INFORMATION TO USERS

A STUDY OF THE POLITICAL EXPRESSIONS
OF FIRST NATIONS WOMEN

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis I examined political expressions of First Nations women. Using cultural studies concepts and aspects of Aboriginal theory, I reviewed literature in order to develop some cultural and historical understanding of First Nations cultures in Canada prior to conducting interviews with Aboriginal women. My objective was to answer three questions: how do Aboriginal women express their political interests; how do they define their roles in the politics of their communities; and finally, what do they consider "political?"

First Nations women are virtually absent from mainstream politics in Canada. The women interviewed understood the politics of federal and Band governments. These political forums, however, were outside the range of the politically relevant. Despite their apparent absence on the political landscape the women interviewed illustrated a strong commitment towards the politics of healing. Healing within First Nations cultures refers to individual, family, and community recovery from the consequences of systemic racism by European colonialism (RRCAP, 1996, v.3, 53). The women varied in their approaches to healing, but all of them articulated a commitment towards building balanced and harmonious communities defined by the values and beliefs of First Nations cultures.

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DEDICATION

All the gifts a person potentially possesses are like the fruits hidden within the tree. The tree could be cut into a thousand pieces and no new fruit would be found, yet when the conditions are right for its growth (warm sunshine, rain, nourishing soil) the tree will develop the fruit in all of its luscious beauty (First Nations Teaching).

I would like to dedicate this thesis to Brad Moore: for being my warm sunshine, my rain, and my nourishing soil.

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Understanding Aspects of
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Introduction

The Canadian government and the Canadian political system only partially

represent the Canadian populace because the hegemonic agenda of the state supports a

neo-liberal ideology. This ideology does not lend itself readily to the concerns of women

or any 'other' agenda. On the surface, the increasing number of women elected to the

House of Commons provides the impression that the state is changing, improving and is

increasingly representative of Canada's men and women of many cultures. However,

feminist issues and to a much greater extent the issues of Aboriginal women remain

chronically under-represented in the federal government. The system is unsatisfactory: it

is a system of inclusion and exclusion (Tanguay & Gagnon, 1996).

Among the social groups most consistently excluded from the ranks of the

political elite are the poor, gays and lesbians, ethnic minorities, and women. Oppression,

which can be defined as an abuse of power, is a consequence of being born into a distinct

racial culture with different traditions. Aboriginal people, like non-aboriginal women,

have been oppressed and defined out of the social, economic and political landscape. In

Canada, the oppression of Aboriginal women is a function of, among other things, being

both female and being born into a First Nation.

Race separates Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women; they have autonomous and yet connected struggles (Brown, 1995, 76). Non-Aboriginal women hold fewer than 25% of the seats in the House of Commons while Aboriginal women are virtually absent from federal politics. The oppressive and exclusive nature of federal politics is a contributing factor to the Aboriginal woman's conscious decision to focus her political efforts on the politics of her community.

This thesis examines an aspect of the political expressions of women in Canada. My primary research is on Aboriginal women and politics . Mainstream politics can be defined as that which is concerned with governments; this, however, is only one aspect of things political. An essential premise of this paper is that the majority of human interactions are political. In order to understand the political expressions of First Nations women one may consult literature on participatory democracy, populist politics and grass-roots politics. But we must do more. The political expressions of Aboriginal women today cannot be understood without reference to the women working in safe shelters for Aboriginal women, the women working with victims of sexual abuse on reserves and the women who are organizing day care centres in their communities.

In the process of analysis, I pose the following three questions:

- In the dominant culture the political includes: Gallup polls; casting a vote in Federal and Provincial elections and participating in election campaigns. The political for Aboriginal women has been shaped by their traditions and cultures as well as a history of colonialism, assimilation and genocide, rape and exclusion.

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How do First Nations women themselves define the political?

- Using First Nations' definition of political, are Aboriginal women politically active?

- What are some of the roles of Aboriginal women within the politics of their communities?

Purpose of the Study

I attempt to gain insight into Aboriginal women's definition of the political, their roles within the politics of their communities and their concerns for the future of their people. I point out distinctive aspects of the interaction of Aboriginal women with government politics as well as personal, family and community politics. In the political arena, First Nations people have been ineffectual for several reasons. As James Friedres writes in Native Peoples in Canada: Contemporary Conflicts; "Most importantly, [Aboriginal people] have been prevented from voting or running for office until recently. They did not receive the federal franchise until 1960. Needless to say, this severely restricted their ability to make political demands" (Friedres, 1998, 5).

James Friedres also observes that "hose with no voice in the political structure that governs their lives have no means of influencing or sanctioning the policies that affect them" (Friedres, 1998, 5,6). Aboriginal women are virtually absent from federal politics in Canada but are important figures in the politics of their communities. Aboriginal women have a traditional role as healers of the people, leading their community and nation, towards a stronger and healthier future.

In order to fully understand the political expressions of Aboriginal women, in-depth interviews were conducted with five women who were or are presently involved in the politics of their communities. In chapter 5 I summarize my cross cultural findings. relating my experience of conducting interviews as someone from outside a culture in a way that might be meaningful to others. I attempt to explain the process of locating possible interviewees, preparing interview questions and deciding on appropriate locations and modes for conducting the interviews.

One of the main goals in conducting this type of inquiry was to create a space for the political expressions of First Nations women that allowed their beliefs, values and attitude systems regarding the political to be spoken in their own words and not in the words of the non-Aboriginal researcher. If I did not provide a space for the voices of Aboriginal women, the end product would likely be a thesis based upon the political perceptions of the researcher and not the political expressions of Aboriginal women.

Overview and Research Questions

My assumption is that power is essential to the experience of women in politics generally. Our understanding of power is culturally conditioned. Western women, like western men, may understand it as: top of the heap. head of the pack. league of their own, cream of the crop and head of the class. This thesis argues that power is also essential to the aboriginal women's political expressions, but that their ingredients and expressions of power are fundamentally distinct. Some of the words and symbols to describe Aboriginal women's notion of power might be: the collective good. consensus.

holistic, the medicine wheel, balance and addressing all the needs of the self because each one is essential and without all of the parts one's power is lessened.

The literature review provides essential background information for understanding the research topic and for conducting the interviews. The in-depth interviews provided insight and explanations of the beliefs, values and world views held by the individual women which allowed me to better comprehend their understanding of the political.

In the process of analysing various factors affecting the political expressions of First Nations women, I attempted to ask the following open-ended questions during the five in-depth interviews :

- Where are you from?

- Can you explain what you are doing in your current job?

- Do you view your job as political?

- What do you view as political?

- What are some of the roles women have in your community?

- Are these traditional roles?

- There are very few Aboriginal people and even fewer Aboriginal women in federal politics; what are some of the causes?

- What are some of the concerns you have for yourself and your community?

- What do you see as the Aboriginal woman's role in healing?

Theoretical Framework

In the initial stages of my research I decided that feminist theory would provide

me with the appropriate tools for analysing First Nations women and the political. I later

realized that aspects of Aboriginal theory were more relevant and appropriate for my

research, but I will expand on this in later chapters.

There are many feminist theories, the most popular of which are Radical, Marxist

and Liberal feminism. Radical feminist theory focuses on male violence against women

and men's control of women's sexuality and reproduction, seeing men as a group which

is responsible for women's oppression (Richardson. 1983, 51). Marxist feminist theory

views women's oppression as being tied to forms of capitalist exploitation of labour and

thus women's paid and unpaid work is analysed in relation to its function within the

capitalist economy (Richardson, 51). Liberal feminist theory is distinctive in its focus on

individual rights and choices which are denied to women and ways in which the law and

education could rectify these injustices (Richardson, 51).

These three feminist theories, however, do not lend themselves to my research. A

somewhat more useful theoretical approach is found in Feminism and First Nations':

Conflict or Concert? written by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal authors from British

Columbia. The three female authors describe feminism as the political theory and

practice that struggles to free all women: women of colour, working-class women, poor

women, disabled women, lesbian women, old women - as well as white, economically

privileged or heterosexual women (Brown et al., 75). One of the main goals behind this

theory is for all women to have access to the process that determines priorities - to be a

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voice at the decision table (Brown et al., 76).

In the past Aboriginal women and women of colour have been marginalized even within the women's movement. In Feminism and First Nations: Conflict or Concert? Brown, Jamieson and Kovach (1995) state that there are strong hierarchical dynamics of oppression that racial minority women have had to confront in both feminist theory and practice. First Nations women have been marginalized in feminist organizations. Thus, a part of creating and achieving their goal of a place at the decision making table is the necessity for others to recognize that Aboriginal women are defining their own women's movement and reclaiming their history (Brown et al., 76).

The above feminist theory does provide some insight into aspects of Aboriginal women and their construction of the political. In the process of analysing aspects of the five interviews I decided to also use some of the concepts related to the medicine wheel as a foundation for Aboriginal theory. The Medicine Wheel teaches that good health links individuals to family, community and the earth in a circle of dependence and interdependence. In Aboriginal terms, what has been translated into English as 'medicine' actually holds a broader meaning. 'Medicine' refers to a sort of 'power' in a spiritual sense (Waldram, Herring & Young, 28). The medicine wheel is used to guide the healing process (26). The goal of treatment according to Herb Nabigon and Anne-Marie Mawhiney's article "Aboriginal Theory: A Cree Medicine Wheel Guide for Healing First Nations", is to encourage balance and harmony withing individuals, groups of people and communities and to assist in action to relieve pain in the communities and nations of the world (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 1995, 28). The medicine wheel uses the

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compass points of the four directions to aid individuals in the process of rediscovering their life path.

Methodology

This research used two methods of information collection, reviewing a key primary document and in-depth interviews. I used the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, as my primary source of information. The general topics covered in the in-depth interviews included: the respondents' definitions of the political; Aboriginal women's traditional roles within their cultures as well as their roles currently; present concerns for their family and community; positive and negative political issues affecting them currently; and political conditions that need to be improved or changed. The interview questions, discussed above will incorporate several themes including patriarchy, Eurocentrism, neoliberalism/capitalism, feminism, colonialism, oppression and exclusion, without using these terms explicitly.

The purpose of collecting both forms of information was to obtain both background information and first-hand experiences of aboriginal women. These techniques enable the researcher to have some cultural and historical understanding of Canadian Aboriginal cultures prior to conducting interviews with First Nations women. In order to have effective cross cultural communication the interviewer needs to have a certain degree of cultural sensitivity and understanding.

The process of creating appropriate interview questions included an overview of possible themes found in the literature review as well as a review of the various

qualitative approaches to conducting interviews. In his <u>Interpreting Qualitative Data</u>,

Silverman emphasizes the importance of qualitative researchers attempting to view social

phenomena through the eyes of their subjects by using an open and unstructured research

design which increases the possibility of the emergence of unexpected issues. This is

especially true when the social researcher assumes a "learning role" because detailed and

closed questions guide the interviewees responses in the direction chosen by the

interviewer (Silverman, 1993, 30-31). I believed that the use of open-ended questions

would create a greater possibility for the women to articulate their responses in their own

words. This supports what is referred to in qualitative research as humanistic inquiry

where respondents are encouraged to use their own ways of defining the world around

them: it assumes that there is not a fixed sequence of questions that are suitable for all

interviewees and it allows respondents to discuss important issues that are not contained

in a schedule (Silverman, 1993, 95).

I decided that open-ended interview questions were best suited for cross cultural

interviewing with members of various Aboriginal cultures for a number of reasons. This

type of research not only encourages interviewees to define the world around them in

their own terms, but it also accepts that there are various ways to answer questions. In the

dominant Canadian culture most questions are answered in a direct and linear fashion. In

alternative cultures, such as First Nations cultures, communication flows from a more

indirect and holistic approach whereby everything is interconnected (Gudykunst & Kim,

1997, 159).

The Researcher's Role

My work experience as an assistant to British Columbia's past New Democratic Party Premier Mike Harcourt and volunteering at a safe shelter for women helped to form my interest in politics and Aboriginal people. The experiences enhanced my desire to understand women's role in Aboriginal culture and the significance of their participation in grass-roots politics. In order to gain more understanding of Aboriginal culture I audited a course in Aboriginal communications and culture during the 1997 fall semester. At this time I met a few Aboriginal women who agreed to introduce me to other members of their communities. As a non-Aboriginal person interested in learning about and doing research with Native cultures it is essential to be introduced into Aboriginal communities by members or friends of the community. I also met with Liz Chamberlain, a councilor for the Aboriginal Education Centre at the University of Windsor, who aided my research project both as a reference to the Aboriginal community in Windsor and as a source for information on Aboriginal culture and traditions.

Sampling

The sampling strategy used in this research was purposive sampling: informants were selected based on their ability to best answer the research questions. No attempt was made to randomly select informants, but I did attempt to select women with a variety of experiences, philosophies and participation in the politics of their communities. For example, the women interviewed had various political experiences, from a woman who was actively involved in the Oka Crisis of 1991 to a woman who is a published poet

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living on her home reserve after spending the majority of her formative years in an urban setting. The interviews were in-person, one-on-one, unstructured, audio-taped and conducted in the women's homes or offices at work.

In my thesis proposal there were some initial concerns regarding research strategies. For example, the concern that the researcher had already established specific themes and responses prior to conducting the interviews, that the interviewer was ill equipped to conduct cross cultural interviews, that it was not culturally sensitive to audio tape the interviews, and that the interviewer might use the audio-recorder as a tool for listening rather than an aid for learning. I attempted to deal with these dangers by creating a consent form that underscored choice. In addition, I verbally articulated to the interviewees that it was their choice. A detailed analysis of these concerns is discussed in Chapter Five.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

Delimitations address how the study will be narrowed in scope. The sampling strategy for locating respondents places several delimitations on this research including:

- This study is confined to five in-depth interviews with five different Aboriginal women.

- The study is confined to Aboriginal women's experiences, philosophies, beliefs and values regarding the politics of their communities. In the First Nations culture the concept of community varies and it can include more than the community in which one is living. For some of the women interviewed, community included both Aboriginal and

non-Aboriginal communities in Canada and the United States. Most First Nations people do not recognize the Canada - United States border; three of the women interviewed were born and raised in the United States. Another interviewee made it clear that her community included Indigenous peoples of the world, and she specifically discussed her connection to communities in Hawaii and New Zealand.

- The research is not a comparison of Native cultures. I attempted to recognize that there are significant cultural differences within Aboriginal culture, however, I concentrated on understanding the commonalities and common themes. (Creswell, 1994)

Limitations

Limitations identify potential weaknesses of both the sampling process and the study:

The purposive sampling procedure decreases the generalizability of the findings. This study is obviously not generalizable to all Aboriginal women's philosophies and values regarding the politics of their communities in a strict sampling-theoretical sense. However, despite the diverse cultural backgrounds and places of residence, there are many commonalities shared by Aboriginal women. The commonalities generate insight and understanding into what is deemed political and where Aboriginal women's responsibilities lie within the politics of their communities (Ross, 1991, 21). The findings may not touch on every aspect of what it is to be an Aboriginal woman; however, the study identifies commonalities that exist among Aboriginal women. The commonalities revealed a pattern of political experience which is clearly distinct from the experience which belongs to the women of the dominant culture.

