me if I go to the longhouse? Maybe instead I better seek out research topics which function to understand mixed-race Aboriginals in an attempt to legitimize my own identity through my research.

I am terrified of seeing my name in print as a First Nations researcher or an Aboriginal academic. Do I deserve these titles? Anytime I present my research at a conference, anytime my picture is posted on a website, people will be able to see how white I am. Who is he to claim that he is First Nations? That guy looks pretty white. How am I going to represent myself?

### **Hope for the Future (First Nations Researcher)**

I will be respectful of the communities and participants I seek to conduct research in and I will also be respectful to myself. I will be comfortable in my own skin, listen to feedback from the community and participants, own what is mine and leave behind what isn't. I will research topics related to First Nations counselling because I feel they are important and valuable free from the expectation that I should be researching First Nations counselling issues because I should be researching First Nations counselling issues.

I will open myself to the potential for learning about traditional healing methods secure in the knowing that I am approaching them with respect and a desire to understand what works for Aboriginal people. I will not get caught up in how I might be viewed if I become interested in researching traditional healing practices. I will not question myself that I am trying to be "more Indian" by the research choices I make. I will research topics of interest to me because I believe they are valuable, not because I am looking for a place to legitimize my identity. I will not feel that I have taken advantage of a funding resource that I am entitled to apply for. I will commit myself to achieving my goals of being of service to my First Nations community because this is what is in my heart, not because I owe a debt for having the opportunity.

### **Fear for the Future (First Nations Practitioner)**

I have been hired by an Aboriginal organization and I am working in a First Nations community as a counsellor. I am afraid of working with Aboriginal co-workers because they will judge me for looking so white. I will not open myself up to them. I am

afraid to work with clients because I do not want them to feel cheated when they were told that they were getting an Aboriginal counsellor and then they see me. I will spend my sessions with my clients wondering what they are thinking about me rather than focusing on them. I will shift the counselling sessions away from areas that are personal to me and may expose my own identity insecurities. I will avoid implementing traditional healing methods into my practice because I do not want my co-workers and clients to think I am trying to be “Indian”. Or maybe I will implement traditional healing methods that I don’t understand because I think this is what the clients want. I will isolate myself from the community I am working in because I am afraid that I will not fit in.

### **Hope for the Future (First Nations Practitioner)**

I have been hired by an Aboriginal organization and I am working in a First Nations community as a counsellor. I will not pre-judge my co-workers by fearing they will judge me. I will be open about my identity and background and maintain appropriate boundaries to look after myself. I will not pre-judge my clients by fearing how they will receive me. I will conduct myself ethically and focus my energy on the client, not myself. I will be open to addressing my identity, background and ethnicity with my client as it is relevant to the counselling relationship and when it is the client’s agenda and not my own. If I feel triggered by something in the counselling relationship I will seek consultation and supervision as I would in any other counselling context. I will not appropriate traditional healing methods to appear more “Indian” in my counselling sessions nor will I close myself off to potentially beneficial interventions because I am

afraid of how it might look. I will follow my heart and work to be of service to my clients as I would in any counselling context.

## CHAPTER 5: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Losing My Way

Indigenous identity is a truly complex and somewhat controversial topic. There is little agreement on precisely what constitutes an indigenous identity, how to measure it, and who truly has it. Indeed, there is not even a consensus on appropriate terms. Are we talking about Indians, American Indians, Natives, Native-Americans, indigenous people? Are we talking about Sioux or Lakota? Navajo or Dine? Chippewa, Ojibwa, or Anishnabe? Once we get that sorted out are we talking about race, ethnicity, cultural identity, tribal identity, acculturation, enculturation, bicultural identity, multicultural identity, or some other form of identity? (Weaver, p. 2001, 240)

Defining Aboriginal identity is challenging. I am the focus of my study and through this deeply personal journey I have come to the awareness that I will not be defined in the literature. That sounds political. It sounds like I am bucking the system - trying to bite the hand that feeds. It's not my intention to raise the cry against the voices of privilege and power that do not speak to my experience. But my stake is so personal. I have reviewed ethnic, biracial, multiracial and bicultural identity development literature and none of these areas seem to address the complexities of trying to understand my First Nations identity. I found myself continually overwhelmed in trying to choose what path to take. There are multiple lenses in the literature with which to view myself. I have been afraid that I will select literature that misrepresents me and other Aboriginal people. Because Aboriginal identity is complex and challenging to define, the volume of literature that might apply, but is not specific to Aboriginal peoples is high. Choosing where to look has been difficult. Because I have such a personal stake in my study I have struggled with having to take a piecemeal approach to this literature review without losing my sense of integrity.

Ponterotto and Park-Taylor (2007) suggest that to understand ethnic identity requires knowledge of: social identity theory, group identity theory, ego identity theory and cross cultural research on the process of cultural identity adaptation. While there is much overlap between the areas in the literature I have looked at, ethnic identity is only one lens I have selected to view myself with. Reviewing literature in social psychology, developmental psychology and cross cultural research is beyond the scope of my study. I have felt a responsibility to review each area I have looked at in the literature thoroughly. I have struggled with the idea of only selecting a few identity development models, my first reaction is that I need to take another year to do this research properly. I ran this idea by my wife and she snapped me back into reality. "Your only writing a master's thesis, just get it done". I know she is right and this literature should not have to define me personally but every choice I make feels like I am being forced into defining myself. I have had difficulty pulling myself out.

I have visited the areas Ponterotto and Park-Taylor (2007) suggest. I have been finding myself in bits and pieces as I clumsily shuffle across the social sciences trying to pull together some logical flowing analysis to frame my story. But when I focus on the literature I stop being an expert in myself and instead start trying to prove my mastery of the literature on identity.

Here is my fear. When I tell you where I've been looking in the literature I will be making choices in how I define myself to you. I don't want to squeeze myself into a box. My study has been facilitated by me promising to be as honest as possible in showing you who I am. These are the rules of engagement. What I am struggling with in my

literature review is another example of what I have been struggling with through the stories you have already read. I feel trapped.

If I start my literature review by citing Erik Erikson (1968) because he is the big name and I've been taught that it's good to start the literature review with a big name and funnel in from there, I will not be true to myself. Erick Erikson doesn't relate to my story. Not right now. Not in this context. The choices I have to make are difficult.

My thesis is a story about identity. How I choose to examine my own identity depends on the context, how I am located by choice or circumstance. I have struggled with what choices to make in examining my identity. I struggle with how I will present myself to you. Which lens do I choose? Do I choose to examine my identity as a whole? I am Robb. Am I me? Do I choose to examine my identity through my ethnicity? I am Robb. Am I First Nations? Do I choose to examine my identity through the ethnicity of my parents? I am Robb. Am I biracial? Do I choose to examine my identity through acculturation? I am Robb. Am I from two worlds?

I am Robb. I am a Status Indian. I have white skin. I am a Heiltsuk band member. I live on my reservation. I grew up off my reservation. I don't speak my language. I am a First Nations student. Who am I? Where do I look?

In order to carry out this literature review I have attempted to locate myself as a counselling psychology student completing a master's thesis and I have tried my best to avoid being sucked into my personal world. This had been challenging, maybe the most challenging aspect of writing this thesis. In staying true to the autoethnography I have documented my struggle of how to engage in this literature review. Before I proceed with my literature review I will provide two stories that I wrote in an attempt to

enter the literature and separate myself. These stories are: *This is not a Literature Review* and *Google Earth*.

