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Organization*

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**SAGE AND THE CITY:  
A CASE STUDY OF IDENTITY AT AN URBAN ABORIGINAL  
ORGANIZATION**

**Dorothy Reno**

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postgraduate Studies in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the MA degree in globalization and international development.

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the past few decades, Aboriginals in Canada have undergone a steep urban transition. The challenges associated with the city, such as racism, poverty, feelings of dislocation, coping and thriving within the broader Canadian society, and negotiating identity, are all issues which led to the creation of urban cultural centres and organizations. Within the context of these organizations, the communities that are formed are multicultural in the sense of bringing together all Aboriginal peoples from a variety of First Nations, Metis and Inuit backgrounds. On one hand, Aboriginal cultural centres are faced with the challenge of respectfully acknowledging the diverse cultures of Aboriginal peoples, while on the other, identifying, and celebrating the common cultural values shared by all Aboriginals. Cultural centres have also stepped up to offer support for Aboriginal people(s) in the ongoing negotiation with modernity and the healing through the process of cultural reclamation. This study, which is exploratory in nature, examines identity at an urban Aboriginal cultural centre, from both individual, and community perspectives. In true postmodern fashion, this work melts away disciplinary boundaries by taking on theoretical approaches from sociology, anthropology, and political philosophy.

*In memory of Marleen Swire*



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## INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, Aboriginals<sup>1</sup> in Canada have undergone a steep urban transition. The challenges associated with the city, such as racism, poverty, feelings of dislocation, coping and thriving within the broader Canadian society, and negotiating identity, are all social issues which led to the creation of urban Aboriginal cultural centres and organizations. Within the context of these organizations, the communities that are formed are multicultural in the sense of bringing together all Aboriginal peoples from a variety of First Nations, Metis and Inuit backgrounds. On one hand, Aboriginal cultural centres are faced with the challenge of respectfully acknowledging the diverse cultures of all Aboriginal peoples, while on the other, identifying the common experiences shared by Aboriginal peoples, namely a historical relationship based on living close to the land, a distinct relationship with the Federal Government that is based upon (de)colonization, and most recently, the transition to modernity and subsequent healing through cultural reclamation.

The research presented in this work is an exploratory case study of identity at *Wapeniag*,<sup>2</sup> an urban Aboriginal cultural centre in Ottawa, Canada. The central question of this thesis asks how cultural identities are understood, transformed, reproduced, affirmed and enacted by the centre itself, as well as the individuals who make up the

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<sup>1</sup> Aboriginal is capitalized throughout this text, as are references to White people, Black people etc. This is a conscious choice that is meant to show respect for all ethnicities and to show their relation to the four sacred colours in the medicine wheel.

<sup>2</sup> *Weti gu wapeniag* loosely translated refers to the 'coming of the dawn' in Mi'kmaq. I have shortened this to *Wapeniag* (meaning people of the dawn - pronounced *Wabenaki*) and will use it as a pseudonym for the centre where I did my field work.

community at the centre. Of particular interest is the pan-Aboriginal setting at the centre which welcomes all Inuit, Metis and First Nations people. How is identity then impacted, given that people are in an environment with so many different Aboriginal cultures? Is there any evidence of a 'new' pan-Aboriginal culture that blurs together aspects from all Aboriginal groups? Or, on the contrary, are differences between Aboriginal groups, nations and communities reaffirmed? These questions arise specifically from the novelty of the pan-Aboriginal environment at cultural centres which, for the first time in history, brings together Metis, First Nations and Inuit people(s) into one setting.

In addition to questions surrounding Aboriginal cultural diversity, the way in which cultural identities are lived out in an urban setting is also being investigated in this work. How does the centre promote Aboriginal values, beliefs and practices from a small building in the middle of the city? How do the people who go there, in turn, respond? More specifically, what are the strategies and discourses used at *Wapeniag* which allow Aboriginal cultures to thrive outside of their original contexts in mostly remote Aboriginal communities?

In true postmodern fashion, this work collapses disciplinary boundaries, and blurs the lines between several fields including sociology, anthropology, and political philosophy. It is at the core of discussions concerning decolonization and cultural rejuvenation in the midst of ever changing Aboriginal landscapes. It also takes up issues of belonging, community and spirituality.

## **Methodological Framework**

This section presents some background and reasoning for the methodological, philosophical and ethical decisions that went into the planning and execution of this research. I begin by giving some information about my own background, followed by an overview of my current philosophical positions. I also discuss the steps of how I approached and prepared for this project followed by a section about some ethical considerations that I have sensitized myself to. Lastly, I give an overview of the four main research methods used for the completion of this thesis.

### ***Situating the author***

Following the lead of standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1986; Haraway 1988), I believe that we are all products of particular contexts and circumstances which inform, colour and shape the way in which we see the world (Marcus et al 1986; Smith, 1999). Since it is very difficult to step out of one's own conceptual faculties, the best way to deal with these limitations is to acknowledge them up front, and explicitly state one's own social positions, views, biases and background.

I am from the Mi'kmaq nation, descended on both sides of my family from the Bras D'or Indians who fled genocide in mainland Nova Scotia following the end of the French Indian war, and the commencement of British settlement in Nova Scotia. Upon arriving on Cape Breton Island, my *nuguminen* (ancestors, literally grandmothers) married French men and spread out, some settling in an Acadian coastal town called Arichat, others returning to the mainland and at least one couple that I can think of

resettling on Prince Edward Island. The French/Indian mix of my ancestors served as a means of escape from rather unpleasant situations; none of them that I know of, for instance, were exiled during the Acadian expulsion, nor were they forced onto reserves. It is often joked about in our family, that the ancestors conveniently played upon whichever part of their ancestry that happen to be less persecuted at the time: when the British exiled the Acadians from Nova Scotia, we were Indians, and when the Mi'kmaq were sent to reserves, we were merely dark skinned French.

Having grown up just outside of Halifax, Nova Scotia in a completely White community, my parents did not emphasize our partial Mi'kmaq ancestry. Rather than taking the chance of, on one hand being rejected or attacked by racist views from Euro-Canadians and on the other hand, being criticized by status Mi'kmaq for not being 'Indian enough', they elected to blend in as much as possible, referring only occasionally to our mixed heritage usually with jokes. In the community where we lived however, the people around us never failed to notice our "ethnic looks" as it is so often put, and as the years passed, my parents did attempt to transmit Native culture through various activities like hunting, spiritual ceremonies, and teaching me to braid my long hair, (my mother); and fishing, picking eatable roots and honouring my father's medicine animal (seagull) through family myths and stories on his side of the family.

In the past few years I have spent a lot of time talking with my parents about our genealogy, and in particular, their experiences as "mixed race people." When I ask my father about his own "Indian identity" he usually responds by using humour, and

recounting the story about a summer he spent at “*Shubie*” (Indian Brooke First Nation).

Here is an example of one of his usual jokes:

I feel my Native heritage through certain preferences I have – they call it “blood memory” and as you know, I *love* wearing beaded necklaces; and I know for sure that I am *not* two-spirited (gay) and I know for sure that I am *not* a hippie, so my attraction to beads must be the ancestors saying “Michael, go bead another necklace!

My mother has taken a more serious approach to reclaiming, and preserving our cultural heritage. When I asked her about being mixed, she said the following:

If we were to take away our *nugumijinen* where would we be? We would not exist without our female blood lines – we would have not been born at all, so we must honour that by taking after those women who have given us life.

My own curiosity about our Mi’kmaq heritage eventually led to an academic interest in Native issues. From there, I started to learn about the history of Canada’s assimilation policies and began to make connections with what had happened in my own family. For the first time, I understood that there were thousands of mixed Aboriginal families who had lost part of their cultural traditions after separating (in some cases forcibly because of gender discrimination in the *Indian Act*) from their ancestral communities.



At the same time that my family went through difficulties surrounding identity and fitting in as well as a substantial loss of both of our languages (Mi'kmaq and French) and some cultural traditions, it can also be said that we benefited from our inclusion in Euro-Canadian society. Occupying the bottom rungs of the middle class, we were in a more prosperous economic situation, and certainly had more choices in life than the majority of on-reserve First Nations people. This disparity has grown substantially in my case, with the completion of two university degrees, and a third one in progress in the field of Globalization and International Development. After a few years in the Ottawa urban Aboriginal community however, I realized that there are in fact many educated middle class Native people of mixed descent, a trend that seems to be growing in larger cities all over Canada. (See Chapter 2 for a history of urbanization)

### ***Entering the field***

I did my fieldwork from January 2008 to October 2008, although I had been an active part of the centre since April 2007, thus expanding the time for which I was able to make observations. I remain there to date after being hired on as a co-ordinator for one of the programs in September 2008. When I first came to *Wapeniag* in 2007, my intentions were to volunteer while simultaneously getting involved in more cultural activities at the centre, and around town. During this time, I had hoped to eventually do a research project at one of the other culture centres in Ottawa that was better known in the academic literature. After months of being a volunteer however, I became very fond of *Wapeniag* and decided to change my project proposal in the hopes of conducting my research there.

Upon obtaining a certificate from the University of Ottawa Ethics Committee for my proposed project (see Appendix A), I first approached an Elder who teaches at the centre and told him of my intentions to write a case study about identity. Within one week he returned my documents filled with helpful comments and suggestions. Included in his comments was a letter expressing interest and support for my project. The last step was submitting all of this information to the Executive Director at the centre in order to seek her approval. This approval was granted at the end of December, 2007.

Although my official fieldwork started in January 2008, I began thinking about Aboriginal identity and community long before. The time that I spent as a member of the Aboriginal community in Ottawa prior to starting my project, and after officially “leaving” the field has certainly informed, shaped and reshaped my thinking and questions with regard to its inception.

### ***Ethical considerations in the field***

One of the first, and reoccurring ethical hurdles I had to face was the question of whether to do this research at all. On the one hand, so little had been written about urban Aboriginals, as compared to rural or on-reserve Aboriginals, that I felt it was important to shed some light on this issue and to lay some ground work for future inquiries. I also knew from a library research project that the Maori in New Zealand had undergone huge demographic shifts which made the city a new site of re-organization

for tribal systems a trend that I thought Canadian Aboriginals would be facing in the future if not already. In terms of the academic literature, it was the right time for a project of this sort.

On the other hand, I worried that my study would be too much of an intrusion and asked myself many times if the people who access services at the centre would *truly* be able to benefit from such an abstract version of their day to day realities. Asking people to talk about abstract issues (i.e. how do you conceive of who you are?) when I knew full well that some of them would be struggling with very serious economic and social issues felt like a betrayal of sorts.

It is for this reason, among others, that I tried to give back to the community<sup>3</sup> principally through my volunteer work at the centre, which continued throughout the time that I was in the field, and after. I do hope however, that the people who so generously shared their stories with me will have derived some benefit from participating in this project, whether it be that they had some new insights into their own lives, or even just the sense of pride for knowing how much they taught me, and that this project would not have been possible without their wisdom, honesty and openness.

It should be stated that the people with whom I spoke to in this study – 7 formal interviews (there were originally 8, but one participant asked for their data to be

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<sup>3</sup> Indigenous scholars have written about the importance of collaboration between the researcher and the communities being researched. This includes giving back to the people who have contributed, and allowing Elders to guide the process. Most of all, “decolonized methods” assume that the knowledge being created assists the community with its social and political goals. See Smith (1999), Battiste (2000), Mihesuah (1998) and Menzies (2001).

omitted) and countless other informal conversations – are not merely participants. They are in fact part of my extended family; I think of them as brothers and sisters, aunties and uncles, grandmothers and grandfathers. Beyond the connection that I have with these people from sharing an Aboriginal heritage, there is also a bond from the time we spent together both in and outside of the centre which goes far deeper than a research project. In fact, I consider this project to be only a small part of my journey within the Aboriginal community here in Ottawa.