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After completing the five in-depth interviews I can conclude that there were distinct commonalities which emerged out of the discussions that are generalizable. However, one of the weaknesses of the sampling process was the failure of the researcher to choose respondents with more diverse backgrounds and experiences. All of the women I interviewed were university educated. One of the women had a Ph.D. in Psychology, another had a Masters degree in English and the others had four year university degrees. Obviously this is not representative of all Aboriginal women in Canada, nor do I think that it is only university educated Aboriginal women who are politically active in their communities.

One of the contributing factors to my sampling error described above is that my current status as a university student means that the majority of the people I am in contact with either work for the university, or are students or alumni of the University of Windsor. As I discuss in later chapters, one of my learning experiences was the significance of a non-Aboriginal person to be introduced into a First Nations culture by a mutual friend. Consequently, it is understandable that all of the women I interviewed had some experience with post secondary education.

Data Analysis

In qualitative analysis several simultaneous activities engage the researcher, including: collecting information from the interview, sorting the information into categories, formatting the information into a story or picture, and writing the analysis. Initially, however, the researcher may treat the simultaneous activities separately

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(Creswell. 1994. 154). The process of qualitative analysis is based on qualitative "reduction" and "interpretation". The researcher takes the large amount of information and reduces it to certain patterns. categories or themes and then interprets the information by using a specific design (Creswell. 154). The final goal is for a larger unified picture to emerge.

In each of the interviews I audio-taped the women's responses using a small Dictaphone. Each of the interviews lasted between one and two hours. After conducting each of the interviews I listened and wrote down the main points discussed on the tapes. I did not transcribe the entire tapes; however. I did transcribe the majority of the first three interviews. After completing the first three interviews I started to see the emergence of various themes and patterns. Thus. in the fourth and fifth interviews I made fewer notes from the interviews and only included in my pen and paper recordings the discussions that were relevant to the other interviews or those that displayed a clear contradiction. I then typed all of my notes from the tapes into the computer. The process of interviewing. transcribing and taking notes with a pen and paper and later inputting the information into the computer provided me with an opportunity to gain a strong understanding of the women's responses and discussions surrounding the interview questions.

After listening and taking notes from the tapes I organized each of the respondents' discussions based on one theme. Health was the common thread found in the five interviews. Thus, I attempted to arrange the women's responses according to "healing yourself." "healing your family." and "healing your community." The three themes are interconnected. but I made an effort to separate them. There were aspects of

the interviews that contradicted the themes in which case I put them to the side and included them as examples in the analysis chapter to illustrate that there were both commonalities and contradictions to the five women's values, beliefs and experiences relating to their political expressions.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Trustworthiness:

In order to check the accuracy or the trustworthiness of the information and whether it matches with 'reality' I compared the data collected from the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples with that collected from the interviews. This process provided an examination of the key decisions made during the research process and validated that they were good decisions. After I completed the list of categories and themes from the interviews I spoke with the respondents and asked whether my conclusions were accurate. Changes were then made in response to the comments and concerns of the interviewees. The qualitative researcher's goal is not to generalize findings, but to form interpretations of events. Limited generalizations, however, must occur in order for the categories or themes to emerge from the data collection (Creswell, 1994, 159).

Authenticity:

There are limitations in the ability to replicate this type of qualitative research. However, statements about the researcher's position or central assumptions, the selection

of informants and the biases and values of the researcher enhance the study's chances of being replicated in another setting (Creswell, 1994, 159). For example, it was suggested to me by a thesis committee member that before I begin the process of searching for possible First Nations women to interview I should first meet with a knowledgeable person from the First Nations community. I met with a councillor at the Aboriginal Resource Centre on the University of Windsor and was given various suggestions regarding aspects of interviewing from outside the Aboriginal culture and possible women to interview. I met with the First Nations councillor because of a recommendation from a professor that I both respect and trust, however, I went to her with my own biases and values.

Previous cross cultural experiences have taught me that the best way to learn from another culture is to go slowly, be mindful and listen. However, before I attempt to understand aspects of another culture it is essential for me to first accept that everyone is different and, therefore, I am different. Thus, I might understand certain aspects of First Nations cultures from my research but this does not mean that I can presume to know a lot or even a little about the individuals I am interviewing. Consequently, my discussion with the First Nations councillor and the interviewees were done in such a way that I acknowledged my own biases, but I also embraced my personal values and beliefs in communicating across cultures by allowing myself to go slowly, be mindful and listen.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout this study ethical considerations are an essential part of the

development and design of data collection analysis and publication of results. I was

given permission to conduct this research by the Communication Studies Ethics

Committee of the University of Windsor prior to conducting any formal interviews.

The research objectives were articulated verbally and in writing in order for them

to be understood by the informants. Also, information regarding the analysis of the

findings was provided to the participants. The informants were informed of all data

collection devices and activities. The informants' rights. interests and wishes were

considered first when decisions were made regarding the reporting of data. Finally,

decisions regarding the extent of disclosure of identity and information rested with the

informant (Creswell, 1994. 66).

Significance of the Study

A study of the political expressions of Aboriginal women in Canada was

important for several reasons. The First Peoples of Canada have a history characterized

by colonialism, genocide. rape and exclusion. Currently. many Aboriginal communities

are plagued by drug and alcohol addiction, family abuse and high rates of attempted

suicide among the youth population. Aboriginal women are virtually absent from Federal

politics. Colonialism and white male historians have stereotyped the Aboriginal woman

as subservient and docile, but, in many of First Nations communities it is the women who

are healing and leading their people towards a healthier future. It is important to gain

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knowledge of the strength and ability of First Nations women in order to have insight into the politics of healing within the Aboriginal cultures of Canada. In addition, the process of interviewing from outside a culture and explaining aspects of the cross cultural findings in such a way that might be useful to others is significant because very little is written on this topic.

Chapter Outline

Chapter two will provide a context by reviewing literature and briefly analysing two theoretical frameworks that will aid in my analysis of the political expressions of First Nations women. In chapter three I will provide a summary of various aspects taken from the five in-depth interviews. Using the summary of the interviews as a road map I will analyse the interviews in chapter four. In chapter five I will discuss the cross cultural findings of the interviews. Finally, in chapter six I review the study's findings and draw conclusions about the political expressions of First Nations women in Canada.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature:
Understanding Women's
Roles in Canadian Politics

Introduction

Women and the poor, as well as visible minority, ethnic and religious groups are

among the social groups most consistently excluded from the ranks of the political elite.

In Women and Politics in Canada, Heather MacIvor states women are one of the most

under-represented social groups in the elected assemblies of the world. Women as a

group account for more than one-half of the population but rarely constitute more than a

handful of the political elite. Few aspects of social life are more male-dominated than

elected politics (MacIvor, 1996, 43).

Gender is not the only determining factor in shaping women's subordinate

experiences. Culture is a determinant of gender. However, how women experience

subordination is connected to and mediated by other core variables outside of gender,

including race, class, religion, age and generation, sexual orientation, history, and

colonialism (MacIvor, 1996, 482).

Aboriginal women are virtually absent from federal politics in Canada. This

absence raises several questions: how do Aboriginal women express their political

interests; how do they define their roles in the politics of their communities and,

ultimately, what do they consider political. I address these questions in part 4 of this

chapter. But first, I will provide some historical context for the discussion, by

considering Aboriginal culture prior to European colonization; the second part examines

the experience of non-Aboriginal women and federal politics and the third addresses

Aboriginal women and federal politics.

Aboriginal Culture During Pre-Colonization and Early Colonization

Traditional teachings of First Nations cultures illustrate that during pre-colonization and

early colonization the distinct values and traditions of Aboriginal communities resulted in

unique political structures and political expressions. Values such as respect, harmony,

balance and strength are essential to the traditions of Aboriginal cultures. The poet

Solomon illustrates some of the traditional values in Eating Bitterness:

> Women were always respected.
> They had an equal voice with men.
> Men listened whenever women spoke
> they were not subordinate in any way
> that way there was no imbalance
> in our relations (Solomen, 1990, 38).

Values such as those described above resulted in specific political, social and economic

roles for women within Aboriginal communities. For example, in Returning to the

Teachings Ross discusses aspects of traditional teachings he learned from the Ojibway

culture. In the Ojibway culture everyone was given an opportunity to participate in the

decision making process of the community. In addition to values such as respect and

politeness, harmony is essential because disharmony within one individual is viewed as

everyone's disharmony as it "infects" all relationships that involve that person (Ross,

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1996. 64).

Ronald Wright highlights aspects of the Iroquois culture in the documentary "The View From the Other Side"(Wright, 1993, 315). Matrilineality, for example, is a cornerstone of the traditional social, political and cultural systems of the Iroquois. One's descent and nationality was determined through the female line. Women were exclusively responsible for electing the chiefs. This system was understood to achieve balance between the sexes.

In the late 1870's, however, Band Councils were imposed by the Indian Act. The Canadian government's goal was to replace all Indigenous governments with a universal system of elected band councillors who would respond to the Department of Indian Affairs. Within the Native communities the Band Councillors were understood to be only the "puppets" of Indian Affairs (Wright, 1993, 311).

The Iroquois people went along with the new system imposed by the government with the understanding that it was only for a short-term, trial period. After a few years the Iroquois decided to reject the adversarial style of European politics. The political system opposed their traditional consensus system of government and ignored the importance of the female voice in their culture (Wright, 1993, 317).

Another example is found in the Dene culture of the Northwest Territories. Prior to European contact they were a strong group of people with their own institutions, cultural systems, governments and leadership. They had balance in their human, spiritual and natural worlds. However, these self-determining nations became "undeveloped" through contact with Europeans. "Like all situations of colonialism, people became

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dependent on the non-Dene institutions" and began to lose strength and meaning (Ryan. 1995, 100).

Dene traditional society is holistic and interconnected (Ryan. 1995, 3). I will discuss Dene social, political and cultural life using the categories and other constructs employed by Ryan in her anthropological study Doing Things The Right Way: Dene Traditional Justice in Lac La Martre, N.W.T.. Ryan states that the Dene people of the Dogrib region of the Northwest Territories had a coherent system of rules for most aspects of daily life. Ryan separates the rules into three categories: natural resource rules, family rules and rules for local government. She concludes that in pre-contact time the Dene people: (i) had a system of rules for ensuring society worked in an orderly way at all times: (ii) had passed rules down orally from one generation to the next: (iii) had ways of enforcing rules: and (iv) had ways of dealing with individuals who did not follow the rules (Ryan, 1995, 2).

Stewardship refers to the maintaining of balance of land, animals, plants, spirits and people. This balance was essential because survival depended on reciprocal relationships among human, animal and natural worlds. The animals are viewed as a life force: and the Dene must ask the spirits of the animals to permit themselves to be taken for food, fur and hides (Ryan, 1995, 3). As long as the Dene respected this system, balance was maintained and needs provided for.

Men and women shared hunting responsibilities. The women ensured that men were properly clothed and had food for the journey. Women sometimes accompanied the men and stayed out on the land for the duration of the winter. During these times both

men and women hunted, trapped and worked with the meat. Trapping, as with hunting, was primarily the man's responsibility and he chose partners with whom he worked the trapline. In some cases, a man and wife might be "partners" by themselves. Some women also had partnerships with their fathers and it is reported that they worked "just like men" (Ryan, 1995, 31).

Families occasionally arranged marriages for daughters and sons at an early age. However, it was more common for men to ask male family members for women, but women had the right to refuse. If a girl was the last unmarried daughter at home, her family might have pressured her to accept the marriage proposal so that her family was no longer responsible for feeding and clothing her. Once a couple was united they would often live in the home of the wife's mother until they had their own home (Ryan, 1995, 33).

The traditional leader (yabahti) in the Dene community had the most authority and power. Leadership positions were generally hereditary. If the son of a yabahti had the necessary knowledge and skills to continue his father's work he was asked to take the position. The decision, however, was not automatic; it was discussed at length. If it was decided that the young man was not suitable, another man was chosen by the male and female elders of the community (Ryan, 1995, 54-55).

Women never became yabahti. Senior women were in charge of the camps when men were away. Women did, however, receive respect. They were in charge of children when they were young and responsible for their daughters for life. If women had special medicine powers they were regarded as special helpers of yabahti and helped out in times

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of severe illness or when game was scarce (Ryan, 1995, 55).

Colonization brought the arrival of the fur traders to many parts of Canada. Their presence resulted in many changes for Aboriginal people's way of life. It brought a shift in economic activities from subsistence to cash for furs. The shift caused women's roles to change. Women still worked, but they no longer received recognition since they received no cash for their work. Men received cash at the trading post for "their" furs. This led to the change from traditional sexual equality between men and women in the economic and social spheres to male economic and social dominance (Ryan, 1995, 60).

Ryan's effort to reveal the structures of social, cultural and political life within one Aboriginal community is a welcome addition to the literature. However, my attempt to use Ryan's study in order to understand the roles of women within these same institutions highlights the limitations of secondary literature vis-a-vis women. In the index to Ryan's study, "women" do not occur independent of their roles in, for example, leadership. In addition, I observed that the content concerning women is underdeveloped in Ryan's study.

Generally speaking, the important work which has been done to investigate the nature of Aboriginal communities has been done by white men. Thus, extensive investigations such as those by Rupert Ross and Ronald Wright reveal few specifics concerning women's roles. The nature of the roles of women within these communities is often not clearly stated. Women are not absent from the Aboriginal communities under study; however, their roles and lives remain implicit and must be discerned between the anthropological lines.

Poetry resists processes of categorization and classification – instead it can

capture some of the essence of possibilities. I return to <u>Eating Bitterness</u>, to reveal the

political possibilities of Aboriginal women:

> Women were always respected.
> They had an equal voice with men.
> Men listened whenever women spoke
> they were not subordinate in any way
> that way there was no imbalance
> in our relations (38).

Thus. my decision to speak to Aboriginal women about the political expressions of their

lives is an effort to reveal more about the politics of Aboriginal women. past. present and

future. While the choice of women only may be viewed as another imbalance. it is

adding weight to the previously under-valued side and thus. I hope. has the affect of

moving toward greater. not less. balance.

Non-Aboriginal Women and Federal Politics

The political experience of non-Aboriginal women does not explain that of

Aboriginal women. However. the Canadian community at large can be defined as a

patriarchy; it profoundly affects the experiences of both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal

women. An overview over non-Aboriginal women's political experience provides a point

of reference which illustrates that the political road has been one of struggle for all

women in Canada.

It is understandable that women were. and continue to be. strangers within a realm

which is built, maintained, and supported by a patriarchal society. A patriarchal culture is

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one in which women are defined by those who subordinate them. For the most part, men are the photographers, publishers, editors, film directors and others who produce the images that define women (Richardson, 1993, 126). In such societies, power and privilege allow men to occupy positions which enable them to shape and control many aspects of women's lives. Most known societies are patriarchal to a greater or lesser degree, although there are variations amongst patriarchal societies (Richardson, 1993, 181).

Prior to 1918 women did not have the right to vote in elections in Canada. Due to the efforts of the female suffragists, women received the federal franchise in 1918. The suffragist era is considered the first wave of feminism (Bashevkin, 1994, 481). For more than 15 years after the federal franchise, Agnes Macphail stood alone as the sole female Member of Parliament (Bashevkin, 1994, 481). In terms of general barriers to elite-level participation in politics, Agnes Macphail's experience was characteristic of the post-suffrage era. Macphail, like many female candidates in competitive ridings, had to defeat ten males to win the nomination initially and then withstood strong protests from both the constituency organization and the electorate. The anti-suffragists considered women to be outsiders and second-class citizens within politics and society.