### **Not a Literature Review**

The anger inside us has accumulated generation by generation and because it was left to decay, it has become hatred. By its very nature, racism only permits the victimized race to engage that hatred among it's own. Lateral violence among Native people is about our anti-colonial rage working itself out in an expression of hate for one another. (Maracle, 1996, p. 11)

I'm sorry Lee Maracle, I feel guilty for taking your words. They remind me of my great grandfather and my family history. You write so beautifully it brings me to tears. I feel compelled to tell you I know one of your sisters. Why do I need to try and qualify myself to you? Why do I always feel the need to present myself on my knees?

I first read you when I took a sociology class at the University of Victoria: Feminist theory. Maybe I am too sensitive -- overly concerned with appropriating your voice. Years of university class small groups listening to white students lament their lack of Canadian identity cautions me not to take over. "Enough with the minorities, what about me?" Not that I have ever been silenced, but that is the point.

I was thinking about something you wrote about European philosophers creating the myths of Natives as "savage" and "noble". I couldn't find the place were you wrote it so I am not allowed to use it but the memory of what you wrote hit home. As white and invisible as I am I still feel it. Where is all the space that should exist between reverence and disgust? "Oh that's why" heard from under the breath of a girl who found out I was First Nations after she knew me as a self-destructive alcoholic. I put her in the

same file as the new age counselling student who is drawn to me through his own vision of my apparent mysticism.

I didn't mean to start my literature review by talking to you Lee Maracle but this is not a literature review. I have been reading Waldram's *Revenge of the Windigo* (2004) and he told me the names of those European philosophers I first heard about from you. It triggered my memory and I went looking for you and found another quote instead which reminded me of my great grandfather. I will say goodbye now.

Thomas Hobbes is credited with the idea of Native as savage, while the Native as noble savage is attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Waldram (2004) articulates how these myths stem from a dichotomy in the discourse of the primitive:

Primitiveness is not simply a sign of inferiority, a lack of cultural and intellectual development, or evidence of an earlier stage of human cognitive evolution. Primitiveness exemplifies what the West has lost, what it pines for and laments and, in some ways, what it hopes to recover. (p.10)

And this fits. This speaks my truth. I feel it from both sides. When I hear a racist quip. When I am used by non-Native people who want to connect to something primordial that is missing in them. And I'm an easy target: so safe, so polite, and so white. You'd think my appearance would ruin the authentic experience? But they still come. I'm the type of Indian that gets invited by white friends to go see movies like *Smoke Signals* and *Once Were Warriors*.

I can't keep my lens is out of the personal and I feel like I will never be able to engage in the literature. I am guilty of wildly drawing casual connections, mind reading, making assumptions. My experience is not representative of appropriate social science research. This is not a literature review. Waldram (2004) makes the observation that

the fields of psychology and psychiatry are not as receptive to postmodern critiques as the field of anthropology. Waldram (2004) states:

My interest is in understanding how knowledge about Aboriginal peoples, how the 'truth' of their mental states, has been generated by non-Aboriginal scholars, and also how this truth has been accepted uncritically by many scholars of Aboriginal heritage. (p. 10)

I am inspired to take a critical position like Waldram, but at the same time I am hesitant to engage. The stakes for me are so personal that I can't stand outside of it. I am constantly questioning the position I take when I engage in the literature. How am I representing myself? When I criticize literature involving Aboriginal people I am taking a position and I am concerned with the how my position will be viewed. Do I represent my family, the people of my community? How will what I say reflect on them? What about Aboriginal people in general? If I am making an academic contribution, what are the implications for how what I say will be used to view other Aboriginal people? I want to take a critical position, but I can't walk away from this at the end. This is so much more than a research topic to me. Smith (1999) points out the challenges that 'Native' intellectuals face in negotiating their academic and indigenous positions. Smith explains: "these producers and legitimators of culture are the group most closely aligned to the colonizers in terms of their class interests, their values, and their way of thinking" (p. 69). This is true for me and I am concerned with how I will represent myself. Can I engage in the literature and remain true to myself? Can I engage in the literature without risking the further marginalization of the Aboriginal people I will inevitably be forced into representing. I am struggling with my position as student in the university producing knowledge in a thesis. I don't want to do it. I fell confused and lost and I don't know what to do. This is not a literature review. I can't stop thinking about my

great grandfather, my family history, and how far this academic exercise is removed from my experience. I need to find a way to pull myself out.

## **Google Earth**

In a moment of procrastination during this writing process I found myself fooling around with Google Earth for the first time. From satellite images of our world at large you can zoom right in to find the place you are looking for. It is scary and fascinating technology. I looked for my home address first...

Zoom out to the world, scroll over Western Canada and zoom in; scroll to the edge of the Central Coast of British Columbia, zoom in; the world is large and the zooming isn't precise, adjust. I came in a little low off my target so my hand pushes the mouse and as it rolls the cursor scrolls and I am moving North on a trip I have taken many times. Push the cursor North through Fitz Hugh sound, West into Lama Passage, North towards Campbell Island. I am thinking of the many times I have taken this same trip on my family's fishing boat. Zoom into memory; I am sitting with my dad in the wheelhouse of the M.V. Good Partner and I am looking out on the water trying to spot salmon jumping. We are discussing what our fishing season might be like. He is drinking coffee and sucking on scotch mints. I am listening to the comforting rumble of the diesel engine slowly powering us on towards Bell Bella. This is the community I now live in. This is the community where my mom was born.

Zoom out of memory; find Campbell Island, zoom in on the community of Bella Bella. Here is my street, the images won't zoom anymore but I can place my house where it should be on my street. Zoom into memory; I am standing at the kitchen sink peeling carrots for supper. My three-year-old son is putting a puzzle together on the

floor and my one-year-old daughter is trying to get into the garbage can. I am fending her off with my foot. Now the three of us are standing at the window; we are watching mommy walking down the street coming home from work. Zoom out of memory; I scroll along the streets of Bella Bella; zoom into memory; here are the houses of relatives and friends. I can smell baked bread and wood smoke and barbequed salmon; I can see my uncle George mending a gillnet on a Sunny day; I am watching kids play on the beach and splash in the water during summer time. I am collecting starfish on the beach with my cousin; scroll to Martin's Island and I can see the remnants of the broken down shack my mother lived in with her grandfather. This is the island that they lived on as squatters because they were non-Status Indians. This is the same island she bought from Shell Oil in the early 1990's in an ultimate act of reclaiming herself. Zoom out of memory and I back sitting at my desk starring at a computer screen with the mouse in my right hand.