During the preparations for this project, some of my professors stressed in class the importance of scientific detachment from one's subject matter but I do think that my insider status in this case was an important strength; due to being an over-researched, over-regulated population, Aboriginal people are at times understandably suspicious about sharing personal information with outsiders. In fact, they laugh and joke about giving outside and non-Native researchers bogus information! I therefore feel that my presence at the centre as an Aboriginal person and a regular member elicited more honest and in-depth responses – because I was also attending events and accessing cultural services at the centre, the community members understood that I had my own personal attachments to the centre, and they trusted that I would use their stories and information in a good way.

The downside to this is that perhaps I have lacked some of the keen critical awareness that an outsider might have. I am probably also more prone to being influenced by the opinions and desires of others in terms of my research results, as I consider myself to be

a permanent member of the community, and therefore would have to deal with the fallout of people being upset if I wrote something that displeased them.

Social researchers always bear the ethical burden of figuring out what to include, and what to leave out of their writing. As researchers, we are all committed to the balance between generating knowledge, without shedding light on issues that could potentially inflame existing problems, particularly in situations where people are already disadvantaged. As a researcher who is also part of the community being researched, this balance was an even more delicate one to strike. I have thus done my very best to balance the pursuit of knowledge with my responsibilities to my community by having readers from the university as well as Elders from the community comment on the progress of my work. I have carefully considered all comments and queries and attempted to address concerns brought forth by all parties who have read my work.

### ***Research methods***

The methodological choices for this project are qualitative (Marshall et al., 2006: 52-53). Due to the lack of research that has been done on my topic, it was necessary to take a qualitative approach by way of exploratory research<sup>4</sup>. Given the complexity of a topic such as 'identity', the use of qualitative methods has afforded me more flexibility in exploring and interpreting 'identity' and related concepts. Qualitative methods also allow for more relaxed, less structured encounters with my participants where they can offer lengthy and nuanced commentaries. Aboriginal people in Canada have a long

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<sup>4</sup> Quantitative approaches are more readily associated with areas of research where there is already a lot of existing literature.

history of being calculated with quantitative methods that have pre-figured and controlled identity from the outside. My methodological style reflects an attempt at decolonizing research methods (Smith, 1999) in such a way that puts an emphasis on self and collective Aboriginal ideas of identity.

A major method of inquiry was in-depth interviews which were semi-structured and fit largely into the category of narrative inquiry (Marshall et al., 2006:101-115). I started interviewing people after nearly one year at the centre, and three months after I had been officially approved. I pre-figured several questions that I wanted to ask (see Appendix B), but I also left a lot of flexibility for the interviews to take different twists and turns. At several intervals during the interview process, I asked participants if they had additional comments on issues that I may not have raised with my questions. All in-depth interviews were transcribed and coded for themes before content analysis was performed (Marshall et al., 2006:158-160).

During my time in the field I also took part in many informal discussions where people shared their views and experiences on the subject of identity (Marshall et al., 2006:98). Given that these less formal conversations continued and developed over time (in contrast to the interviews which took place once for each participant over the span of a few hours), I hold them in very high regard in terms of how much they have shaped the direction of this research.

I also relied on my own observations about how identity was conceived of, shaped and played out during my time in the field (Marshall et al., 2006:98). This is also another key method as my observations continued over an extended period of time, and were something that I was able to do regularly, and continuously. My observations in the field have helped me to strengthen and clarify many of the themes that people brought up during the interviews, just as the interviews and discussions have assisted me in the interpretation of my observations.

Lastly, I have relied upon content analysis of written documents at the centre (flyers and the website) in order to bring some balance to the other methods, and to check for continuities and contrast at the macro level (the centre) and the micro level (the individual) of identity.

I have, to the best of my ability, protected the anonymity of the people who participated in this study. Their taped interviews were kept under lock and key, and I have not used any of their proper names, or specific information that could indicate who they are. Most of the pseudonyms used in this work were chosen by the participations themselves. In instances where people insisted that they did not need a pseudonym, or could not think of one, I assigned last names that are common in Mi'kmaq communities throughout Nova Scotia.

## **Chapter Outlines**

In chapter one, I introduce the theoretical framework used for this project. After providing a brief history of postmodern thought, as well as a synopsis of some major Aboriginal philosophies, I then go on to argue postmodernism's relevance in studying Aboriginal themes. Next I discuss postcolonial theory as a more general backdrop to this work, followed by a quick review of some postcolonial perspectives.

Chapter two looks into the major themes of this study; namely, the presence of Aboriginal people in cities, the history and development of urban Aboriginal centres and Aboriginal identities. After reviewing some of the literature, I describe the specific areas of interest in my case study in greater detail.

The personal histories of the seven community members who participated in in-depth interviews are the focus of chapter three. I have included these conversations in order to have the participants introduce who they are, in their own words. The sharing of stories between people is a part of all Aboriginal cultures and therefore adds a more traditional component to my research. Some of the themes on identity emerging from their narratives are linked and discussed as a bridge to the last two chapters in this thesis.

The central argument in chapter four is that people who go to *Wapeniag* become more "traditional" from their experiences there. The flexible ways in which they identify with traditional culture(s) do not conflict with the reality of modern, urban living. I call this



identification strategy *postmodern traditionalism* and through this concept which has been formed from my field work, the idea of an urban “First Nation” emerges.

Chapter five, explores the idea of *Wapeniag* as an “urban nation.” After addressing some of the complexities associated with “nation” as a concept, I proceed to discuss *Wapeniag* as a nation from the perspectives of ethnicity, and community. The experience of Maori with the formation of urban iwi (tribes) in New Zealand is highlighted in the next section and finally, I analyze the urban Aboriginal nation in light of Scott Lash’s organic and spectral postmodernisms.

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POSTMODERNITIES AND POSTCOLONIALISM**

Chapter one will provide an overview of the theoretical frameworks used in this research project, as well as an introduction to some of the general philosophical, and spiritual assumptions of Aboriginal cultures that are subscribed to at *Wapeniag*. The main objective of this chapter is to justify the usage of postmodern theories for understanding and explaining Indigenous experiences, as well as to locate some other relevant theories and approaches, namely from the postcolonial perspective, in this work.

#### **Indigenous Peoples and Postmodernism**

Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith once wrote “there can be no ‘postmodern’ for us [Aboriginal people] until we have settled some business with the modern” (1999:34). Her point is well taken. The ‘post’ in postmodernism and postcolonial studies refers to the closure of a particular era; that is, what follows logically *after* the modern period and its many manifestations, one of which happened to be colonization. For Aboriginal people residing in settler states, closure and healing from the colonial period, that is to say, “decolonization” will have to occur in a way that is completely unique from how it unfolded in the third world.

Some of the laws which were put into place under European rule made policies aimed at stopping attempts at maintaining and/or reaffirming Indigenous ways of life, especially surrounding Indigenous governance. Coupled with assimilation programs that presumed the inferiority of Aboriginal peoples, rapid social change has led to a complex knot of social problems so dense that even today the conditions under which many Aboriginal people in industrialized countries live are similar to that of the third world. It is therefore, not uncommon to hear Aboriginal scholars and activists shrugging off the idea of 'posts' (postcolonial, postmodernism) arguing that the situation of Aboriginal people in the fourth world<sup>5</sup> is still very much colonial in nature given the persistence of its social consequences.

Modernity as a philosophical or theoretical position (rather than simply as an era), promotes rational thought, linear progress, regulation, standardization and classification of people places and things: most often under the direction of empirical scientific paradigms (Escobar, 2004: 208). If it had a physical manifestation, modernity would be a grid of conceptually slotted objects and subjects, organized within little squares; the majority of which would be mutually exclusive and ultimately, hierarchical.

Without diminishing the many profound projects that modernity has given birth to, I will suggest that its underbelly, namely its goal to 'civilize' (under the guise of linear

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<sup>5</sup> The fourth world is a term used to locate Aboriginal people in industrialized countries. It is common to hear about conditions on reserves described as being 'third world' – fourth world denotes these third world conditions as happening in a rich country (Manuel et al. 1974). Additionally, the number 'four' is a First Nations play on words as four is also a sacred number for most nations. i.e. the four quadrants in the medicine wheel or the four sacred medicines, the four sacred directions etc. For more on this see Ouellette (2002).

progress) which has underpinned most, if not all, forms of colonization(s), has had the most devastating impacts upon Indigenous cultures throughout the world. In this way, one can see how Aboriginal people, as Smith (1999) suggests, still have much to sort through when it comes to modernity. Notwithstanding her criticism of 'posts,' I have nonetheless chosen my theoretical tools for this project based on postmodern framework specifically, in an attempt to escape the rigid modern grid, and a postcolonial framework more loosely, to signal the importance of decolonization in Indigenous academic literature.

The next few sections will explain the difference between the two schools of thought, and chronicle my position on the multitude of ways in which the postmodern and postcolonial theories can be useful for analyzing social change within Aboriginal cultures.

### ***Postmodernism***

A general understanding of postmodernism is that it criticizes modernity on one hand, while being a continuation of it on the other. It is also an epoch; the era which comes after modernity, roughly thought to have started somewhere around the 1970's but having had many forerunners to it (Smith, 2001: 217). As a critical tool, postmodern thought and methods question some of the general tenants central to modern thought, including: linear progress/development, a heavy reliance upon text book history; the importance of authority figures and 'experts'; and finally, the idea of an absolute truth (Peet et al. 1999: 127) . Given that postmodern thought interrogates the solidity of long

standing and dominant paradigms, it follows that within this view, space gets opened up for alternative methods of understanding and problem solving in the social world. It is my position that the acceptance of different ways of perceiving reality via postmodern provides an excellent opportunity for Aboriginal philosophy and spiritual views to be expressed academically.

Before going on to articulate the specificities of using postmodern thought as a tool for bringing Aboriginal world views to the forefront, it is useful to spend some more time considering the complexity of postmodernism/postmodernity in order to more narrowly define how this approach will be used in my work.

Postmodernism made its first appearance in the United States (Macey, 2000: 306) within the realm of visual arts, for example, the incorporation of the body into works (performance art) and also, with the usage of installation pieces. In literature, non-linear and surreal story lines marked the introduction of the postmodern style. Later, as an architectural style, it sought to challenge, rearrange and scramble some of the structural and stylistic rules that had been governing modern architecture (Jameson, 1984; Smith, 2001: 214). Where modern architecture relied on straight lines and angles that catered more to function and uniform aesthesis (this being evocative of the 'modern grid' discussed in the last section), the postmodern version sought playful designs that used curves or circular patterns in the place of sharp angles (Smith, 2001: 216). The main goal of this movement was to express creativity, and mark the beginning of another era

which was signalling the end of the industrial period in the West. The fundamental assumption was that the experience of reality was now open to being questioned.

Postmodern architecture's rebellion against the modern version began to seep into French social theory during the 1970's with the work of Jean Baudrillard (1970) and Jean Francois Lyotard (1979). Baudrillard argued that society was no longer governed by the forces surrounding material culture (as characterized by the industrial period) but rather had moved into a phase where material goods had come to represent ideas or symbols *just* as much, or more than they represent the activity for which their use was initially intended<sup>6</sup> (1970: 80).

The consequences of such a societal shift include a blurring as well as a proliferation of meaning(s); this in turn, according to thinkers like Baudrillard (1970) has led to a questioning of the idea of truth and reality. Jean-Francois Lyotard continued along this line of thinking (1998 [1979]: 6) by putting forth the idea that the rise of science and its tenets of progress, reason, and objectivity could no longer be trusted to provide society with the answers to its deepest concerns: in a time of multiple realities and interpretations, it would be incumbent upon each individual to find out what 'truth' was for themselves, as oppose to relying upon the conclusions of authority figures.