Women were defined out of the political scene because they had no place in a political landscape traditionally reserved for men (MacIvor, 1996, 5). Consequently, the extension of the franchise failed to open the doors of wider political power to women. After the suffrage movement, most women and women activists were content to be members of "ladies' auxiliaries" of the political parties, rather than full-fledged party

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members (MacIvor, 1996, 483). The work performed by women in the parties included

bake sales and other less visible or less valued service than the work of their male

counterparts. The New Democratic Party was an exception. By the early 1920's the

NDP had granted women the option of direct party membership and female involvement

was somewhat more meaningful (MacIvor, 1996, 483). Regardless of the party stripe,

however, as a woman ascended the hierarchy of a political party, she found herself

increasingly alone among men (Brodie, 1994, 59).

Some of the initial reasons for lower levels of political participation include:

economic dependence on men, low levels of education among women, marital and child-

rearing responsibilities and traditional social norms that defined women as unfit for

political involvement. Men were equated with the public sphere of paid labour and

politics while women were limited to the private sphere of home and family (Brodie,

1994, 58).

The early 1970's brought change and the second wave of feminism: women,

especially younger educated women, were no longer plagued by lower political

expectations, ambitions and levels of self-confidence. Women became increasingly vocal

about their subordinate role in both society and politics. Leaders of various feminist

organizations spoke against the status-quo of women as marginalized members of a

patriarchal society. Feminists challenged the prevailing view that men should determine

the 'real' issues and pass judgement in society (Spender, 1980, 11). The Royal

Commission on the Status of Women reported in 1970 that women's participation in

politics was little more than 'tokenism' (Megyery, 1991, 4). Women continued to be

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under-represented in parties and men continue to dominate the political landscape as candidates or as important decision makers within parties. Women with political aspirations face discrimination by both men and older women within party organizations. Politically active women were largely clustered in municipal politics. Women who were given the opportunity to run in provincial or federal campaigns were given little financial assistance by their respective parties and often ran in no-win or long shot ridings (Bashevkin, 1991,484).

In the 1970's, women became increasingly aware that achieving the vote and having the power to elect a sufficient number of women to the House of Commons were two separate issues. In Women and Politics in Canada, MacIvor notes that very few women have had access to the informal occupational networks upon which political careers are built (1996, 180). She uses the example of male lawyers and businessmen attending their 'male only' clubs to make political contacts. Women have been excluded from the masculine camaraderie. In the world of 'old boy' networks, the sense that women are strangers is palpable (MacIvor, 1996, 182).

Women's exclusion from high-status jobs and from the important informal networks results in a lack of "social capital" (MacIvor, 1996, 182). Social capital can be defined as "social knowledge, contacts, and networks of power relations characterised by their own rules of competition, conflicts and strategies" (MacIvor, 1996, 183). Social capital is accrued through informal contacts with elite members as well as the acquisition of elite skills and attitudes through formal channels such as law firms (MacIvor, 1996, 182). The notion of social capital explains why women's power in the private sphere - -

as mothers and wives - - has not been transferable to the public sphere.

MacIvor argues that only those people with social capital can rise through the ranks to elite levels, because it is the currency needed to purchase the status power (MacIvor, 1996, 183). Elites have a tendency to recruit those who are similar to them, if at all possible. Therefore, a history of male-dominated elites has been more than enough to ensure a future of male dominated elites (MacIvor, 1996, 183).

Another barrier to women's political participation is the lack of access to sufficient funds. On average women are paid less than men which limits women's ability to fund political efforts. Also, the exclusion from elite networks denies women access to "rich" sources of support, such as corporations, which are required to fund political careers (MacIvor, 1996, 183). Limited access to social capital, as well as gender stereotypes impede the advance of women in the political field.

Canadians have been socialized to associate politics with men and masculine values, such as competition and winning, not with women and feminist values like kindness, helping, and honesty. This discouraged women during the suffrage movement. Today, gender stereotypes continue to discourage women from taking an interest in political matters because of the fear of appearing 'less feminine'. The previous exclusion of women from the political sphere has encouraged negative stereotyping of today's politically ambitious women. Politics was, and to a lesser extent continues to be, a male dominated field; therefore, politically active women are viewed as masculine-strangers who ignore the social norms of society. The media and the outside world reinforce stereotypical and sexist images of how women ought to appear. A Toronto Star journalist,

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Rosemary Spiers, wrote that Kim Campbell was "crushingly ambitious"-- a phrase that Campbell claimed would never be used to describe a male politician (MacIvor, 1996, 24). It was reported that this term reminded Campbell of old definitions about how a man is forceful; a woman is pushy -- a man stands his ground; a woman is a complaining bitch (MacIvor, 1996, 24).

Language and communication style are important ingredients in understanding and succeeding in the world of politics. Linguists and cultural studies experts have identified that significant differences exist between male and female communication styles. However, the male gender has traditionally created the rules and decided the norms of acceptable communication within our society. Anything differing from societal norms is considered wrong. Thus, women are operating as aliens within the present structure and speaking a different dialect from that which is socially mandated.

Women's limited ability to achieve political power has affected both the number of women elected to the House of Commons, and the agenda of the federal government. Feminist concerns, including child care, education, social assistance and unemployment, continue to be virtually ignored by Canadian political parties on the centre and right in the absence of significant numbers of feminist advocates. In the absence of a strong feminist voice, economic, political and social decisions are made with little attention to, or awareness of, the special impact that new policy initiatives or the lack there of have on women (Megyery, 1991, 9).

In the process of analysing women's subordination and alienation from the political realm, it is important not to isolate gender as the only determining factor in

shaping women's subordinate experiences. The ways in which women experience

subordination are connected to and mediated by other core variables besides gender. such

as race, class, religion, age and generation. sexual orientation. History and colonialism

are also factors effecting the subordination of women. In the next section. I consider

some of these core variables.

Aboriginal Women and Federal Politics

Oppression is a function of being born into a race and culture with different

traditions and norms than the dominant culture. Aboriginal people have been oppressed

and defined out of the social, economic and political landscape in a different way than

non-Aboriginal women. Within Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal men and women were

traditionally equals (Ross, 1992, 30). But Aboriginal people, men and women alike, have

been discriminated against by the dominant culture. Thus, the oppression of Aboriginal

women is more complex than the experience of their non-Aboriginal sisters. In Canada,

the oppression of Aboriginal women is a function of, among other things, being female

and being born into a First Nation.

The oppression of First Nations' people in Canada is nothing less than cultural

genocide. The colonization and reservation system resulted in extensive victimization of

Aboriginal women and men (Harding, 1992. 6). "Status Indian" people are persons

registered or entitled to be registered as Indians under the federal Indian Act. There were

limited rights under Aboriginal policy for "status Indians" who were regarded as wards of

the state. Many Aboriginal women lost their "Indian status" by marrying non-Indians;

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this also meant the loss of housing on their reserves. Harding stresses that the European legal and patriarchal system imposed a dependent non-participating status on 'Indian' women. He also understands residential schools to have eroded and denigrated parental roles and values (Harding, 1992, 6).

Nearly a century after Canadian confederation, the federal government in 1960 finally gave the franchise to Native peoples. In the early 1960s approximately three in four Native people were denied the right or the ability to vote in federal elections. Some of the particular factors inhibiting Aboriginal people from voting include lack of education, language barriers and the existence of few ballot boxes. Only 25% of First Nations people were entitled to vote; and only 60% of this number, or approximately 15% of Native people, could effectively exercise the franchise. In the late 1960s, the Canada Elections Act finally accorded all Native people the right to vote in federal elections. Six Nations people continue to refuse the vote and others elect not to vote for reasons such as the political system is not their system and it is not reflective of consensus and harmony that are characteristic of most First Nations (RRCAP, v. 1, 1996).

The federal government treated non-status Native people and their descendants as having the same individual rights as all other Canadians, but no group or collective rights were recognized. Non-status Native people are those who have lost their entitlement to be registered under the Indian Act either voluntarily or involuntarily because of government legislation that renounced their right to registration (RRCAP, 1996, v. 3, 5).

During the 1960s a significant number of Canadians became attuned to the circumstances and plight of Native people. Canadians looked south of the border to the

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civil rights movement and the plight of black Americans. Consequently, a few Canadians began questioning the poverty and treatment of Aboriginal people in this country (Millen, 1991, 7).

By the end of the 1960s, the federal Aboriginal policy objectives included the removal of perceived barriers and impediments to the fuller participation of Aboriginal people within the mainstream of Canadian society. In 1969, the federal government released a "White Paper" calling for an entirely different approach to federal Aboriginal policy. The collective rights of Aboriginal people were to be abolished. The proposed solution for 'their' socio-economic problems was to abolish the Department of Indian Affairs and to allow Aboriginal people to move freely into society unrestricted by, or liberated from, the provisions of a paternalistic Indian Act (Millen, 1991, 6).

Political scientists have suggested that the White Paper ignited Aboriginal self-awareness and led them to seek greater economic and political control over their own lives. It is reported that the Paper was so provocative that it lit Indian bands, tribal councils, and provincial as well as national associations into a burst of self-defining energy across the country (Millen, 1991, 6). As a result of these reactions to the White Paper, the federal government retracted the Paper but not the policy (Millen, 1991, 6).

Prior to the early 1970's First Nations People were silenced regarding the continuous exploitation of their culture and history. Canadian residential schools, for example, forbade Native children to speak their native language. Native ceremonies were prohibited. Thus, various media for communicating content and identity, such as language, ceremony and experience, were marginalized, and therefore culture itself was

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overpowered or overwritten by 'history' (Millen, 1991).

The significance of Eurocentrism within Canadian society is illustrated in the continual minimization of oppressive treatment towards Aboriginal peoples, as circumstantial, accidental and exceptional. Colonialism and imperialism are not seen as fundamental catalysts to Canada's disproportionate power. The Indian Act was the result of a conscious political stance which was deliberate cultural genocide (Millen, 1991).

In light of the marginalization or total rejection of Native culture, values and history by the federal government, it is understandable that Aboriginal people view the ballot box as representing injustice rather than democracy (Switzer, 1997.10). The historic injustices inflicted on Aboriginal people have resulted in an Aboriginal population that traditionally avoids participating in the federal election process. Party politics is virtually non-existent in many of the 2,400 reserve communities that are home to approximately 300,000 Aboriginal people (Switzer, 1997, 10).

Refusal and rejection is a common theme in understanding Aboriginal peoples' attitudes towards the federal government: "Betrayals at the hands of federal politicians have been a way of life for Indians" (Switzer, 1997, 10). For example, the six-volume, 1.5 million-word Report by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People was released in 1996, after the most extensive and expensive federal inquiry in the history of Canada; yet the Prime Minister has endorsed only a few of the 440 recommendations. Justifiably, the Aboriginal community lacks interest in the politics of the federal government.

Aboriginal people constitute a unique community of interest and identity which has been suppressed in the House of Commons. Only 12 identified Aboriginal Members

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of Parliament have been elected since Confederation. The failure of the House of Commons to reflect in its make-up the uniqueness and importance of the Aboriginal community calls into question the legitimacy of parliament itself (Millen, 1991, 48).

Both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women require government action to free them from traditional undervaluation of their work and from job ghettos, to provide support for child care and to "cushion" them from poverty (Millen, 1991, 67). However, Aboriginal women are uniquely vulnerable. They are excluded from the present government agenda because of historic injustices and continuing power imbalances within society.

Aboriginal Women and the Political

The definition of power is culturally conditioned. The dominant culture in Canada views the political as having power over others. Western women may understand power as: top of the heap, front of the pack, league of their own, cream of the crop and head of the class. Power is also essential to the Aboriginal women's political experience, but the ingredients and expressions of power are fundamentally distinct.

> 'Power' in an Indian sense is understood according to a different set of values. In Aboriginal terms, "power" or empowerment is individual and can be equated with self-determination: the right to have control of your life and future, as an individual and as a community. Power is relational but not dichotomous or hierarchical. It is balanced and complimentary (Angus, 1995, 224).

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Aboriginal women may have little political power in the Western sense with regards to their role in federal politics; however, some Aboriginal women are having a significant impact within the politics of their communities. The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples explains that Aboriginal women are using their own powers to provide leadership in facilitating the healing process and other initiatives (1996, 53): "Aboriginal women are profoundly aware of the need for healing, not just of the body, but the mind, spirit and environment. Overall wellness is the ultimate goal" (RRCAP, 1996, 56). Consequently, Aboriginal women may not view an elected position in the House of Commons to be of great importance to their immediate future or environment.

Aboriginal women's virtual absence from federal politics is anything but apolitical; it is a politics of survival: " Until we get our people into a position where we don't have to worry about the basics of health of our children, and food for our families, and shelter for our families, it is very difficult to talk about representing our communities" (Brown et al., 1995, 71). Until Aboriginal women have achieved self-determination and the right to have control of their lives and futures both as individuals and within communities, political representation in the House of Commons will be of little importance to their daily lives. .

Ross believes that, despite the diverse cultural backgrounds and places of residence, there are many commonalities shared by Aboriginal women. The greatest one might be their overriding concern for their own well-being, and that of their children, extended families, communities and nations. Ross believes their common vision is of a

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future in which the values of kindness, honesty, sharing and respect are part of everyday life (1996, 21). Their vision includes healing initiatives that are holistic and include traditional values and beliefs that have been passed on by the elders of their communities (Ross, 1996, 187). Within Aboriginal cultures, healing is the process that restores the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being of Aboriginal people, their families, their communities and their nations (Nabigon & Mawhiney, [no date], 2). Aboriginal women are using their traditional vision of healing to understand their own histories, to deal with the effects of past injustices, and to create a vision for a future which is stronger and healthier (Ryan, 1995, 2).

Thus, some Aboriginal women have viewed the political as the process of healing the individual, family, community and nation. Aboriginal women are initiating the healing in many community based projects. They are leading their communities away from alcohol and substance abuse, child abuse and family violence toward a healthier future and a stronger Nation (RRCAP, 1996, v.3, 21). Another essential element in the political tapestry of Aboriginal women and their non-Aboriginal sisters is access to the decision-making process. The analysis of Brown, Jamieson and Kovach shows one aspect of what Aboriginal women deem political: the ability to participate in determining political priorities within their own families, communities and nations. Thus, for some Aboriginal women, the freedom to determine their own life path is "political" (Brown et al., 1997, 69).

Aboriginal women have been denied the freedom to define what is important to them, and to have access to the political process. For instance, Aboriginal women have

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been excluded from the politics of federal government and marginalized in reserve politics due to the patriarchal impositions of the federal government. The federal government forced Native communities to accept the foreign political process of creating band councils and electing chiefs. The federal government with its patriarchal ideas discouraged Aboriginal women from participating in both the election process and from being part of the band councils.

In addition to being excluded from federal government and the politics of reserves. Aboriginal women were silenced by the dominant feminist movement. Initially, white feminism was almost exclusively concerned with aspects of gender discrimination and focussed little attention on the issue of race (Brown et al.. 1997, 70). White feminism did help redefine the existing social, economic and political order: these were rendered problematic by feminists who revealed the contingent nature of the present political structure. Thus, the door was opened to the possibilities of 'other'. Yet, the early feminist movement excluded the concerns of Aboriginal women as well as other minority women. Consequently, First Nations women organized their own women's movement which included the concerns of both gender and race (Brown et al.. 1997. 71).