Zoom out of Bella Bella and the map expands again. The lens is getting wider and now I can see the Central Coast of British Columbia again. Zoom out; and now I see the Province of British Columbia; scroll the mouse and find the North end of Vancouver Island. Zoom in; here are the communities of Port McNeil, Sointula and Alert Bay. Zoom in; here is the mouth of the Nimpkish River. Zoom into history; this where my grand father Baron Lansdowne built a homestead after immigrating to British Columbia from England; a homestead on land given to him by the Government of Canada without the consultation the 'Namgis people. This is the river my grandfather was born on; this is the river he knew every inch of; the river my uncle Donny drowned in; the river that runs through the veins of my family. This is where my family would

have starved, if the 'Namgis people hadn't helped them through the winter – the winter my great grandfather went off to fight in the war. Zoom out of history; scroll across the water to Cormorant Island and the community of Alert Bay. This is where my father was born. Zoom in on the map; scroll along streets with names I have never heard of; I can picture every inch of. This was my home as a boy. Scroll along Front Street from the ferry terminal; zoom into memory; I can see the white painted bricks of St. Michael's Residential School. Zoom out of memory; scroll onto Park Street; zoom into memory; I am on the Indian side of town. I am walking up the hill towards the soccer fields and the Big House. This is the spot where I once saw over a hundred eagles flying in the sky. I can look to my left and see the hospital where my grandfather died a few years ago. Walk up the hill and I can see the big house. Zoom into memory; I am in the big house again and I can see myself walking around the fire instead of dancing. Zoom out of memory; scroll back down Park Street, back to the place where Front Street turns into Fir Street and I am heading to the white side of town. Zoom into memory; I am seven years old and I am trying to ride my bike home and the wind is blowing so hard that I have to walk. I can smell and taste the salt spray from the ocean; the giant trees behind my grandfather's house are dancing in the wind; zoom out of memory; scroll along Fir Street up along Poplar Road then onto Balsam; zoom into memory; I am walking down the road to my house, picking salmon berries and wondering if my mom will be mad that I am late for dinner, again. This is the house that my father built on the land that he bought with his fishing money when he was a teenager. Zoom out of memory. Zoom out until I can see all of Cormorant Island, all of Alert Bay. Scroll to the Indian side of town. Scroll to the white side of town. Scroll to the Indian side of town. Scroll to the

white side of town. Zoom out; I am sitting at my desk staring at a computer screen with my right hand on the mouse.

I am zooming out until I can see the entire world again. I can travel wherever I want. Scroll over North America; zoom in on the West Coast of the United States; scroll over Los Angeles, scroll north. Find the community of Northridge and zoom in; find the campus of Cal State Northridge, the University where my best friend works as a basketball coach. Scroll to his bachelor apartment, which he has appropriately dubbed the sweatbox. Zoom into memory; we are in grade four and we are the dumb kids that get sent to learning assistance where Mrs. Austin gives us orange tic tacs for getting the right answer; we are sixteen years old and we are on the playground outside our old elementary school shooting hoops in the dark using the headlights of his mom's Toyota Corolla; we are 18 years old standing outside a grocery store in Twain Harte, California on our first real road trip. We are watching two little blonde boys wearing pink and blue feathered Indian head dresses and one is grinning at me in a way that needs no explanation; now I am listening to him give the best man speech at my wedding and now I am telling him on the phone that I have named my son after him. This is a relationship where race and ethnicity are never questioned and a place where I never have to think about my identity. Zoom out of memory; I am sitting at my desk staring at a computer screen my right hand is on the mouse.

Zoom out again to the world at large and I can travel wherever I like. Scroll to the country of New Zealand and zoom in; here is the city of Wellington; zoom in and scroll and find Cuba Street. Zoom in; I am surprised to find a virtual picture of Cuba Street. This computer technology is scary and fascinating. I scroll down this virtual street until I

find what I am looking for: the bucket fountain. Zoom into memory; it is December, 1999 and I am sitting in the top bucket of this bucket fountain on Cuba Street in Wellington, New Zealand. I am wearing nothing but my underwear and I am soaking wet. I have been out all night drinking whiskey and dancing in nightclubs. I have eaten a steak for breakfast and washed it down with a glass of champagne. I am sitting in the top of this bucket fountain on Cuba Street looking down at my friend who I am traveling with and our new Kiwi buddies. I am sitting in the top of this bucket fountain in the early morning light, soaking wet, wearing nothing but my underwear and I am laughing. I am laughing because for a moment I am free. Free to not think about who I am or who I am going to be. Who am I supposed to be? I am laughing because I am on the other side of the world, far away from the people I love and everything that I know and I don't have to think about my family history with alcohol or how my behaviour would break my parent's hearts. Zoom out of memory; I am sitting at my desk starring at the computer screen my right hand on the mouse.

Zoom back out to the world at large. This could go on forever. Scroll on to Canada; scroll to British Columbia; scroll to Vancouver. Zoom in to Point Grey; zoom in on UBC; scroll over the Scarfe building and zoom into reality. I am sitting at my desk in this building; it is 4:00 am and this thesis is still not finished. I am thinking about Google Earth and remembering the words to a song by Ani DiFranco. I hope I have found the way to enter my literature review.

## Zoom

From the depth of the Pacific to the height of Everest and still the world is smoother than a shiny ball-bearing. So I take a few steps back and put on a wider lens and it changes your skin, your sex, and what you are wearing. Distance shows your silhouette to be, a lot like mine. Like a sphere is a sphere and all of us here have been here all the time. (Ani DiFranco, "Everest", 1999)

This is a literature review. Consider the last story, *Google Earth*, and the song I was thinking of by Ani DiFranco. I was thinking of these lyrics specifically, "Take a few steps back and put on a wider lens." I have been thinking about the metaphor of lens and zoom and the idea came to me to apply it to this literature review. I will use this zoom feature in an attempt to balance the requirement of writing an academic literature review without having to lose myself to this process. It is my belief that using the zoom function will provide the reader with a deeper understanding regarding some of the choices I have made in this literature review. I will also be using it in an attempt to keep myself safe. Consider the zoom out function to be the world as Ani DiFranco describes it in her song, "Smooth and shiny like a ball bearing." When I am zoomed out I will be objective and keep this literature review at a distance. When I zoom in I will be moving closer to my personal experience. The further I feel the need to zoom in, the closer you will be allowed into my world. Here is an example:

Zoom out:

This literature review is an academic requirement of my thesis. I will demonstrate that I have read literature on my subject and explain how I think this literature is or is not relevant. I will use an objective voice where I have no personal stake in the literature.

Zoom in:

The literature I have read comes from a variety of sources taking a variety of positions on the subject of identity. Trying to pull these sources together seems as complicated as my own bloodlines. Defining my subject fully through the literature is beyond the scope of this academic assignment. The best I can do for you is touch lightly on a few relevant areas. I do not think this is good enough considering my personal stake in the study and I am struggling to let this go.

Zoom in:

This literature review challenges me to show where I have been and what I have read. Because I am the subject of my study this will reveal ways to you in which I could be viewed as defining myself. This makes me uncomfortable. I have had to make hard personal choices on what literature I will use and every step of the way I have resisted definition. I also have had to make decisions of how I will connect myself to other Aboriginal people through the literature. Engaging in this literature review has produced more of the tensions and struggles that I have written about in my thesis. How am I supposed to separate the literature review from the results when the literature review is having this affect on me?

Zoom in:

I do not take this subject lightly. The subject being me. This is my life and it means everything to me. I feel like my life is at stake and it is the hands of this

literature. Some of the things I have read have made me angry and some of the things I have read have hurt me. If I make this literature as personal as it feels I risk obliterating myself. I will make every effort to keep the lens zoomed as far a way from me as possible; to stay objective; and to discuss this literature at a distance. This is an act of self-protection. I have told myself over and over to summarize a few articles and move on. I have not been able to let this literature go.

Zoom out:

This literature review will cover the follow areas that the author has determined are relevant to this study. First, the author will provide an overview of the literature focusing on ethnic, racial and bicultural identity models. Before we continue I will use my zoom function to explain my reasoning for my choice to begin here.