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<sup>6</sup> I will use clothing as an example to explain what is meant here: clothing was created to keep people warm and protected from the elements – in this sense the creation of clothing was purely for utility. Clothing however has also come to symbolize wealth, identity, gender, and a multitude of meanings that have little or nothing to do with its initial adaptations into human cultures.

Midrange theorists thereafter who contributed to postmodern thought have mostly come from very diverse backgrounds and perspectives; some from the Marxist tradition ( for example, David Harvey, Frederic Jameson, Scott Lash) some from feminist theory (For example, Sandra Harding, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway) and still others who come from related schools of thought who might even argue that they are *not* in fact postmodernists, despite the fact that they have contributed greatly to postmodern thought (for example, Jurgen Habermas). All of this confusion and fragmentation surrounding the ‘who’ and ‘what’ of postmodernity has served as an easy point of entry for many of its most vocal critics (for a more in depth critique of postmodernism see Callinicos, ( 1989 ); Calhoun, ( 1995 ) and Frow, ( 1998 ) )

In Anthropology, the influence of postmodern thought can be largely seen in the work of Clifford Geertz (1983) who introduced the “postmodern ethnography.” Rather than uncovering major causes for social phenomena, or identifying the impact of societal structures, Geertz introduced the idea of subjectively reading cultures, whereby symbolic meanings are decoded, in a literary fashion. Following Geertz’s influence, anthropology took an interpretive turn, most notably with authors such as Clifford and Marcus (1986) who emphasized anthropological texts as being social constructions, thereby problematizing the relationship between the author, the subject and the readers. This dilemma is most often moderated through the use of reflexive methodology, where the author can reflect upon their own biases.

One common critique of postmodernity is that there is no clear starting point; postmodern architecture began in the seventies, but yet there is evidence of a few writers and poets who may have used the term as early as the 1800's (Smith, 2001:226). It has also been said that postmodernity contradicts itself by criticizing its predecessor while at the same time continuing on with some of its most important traditions.

One of the most common critiques levelled at postmodernism is that it is nihilistic; that is, there is no reason to do research anymore because there is no 'truth' being sought after. While this may indeed be the position of some theorists (in the later work of Baudrillard for instance (1989; 1990)) it is not the stance that I take as a social thinker and researcher. Instead, I have used postmodern thought as a way of achieving greater flexibility, imagination and the use of metaphors in my analysis.

For my purposes, this allows me to incorporate traditional Indigenous thought and knowledge into my work. As opposed to advocating the idea that there is 'no truth' I instead opt for the notion of several subjective truths (Clifford et al, 1986:2). In this sense, I follow Sandra Harding (1986) and Donna Haraway (1988) in their thinking that knowledge can come from different perspectives and therefore, hearing from groups whose perspectives differ from the mainstream increases the pool of knowledge. It also allows me to illuminate traditional beliefs and practices (within my research) without necessarily abdicating the value of western knowledge upon which the entire university system, and therefore my work, is based.



### ***The Medicine Wheel and non-linear existence***

The Medicine Wheel, most often represented in First Nations culture(s) as a circle with four quadrants, is an all encompassing, multidimensional, intertwining set of principals that symbolize and govern not only spiritual life, but every single aspect of being (McGaa, 1995:57)<sup>7</sup>. The teachings of the medicine wheel usually vary from nation to nation (Ouellette, 2002:47) but nonetheless capture a few key universal understandings that are shared across nations. The following points are by no means an exhaustive depiction of the medicine wheel, but instead are meant to capture some of the fundamentals:

- 1) *Everything* in Creation is connected and life moves forward in patterns and cycles (Little Bear, 2000: 77). The circular form of the medicine wheel reminds us of these cycles while the inner area of the circle is meant as a symbol of Creation, where everything that has come into being shares space with all other beings. This is exemplified very well in dream catchers; the intricate webbing is said to prevent bad dreams from passing through while allowing good ones in. A more in depth and traditional understanding of this however is that the webbing is emblematic of the interconnectivity for all things on Earth.

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<sup>7</sup> I acknowledge that a great deal of what has become “shared culture” between the First Nations has evolved in the last few decades due to a rejuvenation of the culture, as well as shared political aims. Dream catchers, for instance are more or less known to come from the Ojibwe people, but became a symbol for Indian solidarity (and spirituality) after the American Indian Movement. It is certainly not a stretch however, to say that they philosophy underpinning objects like dream catchers is common to not only First Nations, but also other Aboriginal groups such as Metis and Inuit.

- 2) There are four cardinal directions: east, south, west and north which each take up one of four quadrants in the the circle (Benton-Benai, 1988:63). Each one of the directions represents one of the four sacred medicines (tobacco, cedar, sage and sweetgrass) and any number of animals, aspects of nature (earth, sun, moon and stars, or sometimes water and fire), people and the various life stages (such as elders or men women and children), seasons, times of day, and various states of being to name *only* a few (McGaa, 1995:61-63; Ouellete, 2002: 47).
- 3) There are four primary colours (Yellow, Black, Red and White) which each take up one of four quadrants in the medicine wheel. These are matched up to a particular direction, (i.e. Yellow in the east) although the colour representing the direction varies a lot from nation to nation. Some historical/traditional understandings of the four colours taught that each other stood for an aspect of one's place within the nation (clan, position, title, gender – and I am specifically thinking of Mohawk teachings here) however contemporary understandings of the medicine wheel represent the four “races<sup>8</sup>” of people on Earth by colour, as well as some of the perspectives and gifts that they bring forth as a collective (Alfred, 1999:10);
- 4) The medicine wheel is used as a guide for the way in which prayers are spoken for many nations: first, the eastern direction is thanked followed by words of gratitude for

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<sup>8</sup> Included with the four races is also a notion of worldview or religion: i.e. The Yellow quadrant of the medicine wheel represents people from Asia and their world view; in this way Yellow could also represent the religions that came from Asia such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism etc.

all things that are said to reside in the eastern quadrant<sup>9</sup> it then follows suit to the south, west and northern directions. Some people will acknowledge the Creator at the beginning, while some will wait until the end of the prayer.

The Medicine Wheel philosophy bears some resemblance to postmodernism in several ways; first, there is a key parallel in both traditions with the notion that history and events do not occur in a linear or measurable fashion. Postmodern thinkers show a great amount of suspicion toward the idea of time marching forward in an upward fashion toward 'higher' goals. Likewise, a person who lives the Medicine Wheel philosophy would not conceptualize history as a straight line with only one true version; instead, there would be an inclination to read a particular history as a reoccurring set of patterns that repeat certain lessons or problems. How an individual interprets these lessons or problems would depend largely upon where they were standing in the circle at the time (in other words, their age and the particular traits that are associated with development along the different parts of the Wheel). There are no 'end goals' in this philosophy but instead, a constant and never-ending quest for all things to be in balance and harmony with one another.

As mentioned earlier in the description of the Medicine Wheel, there are many different teachings that reflect how a particular community understands and practices being in the circle of life. Even within nations, it is not unusual to see slightly differing accounts of the Medicine Wheel. In particular, multi-tribal settings, such as Aboriginal communities

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<sup>9</sup> After acknowledging the Creator, a prayer might begin in the east like this: "Thank you to grandfather sun, our oldest relative; we also give thanks to the children who are placed in the east for the teachings that they bring to us everyday; we also acknowledge and thank the eagle who comes from this direction..."

in the city, have to be flexible in allowing for a myriad of teachings and protocols to be expressed. In most instances in my experience, this is achieved with ease, as it is broadly believed that all people have a right to find their own way of doing things. Again, I see this practice as being compatible with postmodernism's advocacy of multiple truths. Although there are overarching frameworks of belief and ways of being within Native circles, it is accepted (and almost expected) for each individual to have their own, more personalized version of the 'Truth' (McGaa, 2002:4).

Many First Nations people east of Ontario for instance, will place the colours as following within the medicine wheel: Yellow in the east, Red in the south, Black in the west and White in the north. In my own prayers however, I associate Red with the west ("Red" people come from Turtle Island which appears as being west when looking at a flat map) and Black with the south (Black people come from the African continent which I associate to the southern part of the globe). I do this because it feels right *to me* and I am seldom challenged on this issue as most other Native people whom I have met (particularly in the urban setting) are respectful of the philosophy that people need to find what works best for them.

This type of flexibility is likely to be rooted in the humility which comes from realizing that, in the absence of the Creator showing up in physical form and giving orders, no one knows anything *for certain* about how things should be done, and therefore all people must find their own way. The next passage, taken out of a book by Ed McGaa, expresses this well:

Most traditional Sioux whom I have known, and in particular my teachers, consider *Wakan Tanka* [the Great Spirit] to be beyond the mind of man or woman. If you ask a traditional believing Sioux, who, exactly, is the Great Spirit or who is God? - they will honestly respond that they do not know. It is beyond contemplation of mere two leggeds (McGaa, 1995:8).

Similar to what McGaa says about the Sioux, most of the Elders/traditional teachers whom I have encountered do not make claims of knowing the 'Truth' about the Creator, although everyone seems quite clear that there is one. The fact that this tradition does not make solid claims to knowledge about God or Creator speaks loudly to the openness surrounding the way in which Aboriginal people practice their spirituality. If the Creator is a mystery beyond our minds, then it stands to reason that there should not be any hard and fast rules about him/her: in other words, there should not be any type of promoting 'Truth' on this subject. Instead, Aboriginal people rely upon the patterns and cycles that they see in nature to guide the functioning of the Medicine Wheel. It is believed that to walk and function within the realms of the Medicine Wheel, or in other words, "to walk in a good way" is to be aligned with 'Truth' and therefore, to be close to the Creator.

Another aspect of Aboriginal philosophy that can be linked to postmodernism is the symbolic perspective. When an Elder begins a teaching, he or she will often start with a question: For instance, what do the seasons bring? What does the moon do? The people who are receiving the teachings will rarely answer these questions from a literal point of view by suggesting that the seasons are the result of the Earth's rotation and the

moon is a structure in the sky. Instead, people will express what the seasons and moon *represent* as opposed to what they actually are. In the same vein, when a Healer or Medicine man/woman considers taking on an apprentice, they will test this person's ability to interpret the symbolic. For instance, a Healer might pose the question: what does it mean if a man appears before you and sets down nine sticks? The key to this riddle is the number nine, and the word man. There are nine parts to the lunar cycle which corresponds to the number of months for human gestation – therefore the appearance of a man with nine objects is a symbol for pregnancy<sup>10</sup>.

Postmodern cultural theorist Zygmunt Bauman (1992: 105-6) calls actors within the symbolic perspective *interpreters*, making the argument that with the rise of relativism in the postmodern period, people are constantly having to search out, and decode meaning(s). Bauman argues that the modern period by contrast, was characterized by *legislators* whose main function was to make sure that universal narratives were entrenched into the collective psyche of society.

Native philosophy as described here, with its fluidity, multiple meanings and strong use of symbolism is a good fit with Bauman's notion of the *interpreter*. Where Bauman contrasts highly structured and systematic modernity (*legislators*) with a less structured and more open sense of reality (*interpreters*) I envision his concepts as being, in a very general sense, evocative of the difference between the way that Aboriginal culture(s) *see* versus that of the mainstream Canadian society.

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<sup>10</sup> This is meant as a very general example: Elders from different nations and communities have quite diverse ways of sharing teachings, this is however an example of the common pattern that I have noticed with traditional teachers.

### **Postcolonial Thought in an Ongoing Colonial Context**

In a much broader sense, my work is also anchored within a postcolonial framework, although I do so carefully, and within the confines of my own, more conservative views. While I will not refer explicitly to some of the following authors throughout this work, they have, in many ways, served as a point of reference for my thinking for this project.