Brown, Jamieson and Kovach provide a feminist theory which illustrates strong potential for understanding and revealing aspects of the political expressions of Aboriginal women by illustrating the importance of empowering all women, including women of colour, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbian women, old women-as well as white, economically privileged, heterosexual women (Brown et al.. 1997, 75).

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In addition to the exclusion of Aboriginal women from mainstream politics and white feminists. Aboriginal males have effectively silenced women by monopolizing the political leadership in many First Nations communities. It appears that the survival and care-taking priorities for which Aboriginal women are taking responsibility. are not considered central to the First Nations political agenda by white feminists. mainstream politicians and many First Nations men (Brown et al., 1997, 71). In many Aboriginal communities. there is evidence of gender hierarchy as men have the political power to determine the issues of priority. First Nations women are often told that once self-government is achieved their concerns regarding poverty, family and violence will be addressed. But Aboriginal women are often excluded from the decision making tables where these discussions about self-government take place.

In summary, in some Aboriginal communities it is primarily the women who are leading their people away from cycles of alcohol abuse, substance abuse and self-denigration toward wholeness, recovery and self-governance. Because Aboriginal people are deprived of their traditional way of life, poverty, family violence, drug abuse, family breakdown and incarceration become a way of life for many Aboriginal people. Patricia Monture-Angus states in her Thunder in My Soul that some Aboriginal people believe that the main cause of violence is the lack of control experienced by Aboriginal people. She believes that self-determination would be first the ability of Aboriginal people to see their situation as it is, and later to develop and control responsive resources in the community to change their lives in a positive direction (Monture-Angus, 1996, 51).

Many Aboriginal women have decided to heal and strengthen their people rather than leave their communities and culture for the elite politics of Ottawa. The political activism of Aboriginal women is a manifestation of a common vision of the importance of community within Aboriginal cultures. Ross informs us that in the Navajo language one of the greatest compliments is to say of another that she takes care of her 'relatives'. The term 'relatives' refers to other people as well as all other aspects of creation. Thus, it is not surprising to find that many Aboriginal women with political aspirations make the conscious decision to focus their energies on helping themselves, their family, community and Nation rather than leading or governing in Ottawa. Regardless of the particular form of political expressions, whether they are working in an urban shelter for Aboriginal women, organizing healing circles on reserves, or blockading heavy machinery from destroying rainforests on sacred land, Aboriginal women are political leaders.

Chapter Three

Summary of Interviews:
The Politics of Five
First Nations Women

Introduction

To supplement the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, and to fully understand the political expressions of Aboriginal women, in-depth interviews were conducted with five women who are involved in the politics of their communities. The political expressions of the women interviewed varied from a woman who was involved in the Oka crisis of 1990 to a published poet.

Overview of the Interviews

Three of the five interviews were conducted in the women's offices at work, and the other two were done in the women's homes. Four of the interviews were conducted in March and the fifth was done in April. On average the interviews took between one and two hours. All of the interviews were audio-recorded with the aid of a small Dictaphone which was placed on a table in front of the interviewees. Prior to establishing a time, date and location for the interviews I met with each woman and asked for permission to interview. At this time I also talked with the women about various aspects of their job and discussed aspects of my research. These meetings varied in length but were often an hour long. At the formal interview the interviewee and I usually talked casually for about 15 minutes prior to starting the actual interview. Both the informal

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meeting prior to the interviews and the conversation immediately before the interviews allowed us to get to know each other and to build a certain degree of trust.

Respondents

The respondents were all between 30 and 55 years old. I did not ask the women their exact age. but I am able to approximate based on various pieces of information they provided during the course of our discussions. All of the women are university educated with a minimum of a four year degree, and the most highly educated interviewee had achieved a Ph.D.. Two of the women are unmarried, one is married and two have children. The interviewee's occupations included: a student. a therapist. a counselor. an administrator and. finally. a writer/communications consultant. I asked the women their birth place because in First Nations cultures, as in most cultures of the world. place of origin helps shape the lives of individuals. In addition. learning about aspects of the woman's community provides a context for understanding her political landscape.

Two of the women were born in Canada. and the other three were born in various parts of the United States. However. it should be noted that to many First Nations people the border between the United States and Canada is less meaningful: however. depending on where they grew up they would have experienced different environments affected by history and government policies. Also, the interviewees' attitudes regarding the border between the two countries varied depending upon the geographical location of their home communities. For example, most of the women interviewed had spent a long period of time in Windsor which is very close to the United States border. These women traveled

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between the two countries regularly and had family members in both countries. In contrast, the interviewee who lives further from the border underscored the differentiation between the two countries more than the other women.

Analysing Data

Prior to analysing the data I spent an extensive period of time listening to the audio-tapes and recording by pen and paper almost the entire first three interviews . After recording on paper the discussions I then typed them into my computer. Initially, the women's responses appeared to be extremely diverse but after listening to them several times and going through them on paper I began to see themes and categories emerging. Consequently, I did not completely transcribe the majority of the final two interviews; rather I chose the responses that agreed with the others or that strongly disagreed, in order to show variations in the women's viewpoints.

Before the interview process I had completed a review of literature which included an extensive review of the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples

(the "Report"). The Report has a specific section on issues affecting First Nations women which provided me insight to predict possible analytical categories and themes. I did, however, attempt to create open-ended questions that allowed the women to respond in their own words and according to their own values and beliefs and not those of the interviewer. The Report did not guide my analysis, but it did provide a starting point to begin the process of learning and understanding some of the issues which are of concern

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to First Nations women.

It was obvious in my review of the literature and in the women's responses that health was an enormous concern for First Nations people in Canada. After studying the medicine wheel and other aspects of Aboriginal theory which are discussed in Chapter four I decided that I would organize the information from the interviews into three main themes. Healing yourself, healing your family, and healing your community are themes which are interconnected and supported by the teachings of the medicine wheel. The themes also provided me with the tools to better understand the political expressions of Aboriginal women. Some of the responses which did not fit with the three themes are briefly mentioned in this chapter but they are not discussed further in the Analysis Chapter unless they are in conflict with the majority of the other respondents' viewpoints. I did this in order to illustrate that there was a variation in the women's beliefs and values regarding the political.

The Results

For reference and confidentiality purposes most of the "interviewees" have been assigned a pseudonym. In the interviews, the women were asked to tell their story. I used five open-ended interview questions in most of the interviews, but I varied them depending on the women's responses. For example, one woman stated that she was not political nor did she have an interest in politics. Consequently I did not ask her any questions about Band or Federal politics. Instead, I asked her about her community and some of her concerns about the future of her people. The purpose of being flexible and

using only a few open-ended questions was to encourage each woman to explain her views of the political in her own words and not in the words or following the structure of the interviewer. The following will be a brief summary of the main issues discussed by each interviewee. This overview will provide a framework for understanding the more detailed analysis in the subsequent chapter.

The Interviews

Kate was the first woman I interviewed. She lives outside the Windsor area. She lived in a city, on a farm and now on her reserve. Kate works out of her home as a consultant and has had some of her literary work published. Kate discussed the following issues in our interview: the political; the virtual absence of Aboriginal women from Federal government; healing; traditional roles of First Nations women; the roles of First Nations women today; and men's roles within the community.

In explaining her ideas about the political, Kate discussed how, for her, "the political means much more than just Band politics." She articulated that the political is far-reaching and includes " a lot of the people I know - - that which they are doing is political because just living their lives is political action." Kate stated that "a lot of political change occurs at the community level" and that "women are generally the leaders in the communities."

I asked Kate if she had any thoughts on the virtual absence of Aboriginal women from the Federal government and she responded with the following statement:

It is a system that has never worked for us -- it has always

worked against us; so because of that many Aboriginal
people don't vote because they don't want to support it and
they don't want to be seen as believing that there is some
hope that the Federal government is going to be
responsible to Native people because history has taught us
otherwise. So why vote for that?

Healing was another important issue for Kate as she stated that "if I had to say just one concern it would be healing -- healing within the community." Kate later added that "out of healing comes everything. . . for each family and each individual it's different." She explained that some people need traditional healing while others need other things. Kate articulated that education and family problems are part of the healing issue. She discussed how education can mean "dealing with the ongoing pressures of racism from the surrounding community; learning about ourselves; our history; and our language." Kate views family problems as "issues within the community that inhibit it from functioning to its full potential. . . Addictions. alcohol abuse and family violence are all contributing factors of what are family problems."

In attempting to understand some of Kate's views on the roles of First Nations women I learned that Kate was not raised in a traditional way but she was given traditional teachings throughout her life. Kate stated that "our communities and Nations have been affected by the culture which has been imposed on us; there are conflicts sometimes between these values and the traditional." She later discussed that "there are Native men who think in terms of male privilege. . . colonialism and churches do support a patriarchal way, and this has had an impact -- but the amazing thing is that so [many] of the traditional teachings have survived."

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Kate made few comments on the traditional roles of First Nations women. but she did discuss her views on the current roles and responsibilities. "When you look at how a community functions, not just in Canada, but in speaking with Indigenous women in other countries that have the experience of being colonized, it seems similar: it is the women who are running the communities." Kate later articulated that she perceives similarities in the roles of Indigenous women of the world. She used Hawaii and New Zealand as an example:

> The sovereignty movement is lead by women in Hawaii. and in New Zealand they wanted to preserve the language. . . : the Maori language was being lost, and it was women who started up the Language Nest in the pre-schools. These schools in New Zealand were set up outside of government funding because they couldn't get the funding when they first started. but the women saw the need and got things done anyway.

In explaining how she views women's roles and responsibilities within her community Kate articulated the importance of women in the home and family. She also discussed how she saw women, more than men, ensuring that the daily needs of the community are met. In discussing men's roles in the community Kate discussed that men generally serve the community by becoming involved in the Band Council, whereas she sees women being involved in everything from "daycare programs to safe shelters for women."

Sherry was the second woman I interviewed. She works in the Toronto area as an administrator and has spent a lot of time in the United States in her earlier years. Outside of her paid work Sherry is very involved in various Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

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communities. She discussed her understanding of the political, the Oka Crisis, women's roles within the community, menstruation, hierarchy and the importance of Aboriginal teachings.

One of my initial questions for Sherry dealt with her views of the political. She articulated that for her it includes financial issues and people who are elected to boards, councils and governments. She also discussed how she does not view herself as political nor does she see "Aboriginal women who stand up, who are that strong vocal person, as being political."

After learning aspects of what Sherry views as political I asked her about her time spent at the Kanehsatake reserve. She explained how she was asked to help at the Oka crisis right after the incident started. She stated that "an Aboriginal woman in the Windsor area received a phone call asking people to go up to Kanehsatake reserve to provide support and to take care of some of their traditional things as well as anybody who had medicines were asked to go."

In discussing her involvement at Oka, Sherry also discussed aspects of Aboriginal women's roles and responsibilities. Sherry discussed how she views the role of women within the community as being very important. She articulated that "women are life givers, teachers and those strong vocal people." She stated that women are " at the forefront because of our role as life givers -- that is something that is a priority, that's something that our women need to make a strong commitment to and to understand what it means." She values the "responsibility of ensuring that care is given and that the traditional teachings are given." In her view, "one of the biggest parts of a woman's role

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is to provide the traditional teachings." Sherry also discussed the importance of women

supporting men by stating that "women must stand behind our men to make sure they

continue to stay strong." For Sherry "the role of being a woman is not something you

need to think about - it's who you are; it's what you feel inside that carries that role of

mother; of protector; of teacher."

Later in the interview Sherry discussed the significance of menstruation and its

connection to women's roles and responsibilities. She stated:

> Our roles have a lot to do with our make-up; the water that
> we carry, the strawberry we are responsible for -- all of
> those are medicines, and so when it comes to looking at
> what women go though during our lifetime, our entire
> physical make-up inside is so much more powerful and
> stronger than a man's make-up and so that's why women
> are responsible for guidance and responsible for teaching.

In Sherry's discussion about roles and responsibilities she also discussed balance

and harmony found in Native teachings versus hierarchy taught in the dominant culture.

She stated that. "it doesn't matter where Aboriginal women sit just as long as we sit.

How people look at the hierarchy is different -- we see it differently." Aboriginal

teachings can help First Nations people to avoid getting caught up in the notion of

hierarchy and mainstream thinking "because that kind of thinking is harmful and it's

degrading."

Elk was the third woman I interviewed. She lives in the Windsor area and has

lived in various parts of Ontario for most of her life. She has a political science

background and is currently an education counsellor. In my interview with Elk she

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discussed: her job as a counsellor, politics, the issue of healing, women's roles and

responsibilities, menstruation and the balance between men and women.

In attempting to understand a bit about Elk I asked her about her job as a counselor and

she stated:

> it is a very delicate balance because there is so much
> influence in an institution that we call higher learning
> centre. We are supposed to be the intellectuals, the think
> tank of the capitalist system and the trend setters, that when
> we see the type of ignorance and lack of information that
> has been done purposely by the government of Canada I see
> my job as a wonderful gift. . . I am able to share the truth
> with a large number of people.

In explaining what Elk saw as political she stated that "truth power is the most

political force and the most powerful." She views the political in terms of "education

through social justice." She also discussed the relationship between First Nations people

and the government of Canada as "the best kept secret and likely the darkest legacy of our

country." Included in her discussion of the political was the incarceration of Aboriginal

peoples and the effects it has on First Nations cultures. Elk also commented that "band

politics are often not efficient or effective," rather, "they are destructive against who we

are as a collective and as a consensus people." Elk views women as the leaders and the

teachers in the communities; women are responsible for healing the family and the

community. She stated that "by filling these roles and responsibilities we are restoring

harmony through spiritual wellness."

In her discussion on women's roles as teachers she mentioned that "women, like

mother earth, are completely tied into that energy. . . ; they are tied to the moon because

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of their menstrual cycle -- the moon cycle which is the same 28 days." She stated that she

"recognizes a woman's cycle as being very important because women are revered within

the Aboriginal culture as the life givers and the teachers."

Elk discussed the balance between men and women within Aboriginal cultures.

Men and women have been given their own jobs and responsibilities from the creator and

"that's why there was no threat on the male counter-part because they have their own

responsibilities. . . ; men recognize the importance of women as the creator and the first

teacher."

The fourth woman I interviewed was Kelly who worked as a counsellor in the

Windsor area at the time of the interview. She has spent a lot of the time in the United

States while attending university. In our interview she discussed the following: working

with First Nations People, the political; band politics; women's traditional roles during

pre-colonization and the effects of colonialism today; and women's current roles within

the community.

I asked Kelly about her work as a counsellor and she explained that she is a

counsellor and in her work she uses Aboriginal teachings of the Medicine Wheel. She

stated "I look at not just the psychological part of healing but I try to encompass a broad

definition of health, healing and wellness." Kelly articulated that she wants to develop

and eventually publish culturally sensitive approaches to healing for Aboriginal people.

In Kelly's explanation of her work she also discussed various projects in which

she worked with First Nations People. She discussed how "women are often more

involved in community projects than men; however, men are very valuable in these

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settings as well." She stated that " as a woman, if I'm working on a team where there is a man, because I've worked on so many teams where there isn't a man, I am aware of a different type of energy and strength that I appreciate and that there's sort of a security that you get from the man." She later stated that "the women I have worked with have been awesome -- very committed to their communities. . . They give way beyond what is called for." She expands on this issue by discussing how a large percentage of the healers in terms of western medicine, such as physicians, nursing, social work and other health related fields, are women. She views men in these fields as being valued and respected, however, she does not know or rather has not thought about the difference in the kind of healing that men and women provide. She did state that " there is something that men do provide which is their physical strength. I view this strength as comforting to others."