Zoom in:

I have had to make choices on what literature to review in this section. These choices have been difficult but necessary given the scope of my study. For example, I have made a choice not to review in depth the developmental frameworks on ego identity formation (Erickson, 1968; Schwartz, 2001) or social identity theory (Brown, 2000). Instead I will gloss over these areas via another author's literature review focusing on ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). The contributions of ego identity formation and social identity theories are widely cited in the literature on racial identity, ethnic identity and bicultural identity models (e.g., Doyle & Kao, 2007; Garrett & Pichette, 2000; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Moran, Fleming, Sommervell, &

Manson, 1999; Phinney, 1990; Ponterotto & Park-Taylor, 2007; Poston, 1990). I have chosen not focus on these areas for following reasons: the nature of my study; knowing that the fields of racial identity, ethnic identity and bicultural have acknowledged the contributions of these underlying theorists; my interest in how this literature pertains to Aboriginal people and counselling; and the practical constraints of what is possible for me to study within the scope of my thesis. For these reasons I have decided to abstain from a more in depth review of these theories. Again I will say this was a difficult choice.

Zoom in:

My ontological position has been influenced by literature that takes a critical position against the academic production of knowledge specifically in regard to Aboriginal mental health (Duran & Duran, 1995; Smith, 1999; Waldram, 2004). I am also aware of my tenuous position as an Aboriginal student in that I have given much consideration to how my use of and addition to this body of literature may be contributing to perpetuating untruths of the lived experiences of Aboriginal peoples (Smith, 1999). Given my ontological position, ideally I would feel more genuine by taking a critical approach to the theoretical foundations of racial identity, ethnic identity and bicultural identity models. As Erik Erikson's identity stage model appears to be a foundational theory, this would seem to be an appropriate place to begin. While I ultimately did not make this choice, I have given it consideration.

I have reviewed an article that applies a feminist critique to Erikson's identity theory. I present the following quote from this article, which is one of many which is in

congruence with my ontological position. Sorell & Montgomery (2001) state: “Scholars from a variety of disciplines have argued that these grand psychological theories are founded on outdated positivist assumptions about science as the discovery of principles that govern a mind-independent reality” (p. 98).

This critical approach is more congruent with who I am as an academic, an Aboriginal, and a human being. I feel that if there are foundational theories which ethnic, racial and bicultural identity development models are built on then I should be taking a critical approach to beginning. The challenge I face is that this critical approach is beyond the scope of my thesis. If I were to take on this kind of project with any real integrity, I could probably write an entirely separate thesis on this subject. I do not have the time or resources to engage in this kind of project and it is a path I have chosen not to walk down.

In making this decision, I can't help but to feel that I am settling or being less thorough than I should be. I am frustrated that I am not able to do a better job. I also know that the literature I have chosen to review is still probably beyond the scope of my thesis and that by trying to take too much my literature review will not be focused enough to be convincing. These are all examples of me making things too personal. I know this, yet I still am not able to pull myself out.

Zoom in:

I am struggling with how I am representing myself to you because part of me feels like I am being too idealistic. Am I being arrogant or foolish? This is only a review of the literature why can't I keep this simple? The pressure of choices and

representations is great and I am no longer in the business of making deals about being Aboriginal in this academic context and I am can zoom out and leave, returning to student writing literature review, but before I go I want you to hear again how these choices are not easy. I need you to know that it is hard to engage in the process without losing a sense of who I am, and that I take my position as an Aboriginal in this context very seriously. Maybe I am being to sensitive but I do not want to be a part of a process which may hurt someone. Hear me when I tell you that these theories of racial, ethnic and bicultural identity models for the most part do not represent me. When the literature produces knowledge that casually suggests why I want to participate in my First Nations culture I feel like my HEART IS BEING FLAYED. This is personal.

C. Matthew's Snipp's analysis of the 1980 census reveals that the majority of persons who claimed Indian ancestry did not claim to be of the Indian race and are termed "Americans of Indian descent." Most of these individuals are no different from other whites except that they have an Indian ancestor in their family tree. He proposes that socioeconomic factors account for the choices evidenced on the census. Many people become Indian only when it is economically profitable and socially desirable to be an Indian. (Mihesuah, 1998, p. 202)

Interestingly, we find a wide variation in skin color of monoracial Native Americans as compared to their mixed racial counterparts. Single-race Native Americans appear to be a fairly heterogeneous group in terms of skin color, and have representation in just about every shade in the color spectrum. On the other hand the distribution for Native American-whites is concentrated toward the white category with a relatively small percentage in the light brown and medium brown categories. It must be noted that the observations about the respondent reported by the interviewer may be affected what the interviewer knows about the respondent, since these data were collected after the interviews. Nevertheless, Native American ancestry may still be a symbolic distinction for these multiracials, and this flexibility may not apply to their single-race counterparts. (Doyle & Kao, 2007, p. 412-413)

Rewards and other incentives have driven many American to self-identify as Indian; they may believe that being Indian will enhance the likelihood of securing jobs, help them to receive preferences for admission to academic institutions as well as corresponding grants and scholarships, and place them in a unique position to receive entitlements that otherwise would not be available to them. Out of this momentum has emerged the “academic Indian” (Clifton, 1989, p.20), who claims his or her Indian ancestry to gain a foot-hold on or to climb the rigorous step’s of the academy’s promotion and tenure ladder. (Trimble & Thurman, 2002, p. 60)

Many Indians who are able to pass as both Indian and white use their appearances and social knowledge to their advantage. Root defines one form of identification as “tokenism” – a process by which a person’s ambiguous appearance, but identification with a racial group, allows that person to be hired to fill a minority quota because the person is seen as less threatening than a full-blood. (Mihehuah, 1998, p. 208)

Phenotype is still an important factor that shapes racial self-identification in U.S. society and our results lend strong support to this idea.” (Doyle & Kao, 2007, p. 419)

## **Literature Overview**

In this section I will provide a brief overview of the theoretical foundations of ethnic, biracial, and bicultural identity theories. This overview will not be comprehensive as it is beyond the limitations of this study. The goal is to provide a background on how these theories developed in order to provide context for presenting a selection of past and current identity models.

This review of literature made an attempt to focus on identity models that were applicable to Aboriginal populations. In a review of studies of ethnic identity, Phinney (1990) found that over half of the articles she reviewed focused on white ethnic groups; followed by the study of Blacks; then Hispanics; and Asian Americans. She concluded there were very few studies on Asian Americans, Hispanics or American Indians. In

*Multicultural Counseling Competencies: Individual and Organizational Development*, Sue, Carter, Fouad, Ivey, Jensen et al. (1998) do not provide a section on American Indian identity development models but do provide sections on identity models for Blacks, Asian Americans, and Latino(a) and Hispanic Americans. American Indians were only mentioned in a few sentences in a general minority identity development models section. Fischer and Moradi (2001) were only able to find a few American Indian ethnic identity instruments in their overview of racial and ethnic identity measurement constructs. Of these few instruments they concluded most had only been used once. Ponterotto and Park-Taylor (2007) make no mention of Aboriginal theories or models of race and ethnic identity. These authors suggest that the most influential theories of race and ethnic identity have been: Cross's models of psychological nigrescence, Helm's White identity model and Phinney's conceptualization of ethnic identity development. It appears that theories and models of Aboriginal identity are either still very limited or have not gained acceptance in the field of race and ethnic identity theory.

One area which appears to have been given more attention in the relation to Aboriginal identity is the degree to which Aboriginals negotiate biculturalism (e.g., Barrios & Egan, 2002; Berry, 1999; Choney, Berryhill-Paapke, & Robbins, 1995; Garrett & Pichette, 2000; LaFromboise et al., 1993; LaFromboise, Trimble & Mohatt, 1990; Oetting & Beauvais, 1991; Moran et al., 1999). Search terms used to define Aboriginal populations in this context were: "Aboriginal", "First Nations", "American Indian" and "Native".