Following David Macey, I do not view postcolonial thought as “the period following the independence of the former colonies” (2000:304), but rather as a commitment to understanding the processes and consequences of colonization. It was the work of postcolonial theorist Edward Said (1978) which first allowed me to understand how groups of people become culturally disenfranchised or ‘Othered’ due to differences in relation to dominant groups within and between societies. His predecessor, Frantz Fanon (1963) was one of the first postcolonial authors to write about the psychological dimensions of colonized people.

Many Indigenous authors from Turtle Island and abroad, who fall broadly into the postcolonial camp have informed and shaped my analyses, as well as my deportment in the field. Grace Ouellette (2002), Robert Yazzie (2000), Marie Battiste (2000), James Youngblood (2000) and Leroy Little Bear (2000) speak to many of the cultural components (of both the Indigenous and dominant societies) in the process of decolonization. It would be impossible to do a project of this sort without reading and referring to these Indigenous authors.

Maori scholar Makere Stewart-Harawira (2005) made a notable contribution to Indigenous postcolonial thought in her work on globalization. In deconstructing both western and Indigenous philosophies, she offered both a critique of modern epistemologies as well as some Indigenous alternatives in their place. I use Stewart-Harawira's work very generally as inspiration for combining European theories with Indigenous values, as introduced in the last section about postmodernism.

The work of Taiaiake Alfred, which is very much in a class of its own, is located for my purposes as postcolonial to the extent that it strives toward educating people about Indigenous governance. Throughout all of his work, but particularly in *Peace, Power and Righteousness* (1999), Alfred provides an in-depth critical analysis of the structural dimensions that impede and facilitate decolonization. To this end, Alfred's work assists me in locating and reflecting upon the larger context in which my field work takes place.

This chapter was meant to provide a theoretical foundation for this project. Although the literature discussed here is multidisciplinary in nature, it convergences on postmodern notions of flexible interpretation, as well as the postcolonial spirit of decolonization partly through the inclusion of Indigenous research. The next chapter will explore the history of Aboriginal urbanization in Canada, and provide some information about the evolution of Aboriginal cultural centres as well as the complexity of Aboriginal identities.



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **ABORIGINAL URBANIZATION AND THE RISE OF CULTURAL COMMUNITY CENTRES**

This chapter will serve as a brief historical synopsis of Aboriginal urbanization in Canada up to the present time. I have set it up in such a way that covers the three main themes making up the present study: first, urbanization, as experienced by Aboriginal people; second, the rise and contemporary presence of Aboriginal cultural community centres in cities; and, finally some discussion and conceptualization of Aboriginal identities. I have set up each section in such a way as to introduce the general concept, starting with a very broad overview of the topic, followed by a more context specific discussion of each theme as it relates to the specifics of my case study.

#### **Aboriginal People and Urbanization in Canada**

In the past few decades, Canadian Aboriginals have undergone a steep urban transition. According to James Frideres (1998: 98), prior to WWII the majority of Aboriginal people resided on reserves or in other types of rural communities, such as Metis settlements or Inuit communities in the north. Before the 1960s, the most common reason for leaving an Aboriginal community was intermarriage, especially between Native women and non-Native men and enfranchisement<sup>11</sup> (Wilson et al., 2005: 396). Increased mobility into cities therefore became associated with a better life; economic

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<sup>11</sup> Enfranchisement was the giving up of Indian rights in exchange for becoming a full citizen of Canada. It was practiced during the 1960s and 1970s.

opportunities, adequate housing, education, and access to social services (Newhouse, 2003:243; Cooke et al, 2006: 143; Cook et al., 2006: 142).

Focusing on women's perspectives of urbanization, Heather Howard-Bobiwash studied the first wave of First Nations women migrants to Toronto between 1950 and 1975. Many of these women who left their communities to attend university were often followed by concerned mothers and grandmothers who wanted to ensure their safety and well being in the city (Howard-Bobiwash, 2003: 566). Against the logic at that time which equated urban migration with the desire for Euro-Canadian assimilation, these groups of women started to form urban communities with other First Nations people in Toronto. In addition to providing emotional and cultural support to the young people who were pursuing studies, the urban Aboriginal community in Toronto formed the North American Indian Club in 1950 which was one of the first cultural centres in Canada (Howard-Bobiwash, 2003:572).

Similar histories abound all over urban Canada of Aboriginal women moving to cities and establishing not only their own presence, but also the start of communities which performed services to assist new comers, and maintained aspects of traditional culture (Janovicek, 2003:548). As Aboriginal migration to urban areas increased during the sixties, seventies and eighties, debates started to emerge as to which governmental bodies (federal or provincial) were to assume responsibility for the ever increasing demands for services (Peters, 2006:317; Anderson, 2003:383). Whereas the federal government had always been responsible for funding and providing services on

reserves, provinces started to come under pressure for the provision of services that they knew very little about delivering. As a result of the many federal/provincial disagreements regarding service provision, many urban Aboriginal people found themselves slipping through the cracks and becoming among the most politically and socially marginalized in society (Peters, 2006:315). Today, many urban Aboriginals continue to rely upon social networks and non-profit agencies to assist them with the grey areas where neither federal nor provincial governments will venture.

The Census shows that the proportion of Aboriginal people living in the city has increased to 54 percent since the 1950s (Canadian Census, 2006). Numbers from the 2006 Census show that Aboriginal people are not only choosing to live outside of their home communities, but are carving out lives in some of Canada's largest cities such as Winnipeg with 68,380; Edmonton with 52,100; Vancouver with 40,310; Calgary with 26,575; Toronto also with 26,575; Saskatoon with 21,535; Ottawa/Gatineau with 20,590; Montreal with 17,865; and Regina with 17,105 (Canadian Census, 2006).

When reading through historical, as well as statistical accounts of Aboriginal urbanization, one is easily led to linear, or step by step narratives that make the urban transition of Aboriginal people appear somewhat simplistic and unidirectional. In keeping with the Medicine Wheel's logic of cycles and reoccurring patterns, it is important to note that the rural/urban transition was not permanent for all of the Aboriginal people. In fact, many divide their lives between moving back and forth from their home communities to towns and cities (Cook, 2006:144). Additionally, the

experiences of Aboriginal people in the city are as variable as Aboriginal people themselves; at the present day, there are many people who were *born* in the city and thus may not know any other alternatives to urban life (Culhane, 2003:595). While being born in a town or city would make these people accustomed to city life, it would not necessarily translate into a higher standard of living, nor would it exempt them from experiencing racism, and other social issues.

Even those who make the transition from their home communities to the city, do not all have the similar experiences. Some Aboriginal communities are right next to Canadian towns and cities lending a built-in urban experience to those who grew up in Aboriginal communities. By contrast, many people coming from more remote reserves, settlements and other Aboriginal communities may have a harder time adapting to city culture and pace, especially in cases where their home communities embrace a traditional lifestyle (hunting, fishing and living off of the land) and English and/or French are spoken as second languages (Niezen, 1998: 58).

Still, for others, whether originally coming from Aboriginal communities or not, living in the city represents greater chances for having the freedom and flexibility to make choices that will give them the type of lifestyle that they desire (Wilson, 2005:396). Lastly, there are the most unfortunate cases where Aboriginal people experience the city as a place of discomfort and alienation; for this group, there are countless opportunities for social problems to arise (Newhouse, 2003:132), although there are many services, both mainstream and Aboriginal to offer assistance.

### ***Aboriginal People in the Ottawa/Gatineau area***

The present case study relates specifically to an Aboriginal cultural centre in Ottawa, Canada. The community of Aboriginal people who work, volunteer and access services at this centre, make up part of a larger Aboriginal community that spans the Ottawa/Gatineau area. The 2006 census reports that there are 20, 590 Aboriginal people living in the Ottawa/Gatineau area. 10,790 of those are First Nations, 7,990 are Metis, and 730 are Inuit. There were also over 1000 respondents who identified as being part of more than one group, or claimed that their Aboriginal identities did not fit in one of the three categories (Canadian Census 2006). For the city of Ottawa alone, there was a total of 12, 250 Aboriginal people with 6,575 of those being First Nations, 4,495 being Metis, and 605 being Inuit<sup>12</sup>. Over 500 more people were part of more than one group, or identified as being ‘other’ than the three groups (Canadian Census).

Based upon my experience of being in the Aboriginal community in Ottawa, I would say with some confidence that these numbers are extremely conservative estimates of Aboriginal people in the greater Ottawa area. I know for instance, that the organization presented in this study has served at least or *more* than 600 Inuit, leading me to believe that there are in fact many more Aboriginal people living in Ottawa/Gatineau than what

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<sup>12</sup> First Nations, Metis and Inuit are the official terms used to describe the three main categories of Aboriginal peoples in Canada. The Inuit come from the far north and are united by a common language (Inuktitut) although various dialects are spoken. Metis people are a mixture of European (mainly French) and Indian ancestors whose cultural synthesis happen as a result of being largely rejected from both European and Indian cultures. The First Nations are “Indians” speaking a variety of different, though loosely related languages. See the next section for more on this.

has been counted by the census. There are several possible explanations for this, most of which may involve homelessness, transient addresses or simply a refusal to participate.

While Aboriginal people can be found in all of the various neighbourhoods through-out Ottawa/Gatineau, the largest concentration of Aboriginal people live in a community that is east of downtown. Generally speaking, this neighbourhood, which was historically the home of many French speaking Canadians, is a lower income yet culturally vibrant community with at least two Aboriginal organizations. It is one of the few places in Ottawa (aside from Rideau Street which tends to be a popular hang out for pan-handlers of all colours and nations) where Aboriginal people make up a visible proportion of the population. I have often heard people in the community refer to this part of the city as “the little Rez<sup>13</sup>” calling attention to the fact that there are so many Native people in the area.

### **Urban Aboriginal Cultural Centres**

Urban Aboriginal cultural centres are houses, buildings and sometimes even office spaces set up in urban centres as non-profit organisations where Aboriginal people can go for various services, cultural and community events. Native Friendship Centres were the first cultural centres becoming formally recognized by the Government of Canada in 1972, although they started operating in Toronto in the mid 1950s as a reaction to Aboriginal urban migration (National Association of Friendship Centres, 2006; Newhouse, 2003:244).

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<sup>13</sup> As in “little reserve”

The majority of these centres are non-governmental and are owned and operated largely by Aboriginal people. Historically, programs and services were designed to assist Aboriginals who came to live in the city permanently, (Halladay, 2003: 48). However, circular/cyclical migrations patterns between reserves and urban areas are now widely understood and accounted for in programming. Although Aboriginal cultural centres are considered 'Aboriginal institutions', they are not outwardly "political" in the same way as, for instance, the Assembly of First Nations. S. Andrew Halladay notes however, that their tendency toward community building reflects, in many ways, the will of the collective, thus making cultural centres politicised in some respects, especially concerning social issues (Halladay, 2003: 48).

Today, there are thousands of urban Aboriginal organizations and cultural centres all over Canada. Friendship Centres alone across the country number well into the hundreds (First Nations Information Project, 2007), each with their own specific programs for accommodating urban Aboriginals. The National Association of Friendship Centres holds that the overarching motive for Friendship Centres is three fold. First, Friendship Centres aim to improve conditions for urban Aboriginals. Secondly, they seek to aid Aboriginals in coping with and participation in Canadian society. Third, Friendship Centres try to achieve the aforementioned goals in a context that is culturally appropriate for Aboriginals (National Friendship Centre Association, 2006).

While Friendship Centres have long been dominant in the cultural arena of urban Aboriginals, these days they are only one of many possible Aboriginal institutions. David Newhouse (2003:245) estimates that there are approximately 20, 000 Aboriginal organizations across Canada, with as much as half of those being culturally related non-governmental organizations. Apart from providing services to Aboriginal people in the city, other functions include: economic development, sports groups, religious/spiritual instruction, and corrections. The proliferation of Aboriginal cultural/community centres with such a wide variety of functions indicates that Aboriginal people in urban areas are active participants in establishing and building communities, as opposed to being passive recipients of social services.