In Kelly's discussion of the political she articulated that Band politics are a "system which was imposed on us and there are problems with it that are not a result of the people involved." She mentioned that she has no intention of becoming involved in Band politics, but does view herself as political "because I speak out, voice my opinion when involved in community projects." Kelly discussed how she does not see her paid work as political but her community work outside of the Friendship Centre is her time for being political and helping people to empower themselves. For her, "empowerment is a political act."

Before discussing the current roles of First Nations women Kelly discussed, at length, Aboriginal women's traditional roles during pre-colonization and the effects of colonialism today. She stated the following:

I think primarily with some tribes the men's sources of pride were available outside of the camp like in hunting and warfare -- those kinds of exploits. Whereas the women's honour was accrued within the camp -- the way they dress the hides and kept their dwelling, and their own personal deportment or whatever. So with colonization, and being limited to certain pieces of land, the men no longer had access to their sources of honour as the women did. This is very generally speaking. The men may have experienced more of a decrease in the places that they could have gone too -- even the women could also choose to hunt and go to war -- men could stay closer to the camps. It wasn't rigid.

In the course of my discussion with Kelly she articulated several times that the traditional roles of Aboriginal women were flexible. The review of literature supported this and emphasized that both men and women had choices in the jobs and duties they performed. The Report, for example, articulated that if a woman loved the outdoors and proved herself to be a good hunter she would hunt with the men for extended periods of time.

The dominant culture might perceive some of the responses from Kelly and the other interviewees as examples of a "sexist" society which ensured that women were left in the homes while the men were outdoors hunting and fighting. Our perceptions are influenced by our own beliefs, values and attitude systems and by those of our culture. First Nations cultures continue to have different values, beliefs and attitude systems than the dominant culture (Samovar & Porter, 1995, 22). These systems which are specific to First Nations cultures are evident in the women's discussions in this chapter. I will provide a more detailed discuss on this topic in chapters four and five.

Kelly continued to discuss the roles of First Nations women and the impact of colonization:

I would say that the women are able to continue some of their roles. Women have valued these roles even in spite of the fact that Europeans' views

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of the women have been insulting and -- say back during the time period where Indians were put on reservations and even before that -- Indian women were demeaned by non-Indian writers; because of their labour they were seen as "drudges" or as just a burden or whatever. And, they were not valued because of the very labour that we have always done, and yet it was because of our labour, our industriousness that we obtained honour amongst our people. I think it's complicated because it may be that we among ourselves and within ourselves believe that we have retained some of the belief in the honour of our industry, but there is also that stigma that has been applied to us as Indian women that we must get beyond and that we must heal from. Some of us have healed. But you cannot deny that even in this day and age to think about it is strange, but there is a stigma applied to our liberty, in terms of our labour, our sexuality, ownership of our households. They actually had a lot of rights that their kin, the European women, didn't have and are still fighting for. Indian women realize this and I think we gain some of our strength in the knowledge of our traditional roles and responsibilities. The nature of our cultures and our roles seems contrary to what the stereotypical view of Indian women is - because the stereotypical view would not be in that direction. It would be that we're passive, docile, subservient, walking behind these warrior men. Yet there is an aspect of respect that we do have for these men, but I think it was misunderstood by the early ethnologists -- as they defined for America the Indian woman.

In Kelly's discussion regarding the current roles of First Nations women she mentioned that they respond to the daily needs of the community which often includes supporting men. She discussed how "it is more common for women than for men to fill social work positions within the community." However, she emphasised that "serving the community is important for both men and women because it is part of traditional Aboriginal culture." For her, "serving the community is very broad; it can mean many things and includes working with all age groups -- from working with elders to working with teens." Kelly also mentioned that she views "childcare as mainly women's responsibility, but that it is something to be proud of and is looked upon within the community as important."

Sandra was the last woman I interviewed. She is currently living in Windsor and works part-time at the First Nations counselling centre on the University of Windsor campus. Sandra is a mother of two and is currently a student. In my interview with Sandra she discussed her education, her father and the effect his political involvement had on her, education, her views of the political, the roles of women in the community, traditional teachings, and menstruation.

Sandra initially discussed her previous career as a journalist. She took a two year program at Fanshaw college in London, Ontario. Sandra described her time in London as "isolating and difficult" because there were so few Native people around her. She was the first Aboriginal person to enroll in the program.

In my interview with Sandra she expressed various aspects of what she views as the political. In explaining her views she articulated that her father had been a very strong influence on her personal politics. "He was a very politically active person at all levels. . . He was involved in having three different pieces of legislation passed at the state level of government." She also discussed how he organized a community watch program out of their home; people drove around her neighbourhood in Detroit and reported any suspicious incidents. Sandra discussed how her father was more conservative than she is, but she realizes that society is much different today. She discussed how "he was a very patient man and believed in the 'suit and tie' approach to government -- he did not agree in taking up arms or breaking the law in any way." In contrast, Sandra stated that "sometimes people have to get militant even though I wouldn't want to be involved or wouldn't want any of my family members to be involved." She later explained that

"because we have been ignored for so long and so many promises have been broken, that sometimes you have to step beyond the law."

In expressing her views on the political Sandra articulated that the political includes many things because "within First Nations culture all things are interconnected." She explained this by stating "that which is spiritual, economic, political, legal and social are connected in some way so it's very difficult to define what is strictly political." She did, however, discuss how "Aboriginal peoples living in cities are affected by all forms of politics including Band, Municipal, Provincial and Federal politics."

In discussing some of the roles of First Nations women Sandra stated that "they include the responsibility for family and children." Providing children with traditional knowledge and teachings is part of what she views as the woman's responsibility. In addition, Sandra discussed the importance of taking care of and supporting men in the home and community. I will provide a more detailed discussion of women's role in supporting men within First Nations cultures in Chapter four. I will also provide examples from the review of literature to illustrate the balance and harmony of women supporting men and men supporting women. Sandra and the other interviewees did not discuss the role of men serving women in their responses. All of the women during the interviews articulated that they would only discuss their experiences because they could not speak for the experiences of other women or men. This illustrates why they did not discuss the men's role in supporting women.

Aboriginal teachings were one of Sandra's "biggest concerns." She believes that "teaching her children a good way of doing things is important, but it is sometimes

difficult to follow traditional teachings in today's world." Initially, when she was married she did not cook or touch food that was being prepared when she was on her cycle, however, both she and her husband were working and taking care of the children which made it very difficult to carry out this tradition.

This overview illustrates some of the main issues affecting the political expressions of First Nations women. To briefly review the five women interviewed; Kate is a writer and a communications consultant who views women as playing an active role in the politics of her community. She is concerned with health issues and stated that "out of healing comes everything." Sherry is an Administrator working for the Native Friendship Centre in Windsor. Sherry participated in the Oka Crisis and articulated that it is Aboriginal women's role to be strong and vocal within their communities. Elk is an education counsellor for First Nations students. She values truth power and believes it to be the most political force and the most powerful. Elk is concerned with social justice issues and understands women to be the life givers and teachers within Aboriginal cultures. Kelly is a counsellor for First Nations people. Kelly provided a detailed outline of the traditional roles of First Nations women as well as some of the effects of colonization on her people. Kelly views empowerment as a political act. Sandra was the last woman interviewed and the only interviewee who is currently a student at the University of Windsor. Sandra discussed the influence of her father's involvement in Michigan politics and the importance of maintaining traditions within her family life. The following chapter will include more in-depth analyses of both the distinctive and common views of the political expressed by the women.

Chapter Four

Analysis of Interviews:
Understanding Different Perspectives
of the Political

Introduction

After completing five in-depth interviews with politically active First Nations

women I conclude that for these women politics is healing and healing is politics. It is

my perception that in Canada's dominant culture every action is political. As Chapter

three illustrated, First Nations cultures are characterized by, among other things the

effects of colonialism, genocide, rape, and exclusion. Thus, it can be determined that for

many First Nations people all actions are political. The term politics may suggest the

politics of the oppressor; thus, Aboriginal women may not identify with the word politics

and its concomitant baggage. However, by resisting the political as defined by the

dominant culture Aboriginal women are determining their own politics; a politics of

healing.

The review of literature in Chapter two and the interviewee's responses regarding

the importance of a healthier future for First Nations illustrates that the impact of

European colonization on all dimensions of Aboriginal life, including health, is

devastating. Domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and attempted suicide continue

to plague many First Nations communities (Hill, 1995, 11). These social problems are

symptoms of systemic racism within the Canadian society. The women I interviewed

did not include a detailed account of the health problems, but referred to them globally in terms of "the problems which continue to plague our communities and distract our people from living balanced lives" (Elk). As the summaries indicated, many Aboriginal communities are focusing their energies on healing. The women interviewed have various backgrounds and experiences; however, one of the common threads is their concern and determination to heal themselves, their families and their communities.

My discussion of the women's voices from the interviews will use as an organizing concept the idea of the medicine wheel, a key notion for Aboriginal theory. The medicine wheel concept will provide the framework for a discussion of the interviews which will be ordered under the headings of "healing yourself and your family," and "healing your community."

The Medicine Wheel

The arrival of the Europeans in the Americas over 500 years ago dramatically affected the lifestyles of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. According to Waldram, Herring and Young's <u>Aboriginal Health in Canada: Historical, Cultural and Epidemiological Perspectives</u>, the health of a human population is the result of a complex web of physiological, psychological, spiritual, historical, sociological, cultural, economic, and environmental factors. Each of these elements within Native cultures have been abused as a result of European colonization. The health conditions of First Nations peoples are among the worst of any cultural group in Canada according to the 1996 Report of the royal commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RRCAP, 1996, v. 3, 51).

Many Aboriginal people suffer from specific diseases and social problems, but also from a depression of spirit resulting from extensive damage to their cultures, languages, identities and self-respect. Consequently, many First Nations communities in Canada are working towards healing and restoring balance and harmony within their lives (RRCAP, v. 3, 51).

Healing within the Aboriginal culture refers to individual and community recovery from the oppression and systemic racism imposed over generations by European colonialism (RRCAP, 1996, v. 3, 53). According to Malloch, (1989) a First Nations writer, good health is given by the 'Creator'; it involves a balance between physical, emotional and spiritual elements. One of the learning tools valued by many Aboriginal cultures and used in understanding good health is the Medicine Wheel.

The Medicine Wheel teaches that good health links individuals to family, community and the earth in a circle of dependence and interdependence. In Aboriginal terms, what has been translated into English as 'medicine' actually holds a broader meaning. 'Medicine' refers to a sort of 'power' in a spiritual sense (Waldram et al., 1995, 28). The medicine wheel is used to guide the healing process (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 21). The goal of treatment, according to Herb Nabigon and Anne-Marie Mawhiney's "Aboriginal Theory: A Cree Medicine Wheel Guide for Healing First Nations", is to encourage balance and harmony within individuals, groups of people and communities, and to assist in action to relieve pain in the communities and nations of the world (Waldram et al., 28). The medicine wheel uses the compass points of the four directions to aid individuals in the process of rediscovering their life path. Each direction, often

referred to as a 'door,' has a specific meaning and teaching. In the Cree teachings, for example, the healer starts the helping process in the east (Waldram et al, 29).

The east door is understood within traditional teachings to bring a message of peace and harmony into the community. In the east the healers and traditional teachers help individuals to look at their aspirations by reflecting on the direction in which they are heading and what needs to be accomplished (Waldram et al., 29). In the south door, individuals are taught to reflect on their relationships to family and community and encouraged to build on existing strengths and to overcome barriers and problems such as envy. In the west door, individuals are helped to reflect on intimate relationships and past behavior. This direction teaches that showing respect for others and for oneself is essential to maintaining balance in relationships with others. In the North door, individuals are encouraged to build on their understanding of the ways that behavior affects the family and community because caring, in many Aboriginal cultures, is defined by the level of interaction within family, school, community and nation. The centre represents balance and listening because it is understood that listening helps change behavior from negative to positive; the ability to listen is required in the healing process. The four directions teach people how to balance themselves and to learn and know their place in the world (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 1993, 2). Finally, within the First Nations teachings healing is never completed; rather, all individuals need healing, and healing is a life-long journey. Individuals need to constantly strive to create and recreate harmony and balance in every aspect of life (Malloch, 1989, 105 - 112).

Healing Yourself and Your Family

In attempting to understand the politics of First Nations women, I asked the interviewees various open-ended questions about their concerns for themselves, their family and their community. The responses varied, but the commonalities are underscored in Kate's statement "it's all about healing." All of the women articulated a deep concern for the health and future of their people. Kate's statement illustrates the holistic teachings of the medicine wheel. The teachings discuss how all things are related. According to Aboriginal theory mind, body, emotions and spirit are not separate, and humans are not separate from the earth and everything on it and in it (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 21).

Traditional First Nations teachings suggest that all individuals need healing. The teachings suggest ways to grow spiritually in all aspect of life. For example, the Cree teachings offer ways to balance the inner self by listening to ourselves, our surroundings and others in "order to get in touch with our inner selves" (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 21). The First Nations authors state that "facing pain and understanding it is part of the journey towards personal growth" (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 21).

The interviews indicated that Aboriginal women often play an essential role in the healing process within their communities. For example, Kate and Kelly both articulated that it was the women who ensure the daily needs of the family are met. Kelly stated that "it is often the women who are responsible for the health of immediate and extended families." Sandra illustrated this by stating that "if a family member is having a hard time it is the women in the family who are responsible for providing extra food and money

until their situation improves." First Nations men realize woman's role as the helper and

supporter as illustrated by the following statement:

> Men recognize women as the creator and the first teacher -- women are
> understood to be the heartbeat of the Nation. If you kill the
> heartbeat of Nation what's left except illness and despair,
> problems and crisis. (Elk)

One of the essential factors in the future health of First Nations communities is the health

of their women. Both the interviews and the review of literature revealed that within

many of the Aboriginal cultures, it is the woman's responsibility to heal herself and

become strong again in order to take care of the children. "Once women are strong the

men will become strong and so will mother earth" (Elk). It is women's responsibility to

heal themselves first and to then help the men in their healing process because

"Aboriginal women are stronger than men -- they are strong like mother earth"(Elk). The

views discussed by Elk illustrate many of the medicine wheel teachings. For example,

part of healing is learning about individual aspirations and what is needed to be

accomplished within the community and nation in order to maintain balance and harmony

as an individual and as a community. Together the four directions help people to balance

themselves, their place in the community and in the world (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 32).

The process of healing oneself varies from one individual to another. For the

women interviewed it included the following: " accepting my role and responsibility as a

speaker within the community" (Sherry); "educating and speaking the truth about issues

such as racism and other means of oppression" (Elk); " upholding a certain way of life"

(Kate); "supporting men and others in the community" (Sherry); "speaking out about

issues that are of importance to me" (Kelly) and "making sure my children are being taught the traditional ways" (Sandra).