Zoom in:

I am the focus of my study. My goal in approaching this literature review was to locate studies that might be considered applicable to my identity journey. I was tempted to focus mainly on literature focusing on biculturalism and acculturation because these areas seem to be the most researched in regard to Aboriginal populations. General ethnic identity models and biracial or multiracial models do not look specifically at Aboriginal populations although ethnic and multiracial instruments and subjects are used in studies related to Aboriginals (e.g., Brown & Smirles, 2005; Doyle & Kao, 2007; James, Kim & Armijo, 2000; Miville, Constantine, Baysden & So-Lloyd, 2005; McNeil, Porter, Zvolensky, & Chaney, 2000).

Even though I did not find much specifically related to Aboriginal populations in these areas, I felt it was important to consider them because they might be relevant depending on how I choose to define myself. This was one of the hardest parts about looking at this literature. I felt forced into looking at ways I might define myself. In order to address these uncomfortable feelings I made a decision to consider where a counsellor might look to in the literature if I was their client and I was struggling with an identity issue. This was my rationale for considering ethnic identity models, biracial or multiracial identity models, and bicultural models.

Zoom out:

The terms I have used: ethnic, racial, bicultural and multiracial, were not specific to my search but instead are listed as some of the results of my search. This is an important distinction. It is widely acknowledged that multiple definitions and

understandings of ethnic identity, racial constructs and related terms exist in this field (Cokely, 2007; Phinney, 1990; Phinney & Ong, 2007; Ponterotto & Park-Taylor, 2007; Trimble, 2007). Terms are often used interchangeably which can be confusing (Trimble, 2007). As a point of clarity from my perspective I consider; ethnic identity related to my First Nations identity; bicultural identity to be related to the relationship between my First Nations culture and my Canadian culture; and biracial and multiracial identity to be related to having a First Nations mother and a white father.

Zoom in:

I am not interested in defining these terms further as it is not relevant to my goals in this literature review. There will be overlap and it is confusing and I believe this is an excellent metaphor for relating this literature to my lived experience.

Zoom out:

Three articles will be used to provide a theoretical overview of each of these chosen areas. Phinney's (1990) study: *Ethnic Identity in Adolescents and Adults: Review of the Research*, will be reviewed based on the assumption that I have a singular First Nations ethnicity. Poston's (1990) study: *The Biracial Identity Development Model: A Needed Addition*, will be reviewed based on the assumption that because I have a First Nations mother and white father that I therefore have a biracial identity. Finally, *Psychological Impact of Biculturalism: Evidence and Theory* (LaFromboise et al., 1993) will be reviewed based on the assumption that I have a First

Nations culture and a Canadian or mainstream culture which are in contact with each other.

All three of these articles were written in the early 1990's. I am using these dated sources to provide a theoretical overview in order to give a sense of how ethnic, biracial and bicultural identity models have developed. The history of cross-cultural counselling saw a transition from its beginnings in the early 1970's, where emphasis was placed on understanding clients from a sociocultural context to the study of within-group cultural diversity in the early 1980's (Sue et al., 1998). It appears that the 1990's are a suitable place to look back from as relevant identity models were beginning to be proposed at this time. After providing a brief overview of these areas using the three articles I have selected, I will review some of the relevant identity models from these fields.

### **Ethnic Identity Development**

Phinney (1990) suggests that there are three conceptual frameworks that are applicable to the study of ethnic identity. These are social identity theory, acculturation and identity formation.

Social identity theory developed from social psychology and its basic premise suggests that being part of a group creates a sense of belonging in an individual that contributes to a positive self-concept. Ethnic groups have been considered in terms of the effect that the dominant group in society's view of a particular ethnic group has in shaping those group members social identity. For example, if the dominant group views an ethnic group negatively, then group members of the ethnic group may see themselves negatively. Ethnic group members who are viewed by the majority group

negatively may seek to improve their status and may have difficulty in negotiating participation in two cultures.

Acculturation looks at the impact of distinct ethnic groups in contact with each other over time. Ethnic identity is considered by how an individual relates to the cultural attitudes, values and behaviours of their ethnic group in regard to the attitudes, values and behaviours of the dominant culture.

Using a linear or bipolar model of acculturation, ethnic identity is viewed along a fixed continuum between identification with an ethnic group and identification with the majority culture. A two dimensional model of acculturation has also been applied to ethnic identity which suggest that an individual's relationships to their traditional culture and the mainstream culture do not operate on a continuum and must be considered independent of each other. Phinney (1990) cites Berry et al. (1986) to show how application of this two-dimensional model of acculturation produces four ways of negotiating ethnic identity. These are: integration, marginality, assimilation and separation.

Ethnic identity formation looks at how people construct their ethnicity developmentally. Phinney (1990) cites Erikson's theory of ego identity formation that suggests that identity is achieved through periods of exploration and experimentation primarily in adolescents that leads an individual to making commitments to defining areas in their life. Phinney (1990) also cites Marcia's contribution of four ego identity statuses that are based on whether an individual has explored their identity options and made decisions based on this exploration. These four ego identity statuses are: Diffuse – an individual who has not engaged in identity exploration or come to any decisions

about their identity; Foreclosed – an individual who has made a decision about their identity, usually influenced by their parents, without exploration of their options; Moratorium – an individual engaged in exploration who has not made a decision; and Achieved – an individual who has made a decision after a period of exploration.

Phinney (1990) suggests that ethnic identity formation is similar to ego identity formation in that an individual may explore and make decisions about their ethnicity over time. Phinney (1989) proposed a three-stage model of ethnic identity where an individual moves from an unexamined ethnic identity to a period of exploration and then on to an achieved ethnic identity. Adolescents and adults who have not been exposed to ethnic identity issues begin in the unexamined stage and may move into the exploration stage after being triggered by a significant event. The process of exploration in ethnic related activities assumes that an individual will come to the achieved ethnic identity stage with a deeper understanding and appreciation of their ethnicity. Phinney (1990) suggests that an individual progressing through these stages of ethnic identity formation may have to come to terms with cultural differences between their ethnic group and the majority culture and the lower status of their ethnic group in society. These suggestions of ethnic identity development demonstrate the influence of social identity theory, acculturation theory and ego identity development theory.

### **Ethnic Identity Development Models**

Phinney's (1989) ethnic identity stage model was created by examining similarities in other stage models applied to ethnic identity development. Two examples of ethnic identity development models, which I review are the Minority Identity

Development (MID) Model (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1998) and the Chicano/Latino Ethnic Identity Development Model (Ruiz, 1990). I was not able to find any ethnic identity development models which were specifically designed for Aboriginal peoples but Mihsuah (1998) did attempt to apply Cross's Nigrescence Model to American Indians. This approach involved many challenges. Mihsuah states: "Cross's model presents an adequate outline to begin discussion of identity developments for Indians, but numerous factors must be taken into consideration, most of which spur confusion" (p. 197). Mihsuah (1998) listed the following six factors which present challenges to applying Cross's model to American Indians: 1) American Indian tribes are not alike; 2) Tribes include members with minimal biological heritage and no knowledge of tribal culture; 3) Many tribal members look phenotypically Caucasian; 4) Many people with little or no knowledge of Indians want to identify as Indian; 5) The historical time period must be taken into account; and 6) Personal needs, physiology, and environmental influences of each individual are different. Mihsuah (1998) also suggested that there are three possible scenarios in applying Cross's model to American Indians. These are:

(1) Some Indians go through stages on their way to becoming like *whites*; (2) Some white, black, and Hispanic individuals and mixed-heritage people of minimal Indian heritage who desire to "become Indian" also progress through stages on their quest for an Indian identity; (3) multi-heritage individuals, especially those who do not have cultural knowledge of the group they aspire to become a member of and /or do not physically resemble other members of that group, will have difficulty in establishing a comfortable identity. (p. 198)

I disagree with much of what Mihsuah (1998) suggests in her article. I have reacted to her focus on and personal assertions about individuals who claim an Aboriginal identity. This seems to be a misinterpretation of Cross's model. Given the struggles in claiming my own identity, I also want to own my personal reaction to

Mihesuah's (1998) assertions. Mihesuah's (1998) application of Cross's model seems to go far beyond the 5 stages that the original model suggests. It should also be noted that this article appears to have been written outside of the fields of psychology or counselling psychology.