### ***Cultural centres in Ottawa***

There are a number of Aboriginal businesses, cultural centres and/or institutions in the national capital region. In terms of centres that deal specifically with Aboriginal clients in the cultural arena however, there are three major players that are referred to by the Aboriginal community as being the pillars. First, there is a Native Friendship Centre which runs many different types of Aboriginal cultural programs as well as other large scale events such as two powwows per year. There is also a women's healing lodge whose mandate is specifically concerned with women and children who have survived abusive situations. Lastly, there is a health centre that promotes Aboriginal healing and wellness both from traditional perspectives as well as with conventional medicine. All three of these centres have mandates which seek to assist Aboriginal people in achieving healthy and balanced lives in the city. One common thread that runs through



the culture of these centres is an understanding, as well as a commitment to the idea that Aboriginal people can live comfortably in cities without having to compromise on traditional values having to do with culture, community, and spirituality.

### ***The Wapeniag centre for Aboriginal culture: first impressions***

I came to *Wapeniag* as a volunteer, in hopes of spending more time in the Aboriginal community. I had just completed my first year in grad school, and I was contemplating doing a research project about urban cultural centres, although I had my eye on another Aboriginal organization in the area.

As I walked into *Wapeniag* for the first time at the end of April 2007, I was struck by the crafts and artwork that adorned nearly every inch of the wall space; a beautiful circular display of the centre's motto done entirely with seagull feathers, a mural of mystical animal images, a display case with walking sticks intricately carved and decorated lavishly with ribbons and feathers. There was any number of inukshuks displayed prominently on table tops, both in the board room as well as the seating area, or "living room" as it is often called. A Metis sash<sup>14</sup> along with a fiddle lay behind a glass case that was embedded into the wall. While seeing so many First Nations, Inuit and Metis icons was striking, I was most touched by the hundreds of pictures of *Wapeniag* staff, clients and volunteers. There were so many framed photos of celebrations, events and the everyday workings of the centre that there was hardly an inch of wall space left.

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<sup>14</sup> The Metis sash is a Red belt, scarf or rope that was used to hold coats closed for Metis around the Red River area. It has become an iconic cultural symbol for most Metis all over Canada.

Although I was initially afraid of how people at *Wapeniag* would respond to me as a non-status Indian, I soon found out that the centre's over arching philosophy was to create a place that would welcome and accept *all* Aboriginal people. In fact, I ended up meeting a lot of people who came from similar mixed origins.

I began volunteering for a program called "Community Night" which ran once a week every Tuesday from 5pm to 8pm. Community night was *Wapeniag's* largest program, bringing in upwards of forty people.<sup>15</sup> The evenings always started with the gathering of everyone in a circle, followed by drumming and chanting after which an Elder would give a prayer and a traditional teaching. At 6pm, everyone piled into the kitchen for a meal after which they would be split into groups according to different activities. Some people went into a talking circles, while others made Aboriginal crafts, or watched educational films about Aboriginal culture(s).

My volunteer work started 2pm every Tuesday with setting up chairs, tables and the large buffet from where the food would be served for Community Night. I also assisted the cook, a sharp eyed young woman who had a talent for putting people in their place. I learned how to navigate her kitchen space without getting in her way and found out rather quickly that she had one of the most difficult jobs at the centre, as every single program served a meal, not to mention the extra cooking for staff retreats and special events.

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<sup>15</sup> Today, two years later, the same program routinely has numbers in the 60-80 range.

The other programs at *Wapeniag* revolved mostly around age and gender: there were three different programs for children (babies, kids and teenagers), men and women's drum groups, a family art program, a senior's group and other programs which had themes of health and healing. In addition to the regular programs which were designed to have educational, social, cultural and nutritious components, there were several special events and/or celebrations. Most of the programs, with the exception of the senior's circle, and a traditional cooking class, ran in the late afternoon or evenings in order to accommodate children and youth during after school hours.

The staff at the *Wapeniag* centre struck me as being overworked and frazzled. In the year that I worked as a volunteer I saw many program coordinators on the verge of breakdowns, although they always took the time to interact closely with the clients, especially the regulars. The clients (they are referred to interchangeably as "community members" and "clients" at *Wapeniag* hence my own use of both terms throughout this text) were usually very happy to be there, and it was and remains common to see people demonstrating emotional displays to thank *Wapeniag* staff for giving them a safe place to fit in.

I myself was also very affected by the warm and welcoming atmosphere. I actually looked forward to my weekly volunteer job, even though it entailed lifting heavy tables and scrubbing out large pots and pans for hours. I was always in the good company of other volunteers and staff members who kept me entertained with stories, jokes and even cultural teachings. Another volunteer named George, used the hours that we

worked together to teach me what he knew about Anishnabe (Ojibwe) culture. He adopted me almost as a little sister, and for the many, many weeks that we worked together he always walked me to the bus stop after the program ended to make sure that I was safe.

### **Aboriginal Identities**

There are perhaps no other identities in Canadian society as fraught with complexity as those of Aboriginal people. Whereas other Canadians might identify their ancestral links with relative ease, there is something about identifying oneself as Aboriginal that immediately invites tension. There are many reasons for this, most of them having to do with the heaviness of the colonial experience in Canada: whether it is criticized, denied or defended; spoken about openly, or kept quiet, it is a burden that is carried and shared by all Canadians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

A small part of this colonial history is often played out in interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people where there are clear expectations from non-Aboriginals in terms of Aboriginal people having to declare their blood quantum. I have always chuckled over the shock and awe appearing on the faces of White people when they meet Aboriginal individuals with blue or green eyes! This also includes the asking of very personal questions about whether one lives on, or comes from a reserve/Native community and the person's knowledge of wilderness and ancestral language, to name a few. It is as if some non-Indigenous Canadians consider it their duty to inspect our backgrounds. For Aboriginal people, these types of comments are annoying and trite at

best and very hurtful at worst; most people however understand these comments as being the inheritance of the state project to monitor and define Aboriginal identities.

I have noticed that some of these stereotypes have also made their way into Aboriginal circles where people will often discriminate against other Aboriginal people for being, 'not Aboriginal enough' in terms of upbringing or ethnic heritage (in other words, blood quantum), or conversely, for being 'too Aboriginal' for the opposite reasons (Urban Aboriginal Task Force, 2007:67). Again, I believe that this traces back to the constraints that were set by the Federal Government, particularly regarding criteria for official inclusion into Aboriginal groups, and the choices of some Aboriginal people to buy into this philosophy.

### ***First Nations/Indian identities***

For the First Nations in particular, most of the difficulties associated with belonging and identifying stem from the *Indian Act*. First enacted in 1868, this piece of legislation governed, and continues to govern every single aspect of the lives of North American Indians<sup>16</sup>. In addition to outlining the rights and restrictions that apply to Indians pursuant to this Act, its main function was to assimilate Indians into mainstream society, principally to consolidate European control over land (Lawrence, 2003:3).

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<sup>16</sup> The word 'Indian' is used here because it is the legal term for the First Nations people. It is also still very common for First Nations people to refer to each other as Indians, despite the fact that it has become passé with the general Canadian population.

The *Indian Act* is criticized frequently for instituting official Indian identities using blood quantum (Granville-Miller, 2006:466). Beginning with an 1876 amendment which favoured patrilineal descent of Indian descent, the methods by which Indian “blood” was accounted for became very selective; people of mixed parentage who traced their ancestry through their mothers often were, and continue to be, denied legal status as Indians, while others were granted legal status as “full blooded Indians” so long as they could trace their lineage to a male ancestor (Green, 2001:716).

One of the most bizarre consequences of this was that White people actually became Indians, while Indians were legally transformed into White people (Barker, 2006:130; Janovicek, 2003:550). Between 1876 and 1985, Indian women who married non-Native men lost their legal status as Indians, while non-Native women who married Indian men were actually granted status (became Indians by law) and could continue passing “full blooded status” (under section (6.1)) onto male children regardless of how many subsequent generations married non-Natives.

Since 1985, one of the many amendments to the Indian Act, referred to as Bill C-31, made Indian women who had lost their status legally eligible for reinstatement (Guimond, 2004:61). There was a major catch however: the children of these women were granted a type of status (under section 6(2) ) that could not be passed along to the next generation, in stark contrast to their male counterparts who could pass status down through many generations. More recent amendments to the Indian Act have resulted in status being phased out after one generation in all cases of mixed parentage – a change

that could lead to the eventual dissolution of Indian status all together (Grammond, 2009:11).

Being legally entitled to certain rights pursuant to the *Indian Act* does not fully determine who is, or who is not an Indian by cultural and spiritual standards; many people without status continue to self-identify and be accepted in various communities, both on and off reserve. Having status as an Indian however, is a major point of tension that can be divisive and extremely emotive for people on both sides.

On one side of the issue, there is a desire to protect culture; rooted in the presumption that ethnic heritage is the most important factor in this process, some Indian bands have adopted membership regulations that are even more stringent than those of the *Indian Act*. Kahnawake Mohwak territory for instance, has attempted to restricted intermarriage by not allowing band membership to individuals who have married non-Natives (Lawrence, 1999:109; Grammond, 2009:8). This came as a direct reaction to Bill C-31 which reinstated thousands of Indian women as registered Indians, as well as their children. With so many bands already grappling with very limited resources, Bill C-31 meant that communities suddenly had more people to house and support with the same amount of funds.

The counter argument is that traditional Native societies did not view cultural links as being blood based or biological; many Indigenous nations both pre and post contact, most notably the Iroquois Confederacy (*Haudenasaune*, or “people of the longhouse”)

practiced adoption, and viewed inclusion into that culture as being based upon citizenship and acceptance of “The Great Peace” as oppose to sharing blood. Ancestry was part of the equation however, with descent coming through the Mother’s clan (Lawrence, 1999:110). The following excerpt from Bet-te Paul (Maliseet) touches upon the tension between traditional ideas of membership and the reality of trying to conserve culture in a settler society:

You see a lot of blond-haired Mohawks in the States, but you would never consider them “non-status” like you do in Canada. They see themselves as Mohawks and so does everybody else. Their identity comes through the clan, and if a woman married a White guy it didn’t matter; the child would be whatever the mother was. It was the same for us traditionally and obvious the government wanted to break that up.

But we believe now that membership has got to be restricted somewhere down the line. That is only common sense because, if you don’t restrict it, after some point you wouldn’t have a drop of Indian blood in you. We have to make our blood line stronger, and instill in our children a sense of pride in our children (In Silman, 1987:227).

From my experiences in the field, and more generally as a member of the urban Indian community in Ottawa there seems to be more openness with regard to non-status Indians, although individual attitudes vary. I think that this sense of openness and the rejection of “purity” stems from three things: the first is the sheer number of ethnically mixed Indians, many of whom have long been at home in cities. Secondly, there are already so many differences between people in terms of nation, family history, and



background that it would be nearly impossible, not to mention exhausting to explore everybody's person links to their ancestral communities, unlike on reserves where people tend to know more about each other's family histories. Third, resources for reserves are more fixed (number of houses, land available) and extra people means dividing these resources in more ways. In the city, First Nations are connected to each other through associations or social linkages where there is less direct competition for resources between individuals. Cultural organizations also require resources to be run, but a lot of the funding is based upon numbers which fosters a 'the more, the merrier attitude' thus easing some of the tensions and fighting that arise from scarcity.