In Sherry's discussion regarding the roles and responsibilities of First Nations women she stated that "everyone carries different roles, gifts and abilities which provide a fine balance within the community". This supports the teaching that the four directions help people to balance themselves and contribute to the balance of the community by understanding their place in the world (Bopp et al., 1984, 21). The medicine wheel teaches people to recognize and accept the gifts and abilities bestowed on them by the 'creator' (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 32). Sherry stressed the idea that, traditionally, most First Nations cultures do not view one person's gifts as having greater or lesser importance than another's because Aboriginal people generally view community and social organizations differently than the dominant culture. For Sherry, "it does not matter where First Nations women sit within the community structure just as long as the sit." According to the four directions of the medicine wheel, accepting one's gifts and knowing one's place in the world helps individuals understand the balance within themselves. By encouraging others to revisit traditional teachings these women are empowering their families and their communities (Bopp et al., 1984, 20).

During pre-colonization times First Nations cultures had distinct values and cultures that resulted in unique political structures and political expressions. Values such as respect, harmony, balance and strength are essential to the traditions of Aboriginal cultures (Solomon, 1994, 38). Colonization brought the arrival of the fur traders to many parts of Canada. Consequently, there were many changes for Aboriginal people's way of

life. It brought changes to economic activities from subsistence to cash for furs. Women still worked; however, it was only the men who received cash at the trading post for "their" furs. Also, in the late 1870's Band Councils were imposed by the Indian Act. The Canadian government's goal was to replace all Indigenous governments with a universal system of elected band councillors who would respond to the Department of Indian Affairs. Within the Native communities the Band Councillors were understood to be only the "puppets" of Indian Affairs (Wright, 1993, 318). The colonization and reservation system resulted in extensive victimization of Aboriginal men and women (Harding, 1992, 6).

The First Nations history of rape, exclusion and cultural genocide is illustrated above and was extensively reviewed in the literature review in Chapter two. The process of reviewing the literature and conducting in-depth interviews with First Nations women forced me to conclude that for First Nations people all actions are political. It was not articulated by the interviewees; but returning to the traditional teachings of the medicine wheel in order to understand and maintain balance and harmony could be viewed as a political choice. Many of the traditional First Nations' ceremonies and teachings were once prohibited by law and policy at different levels of government in Canada (Wilson, 1996, 28).

The decision for Kate not to vote in *any* election is a political act. In addition, Kate's decision to live on her reserve after living in an urban setting could be viewed as a political decision because under the Federal Indian Act her mother was not a "status Indian" since she married a non-Indian. This meant that Kate's mother and Kate herself

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lost many rights, including housing on her reserve. Finally, upholding a certain way of life, whether it is speaking or writing their truth about the effects of colonization on First Nations people is a political act because it is the refusal to succumb to the pressures of the dominant Canadian culture.

The above illustrates the interconnectedness of health, politics, power and empowerment. The lifelong journey of achieving and maintaining individual harmony and balance is a political road for First Nations people. In my introduction I stated that for First Nations women politics is healing and healing is politics. Choosing to lead a healthy life can be equated with power and empowerment. The concept of empowerment and power vary from one individual to the next as illustrated in the medicine wheel teachings. The medicine wheel teaches individuals to accept powers and gifts bestowed on them by the creator. This enables individuals to understand what they must do in order to achieve empowerment. For example, in attempting to achieve empowerment some people are encouraged to build on existing strengths and others are taught to overcome barriers and problems such as alcohol and drug abuse (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 22).

First Nations author Patricia Monture-Angus equates power and empowerment in her Thunder in my Soul with self-determination or the right to have control over one's life and future as an individual and as a community. "Power is relational, but not dichotomous or hierarchical. It is balanced and complementary" (Monture-Angus, 1995, 224).

A person's understanding of power is culturally conditioned, argues Monture -

Angus (1995, 225). In Canada, the dominant culture views the political as having power

over others. In attempting to understand what the political is for Aboriginal women, I

asked the interviewees to describe what they would include in their description of

politics. In response to this question all of the women, with the exception of Sherry,

articulated that they were political at some level. Sherry, however, immediately stepped

outside the discussion by stating: "I am not political; I understand what it means to be a

political person, and it is not my strong point." This did not prevent the researcher from

understanding and learning about her as a person, but I realized that I had to be cautious

not to define and confine her within my concept of politics. Consequently, I encouraged

Sherry to share with me some of her previous and current involvements within various

First Nations communities. Sherry responded by giving me a detailed description of her

involvement at the Kanehsatake reserve during the Oka Crisis of 1990:

> I was asked by a woman from the Kanehsatake reserve to
> bring her medicines to help at the Oka crisis of 1990. I
> was asked to go up to Oka right after the incident started. I
> was asked to provide support and to take care of some of
> their traditional things. Initially, I was unsure of my role,
> but I wanted to stand by and provide support for the people.
> Most people at Oka stayed at the campground, but I went
> onto the reserve and back into the pines where everything
> was happening. I was asked to do this, because a lot of their
> women needed help. I was able to support these people by a
> lot of prayers and counseling. I also did a lot of counseling
> reminding the people not to get caught up in the crisis and
> reminding them that they were there to protect something
> that they believed in. Even when I was on the front lines at
> Oka -- being asked by the media to provide a statement on

what was going on inside the reserve, I did not see my role
as being political but as being there to provide support. My
roles and responsibilities do not change once I am outside
of my family or community because maintaining my values
and belief is essential, so regardless of whether I am at Oka
or at work, it does not change - - it is serving and taking
care of my people (Sherry).

Sherry's understanding of the political and her role within it is a different understanding

than the one I proposed earlier in this thesis. She does not view actions as political;

rather, they are "part of her role in the community." Sherry's discussion of the political

and her subsequent comments on what she views as her role within the community

confirms many of the teachings from the medicine wheel. For example, understanding

what needs to be accomplished, building on existing strengths and knowing one's place in

the world are just a few of the teachings illustrated by Sherry's responses to my questions.

In my interview with Elk she articulated a very different view of the political from

Sherry. Elk stated that "for Canada's First People everything is about politics. . .

Aboriginal people are very political and have political wisdom as a result of the

colonization process." Part of the colonization process included the Canadian

government's goal to replace Indigenous governments with a universal system of elected

band councillors who would respond to the Department of Indian Affairs. The Iroquois

people went along with the new system with the understanding that it would only be for a

short-term trial period. After a few years the Iroquois decided to reject the adversarial

style of European politics. The political system opposed their traditional consensus

system of government and ignored the importance of the female voice in their culture

(Wright, 1993, 317).

The three other women interviewed did not illustrate the same sentiments towards Aboriginal peoples and the political; however, they all discussed the broad nature of what they included in the notion of "political." For example, Sandra stated "it is difficult to say what is political because everything is connected. . .; when a spiritual leader comes into the community it is about justice, spirituality, health, politics and finance. . . ; it is about everything." Sandra's comments illustrate the holistic teachings of Aboriginal theory.

Although the women interviewed have differing ideas of what is political, the commonality lies in the women's acceptance of their responsibilities as First Nations women. All of the women articulated a strong understanding of what they expected of themselves. For example, "upholding a certain way of life;" "living the life one chooses;" and "speaking the truth." All of these actions are about healing and becoming stronger, but they are also political. Kate supports this idea by stating:

> upholding a certain way of life, adhering to one's values
> and beliefs and even the act of speaking can be a very
> political act if people are trying to silence you. For
> example, there is a dispute here in my community over the
> right to fish and treaty rights. When fish stocks were down
> in the area it was expected that the people here would be
> the last ones expected to stop fishing. We had priority in
> the area because of the treaties. We won the case but there
> was a lot of violence on behalf of the Sports Fishermen;
> nets were slashed and boats were sunk, some women were
> attacked selling fish at the local market and there were
> bomb threats. People who fish are political -- they continue
> to fish and have the support of the community is a political
> act.

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Thus, living the life one chooses can be viewed as a political act because it is a refusal to conform to or accept the norms and values of the dominant culture. Regardless of whether it is a woman selling fish to locals who are ignorant of her history or a woman who is teaching her children the 'right' way of doing things, these are individual political actions which reflect the continual struggle to be free of oppression from the mainstream culture.

Situations such as the one explained by Kate illustrate the continual minimisation of oppressive treatment towards Aboriginal peoples as circumstantial, accidental and exceptional. Prior to 1970 First Nations People were virtually silenced regarding the continuous rape and exploitation of their culture and history. For example, Canadian residential schools forbade First Nations children to speak their native language. Aboriginal ceremonies were prohibited. Thus, various media for communicating content, such as language, ceremony and experience, were marginalized and, therefore, culture itself is overpowered or overwritten by 'history.' The significance of Eurocentrism within Canadian society is illustrated in the above example about treaty fishing rights. The Eurocentric world view promotes Western history as superior while relegating the non-Western cultures to insignificance (Shohat and Stam, 1994, 3). The effects of Eurocentrism and the marginalization of First Nation cultures contribute to the high levels of alcohol and drug abuse, attempted suicide of the youth population and family abuse. Consequently, First Nations elders encourage individuals to revisit the traditional teachings in order to improve social and environmental conditions (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 20).

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In my interview with Elk I learned that her view of the political is similar to that of Kate. Elk explains that "one of the most political things a person can do is speak the truth and live the life that one chooses. . . The most political thing is to tell the truth because we have been so divided and so hurt. It is a big part of our teachings; honesty, truth, courage and bravery." Elk articulated that "truth has the capacity to change the world and to change societies." She views herself as a humanitarian and expresses her political interest by "speaking out on social justice issues such as ageism, gender issues and other issues which concern my own people." Her approach is to pursue social justice issues through education. Elk identifies the political as being able to reach out and speak to people on issues that are of importance to her, such as gender and cultural issues.

It was clear from my interview with Elk that being a strong First Nations woman educating others and speaking out about issues that are of concern to her and her community, is a political act. Her voice provides an opening for other women outside the dominant culture to have not only the opportunity to be at the decision making table, but also to provide the initial tools required for the path to self-determination. Within Aboriginal theory individuals are encouraged to build on their understanding of the ways their behaviour affects the family and community, because caring is defined by a person's level of interconnectedness within the family, school, community and nation (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 32).

In summary, one of the main roles of women in First Nations cultures is healer and teacher. In order for families to heal and learn a healthier way of life women need to first heal themselves by following the teachings of the medicine wheel. According to the

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Cree teachings every person's nature is reflected in the four directions of the medicine wheel. These four aspects of one's: mental, spiritual, emotional and physical being need to be involved in the healing process in order to achieve balance (Bopp et al.. 1984. 29). The process of healing according to the medicine wheel requires a balance of the four directions. but it is also an individual process as illustrated by the interviewees. For example. Elk emphasized the importance of "speaking the truth" because for her this is an essential part of her role and responsibility in the community. Accepting individual roles and responsibilities is part of the process of achieving and maintaining balance and harmonious life (Nabigon & Mawhiney. 22) Thus, a balanced and harmonious woman in the home and in the family provides the building blocks for a family and community to ensure a stronger, healthier and happier future.

Healing the Community

The 1996 Report by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples discussed how Aboriginal women are using their powers to provide leadership in facilitating the healing process and other initiatives. Aboriginal women are seen as profoundly aware of the need for healing the body, mind. spirit. and environment of their communities (RRCAP. 1996. v.3. 53). Aboriginal women are initiating the healing in many community-based projects. leading their communities away from alcohol and substance abuse. child abuse and family violence toward a healthier future (RRCAP, 1996, v3. 21).

The women interviewed shared an overriding concern for their own well-being and that of their children, extended families, communities and nations. A wide range of

issues were included in their discussions about healing the community, from providing leadership to First Nations students on a university campus to serving the men in the community. Excluded from this discussion, however, were Band and Federal politics. In attempting to understand the roles of the First Nations women in the politics of their communities, I asked most interviewees why women are virtually absent from both Band politics and Federal politics. The women's responses varied, but all of them expressed the belief that "it is not the best way to serve their communities" because many of the decisions made at those levels continue to be controlled by the Federal government (Kelly). This was not the single factor discouraging the interviewees' participation in Band politics. Other reasons included the notion that Band politics are ineffective because it is a system which was imposed on Aboriginal communities. They replaced hereditary chiefs with elected chiefs.

None of the women interviewed had negative comments about the men who participate in the politics of Band councils. All of them, however, displayed some degree of skepticism regarding the system of band politics, and all dismissed Federal politics as "exclusive and ineffective in representing the interests and concerns of First Nations people" (Elk). All of the women who discussed Band politics pointed out that the men who are involved in band politics usually engage because "they want to contribute to a community" and feel this is a good place to put their respective energies (Kate). Kate articulated her ideas on this issue in stating that "men might have bought into the political system a bit more than women. . . this makes sense because in the dominant culture, which is both a patriarchal and racist system, there is some opportunity for men

to have some power by using those systems of government." However. Kate explained that for women there are not the same incentives for becoming involved as there are for men. "Historically, there has not been very much incentive because they are Natives and they are women, so they are never really going to achieve much power in those kinds of systems, systems that have been imposed on them" (Kate).

Elk and Sandra also explained their skepticism of both Band and Federal politics. Elk understands Aboriginal women to be virtually absent from both political realms and understands it to be "a factor of a European model that was instituted in Native communities and that provides little power for those who participate." Elk illustrated that "the ultimate decisions of Band Councils continue to be controlled by Ottawa". She later queries why someone would want to be involved in something that provides little opportunity for "power and achievement" (Elk). Sandra discusses a different aspect of Native politics by stating that "there is a lot of confusion and frustration between Native and non-Native politics, because for myself and others who are not living on the reserves, we are affected by municipal, provincial and federal politics in the form of land treaties and government funding for projects." Coinciding with the women's skepticism towards Band politics is a respect for others' choices. All of the women interviewed illustrated respect for the choices of other First Nations women and men which, according to Aboriginal theory, is essential to maintaining balance in relationships with others (RRCAP, v.3, 32).

The skepticism articulated by some of the interviewees regarding Band systems of government reflects the alienation of a people governed at all levels by political systems

which are not of their own making. The imposed Band council system opposes the

traditional consensus system characteristic of First Nations (Wright. 1993. 317).

Canada's ruling hegemonic elite are a product of a country whose history is characterised

by colonial exploitation of the First Peoples of this country (Bashevkin. 1996. 479-493).

The consensus system of politics which is characteristic of First Nations cultures

illustrates that everyone is a unique human being with a special combination of gifts that

can be used to develop one's self and to serve others (Bopp et al.. 1984. 55). Thus. all

individuals have something unique to contribute to the political process of decision

making and goal setting. This teaching of the medicine wheel opposes the dominant

culture's political process whereby only the elite are part of a decision making process

which includes mainly the ideas of the hegemonic class and excludes everything and

everyone as 'other' and lesser. As discussed in the review of literature in Chapter two.

the dominant culture in Canada is patriarchal whereby women are defined by those who

subordinate them. For the most part, men define women because men are the

photographers, publishers, editors and film directors (Richardson. 1983. 126). Women's

limited ability to achieve political power in the dominant culture has affected both the

number of women elected to the Federal governments, as well as the government's

agenda. Concerns which are often labelled 'female concerns' including child care.

education, social assistance and unemployment continue to be minimized. The current

agenda of the Canadian government does not completely reflect the population it

represents. Balance and harmony are inconceivable when the voices of not only women.

but visible minorities, First Nations people, gays and lesbians, and the disabled are

largely excluded from the decision making table.