I believe that Mihesuah's (1998) application of Cross's model to American Indians is flawed but her article does draw attention to some of the challenges of representing the complexities of Aboriginal identity. It seems to provide evidence for why the application of current ethnic identity development models to Aboriginal populations is not appropriate. Perhaps the complex nature of Aboriginal identity is the reason why there are still no ethnic identity development models that are specific to Aboriginal peoples when models have been constructed for: African American, Asian Americans and Hispanic American populations.

In the ethnic identity development models I have reviewed I have not found any reference to how to negotiate the complexities of Aboriginal Identity. The impacts of colonization (Duran, Duran, & Brave Heart, 1998) and the unique statuses of Aboriginal people in Canada (Lawrence, 2004) and the United States (Garrouette, 2003; Weaver, 2001) appear not to be addressed or even considered. Models that suggest ethnic identity development can be generalized to multiple ethnic groups (Atkinson et al., 1983; Phinney, 1989; Phinney & Ong, 2007) do not represent the complexities of my lived experience as a First Nations person.

## **Biracial Identity Development**

Poston (1990) covers much of the same territory as Phinney (1990) in his review of previous models of racial identity development. Poston (1990) cites Cross's nigrescence model as well as the Minority Identity Development Model. The theoretical frameworks of these models has been linked by Phinney (1990) to social identity theory, acculturation and ego identity formation. Poston (1990) also cites Stonequist's (1937) marginal man model which suggested that biracial or mixed race individuals are at a deficit or marginal because they are not accepted fully in either of their cultures.

Poston (1990) gives 4 reasons why ethnic identity development models are limited when applied to biracial persons: 1) these models suggest that an individual might identify with the cultural values of one culture over the other during their progression of ethnic development; 2) the models imply first a rejection of ethnic culture followed by a rejection of the majority culture when biracial individuals may come from both of these groups; 3) these models do not allow the integration of multiple group identities; and 4) these models make the assumption that an individual will begin with acceptance in their minority culture which may not be the case for a biracial person. Using this rationale, Poston (1990) presents his model of biracial identity development.

### **Poston's Biracial Identity Development Model**

Poston (1990) presents a five-stage model of biracial identity development. These stages are: 1) Personal Identity; 2) Choice of Group Categorization; 3) Enmeshment/Denial; 4) Appreciation; and 5) Integration. In the personal identity stage the individual is young and not yet entirely aware of their membership in any ethnic

groups. A child's sense of self may be independent of their ethnic background. In the choice of group categorization stage, the individual may be pushed by societal forces to identify with one ethnic group. A bicultural person may be pushed to make a racial choice in order to engage in family and social groups. At this stage a biracial individual may adopt a multicultural identity, acknowledging the racial heritage or both parents, or choose the racial identity of one parent over the other. Poston (1990) lists potential factors that may influence a biracial individual's choice in this stage as: status factors; social support factors; and personal factors. The enmeshment/denial stage is characterized by the biracial individual's feelings of confusion and guilt at having to choose an identity that is not representative of their entire racial heritage. Individuals may experience exclusion from one or more ethnic groups and experience feelings of guilt or self-hatred. At the appreciation stage the biracial individual begins to appreciate their multiple identity and broaden their involvement in both of their ethnic groups. The person will most likely still identify with one ethnic group but may start to learn about both of their racial heritage cultures. At the integration stage, biracial individuals experience wholeness and recognize the value of their multiple ethnic identities.

Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model does not reflect my identity journey for many of the same reasons that ethnic identity development models do not represent me. My First Nations identity is too complex for this model.

There is no place in this model that can account for the Government of Canada making me a Status Indian at the age of 13 and the effect this has had on my identity. Assuming that my goal is to reach an integration stage where I value my white heritage and First Nations heritage equally, I will still have to negotiate my relationship with the

Government of Canada as a Status Indian. This is one example of how Poston's (1990) model does not consider the complexities of my First Nations identity even though I am genetically a biracial person. The impact of colonization and the unique statuses of Aboriginal people are important factors that are not examined in the biracial identity literature.

I was not able to locate any identity literature that specifically addressed mixed race Aboriginal people. I did find some studies that used mixed-race Aboriginal participants (Doyle & Kao, 2007; Miville et al., 2005) but they did not reflect my experience.

### **Theories of Biculturalism**

In presenting a model of bicultural competence, LaFromboise et al. (1993) provide detailed reviews of five-models that examine the psychological impact of being bicultural. These are: the Assimilation model; the Acculturation model; the Alternation model; the Multicultural model, and the Fusion model. Rather than describing these models in any detail, I am citing this study because it provides an overview of some of the theories that consider how individuals negotiate a sense of identity when living between two cultures.

In presenting a model of bicultural competence, LaFromboise et al. (1993) suggest a need to move away from applying linear models of cultural acquisition and toward understanding the dimensions which a bicultural individual may need to develop competence in order to negotiate living in two cultures. This model is based on the Alternation model which assumes that it is possible for an individual to know and

understand two different cultures and that an individual can adjust their behaviour to fit a particular social context.

There are distinct differences in the five theoretical models that are reviewed in this study. Rather than reviewing the strengths and weakness of each model, I would like to focus on and challenge a commonality that they all seem to share. The commonality that all of these models seem to share is that a bicultural individual's identity is psychologically impacted by living in two or more distinct cultures. More specifically, these theories all imply that there is a sense of wholeness to the cultures that define a bicultural individual. My objection to this view, although perhaps useful at a theoretical level, is that it oversimplifies the complexities of Aboriginal cultures and perpetuates a metaphor of individuals existing in and negotiating their place between two worlds. The history of these models is grounded in early Western anthropological assertions that distinct Aboriginal cultures can be amalgamated and considered the same by contrasting their commonalities against the differences of Western culture (Waldram, 2004). Despite the evolution of bicultural identity models (e.g., Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005), the complexities of my First Nations identity and the impact of the fragmentation of my First Nations culture on my identity are not accurately examined.

### **Acculturation**

LaFromboise et al. (1993) identify the acculturation model as one of five theoretical models used to understand change that occurs in transition within, between and among cultures. Acculturation seems to be the term most often associated with

studies that examine the impacts of biculturalism on Aboriginal people. Therefore, I will review a few studies that apply the theory of acculturation to Aboriginal populations.

The trend in cross-cultural research in counselling related literature has seen a transformation from studies comparing racial/ethnic groups to studies making comparisons within racial/ethnic groups (Atkinson et al., 1998). This trend has suggested a necessity for counsellors working from a cross-cultural perspective to not only understand their client's cultural heritage, but also the degree to which their clients identify with this heritage.