I have often heard one of the Elders in the urban community here in Ottawa saying that we are all so mixed today, that it has become increasingly important to focus upon our cultural values and less upon whether we are "full-blooded" or ethnically mixed. Huron (Wendat) historian Georges Sioui shares this philosophy and reflects upon how ethnic mixing has, quite ironically, saved his nation from disappearing:

(...) when we became drastically depopulated through epidemics and wars  
(...) we were saved from complete extinction principally because we had  
matricentrist socio-political traditions (...) We used our alliance with the  
French to go and attack the English colonies to the South the primary intent  
of capturing people, especially young and female, and ritually, through  
adoption, giving them a new life in our Nations.

As it was, clanmothers and matriarchs had the principal say in these  
undertakings (...) In this manner, we, the Huron became genetically mixed

with the English and others in the British colonies (...) and some of our Aboriginal Nations survived only because of our traditional mother-centred thinking (...) seeing these young captives, patricentrist would have said, as they often say today about some of their own people: “We have no use for these children because they are White, they are Black, they are not Indian. They do not have the proper quantum of blood...” But as I am implying, our good fortune was that we lived within a matricentrist, circular system, where people and other species are not disqualified and destroyed because of not being what they are not (Sioui, 1997b:55-56).

The status versus non-status debates and other issues surrounding membership and blood quantum, are all driven by the same desire to protect and conserve the means which allow culture to be transmitted. The strategies used by different people to reinforce their culture, largely depends upon whether they themselves happen to be status or non-status Indians. Being that there are so many non-status people in urban areas, it stands to reason that the overall urban Indian community is more or less a safe place for all people of First Nations descent.

### ***Metis identities***

While the Metis people are not subject to any of the legislation governing the *Indian Act*, they too have some difficulty in coming to terms with membership, and group identity. The word Metis simply implies ‘mixture’ which refers to the people of European and First Nations descent (Gibbs, 2000:5). Rather than general ethnic mixing between Natives and White people however, the Metis nation is said by many to have

evolved from a specific context in Canadian history; namely that of the fur trade particularly around the Hudson Bay and extending out to the Red River area, with intermarriages happening between French men and Cree women (Steckley, 2001: 98-101). There are several variations on this history however, with ethnic lineages that were also said to have been created between Scottish and British men, with Cree and other First Nations women (Lawrence, 1999:73; Gibbs, 2000:21). One of the major characteristics giving genesis to the Metis ethnicity was the group's rejection from both the White and Indian communities of their ancestors, thus giving rise to a completely distinct way of life which employed and merged cultural and social production from both the European and First Nations cultures (Redbird, 1980:3).

There are many voices which claim Red River, in Southern Manitoba, as the homeland and birth place of the Metis nation (Purich, 1988:9). Under this criterion, any person claiming to be Metis must be able to trace their ancestry back to the Red River. This is not agreed upon by everyone however, as many people across all provinces in Canada without Red River links also identify as Metis. For instance, some people with one First Nations parent and one non-First Nations parent will identify as Metis. It has also been argued by various groups that there were Metis settlements which sprung up in other parts of Canada that are not associated with the Red River, such as the East coast where French and Natives had been experiencing cultural mixing for centuries. As Joe Sawchuck puts it: "The Metis have many local, regional and cultural variations which militate against their being a unified whole" (2000:74). To complicate matters even further, acculturation, intermarriage and migration have made it increasingly difficult

for people of distant, or mixed Aboriginal ancestry (non-status Indians) to know whether to identify as Metis, or as First Nations people of mixed ancestry.

There is no single authority in Canada that has been able to define Metis membership without causing controversy. A visit to any of the official Metis association websites reveals several different definitions – with the Alberta Metis defining themselves as a group that: “descended from the historic Metis Nation [who] resided in the historic Metis Nation homeland” (The Metis Nation of Alberta, 2008). The Metis “homeland” in this case is referring to Red River Manitoba, and therefore rejecting the notion that there were/are Metis communities outside of Western Canada. The Confederation for Nova Scotia Metis by contrast, has a more open definition:

Our members come from all walks of life and heritage. Most are Indigenous Métis of Mi'kmaw and Wampanoag heritage. Others are western Métis whose heritage may be Cree, Ojibwa, Blackfoot, Sioux, or others. Our commonalities are our inability to walk comfortably in the everyday worlds of either side of our heritage, and our wish to simply be who we are – Métis (Confederation of Nova Scotia Metis, 2008).

In both cases however, membership can only be approved upon proof that applicants are not *only* of partial Indian and White heritage, but also belonging to, and recognized by a Metis community. This stipulation would disqualify mixed people whose ancestors' migrated from the original Metis settlement, an occurrence which would be common in contemporary times.

### ***Inuit identities***

Like the Metis, Inuit people of the north are not governed by the *Indian Act*. Their experience with European contact and colonization has proven to be quite different from that of the Indians and Metis. Because Inuit communities remained *comparatively* isolated from settler communities (and most other non-Inuit communities for that matter with the exception of places around James Bay and in the Northwest territories), they were able to maintain a greater degree of cultural and ethnic cohesiveness for longer than their other Aboriginal counterparts. This is not to say that they have escaped colonization altogether – indeed their experiences of having been controlled by a foreign entity has cost them greatly – it has simply come somewhat later than it did for the Indians and Metis.

Contact with European whalers from the mid 1700's to the end of the nineteenth century (Collings, 2005:50; Wilson, 2005:83) was not nearly as disruptive to the Inuit way of life as was the government presence that began in the North during the 1940s. The complexity of the traditional Inuit naming system resulted in the government issuing numbered tags in order to identify each Inuk, and keep track of their activities (Kulchyski, 2005:83). During this period the Church was also active in establishing Christian names for the Inuit – both processes complicating and interrupting the intricate structure which had previously been one of the bedrocks of Inuit identity (Kulchyski, 2005:83).

Other programs followed around the middle of the twentieth century, each time becoming increasingly antithetical to the Inuit's nomadic lifestyle and identity (Collings, 2005:50; Wilson, 2005:83). Some of the policies and initiatives included persuading the Inuit to live in permanent settlements, thus moving them further away from a subsistence system that had allowed them to survive the harsh Arctic conditions for millennia. By the 1970's, many Inuit communities recognized that a dependence on the government had developed and thus began negotiating land claims and Aboriginal rights, a process that spurred the development of a unified Inuit identity (Dorais, 2000: 108).

Elana Wilson writes:

In 1971, the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC) - the first Inuit organization to represent the Inuit of the Northwest Territories, Labrador, and Northern Quebec - was established. ITC's founder, Tagak Curley, emphasized the need for unity in addressing the problems facing the widely geographically dispersed Inuit communities, stating that "we must all become one group: the Inuit". This movement towards unity was part of an attempt to deal with the trauma of rapid change, manifested in high rates of suicide, poverty, and violence, and to regain a measure of control for the Inuit over their own lives. It was during the land claims process which ran intermittently from the early 1970s to 1993, that cultural traditions, previously practiced more or less unselfconsciously, emerged as national symbols (2005:83).

While the process of defining who they were to the government contributed to the development of a cohesive national Inuit identity, it also invited the systematization of

Inuit identities through blood quantum, and much like with the Indians under the *Indian Act*, the government imposed its own version of who was Inuit *enough* to be a beneficiary of state programs and services (Groves, 2004: 16).

With the opening up of the north, migration and cultural change, today an increasing number of Inuit families are of mixed heritage. While the government has instituted blood quantum cut offs (Groves, 2004: 16) in its agreements with the four Inuit homelands'; Nunatsiavut, Nunavik, Nunavut, and Inuvialuit (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami. 2008)), the majority of the Inuit people whom I have encountered seem to dismiss blood quantum as having any real influence on the way in which Inuit people view group membership. I have often heard it said around the community in Ottawa (home to the greatest number of Inuit people *outside* of their four traditional homelands) there is a one drop rule: that is, a person is Inuk if they have one drop of Inuk blood and are recognized by a community as being Inuk. While percentage of Inuit ancestry does not necessarily play a deciding role in group and individual identities, there is some research to suggest that Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit, is becoming one of the most important contemporary ways for Inuit people to relate to, and maintain cultural ties, both in the Arctic and in Southern cities (Dorais, 2000: 108).

I met a lady in the Aboriginal community in Ottawa for instance, who despite being entirely of White ancestry was accepted by the Inuit. Her family had moved to the Arctic when she was a very young girl and thus she grew up with the Inuit, speaking their language as her mother tongue and spending summers out on the land. She was,

along with the other children in her village, taken away from her parents and send to a residential school where, quite ironically, she learned to speak English! Based upon seeing her interact with other Inuit, I have absolutely no evidence that they saw her as anything other than Inuk.

### ***Identities in Ottawa and at the Wapeniag centre***

The identities of Aboriginal people in Ottawa and at the cultural centre where I did my field work is the main focus of this thesis and will be discuss throughout. It can be said however, that the complexities discussed in the last sections are all a part of the social landscape in the general community and at the centre. For the most part, the Aboriginal community at the centre was very much aware of complex issues associated with government interference in Aboriginal identities, and therefore rejected the methods by which *Aboriginalness* was instituted. To this end, the majority of people advocated Aboriginal identities as being much more than a legal government category – and acknowledged that Aboriginal identities come from social, ancestral, emotional and spiritual origins.

This chapter has presented a literature review for the main themes in this study; the urbanization of Aboriginal people, the development of Aboriginal cultural organizations, and Aboriginal identities. Following a general history of the study's main concepts, some specific background information was provided for the project at hand.



## CHAPTER 3

### “WHO WE ARE”: LIFE HISTORIES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

This chapter is designed to introduce the seven people who co-created this project with me, by so freely sharing their histories, and experiences at *Wapeniag*. Their participation in in-depth interviews has informed a large part of the analysis for this project. While I will be using, and referring to, specific parts of the interviews to discuss my findings in the chapters, I would first like to honour these people by letting them introduce themselves and telling the readers who they are, in their own words. Confidentiality and ethical codes of conduct require that I use pseudonyms; therefore all names seen in this work are made up by either myself, or the participants.

#### **The Participant's Stories**

*Albert “Sugarfoot” Axehandle-Carvery, Mohawk ~60yrs.*

*Okay...about my life. Well I was born in the city – in a very large city in an area of the city that was sort of in between where the rich people lived and the so called poor people lived. It was very, very mixed – and that had some influence on me growing up because it was predominantly one or the other so there was still that sense of being different. Well mostly because of my mother's nature and mostly because my mother was the only female in her family so for a time her mother and father also lived in the city although they maintained their home in the reserve – I'm not really sure why.*

*First of all, let me back up. I didn't know my father's parents but my mother's mother – I remember her although she left this world when I was young but my grandfather lived with us so I knew him and my mother's brothers since they worked in the city as iron workers. My memories of my father are very abbreviated also because he became seriously ill when I was five and only lived for another five years. So for me, my main source of growing up was through my mother which would have been historically accurate anyway – and through her father too.*

*I am the last in a family of 8 – my mother lost her first child who was struck by a car at the age of 8 and died. I was a twin but my twin only survived for six months. In any case, the whole time that we lived were economically difficult times for all people. My mother worked and my brothers dropped out of school to help. By the time I was ten I had three jobs but it came to a point when we couldn't maintain ourselves there. So we moved to my mother's reserve and lived with my grandfather. I was eleven. Moving to the reserve was a really exciting time for me. It was a healthy reserve at that time – everyone there was almost totally self sufficient. During the summer I was out everyday and during the winter we skated on the ponds. It was a wonderful time but it was also short lived because my grandfather was struck down by a drunk driver going through the reserve and that was a huge loss. And not long after that my mother was struck down with cancer.*

*Fast forward – the times and circumstances were such that I had the grades to enter into university but I did not have the wherewithal to do that. I started working different*