In the early stages of my research I used aspects of feminist theory to understand the political expressions of First Nations women. Feminist perspectives helped me to deconstruct the dominant patriarchal society, but they do not help me to better understand aspects of First Nations cultures.

Feminist perspectives did not provide me with the tools required to decentre myself in order to recognize that beliefs, values and perspectives are learned and formed by the culture to which one is embedded. First Nations cultures are distinct with their own values, beliefs and attitudinal systems which are best understood in the context in which they are based. Thus, in order for me to learn and understand the research and in-depth interviews, I had to first recognize aspects and biases of my own world view in order to begin to learn about the world views of First Nations people. Balance, harmony and interconnected-ness characterise some of the values and beliefs of First Nations cultures. In the dominant culture balance can be equated with "equal" numbers of men and women in government or an "equal" sharing of domestic duties between husband and wife. In my research of the medicine wheel and Aboriginal theory the notion of equality was not present. Instead, balance in Aboriginal cultures is achieved between men and women when both are living healthy lives and respecting the four directions of the mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional self. When one is not adhering to one of the directions, imbalance occurs and the relationship is no longer a harmonious one (Bopp et al., 1984, 69).

The above analysis allows me to conclude that it is incorrect to assume that the oppression of First Nations women is a direct result of their virtual absence from Federal government and minimal involvement in Band politics. None of the women interviewed expressed any interest or concern for women's involvement in Federal or Band politics. Three of the interviewees articulated that until their immediate community is healthy and more balanced they did not view this kind of politics as a goal or a concern. The Report illustrated these same sentiments when it discussed how First Nations women will not be concerned about land claims issues and Band politics until their children are healthy and until their community is healthy (RRCAP, v.3, 52). The values and beliefs of First Nations women are reflective of their world views.

A world view is a culture's orientation toward such things as life, death and other philosophical issues concerning the meaning of life and existence. The cross cultural interviews illustrated the differing world views held by the women and by me. Different world views produce different choices. The dominant culture, although critical, does view the elected elite in Ottawa as valuable and worthwhile. However, the world views of the interviewees did not share this belief, just as the majority of women from the dominant Canadian culture would not give their relationship with the natural world the same importance as First Nations women do (Samovar & Porter, 1995, 5). This is not to say that First Nations women do not view politics as important; however, it is a politics which supports values, beliefs and attitude systems which are characteristic of First Nations cultures.

It is my observation that in the dominant culture the political includes: Gallup Polls; for 40% of the population it is casting a vote; some might say they are political by listening to political programs or reading political stories in newspapers; and for others it is volunteering every four or five years to help a partisan person become elected. In the dominant culture these are "things political."

For most of the interviewed women the political is different; their politics is expressed in action. Most of these women may not be part of the Band Council, but they are serious about their role in their communities. It is my understanding from the interviewees that many of them support Aboriginal forms of organization ensuring the cultural survival and the continuation of their people by supporting and accepting their roles and responsibilities in the communities. Thus, the virtual absence of First Nations women from Federal and Band politics has complex reasons and is anything but apolitical; rather it is a politics of survival.

In attempting to understand First Nations women's roles in healing the community I asked the women to tell me about what they saw as their roles and responsibilities. All of the women discussed the importance of serving their communities and responding to the social needs of their people. The interviews indicated that the act of serving encompasses a variety of gestures and actions including "making sure there are refreshments at community meetings," "educating the youth," and helping battered women find safe housing. The interviewees indicated that men also consider community service to be important, but that they have different responsibilities than the women. The process of men and women within the communities accepting their roles and

responsibilities promotes and illustrates the traditional teachings that encourage balance and harmony (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 33).

All of the interviewed women articulated that " it is usually the women who take responsibility for community programs that address the daily needs of the women and children" (Kate). First Nations women often fill the support role in the community and ensure the health of their people. Education, daycare and women's shelters are just some of the essential areas where Aboriginal women are involved. "First Nations women often believe immediate action is needed for the daily health of the community" (Kate). Kate later stated that "it is the women who are running the communities." She made reference to some of the community programs mentioned above and explained that, with respect to program development and operation, it is the women who are leading the way and setting the pace and the tone for the way the community evolves. She stated that "men are present but it is the women who are keeping things going on a day-to-day basis. . .: in some respects women operate on the current reality -- when they learn of a problem in the community they often want to find ways to resolve it as soon as possible." Kelly and Sandra supported this assumption by stating that "women are the ones who frequently respond to the social needs of the community"(Kelly).

The above examples illustrate that Aboriginal women are profoundly aware of the needs of the community, as the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples indicates (v.3, 34). First Nations women are using their 'gifts' and energies to provide leadership in facilitating the healing process in order to achieve their ultimate goal of overall wellness of their communities. Another factor discussed in the challenge

to heal the community was the health of the men. Supporting and serving the males in the community was mentioned by four of the interviewees as being part of what they understood to be their role in maintaining balance and harmony within their communities. According to Elk and Sherry the role of serving men in the Aboriginal culture does not mean that women are silent and subservient to their male counterparts.

In the course of conducting the interviews I initially used feminist principles in order to understand what the interviewees meant when they described serving the men as one of their important roles as First Nations women. I assumed that this was sexist and diminutive. It was not until the final two interviews that I realized these assumptions were based on my personal world views and beliefs that are rooted in the dominant culture and not reflective of the belief and values systems of the First Nations women. Another factor contributing to my initial misgivings towards the role of serving the men was the fact that all of my interviewees were women and consequently, they did not provide a detailed discussion on the roles of men. The roles of men and women in First Nations culture are illustrated in Arthur Solomon's poem titled "To Be a Father"

> We as Male or Female are self-sterile;
> We cannot reproduce ourselves without the other side.
> And we are created as equals,
> Not one to be subservient to the other (1990, 42).

In summary, the dominant culture's politics as exercised is still a politics of oppression for First Nations women. Politics which is defined by the dominant culture is at odds with First Nations people. It is a system of inclusion and exclusion. It includes the hegemonic class and excludes any other agenda. Not only does it exclude the

individual First Nations woman, but it excludes beliefs and values which are characteristic of most First Nations. By resisting the political as defined by the dominant culture. First Nations women are shaping their own definition of politics. For example, all of the women interviewed illustrated a strong commitment towards building a balanced and harmonious community defined by unique Aboriginal values and beliefs. The survival of Aboriginal peoples as First Nations and not just as a distinct culture depends on forming healthy and strong communities. Resisting assimilation through positive involvement in First Nations communities is a very strong form of resisting oppression and genocide.

Chapter Five

Doing Cross Cultural Interviews:
What I learned

January 15, 1998
I decided after reading a recent article in the Windsor Star that Jane Bourne would be an ideal person to interview for my thesis on Aboriginal women and politics. The Windsor Star newspaper described her as an " Aboriginal woman with political motives." I was able to get her phone number from the local phone book. I telephoned her and I introduced myself as Jen Parker, a masters student in Communication Studies. I explained to her that I was interviewing politically active Aboriginal women living in the Windsor area for my thesis. I asked Ms. Bourne if she would allow me to interview her and I explained that it would only take about one hour. She said "okay" and I proceeded to tell her that I wasn't from Windsor and that my car was in the shop, but, I could meet her at a coffee shop as long as it was on a bus route. She didn't have any suggestions. I wanted to find a location that was central for both of us in order to waste as little time as possible. Also, I didn't want to invite her to my place or suggest her home because that seemed a bit too personal and I didn't want to be an imposition to her. I suggested my favorite coffee shop where I spend most of my free time. She hadn't heard of the place, but I told her it was easy to find and that it was accessible by most bus routes. I told her she should just ask the bus driver for directions. We were able to meet each other on the following Friday morning. I arrived early and had settled myself at a table in the corner. I organized the table with coffee (my treat), I placed my new audio recorder in the middle of the table next to my watch and the consent forms were placed next to where my interviewee would sit. I had planned to meet a friend in an hour after the interview was finished so I was hoping Jane would arrive a bit early. . .

In the scenario I have created above, insensitive, controlling, self-centred, and arrogant are words which describe the interviewer. These are just some of the traits used to characterize researchers who attempt to 'discover' aspects of 'other' cultures without first understanding their own cultural groundings as relatively uncontrollable. Researchers, ethnographers and students from the dominant culture often fail to see themselves as cultural beings who simply occupy one culture out of many (Chen &

Starosta, 1998, 200).

The following is a summary of my insights into cross-cultural research gained from five in-depth interviews with First Nations women. In the process of preparing for and conducting the interviews I was able to identify an approach which evolved out of what I refer to as 'moving slowly', being mindful and listening. The mutual understanding approach to listening between co-cultures introduces the idea that individuals must decentre their communication and recognize that the world consists of many 'other' cultures (Chen & Starosta, 1998, 200). I did not adopt aspects of the Mutual Understanding approach prior to conducting my research. I had reviewed various literary sources for cross cultural communication and qualitative research: however, it was not until I was in the process of writing my findings that I located this approach. The approach, however, allows me to relate my experience of conducting interviews as someone from outside a culture in a way that might be meaningful to others. In attempting to explain some of what I learned from this experience I will provide an overview of learning about possible respondents to interview: approaching possible interviewees and asking them for informed consent; finding interview locations: selecting interview questions; and audio-taping the interviews. I will also include an overview of some of the "mistakes" I realized I made after completing the interview process.

Possible Interviewees

A thesis committee member suggested that before I start the process of searching for possible First Nations women to interview I should first approach a knowledgeable person within the Aboriginal community. On his recommendation I met with Liz Chamberlain, a councillor at the Aboriginal Counseling Centre on the University of Windsor Campus. I explained to Liz the kind of research I wanted to do and asked if she might have some suggestions of good ways to go about the interview process. Liz was very receptive and shared suggestions for conducting interviews in a -- to use a commonly used Aboriginal expression -- 'good' way. She also offered to introduce me to some women that I might possibly interview.

In meeting with Liz I learned about aspects of First Nations cultures, but I was also reminded of the importance of "being mindful" when communicating and interviewing outside of my own culture. "Being mindful" means recognizing that there is more than one way of conducting an interview or that there is always an alternative perspective. In contrast, most people communicate on automatic pilot and fail to recognize alternative perspectives. This type of mind set limits one's ability to see choices and alternatives in how one behaves. When a person communicates mindfully she is able to use all of the communication resources available to her, rather than limit herself to those implicit in her personal theories of communication (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, 40).

Requesting Interviews

Elk informed a few of her 'political' friends and acquaintances of my research and interest in interviewing First Nations women. I was uncertain about the best way to introduce myself to the women and how to request their participation. I initially thought about E-mailing or phoning them because, in my view, this was the most efficient means of introducing myself and organizing the interviews which is not unlike the scenario at the beginning of the chapter. However, after meeting with Elk in her office and attending various lectures given by First Nations people on campus I had the sense that it was best if my interactions with the possible interviewees were personal and face-to-face whenever possible. Thus, I decided to forget the telephone and computer in favour of going to their place of work to introduce myself. In the process of accepting a different way to go about requesting interviews I recognized my own assumptions and beliefs that "saving" time can be equated with an efficient and effective researcher. I will discuss in later parts of this chapter the process of learning about different ways of communicating and conducting interviews that might be more in-line with First Nations ways of doing things.

Upon meeting the possible interviewees I introduced myself and told them that Liz Chamberlain had suggested that I talk with them. I briefly discussed my research topic and later asked them if they would think about possibly allowing me to interview them at a later date. In the case of Sherry, for example, I went to the Friendship Centre and waited until she was available to speak with me. After I sat in the lobby for a while, Sherry came from an all morning meeting and was on her way out for lunch. I introduced myself to Sherry and instead of going for lunch Sherry sat with me for almost an hour.

She agreed to be interviewed at a later date, but shared many things with me in our first hour- long meeting.

In the process of initially meeting and then requesting the participation of the women I forced myself to operate on their time and not mine. For example, my initial reaction was to leave immediately after requesting an interview with Sherry because I did not want to 'waste' any more of her time. However, Sherry appeared to be content to sit and share things with me for an hour instead of following her earlier plan of having lunch with friends. I was struck by her generosity and also by the attitudinal difference towards the concept of time.

According to Gudykunst and Kim's Communicating with Strangers, cultures develop transitory patterns of life that are often part of the psychological environment. These patterns specify when it is appropriate to do certain things such as eating or sleeping and how many things should be done at one time. Gudykunst and Kim describe cultures as either having monochronic or polychronic time patterns. Monochronic time includes compartmentalization whereby people compartmentalize their time and schedule one event at a time. In contrast, polychronic time does not involve compartmentalization. Instead, people often engage in several activities at the same time. Individuals of monochronic time cultures often perceive time as a linear progression "marching from the past to the future" (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, 159). They usually treat time as a tangible, discrete entity that can be "saved", "borrowed", "divided" or "lost." People in polychronic time cultures, such as First Nations cultures, generally treat time in a more holistic way instead of as clock time. If something needs to be completed,

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the person from the polychronic time culture has less difficulty sacrificing the next

scheduled activity than the monochronic time person (Gudykunst & Kim, 1997, 159).

In the process of learning and understanding the differences between the two

monochronic and polychronic time cultures I also realized the importance of allowing

events to happen in the 'right' time rather than clock time. In the dominant culture,

efficiency and effectiveness is essential for most interactions regardless of whether they

are for business or pleasure. However, this is not the case for all cultures. Gudykunst and

Kim explain that it is not uncommon for polychronic time cultures to consider people in a

hurry with suspicion and distrust, because it is often viewed as important to first sit and

talk in order to build a relationship, even in business transactions.

Location of Interviews

In deciding where I should conduct the interviews I initially thought that meeting

at a central place would be convenient and it would be less intrusive than going to the

homes or offices of the interviewees. However, because I met and became acquainted

with each of the women prior to the interviews, they had, in a sense, already let me into

their worlds. Consequently, I interviewed three of the women in their offices at work and

the other two women in the living rooms of their homes.

Without consciously realizing it, I began to take small 'steps' in order not to 'step'

beyond where I should be within the cultures of First Nations people. I attempted to do

things the 'right' way by moving gently and slowly. This does not mean that I was lazy;

rather I was trying to take cues from the interviewees in order to learn from them about

process because I viewed it as being as important as what they might have to say.

According to the Mutual Understanding theory, decentring oneself is essential for

expanding one's horizons, openness and understanding (Chen & Starosta, 1998. 160).

The importance of 'going' slowly when interviewing from outside a culture is illustrated

in my first interview with Kate.

Kate is from the Georgian Bay area of Ontario. I was introduced to her by a

mutual friend when she was giving a lecture at the University of Windsor. A group of us

had lunch together and afterwards I asked her if she would allow me to interview her.

Initially, we thought we would conduct the interview while she was in Windsor. but she

later suggested that I visit her at her reserve and interview her there. After listening to her

suggestion I was 'touched' by her offer but I was also a bit frustrated because visiting her

in Georgian Bay would require a five hour drive which I had not factored into my thesis

schedule. I quickly realized that this was a great learning opportunity and accepted her

invitation.

In order for me to truly learn from Kate and the other First Nations women I

realized that I had to first 'step' outside myself in order to attach proper importance to the

things in my culture, such as time schedules, so that I might give appropriate value to the

positions of Kate and the other women (Chen & Starosta, 1993. 160). In the process of

decentring myself I needed to learn about the assumptions that I was about to take into

the Native cultures. This included the realization that everyone is different. and therefore

that I am different. The process of interviewing in another culture is not a process of

classification: I cannot 'handle' the interviewees as a tool that can be controlled and

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manipulated through the process of taxonomy.