During this transformation the literature related to Aboriginals and counselling has seen a shift toward assessing of the degree to which individual clients are acculturated. Acculturation in the broadest sense is defined as "a process of change that occurs when two or more cultures come in contact with each other" (Atkinson et al., 1998, p. 21-22). Berry, Kim, Power, Young, & Bujaki (1989) describe two dimensions of acculturation as maintenance of cultural identity and maintenance of relations with other groups. These dimensions dichotomized produce four acculturation strategies: integration, separation, assimilation and marginalization. Those who remain connected to their original culture and host culture endorse an integration approach, while those who are connected to their original culture but not the host culture endorse a separation approach. Those who disconnect from their original culture and accept their host culture endorse the assimilation approach while those who identify with neither original or host culture are perceived as marginalized.

Early research viewed acculturation as unidimensional with Aboriginal culture on one end of a continuum and mainstream culture on the other. More recent research

has continued with a strength-based approach suggesting that formation of cultural identity is a fluid process wherein acculturation may occur toward the dominant society and toward the traditions and values of one's cultural heritage (Barrios & Egan, 2002; Choney et al., 1995; LaFramboise et al., 1993).

Some models have been specifically developed or adapted to aid researchers and practitioners in understanding the degree to which individual Aboriginal peoples have been acculturated. One example of a model that has undergone significant transformation is Loye & Robert Ryan's (1982) modified list of Spindler's (1958) five categories of Indianness as cited in LaFromboise et al. (1990). These modified categories of Indianness are: Traditional; Transitional; Marginal; Assimilated; and Bicultural (p. 638). Garrett and Pinchette (2000) again adapted this model by adding contributions from Herring's (1996) four distinct Native familial groups. Herring's (1996) categories are: Traditional, Nontraditional (Bicultural), Acculturated and Pantraditional (p. 543). Garrett & Pinchette's (2000) 5 levels of acculturation for Native Americans are as follows:

1. *Traditional*: May or may not speak English, but generally speak and think in their native language; hold only traditional values and beliefs and practice only traditional tribal customs and methods of worship.
2. *Marginal*: May speak both the Native language and English; may not, however, fully accept the cultural heritage and practices of their tribal group nor fully identify with mainstream cultural values and behaviours.
3. *Bicultural*: Generally accepted by dominant society and tribal/nation; simultaneously able to know, accept, and practice both mainstream values/behaviours and the traditional values and beliefs of their cultural heritage
4. *Assimilated*: Accepted by dominant society; embrace only mainstream cultural values, behaviours, and expectations.
5. *Pantraditional*: Assimilated Native Americans who have made a conscious choice to return to the "old ways". They are generally accepted by dominant society seek to embrace previously lost traditional cultural values, beliefs, and practices of their tribal heritage. Therefore, they may speak both English and their native tribal language. (p. 7)

These categories demonstrate an important shift away from categorizing Aboriginals as a homogenous group and create new space in the literature to begin to understand some of the complexities of Aboriginal identity. Research that considers all Aboriginal peoples in one homogenous group will continually run the risk of misrepresenting the lived experience of individuals. For example, in her article *Providing Services to Aboriginal Clients*, Restoule (1997) introduces traditional First Nations rules of behaviour that health care professionals should be aware of. These include: non-interference, non-competitiveness, emotional restraint, sharing, concept of time, attitude toward gratitude and approval, Aboriginal protocol, the principle of teaching, showing respect and extended family orientation. There is no mention in her article of the possible degree to which First Nations clients might be acculturated. My concern with this kind of article is that the generic information produced, while not necessarily unhelpful, might be taken at face value by a cross-cultural researcher or practitioner and applied to an Aboriginal client who it might not represent. In this way theories of acculturation are useful in understanding the diversity of Aboriginal peoples.

My criticism of applying the acculturation model to Aboriginal people is that this model is still grounded in a dated anthropological philosophy that perpetuates Aboriginals living between two distinct worlds. The focus of acculturation is on cultures as they apply to specifically to the individual. In a sense the worlds that are presented are still homogenous and the acculturated individual is left with the responsibility of locating themselves or worse yet being located by a health professional somewhere along this continuum. I do not see this as an accurate representation of my lived experience. The tendency is to focus on categorization rather than the emotional

impact of an Aboriginal individual's identity location after generations of cultural dislocation.

### **Summary of Identity Models**

In this literature review I have considered three possible ways of addressing my identity. I have looked at ethnic identity development models, biracial or multiracial identity development models, and bicultural identity models. With the exception of models related to acculturation, I have found almost no identity models in these areas that specifically address Aboriginal peoples. My general conclusion is that the models I have looked at do not represent me or explain the complexities of my experience of coming to know my First Nations identity.

Zoom In:

A challenge to having a complex identity is that it makes it difficult to study. It is my view that models and theories that have considered Aboriginal peoples are far too willing to gloss over the individual and cultural differences that exist between Aboriginal people and their communities. In defining his terms for his article, *Aboriginal Cultural Identity*, Berry (1999) states:

The choice of cultural identity as the appropriate concept here signals the view that Aboriginal peoples in Canada share many cultural attributes, and frequently a common history in relation to the larger society, even though there are many specific cultures in the strict sense of the term. (p.3)

I have read this sort of statement over and over again in academic literature that addresses Aboriginal peoples. It is the key that opens the lock that allows an inappropriate and unscientific generalization. It is not good enough. I would like to read

an article that stated: “I am viewing Aboriginal peoples as a whole because if I attempted to engage in all of the complexities of multiple cultures and diverse personalities; and if I attempted to address each and every fragmentation that has been created through colonization, then the scientific model I am using would not work. So for the sake of science, I am ignoring the complexities of Aboriginal culture and identity.”

Zoom in:

But who is generalizing now? Even as I am writing this I know it isn't fair. Who am I to criticize academics, many of them Aboriginal who have worked hard to create space and push the boundaries for new ways of knowing? I am frustrated because I don't have any answers or a better way to do it. It comes back to my rationale for doing a study on myself in that I feel like my only choice was to go inside. All I seem to be able to say is that my identity is too complex to understand at a macro level I want to leave it at that, but it is important to press on.

Zoom out:

The conclusion I have arrived at is that the identity development models I have reviewed in the literature do not address the complexities of my First Nations identity. I would now like to speak to a topic in the literature that I do believe relates to my identity: historical trauma.

## Historical Trauma

In an article on acculturative stress, Berry and Annis (1974) proposed, “persons and groups undergoing social and cultural change will experience a certain amount of discomfort” (p. 382). There is a concept in the literature that considers this discontinuity in Aboriginal peoples as historical trauma (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Denham, 2008; Duran & Duran, 1995; Duran, Duran, & Brave Heart, 1998; Whitbeck, Adams, Hoyt, & Chen, 2004). Duran et al. (1998) state: “While historical trauma includes acculturation stress, it goes much deeper and encompasses the aftereffects of racism, oppression, and genocide” (p. 65). Whitbeck et al. (2004) suggest, “a grassroots movement is growing on reservations and among urban American Indians that seeks to understand the intergenerational psychological consequences of more than 400 years of genocide, ‘ethnic cleansing,’ and forced acculturation” (p.119). The difference in language between “a certain amount of discomfort” and “genocide and ethnic cleansing” is important. While some of the studies I have reviewed on acculturation have acknowledged the historical and present day impacts of colonization on Aboriginal peoples (Berry, 1999; Garrett & Pinchette, 2000), the theoretical lens of acculturation keeps the focus on the contact between cultures as opposed to the intergenerational impacts of colonization and the psychological effect this has had on Aboriginal peoples. In reference to the development of my own First Nations identity, which I have documented in my thesis, intergenerational trauma seems more relevant than applying ethnic, biracial or bicultural identity development models.