*jobs – some of them didn't amount to too much but each time I got a new job I got very involved because I was raised to be very responsible. So finally, with a boost from my foster parents I got an interview with \_\_\_\_\_ [a large corporation in the Ottawa region] and through the series of interviews they concluded that I had more skill than what was on paper. So I ended up with a job that was huge for me – and that was another really big change. With that connection I did take a lot of university courses at McGill which were job related and the interesting thing about this one is that I still – although I was living on my own in a series of boarding houses I was still connecting strongly with my family on the reserve since that were close by. Throughout that period of time I was quite steadfast in knowing who I was – of course I couldn't hide it because people used to ask.*

***Jenny Honeypot, Anishnabe (Ojibwe ) ~ 40yrs.***

*I'm from \_\_\_\_\_ First Nation and I lived there for the first seven years of my life. My mother kidnapped me and my sister from my father when I was seven and she took us to Ottawa and then they found out we were here and my mom packed us up one night and off we went to Oklahoma, and we lived in Oklahoma for a year. Then we went to Edmonton just for a visit, and that's where got caught and we had to come back to Canada permanently. What happened in Edmonton was I sent a card to my Dad cause I had his address memorized in my head and I sent him a card and that's how we got caught. What ended up happening was that my Dad made my Mom chose; you can keep one and I will have the other. So my mom sent my sister back to my Dad and I was raised by my mother. After that my mother and I proceed to travel every three months*

*moving from reserve to reserve and then she met \_\_\_\_\_ and married him and was with him for four years. We travelled a lot!*

*Mom had a job with man power and they had a project going on where they were training band managers to run their reserves. And my mother would provide the training. So we moved a lot. We were mostly in Alberta and sometimes in Saskatchewan. Sometimes it was hard because those reserves were tough and they didn't like me very much because I wasn't from that reserve. There's that inner discrimination. Most were Cree, but there were Black foot, Peigan and Blood. Living in the mountains really touched my heart – that's the place I really want to be – I always want to go to the mountains. When I look at the Gatineau's I think about the foot hills of Calgary.*

*Anyway, so after that my Mom divorced and we left him. She packed everything in her little truck and waited for me after school. She said: "we're going" and I said, what about my school, what about my books, what about my homework? And she said: "no we are going" and then I didn't even know where we were going but we ended up going to a place called Frobisher Bay which is now called Iqualuit – so all the way from there to the North. When we got to Montreal we ended up staying in Montreal for two weeks because there was a Whiteout. And so we stayed there and then we got up there and I got – uggh it was rough the first little while up there because I was the only Indian and I was about a foot taller than everybody else and so I got beat up a lot. I learned how to fight there. Yeah, that was where I really learned how to fight. There was a war – a*

*long, long time ago between the Cree and the Inuit and so that's what brought that bitterness on.*

*And uhm...I ended up running away and then they put me – oh – I got caught with cocaine and then they put me in a detention centre and I was charged – because I got in a fight with one of the inmates at the correctional centre where I was – and I put them in the hospital for three months. And then I got charged with attempted murder, so I was put in there for a while. And I ended up spending a lot of time there and then when I got out I was sent to Yellowknife. But then I just got deeper into problems in Yellowknife and I got put in another detention centre after that.*

*Well I guess I forgot to mention that I was sexually abused by my cousins from the time I was three until seven – and there was five of them and they would have their turns on me and do stuff. It brought on a lot of anger and pain because they would torture my dog to make me stay quiet but they'd buy me things too – it was such a weird situation.*

*Nobody knew until I was in my twenties and I said something. I went back to my reserve when I was thirty and I went there to see my Dad's grave. And one of my abusers called when I was at my Stepmother's house and she wanted to talk to me – my cousin. So I took the phone and I said: "Why would you want to talk to me after sexually abusing me for those years when I was a child, you want to talk to me?" She was shocked and then she hung up. I just sat there and said: "you fucking bitch!" And my step mother was pretty shocked and I told her that \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ – all of them did that*

*to me when you sent us away on the weekends. I don't know if it ever happened to my sister. She denies that it ever happened to her but I doubt it – because we were all there.*

*I was 18 and partied a lot when I moved here. I didn't get in trouble because I stayed away from cocaine – I had finally gotten over that and things were going pretty good for a while but then I was freaked out because I went through a pretty big culture shock from being in the 'big city'. I had a fun time adjusting. I couldn't believe how many bars there were and I couldn't believe that I didn't have to pay for drinks. And then I got an apartment because I was the superintendent of a woman's boarding house and that's where I stayed but I was bad and I had a lot of men. You know I had a sexual addiction for a long time.*

*Then, after years of going through a lot of things, I met a woman named \_\_\_\_\_ and she's my best friend to this day. She is actually the one who plucked me out of this darkness and helped me to get sober and reconnection with my traditions and culture. And so did her daughter because all of my life I hated children – I mean really hated them. I thought that they were noisy and annoying. \_\_\_\_\_ was five years old and she just – I don't know what she did she just zapped my heart and that was it. And then I loved kids after that because she was such a sweetheart. I had this little Red car and we would go to every powwow together. She helped me to establish my culture again. She was really supportive and she didn't care anything about my past. She was Ojibwe but she was adopted by a White family, so it was a real experience for both of us to go through together. Before I met her you see, I had turned my culture away – I*

*didn't even want people to know that I was an Indian so my name was Audrey for a while, or Violet.*

***Olive Greybear-Painchaud, Metis ~50yrs.***

*I am from the Metis Nation in the occupied territory of what is known as Quebec. I was born in Montreal and my father worked high steel and we move around a lot. He worked in the states but also out of the Dominican Republic for a while. But he usually worked in Canada, like in Newfoundland and New Brunswick and all these different places where they had bridges, dockyards and that kind of thing. He did a lot of that stuff so he was gone a lot. And we moved from Southern Quebec to Southern Ontario and then after that when I got to be 17 I moved out and went back to Quebec and then after that I spend some time in Ontario, Newfoundland, Alberta, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. I moved! I say it's just carrying on the tradition of my family – moving everywhere.*

*There are a lot of academic books where you can read about the small “m” métis and the large “M” Metis right? And the small “m” with the accent means mixed blood. Not necessary Acadian culture of Metis from Red River. So you have the large one and the little one. So there is that component of that identity and I think that's what a lot of people refer to themselves as when they don't have status. In the past, there were a lot of people who used to refer to themselves as Metis but are now actually Bill C-31 status Indians. Because they couldn't refer to themselves as status Indians cause that was sort of where the mind set was there.*

*But I don't seem to care about those divisions. We're all the product of colonization! You know, I think that a lot of the fighting happens because of perceived financial benefits. You know, that if one group gets something financially, the other group is going to have that taken away from them. Yeah. There is a struggle that's been going on for a while now with the Red River Metis and the other métis – you know? That's kind of interesting...I mean the Red River Metis state that if you can't find your lineage in the Red River then you are not Metis – but I think that \_\_\_\_\_ was one of the icons for Metis in the past and I think he – well he wasn't from Red River. Some of my people did settle out in the Red River area, but I would associate myself more with Metis because my family travelled.*

*Yeah – it's about that economic – I mean, they were half breeds back then and they travelled out – some of them travelled out. And...there's a lot of interesting things that I found out years ago when I was in school was that we ...I was looking through some anthropological books on what some of the Metis words were in Red River – and it turns out that we use those same words. So that made me think about the travelling first off. They would have been using similar language because they were travelling up. And then some of them decided to stay – they thought that it was a good idea – and my Dad, what does he say every so often? You know – and where does it come from because my father doesn't speak much English, but every so often he'll say: "Canada no good, go back to Winnipeg!" [Laughing] Where does that come from?*



*So you got these guys going back and forth and some of them stay, and some of them come back. And then you've got the Hudson Bay gang of Metis and they were, they were slightly different in their background because they were British predominantly, and a lot of them were farmers and Protestants as compared to the ones who came up through the Quebec area and spoke certainly a considerable amount of French and were Catholic and worked the North West Company. The French ones were more movement oriented as oppose to establishing farms.*

***Glenn Twohawk, Mohawk ~40yrs.***

*I was originally born in Brandon, Manitoba and I lived there until I was thirteen and then went from Manitoba to Ontario and I've been in and out of foster homes since I was knee high to a grasshopper I guess you could say. I was raised by - I guess you could say, other people's parents. Foster parents...I'd say probably from four or five to - until I was almost 21. I met my mother again when I was 21. That was the first time since I was a tiny kid. My father - I never met, but I used to talk to him through group homes. I would talk to him on the phone sometimes. Yeah. I guess my father was drinking and my mother was pretty well trying to stay sober I guess....or it could have been vice versa my mother could have been doing it - and then I guess she decided to keep one of us and pretty well put the other two in group homes because they thought that would be the best thing. Today I still don't know why they did that.*

*The one that they raised - she has kids and that, so I guess she is somewhat better off. You know, just raised different or whatever. Especially when you're in those places -*

*you don't know who you are. But I realized when I was in kindergarten that I was different – I didn't feel like I was in the White race. Those were hard times for me growing up in those foster homes. They don't know a lot of the things going on in those places – there can be physical abuse, mental abuse, all kinds of sexual abuse going on which sometimes is just the way things go.*

*I was around 13 when I came here; there was supposed to be an adopting family that was there for a while and just in the first year one of the sons was trying to throw me into the traffic and physically kill me so I went through hell there – I guess a lot of people are still wondering how come I haven't snapped yet – from the beginning of my life until now. I went to psychologists and stuff like that, and I have gotten rid of a lot of that stuff but I'm still healing.*

*I've taken all kinds of stuff. Like those hyperactivity pills which have probably messed me up more than anything. I was on some kind of green pill – all types. I guess they felt like they had to control me all of the time I was always like 'go here go there' you know, hyperactive. I guess that still today I am a little bit like that. I had to learn to slow down – I don't even know anymore what is a side effect and what is the problem – it all blends together! But everyone thought that was the best solution. I always bought into that too so I would go to local pharmacies and make up some disease that I thought I had in order to start taking different pills. I figured it was the cheapest way to get high. And then it just downgrade from there.*

*By the time I was fifteen or sixteen I spent more time out of school and in jails pretty well until adulthood and then I still kept getting in trouble. Used to go out and steal cars, or do break and enters, a lot of - back then physical violence was the answer. I would try to break things. But then...Oh man...yeah I just had to stop. I guess that would have been a couple years ago now. Back then that was the answer. I thought that I was indestructible because I was stoned all of the time too. It took me a long time – I think that I was in all of that for about as long as I smoked cigarettes which would have been from about 18 until thirty-something. It was about time to stop so I went into a treatment centre for over a month which I thought was the best thing because I was seeing a councillor for a month and then all of a sudden I just said: “get me in there; I’ve got to get in there now...” I can’t wait now! That’s just the way it was.*

*Yeah, I still get days where I’m angry. You know, stress from different people. ‘Cause it’s like where I live now, people are crack addicts. That can get you so frustrated – I just want to knock some sense into them. You know, you get doors slamming and I have been woken up a couple of times at 2 or 3 in the morning. My answer would have been before to get up and go out there to handle it physically, but I’ve overcome that. Just like the other day, I ran out of smokes and I had to go down to the neighbour’s and I saw his papers which kind of gives me a bad reminder about what I used to do with them before so I borrowed a couple from him and all I could smell was marijuana! I said holy Jesus! I guess because I’m getting my senses back now I thought: “man that stuff’s disgusting!” It stinks – I find it so gross.*

*Now I don't do that stuff at all! I had a friend come over one day and I guess he was knocking at the neighbours doors 'cause he was making too much noise, anyways he came up and handed me this huge joint. I said: "man, I'm a recovering addict! Get that thing out of here!" I don't do drugs or drink. I haven't had a drink since my friend passed away in September.*