Expanding one's horizons and 'stepping outside' oneself is not always easy. When I was driving to Georgian Bay to interview Kate I was nervous and anxious because I did not know what to expect. I had not spent very much time on a reserve and I felt uncertain about going to her home because it was foreign and unknown. I arrived in Georgian Bay the night before the interview and stayed at a motel that was not far from Kate's home. By the time I arrived at Kate's the following day I was six hours from my home in Windsor but a world away -- I was prepared to try to meet Kate in her world. I disregarded my monochronic time schedule for the more relaxed polychronic way of approaching time and space. I was more concerned with doing things the 'right' way and according to the 'right' time.

Choosing the appropriate interview questions

After completing a review of the relevant literature I compiled a list of general topics and anticipated that the interview questions would incorporate several themes including feminism, hegemony and patriarchy. Based on these assumptions I created a list of interview questions that were designed to incorporate themes and topics that would later enable me to answer the larger research questions regarding the political expressions of First Nations women. Initially, I believed that the questions I had created were open-ended and that they would allow the women to articulate their responses in their own words. This supports what is referred to in qualitative research as humanistic inquiry where respondents are encouraged to use their own ways of defining the world

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around them: it assumes that there is not a fixed sequence of questions suitable for all interviewees, and it allows respondents to discuss important issues that are not contained in a schedule (Silverman, 1993, 95). During my proposal presentation, however, it was suggested that my questions were "too direct", "too bold", and "too theoretical." The committee also expressed concern that I appeared to presume to know the general issues of concern for the interviewees. Consequently, it was suggested that my assumptions would likely inhibit my ability to see the emergence of new and contradicting themes present in the interviews.

During the proposal presentation I disagreed with most of my committee's queries, but after the first interview I understood that there was some truth to their concerns. I realized that what I needed to understand was that the interview process is not a taxation of culture or cultural characteristics but an appreciation that I am not the centre - - this means that I needed to challenge myself to be aware of the assumptions I would carry in or otherwise impose on the interviewees.

It was important for me to do as much research as possible on the cultures of First Nations people: however, I also needed to ensure that I did not overlook the fact that each woman is a complete human being and that I could not attempt to know everything about her. For example, the interviewee may come from a specific First Nations culture and I may understand particular aspects of her culture from my research. This does not mean that I can presume to know a lot or even a little about her as an individual. I do not know her sexual orientation, family background or life experience. Thus, it is important for me in the process of creating interview questions to be mindful of my own

assumptions and tendencies. I did not realize the importance of this until I had completed my first interview.

My first interview was with Kate. I initially thought it was a successful interview because she discussed all of my pre-set questions. However, the interview appeared to be slightly unnatural and formal. After the interview I asked Kate if she had any ideas about how I might improve my interview skills. She had several suggestions with regards to the types of questions I asked. She suggested that a better way might be to allow the women to tell their story by asking more open and general questions about their lives and interests such as "where are you from originally?" and "I understand you work outside the home?" She pointed out that these types of questions provide a way of getting to know the individual women and help to build a relationship. Kate's suggestions support my earlier statement regarding polychronic time cultures as generally more flexible. less rigid and less segmented. Thus, it is essential for a person interviewing outside of his or her own culture to include an initial time period for general questions that allow the interviewer and interviewee to get to know each other before asking questions related to the research topic. Again. it was only from allowing myself to 'move slowly' and 'gently' through the interviews that I learned the importance of accepting a new attitude and way of doing things. By acquiring a deeper sense of my own prejudice and history I was able to see the importance of accepting other processes as effective and important (Chen & Starosta, 1998, 196).

Another aspect of the interview process was the initial concern regarding the formal request for an informed consent signature. I initially anticipated that this would be

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an awkward process and that it might not be a culturally sensitive way of introducing my

research topic. I also believed that the process of requesting the women's signature

stating that they agreed to be interviewed might somehow reflect poorly on me: the

researcher. However, by the time I presented the women with the informed consent form

prior to starting the formal interview we had already created a degree of respect and

understanding for each other. Also, all of the women interviewed were familiar with the

interview process, and they were not surprised by the request. perhaps due in part to the

fact that they are all university - educated.

Audio taping

Many qualitative researchers view the audio-recording of interviews as

increasingly important. According to David Silverman's Interpreting Qualitative Data.

audio-recordings provide a good record of 'naturally occurring' interactions when

conducting qualitative research (Silverman. 1993. 10). Silverman and other qualitative

researchers believe that the audio recording of interviews provides the interviewer with

the ability to return to the discussion in order to "catch" things that may have been

overlooked or forgotten in the initial interview situation. Note taking is another method

of collecting data from interviews, however, it is not always effective and efficient. Note

taking can be distracting to both the interviewee who is looking at a researcher who is

frantically attempting to record responses and to the interviewer who might miss non-

verbal cues and subtle points because she is busy trying to remember something that was

discussed earlier in the interview.

My initial uncertainties and the queries of thesis advisors during my proposal

presentation included the concern that audio-recording might inhibit the responses of the

interviewees. Further, it might not be culturally sensitive to audio-tape an individual

from an oral culture; some of the meaning from the responses might be lost if one relied

on a mechanical devise to 'catch' everything of importance.

I decided to ask each interviewee if she was comfortable with having the

interview audio taped, but I emphasized that it was her choice. All of the women agreed

to have the interview audio taped. At the beginning of the interview most of the women

appeared to be somewhat nervous, but they eventually 'got used to' or 'forgot about' the

audio-recording. None of the women articulated concern that the audio taping inhibited

their responses. All of them had either been audio taped previously or had done similar

interviewing themselves, therefore , this experience might not be generalizable to a more

diverse group of respondents.

One anxiety raised in the first interview was the concern for the audiotapes after

the completion of my research. Kate articulated her concern with the following story.

She told a story about her grandmother who had been interviewed in the 1970's along

with many others from her community. The man conducting the interviews was from the

area and was doing his master's thesis on the history of the Cape Croker Reserve. Kate's

grandmother thought it was a good idea because the history of the reserve had not been

extensively written about prior to his research. However, a recent court case over a burial

site on the reserve prompted the community to request the return of the audiotapes from

the researcher because there was a lot of important information discussed on the tapes.

The community initially viewed the researcher as an ally because of the assistance they had provided him in his research. He agreed to give the audio tapes back to the community only in exchange for a large sum of money. The researcher views the tapes as "part of his life's work and part of his retirement fund" (Kate). Consequently, Kate was hesitant to have me audio-tape our interview. She explained that this kind of experience is not that uncommon amongst Aboriginal communities.

I had not considered what I would do with the tapes after completing my thesis; after Kate shared the above situation with me I realized the importance of the information obtained on each of the tapes. Consequently, I expressed to each of the interviewees that the audio tapes of the interviews were their property and that they would be mailed to them upon my completion of the research project.

In conclusion, I am unable to fairly judge if audio-taping the interviews inhibited the women's responses. I do, however, believe that what is more important than the presence of an audio-recorder is the ability of the interviewer to 'truly' listen to the interviewee. The audiotape then becomes an aid rather than a tool for learning, because it is the responsibility of the interviewer to listen in a 'good' way in order to 'truly' understand what it is the respondent is saying. For example, during various interviews I believed that the interviewee misinterpreted or did not understand my question because she was not providing me with a direct answer, but appeared to discuss something unrelated to the question. My 'gut' reaction was to stop the interviewee and repeat the question. I did not, however, allow myself to interrupt any of the interviewees because previous research and personal instincts directed me to be mindful, 'go slow' and listen.

This approach proved to be successful because, inevitably, the respondents did provide thorough and detailed answers to my questions. The answers may not have been in the form I was accustomed to, but when interviewing outside of a culture, the interviewer must step outside herself and expand her horizons in order to attach proper importance to the things of her culture. By doing this she is better able to give the appropriate value to the positions of others (Chen & Starosta, 1998, 200). Because an interviewee is not responding to questions in a direct and linear fashion does not mean that her answer is somehow incorrect or unimportant.

Summary

In summary, I learned three things about interviewing from outside of a culture: go slow; be mindful; and listen. Going slow implies that I am moving somewhere, but responsive to the fact that different cultures have different time patterns of life. Thus, when interviewing from outside another culture it is essential to understand that not everyone sees time as 'marching on.' To be mindful implies that one should be aware that how one acts and responds affects what happens in an interview. Rather than having a set of categories into which one expects the interviewees to fit, one needs to be aware that this cultural construction of categories is a trap into which one can fall; if necessary, categorizing needs to be done much later. In order to be ready to receive information one needs to empty one's mind and be aware of cultural constructs. Finally, listening from outside a culture is an active rather than a passive and negligible act. Hearing and listening are two different things; hearing involves one's ears while listening implies that

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the heart is involved.

Chapter Six

Conclusion:
An Overview of Political Expressions
of First Nations Women in Canada

This study began as an investigation of the virtual absence of First Nations women

in the Federal government. I asked myself why this is the case and many other questions

arose including: how do Aboriginal women express their political interests; what do they

consider political; and how do they define their roles in the politics of their communities?

I used these questions to guide my research and to shape the interview questions.

Initially, I conducted a review of literature concerning the under-representation of

First Nations women in Federal politics. The literature review illustrated that Aboriginal

women are excluded from the mainstream political landscape. However, the 1996 Report

of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples underscored that many First Nations

women are using their abilities in the politics of their communities. They provide

leadership in facilitating the healing process and other initiatives within their

communities (RRCAP, 1996, v.3, 53). Thus, they are using their powers to guide their

communities towards a healthier and future.

To supplement the literature review and to better understand the political

expressions of Aboriginal women, I conducted in-depth interviews with five women who

were or are currently involved in the politics of their communities. The patience,

generosity and incredible insight of these five women guided me through the process of

learning about the political expressions of First Nations women. The interviewees presented both similar and diverse political viewpoints and experiences. The common thread that binds the politics of First Nations women is one of healing and strength. All of the women interviewed indicated that the overarching concern facing their communities is the health of their people. The impact of European colonization is visible in the continual pain suffered by many First Nations people. Domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, and attempted suicide continue to plague many Aboriginal communities (RRCAP. 1996). To understand the common thread of healing I used some of the concepts related to the medicine wheel, a foundation for Aboriginal theory. The medicine wheel concepts provided a framework for understanding how the five First Nations women viewed politics.

Healing within the Aboriginal culture refers to individual and community recovery from the effects of oppression and systemic racism by European colonialism (RRCAP, 1996, v. 3, 53). According to Lesley Malloch, a First Nations writer, good health is given from the 'Creator', and it involves a balance between physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual elements. The medicine wheel is one of the learning tools valued by many Aboriginal cultures and used in understanding good health. The medicine wheel stresses the importance of interconnectedness by teaching that good health links individuals to family, community and the earth in a circle of dependence and interdependence (Nabigon & Mawhiney, 32).

The interviewees varied in their approaches to healing themselves, but all of them articulated the essential importance of accepting their respective roles and responsibilities

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within their communities. "Speaking the truth" and "living the life they chose" are two ways in which the interviewees accept and maintain their roles within their families and communities. Accepting individual roles and responsibilities is part of the individual healing process, and it is also an essential step for healing the family, community, and environments in which individuals live..

During the interviews I came to realize that the political arena for many of the women interviewed is not affected by the Canada - United States border, or any of the other myriad boundaries -- provincial, municipal or other -- which construct the dominant political landscape for Canadians. Understanding where one comes from is essential to knowing who one is within First Nations communities and cultures. A place of origin helps shape the lives of individuals; but one's community is more inclusive than the immediate surroundings. For First Nations people community is not only 'where one comes from', but probably includes all First Nations people in North America and perhaps even the world. For example, "community" includes New Zealand and Hawaii in Kate's case and possibly the Kanehsatake Reserve in Quebec in Sherry's case. The women illustrated that their political roles remained consistent regardless of what part of their community they were living in or visiting.

Perceptions of the world are influenced by individual beliefs, values and attitude systems (Samovar & Porter, 1995, 25). Being aware that my own perspective is constructed by and represents only one world view enabled me to receive new and different understandings of the political from the interviewees. Through the process of learning from the interviewees about their perspectives on that which is political, I

eventually identified assumptions that belong to my own feminist ideologies. Attempting

to leave these views aside, I began to make room for an understanding of that which is

political for First Nations women.

Initially, I understood the political for Aboriginal women to be defined by the

oppression resulting from a history of banishment from the mainstream political

landscape. First Nations women were refused entry into the politics of federal

government until the early 1970's, and in many communities women have had a limited

presence in Band politics. I also assumed that the politics of First Nations women

would be advanced according to an agenda which is similar to that of non-Aboriginal

women. For example, an essential part of the feminist prescription for society is that there

should not be male representation of females (Agar, 1986, 28). The political story of First

Nations women, however, is much more complicated.

An essential belief of the dominant Canadian culture is that a person who is

excluded from national and local politics is, by our definition, refused entry into the

politics of 'democracy'. The women interviewed understood the politics of federal and

Band governments but illustrated skepticism and disinterest in participating at any level.

Two of the interviewees explained to me that the current political system of federal and

band governments is completely at odds with First Nations cultures.

Band politics is a system which was imposed on First Nations communities and is

not reflective of First Nations cultures. Traditionally, in many First Nations cultures, it

was the women who selected members of the Band council, and the views of the council

members reflected those of the women (Hill, 1995, 11). "Sexist beliefs have intermingled

with ours for generations and now we have sexist battles within our territories. These are confusing issues for the children and families where they learn about matriarchal societies and see male dominance and abuse" (Hill, 1995, 11). The federal and band political systems exclude not only individual First Nations women, but these systems also deny important features of Aboriginal cultures. Consensus, respect, harmony and interconnected-ness characterize many First Nations cultures. Federal politics in Canada includes the hegemonic agenda and de-emphasizes other agendas.

The politics of national, local and band systems of government are Euro-Canadian constructs. After realizing this I was able to better understand the women's explanation of what is and is not included in their understanding of the political. One of the interviewees, who stood on the front lines at Oka, stated that she was not a political person. This contradicted my understanding of the political. I later realized that this was part of her refusal to be defined in Euro-Canadian terms. Her actions are based on traditional values that precede Western ideologies and are independent of them. Being mindful allowed me to identify that, despite their apparent absence on the political scene, First Nations women have a powerful presence in the politics of their communities.

Healing First Nations communities is a political act because it bespeaks a refusal to be complacent. Healing individuals and their communities is a vital process of personal, communal and political transformation. Once this is understood, it becomes clear that First Nations women are mobilizing their communities and leading a process of change which aims to establish recognition, acceptance and respect for First Nations people and their communities (Smith & McCarter, 1997, 57).

Much work remains to be done in this area. My suggestion to fellow researchers and other concerned citizens is simple: talk with Aboriginal people. This is also the first of many recommendations from the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. Non-Aboriginal people need to understand the role of First Nations women in the politics of their communities in order to comprehend the politics of healing within Aboriginal communities. Learning will begin when non-Aboriginal people begin listening to members of First Nations communities regarding the past, present, and future of their nations. This suggestion may appear obvious, but it is not being done. Failure on the part of governments and non-Aboriginal communities to listen and to learn from the First Peoples of this country will likely ensure that the failed missions of the past will merely find new forms of expression.

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