Brave Heart (2003) defines historical trauma as a “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from

massive group trauma experiences” (p.7). The conceptualization of historical trauma among Aboriginal peoples has been adapted from research on Jewish Holocaust survivors (Brave Heart & DeBruyn, 1998; Duran et al, 1998; Whitebeck et al., 2004) though Duran et al. (1998) point out that the construct of intergenerational trauma has been known to Aboriginal healers and communities for a long time.

Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) draw parallels between the Wounded Knee massacre in 1890 (Brown, 1970) and the Jewish Holocaust. These authors refer to the historical legacy, boarding school era, and assimilation policies of the United States as examples of events that are the source of producing historical trauma in Aboriginal peoples. While absent from much of the literature at the theoretical level, the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal populations is well documented in counselling psychology literature.

“Broken treaties, unwarranted violence, and attempted genocide has clearly fostered a good deal of mistrust” (LaFromboise et al., 1990, p. 632); “Historically, White institutions such as government bureaucracies, schools and churches deliberately have tried to destroy Native American cultural institutions” (Heinrich, Corbine, & Thomas, 1990, p. 129); “The removal of Native Americans from reservations to urban areas, the removal of children from Native American homes, and the sterilization of Native American women exemplify movement toward the goal of assimilation” (Herring, 1992, p. 2); “Characterized by institutional racism and discrimination, dominant culture has a long history of opposition to Native cultures, and the attempt to assimilate Native people” (Garrett & Pichette, 2000, p. 4); “The racial genocide that the American Indian

people have endured has contributed to their identity as a population and has created mistrust of white professionals” (Bruckner & Perry, 2000, p. 312).

Examples of the impacts of colonization are abundant. For literature pertaining to the impact of the residential school system on Canadian Aboriginals see (Chrisjohn, Young, & Maraun, 2006; Dion, Stout, & Kipling, 2003; Fournier & Grey, 1997; Haig-Brown, 1998; Morrissette, 1994; Nuu-Chah-Nulth Tribal Council, 1997). For literature pertaining to the history of Canadian assimilation policies on Aboriginals see (Fleras & Elliot, 1999; Lawrence, 2004; Miller, 1989; York, 1990).

My goal is not to provide a detailed overview of the concept of historical trauma. I have cited the main authors in this field and they in turn reference the literature that has informed them. Instead I would like to speak to a few key points which I believe may be connected to my identity journey. In this academic exercise I am required to look for ways to relate my study to academic literature. I am hesitant to draw a direct connection to my experiences of addressing my identity in therapeutic enactment groups to literature on historical trauma. But as a function of this academic exercise I will cautiously state that there are some parallels between what I uncovered in therapeutic enactment and this literature. I will state that I have no way to verify my experience in a scientific way and can only convey to the reader that I am speaking the truth about something that I do not entirely understand. I am going to resist the pressure I feel to put my experience into the container of historical trauma and instead will only point out some of the similarities that I believe are relevant.

In the introduction chapter of my thesis I pointed out to the reader that I would be referring to shame that I carried in my body. I clarified that this was not meant to be

taken as the clinical definition of the feeling shame but instead I was using the term to represent something that I had been unconsciously carrying in my body which was blocking my connection to my First Nations identity. When I read for the first time about Duran & Duran's (1995) concept of the soul wound I was tempted to refer to the feelings I held in my body in this way. Duran et al. (1998) state that synonymous terms to "soul wound" include: "historical trauma", "historical legacy", "Native American holocaust" and "intergenerational posttraumatic stress disorder" (p.65). I can not say with certainty that what I felt in my body can be applied to any of these terms. What I will say is that when I engaged in my first therapeutic enactment and was addressing a childhood experience involving feeling shamed for not knowing how to Indian dance, the energy that came out of me was greater than me. I remember distinctly listening to myself wailing and wondering to myself where the wail was coming from. I have described the feeling in my body as being hot and it was located to the right of my heart. When it came up into my throat it was too large to be released at once. I remember feeling surprised at having such an intense emotional reaction to an event that did not seem pivotal in my life. I would say the emotion was not congruent with the event. My throat and mouth did not feel big enough to let it all out. The wail that came from me felt like a fragment of what was inside of my throat. It was after this incident that I came to the awareness that I have not been in relationship with my First Nations identity.

In my second therapeutic enactment with the help of the facilitator I constructed a sculpture which represents the areas which impeded my First Nations identity (see Figure 1). Key features in this sculpture are my mother, my great grandfather and an embodiment of the colonizer. I believe this construction shares some similarities with

concept of historical trauma. My experiences in therapeutic enactment were exploratory and not informed by the literature on historical trauma. I have made this connection after the fact.

Two key areas I found in the literature about historical trauma which are relevant to my personal experience are Brave Heart and Debruyn's (1998) descriptions of historical disenfranchised grief and historically unresolved grief. Disenfranchised grief is defined as "grief that persons experience when a loss cannot be openly acknowledged or publicly mourned" (p. 66). "When a society disenfranchises the legitimacy of grief among any group, the resulting intrapsychic function that inhibits the experience and expression of the grief affects, that is, sadness and anger, is shame" (p. 67). They also explain how disenfranchised grief can intensify normal emotional reactions like anger, guilt, sadness, and helplessness.

I have conceptualized what I have carried inside of me as shame. Until reading about disenfranchised grief I had not considered the feelings I have held inside of me as potentially relating to grief. In my family history, through my great grandfather, there is a history of violence and rage. Something I have had difficulty explaining or defining is how I have carried my great grandfather's rage. I believe this rage has manifested itself in me in a different way. I experience it as fear to participate in my culture, shame in not feeling good enough to take part in my culture, and guilt that I have not suffered like my mother. Even though my behaviour is so different from what I know of my great grandfather, I feel I am connected to him through these feelings. This is only one thread of my history but maybe I am using it to try to define something I can only feel and can

not explain. All I can really say is that I know that there is a deep connection there that I was not aware of before I started this journey.

Brave Heart and DeBruyn (1998) suggest that historical unresolved grief has been passed on in American Indians for generations. “Like Jewish Holocaust survivors, subsequent generations of American Indians also have a pervasive sense of pain from what happened to their ancestors and incomplete mourning of these losses” (p. 68). I have always had dreams of going back to the shack where my mother lived as a little girl in order to protect her from my great grandfather. Since engaging in my journey of writing this thesis I have had dreams of going to Port Essington where my great grandfather was born in order to protect him from his father. I don’t want to define these dreams I share with you other than to say that I feel a deep connection to my family history. I want to move past feelings of grief and pain now in order to celebrate all of the good things that still exist in my culture. The feelings I have been holding inside of me have prevented me from taking part. I believe that the concept of historical concept is relevant to my lived experience as a First Nations man on my identity journey. My goal is to learn more about historical trauma for future personal and professional reasons.

## **Conclusion**

I am not going any further with this literature review. My goal was to demonstrate that I have looked in the literature for models and theories which might be related to my study. I have read many articles on ethnic identity, biracial, multiracial and bicultural identity and I have come to the conclusion that they do relate to my experience. In contrast, I found the literature on historical trauma was relevant to my experience mostly

in ways that I can not, or choose not, to explain but intuitively know. I hope I have written enough to satisfy the academic requirements of my thesis but I have to stop now. I am still on my journey and new ideas and new feelings are continually coming to me which I want to incorporate into my thesis but I have to let it go. Thank you for walking with me on my journey for a while. My journey will continue but this thesis will end now.

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