*It was getting sober that made me want to find out who I was. Or maybe even wanting to find out who I was made me get sober? I first came to the community here just to get myself back on track and healthy. That's where the healing process began. I started working on that – and part of that process is to start thinking about yourself more – you know, your head and mind has got to be clear. I mean, there was no way I could find things out about my past when I was high all of the time. I used to remember powwows and stuff like that, but I couldn't get the right positive connection between – I guess you could say your brain and your heart. And then you can start doing all of the work.*

***Singing Fire Raven Woman, Mohawk ~40yrs.***

*I was born in Kapuskasing. We were a family of five children and I didn't really know the background of my parents because I was little when they separated so – well my mom just took off on us and my dad couldn't keep us because he was working in the bush and so he kind of just gave us away. We entered in the system for a few years and I think this didn't quite work out. And then I went to my dad's sister and she raised me. When I got there I was four – I had been in the system for a year and then she decided she didn't want me to be in the system. She said: "if I'm going to raise her, I'm going to*

*raise her on my own. I don't want any money or anything..." Yeah I think that was her idea in the back of her head. She didn't want to report, she was scared of that thing. She did a pretty good job – she was a good mother.*

*I don't know...I always knew I was different because where I lived. The woman who raised me, my aunt... I thought she was White for a while because she always hid the Native things that she was doing – but then I knew she was Native eventually because I was raised differently, and my thinking was always different from other people where I was raised. I was running in the bush – that was our thing. The land was really important in my house and we were not allowed to cut a tree or disturb the land in any way without saying it to mom. My adopted father, I don't know if he was Native or not, but my adopted mom was and I eventually realized that she was a medicine women for sure. She was always gathering roots and leaves. She was more on the land than in the house I would say.*

*I was 15 and I started working because I was on my own. I lived in a little room for a while and I – it was kind of hard because I was only 15 and I stopped school. So my grades were not done. And then after that I said that I had to get out of there. I did have a good job – I was working at the mill in the cafeteria – the paper mill but I left like I was not belonging there, like I needed more in my life. So I decided to go travelling for a while and I got into Temiskaming which is very beautiful and this is where I met the father of my kids. I was 17 years old and then I got pregnant at 19 but I got my baby at 20. So that was my first son and I kind of had a hard time on that one. I felt like I was*

*alone I had a really, really rough time with the father of the kid because the relationship was abusive and then I fell pregnant again even though I was on the pill and the second child was not really planned. We didn't talk about it or anything, but I accepted it. It's there, it's there! I was a little pissed because you take care – you know, I took the pills.*

*But the relationship was not going really good and I wanted to break the cycle from my grandmother and mother. I didn't want the same thing to happen to break the marriage and get the kids everywhere and to be raised in another family without knowing each other the way that I did – I did not know my sisters and brothers or the rest of my family really. So I stayed with the father for 11 years! Which I thought that would be great for my kids to be raised together in a loving home, but it was not a loving home. So, I realized 11 years later that what I was doing was wrong. But at the time I thought it was right. I was so wrong. So finally I woke up and said that I can't live like that anymore. It was getting to the point of my life being in jeopardy so I said, no I can't! It was either me or him – it was really getting to that point. So I took my two kids with me and I went back to Kapuskasing. I thought that my adopted family would help me which they never did.*

*They were saying, yeah you should come and we can help you, but they never did. So I did it on my own again. And I stayed there for a while. I got onto my two feet, put my kids in school and I went back as well. I did some upgrading and there was a course they were giving out for hairstyling and so I said I'm gonna get it and it was to give me 14 credits for my 12. So while my kids were in school during the day, I was in school*

*too so everybody was getting up at the same time and when I was finished I would go and get them at school. So it felt like everything was going well. So I did my course, so the father came back and I took him back for a while. Of course it was the same thing all over again.*

*After a year and a half when I finished my course – I had two diplomas at the same time; my grade 12 and my hair styling diploma. It was a real achievement for me. So after that all the girls who were doing hairstyling with me, they came to the house and helped me to pack so that I would be out of there. I never saw him again. I got on my two feet again. This time I moved real far and a year after that I met somebody and we moved in Ottawa, and since that I'm doing great.*

*I first came into the community here because I got work with this Native guy who I met. He had a cleaning company and he hired me to help him. I felt pretty much that I was Native so I started to say that I was Mohawk but I always felt a little bit bad, because I didn't know that for sure. Then I found out three years ago now that I really am Native for sure! Yeah, I was happy because now I can say who I am for sure and I don't feel lost like before and I don't have to question, "what am I doing here" or where is my purpose in life? Now I know that those feelings and visions are true.*

***Buck Labrador, Cree ~50yrs.***

*Well, my identity as a Cree never really developed until I came to Ottawa from Manitoba. Growing up, we never really thought in terms of being Native and non-*

*Native. There was a reserve close by us and that's why I understood both sides of the...you know I was the unfortunate one though because I was darker than my brothers and sisters. Oh yeah, and they picked on me, but the Natives picked on me too because obviously I was living with the White people and had a White father. They knew I was half. Anyway, when we would go to the reserve to visit my grandmother I'd get picked on there by the Natives. I was an outcast.*

*I never thought about who I was. When we were growing up, no distinguishing was made in my family. We were just people. I knew there was something different about me though, because my grandmother spoke a different language. And we were not allowed to listen to it. They would send us away when they wanted to speak Cree. I think that's got to do with residential school and my grandmother being brought up by a priest. Her father was a minister of some sort – she was adopted so it was very taboo for us to learn Cree, but grandma knew it. So there wasn't much to explore there. By that time on the reserve they weren't even allowed to hunt anymore because it was thought by the government, or Indian Agent that an accident could happen, so they took away all of the bullets. It was just another way to repress the culture, and it meant that there was nothing much for us as kids to learn about. They took some of our crafts away too, so none of that got passed on.*

*And you know, it was hard. It felt that like: "you date him because he's an Indian" (from the White people) and "you can't date him because he's White" (from the Indians). As far as I am concerned, I was better off on my own. And you know, at a very*



*early age I shut down my emotions. And when I got older, I got angrier. So I would use anger to keep people away from me. It's a funny thing, because I did get married and raised two little girls and then after the divorce I spent time travelling back and forth to see them and bringing them up here. But even with that, I didn't know how to be a proper dad because even with the role models I had – they were not really proper role models.*

*Once I grew up I was in the military and they must have thought I was White. After that I moved around so much. I've always moved a lot – just couldn't stay still. I've moved across Canada twice. I have been everywhere from BC to Newfoundland and down in the states. Back then, I had no real inclination about being Native. It came up for me in '95. I came to Ottawa in '85. You know it's funny because while most of the country was moving from East to West, I was going in the other direction – West to East. Then I decided to go to counselling and they sent me to a Native counsellor. That's when I started thinking about the teachings and what it means to be Native.*

*One of the things that sets us apart from animals though...you don't see animals killing each other for nothing or going out of their way to hurt the other one based on anger. They do what they need to do to survive and that's about it. A lot of times I get caught up in myself and I think: how come you guys don't know the teachings of the wolf? They all go hunting together and help each other. No one in the pack survives alone. That's a family unit, and they do it better than we do! The animals will always teach us if we let*

*them. But some people try too hard too – the more you look the less you will be able to see.*

*But I do accept that there are always other ways and suggestions out there. Although, sometimes I can't stand for bad manners. Like one time I went to a feast. So with the teachings I have, Elders are first, women and children and then men eat in that order. That's our history and that's how we keep it alive. So all the guys went first! But I stopped them and told them no. We need to protect our history, the future and the life givers first! I ended up walking out in the end. But at the same time, there are certain things that you can always bend on. It's like the oak tree that doesn't move but then it snaps in a storm. You need to have some degree of flexibility.*

*And being in the city too – you know we have so many different...well the whole tribes like with myself, the history of the plains Cree, we had our own ways that were different from the Ojibwe and the Algonquin. And then I think about the trade routes that were going down to the States and how every single thing was put to use. And think about the Abalone shell; we certainly never would have had those out here so far in land!*

***Emily Crowhorn, Anishnabe (Ojibwe) ~40yrs.***

*Well, I was born in Toronto and I was adopted and my adopted parents came to pick me up in Toronto. They were living at that time in a small town around western Ontario. So, I was born there and made a ward of the state because my mother couldn't take care of me so I was made a crown ward or whatever they call it. So then I went to foster*

*care and then I got adopted and as I said my adopted parents came and picked me up. My birth mother died in 1970 – I found this out only a few years ago but I was only four when she died. She died of an overdose I think. I think she went through a really hard time with alcohol and because they were Native and poor, they were ostracized from the community.*

*So my birth mother didn't put anything about my father in the CAS information, so I don't know who he was or his background – 'cause they would only know what she had told them which was basically nothing. So that's a little history there...But my adopted family are from Newfoundland, so a few years later we went to Newfoundland. But I didn't know anything about my heritage – I always knew that I was part Native but I didn't know what band, you know what Native tribe or whatever I was from.*

*My parents told me I was part Native and that I was adopted from as early as I can remember, but because I don't look that Native to most people, in Newfoundland –well, to other Native people I do – they are the only ones who have ever come right out and said: "where are you from" and I always love when they do that, because it lets me know that they see it – it's always a nice moment. But most White people, even if they notice I guess they wouldn't say. So I can pass pretty easily for White, especially in places where people don't know anything about Natives like in Newfoundland. They don't really think about things like that.*

*The first time that I really started to identify and associate with other Natives was in BC and I have to admit, I'll try not to get teary eyed, but I have to admit that I felt this huge wave of emotion. It was really....a rather strange feeling. I had never felt that before and I kind of broke down, but I tried to control myself because growing up in family we were taught not to show emotion. That's how we grew up. So anyways, I felt emotion welling up inside and my eyes got really glossy. So anyways, I remember that – it was really awesome. I think that they may have started playing the drums and it was at a Potlatch which are popular on the west coast. They never even said anything about my blue eyes -I think that most Native people can see the characteristics – like in the bone structure or whatever. So I think that it was obvious enough to them. If they had any questions, they would ask me what kind of Native I was. At that time I didn't even know what kind of Native I was, so that was embarrassing that I was unable to even say for sure what nation I was from. I told them that I was adopted, and they always accepted me, and it's been basically the same thing here in Ottawa.*

***John Jr. Inuit, ~40 yrs. Asked to have his participation in this study removed.***

### **Reflections: Common Themes and Experiences**

The principal objective of this chapter was to acknowledge, and honour the participants who agreed to be interviewed for this study. While I use quotes from them elsewhere (chapter 4 and 5) to support my main arguments/findings for this case study, I have presented their stories here, not only as a substitute for the soulless “participant demography charts” (i.e. name, age, occupation, nation etc.) found in many mainstream

studies, but also to give the reader a sense of what it feels like to be part of *Wabeniag*. The closely knit environment is such that people will often share their experiences, both joyful and difficult, in order to give a teaching, and/or inspire healing for both themselves and others.

Even from these seven introductions alone, there are several common themes on the topic of identity that can be seen interwoven through the lives of the participants; nearly half of the interviewees (Glenn, Raven and Emily) grew up being completely disconnected from their immediate families. For these three participants in particular, there was such a gap that they were not even able to identify their nation for many years. Although three of the participants (Albert, Buck and Jenny) had a connection to their home reserves, only one (Jenny) had lived there for an extended period, of seven years which were during the first years of her life.

While Albert and Jenny were raised for the most part by single mothers, their childhoods were characterized by the lots of instability and moving around. The theme of moving, in fact, can be seen as a strong thread throughout *every single narrative*. The range of years spent living in Ottawa however, goes from five to over thirty, with three people having lived in the Ottawa region for over twenty years, which marks yet another trend: that they have all settled in this area, making it their home. This theme is explored more thoroughly in the chapter 6, entitled: *The New Nation*.

There was also sense throughout the narratives of wanting to learn/relearn cultural traditions as adults. Interestingly enough, this was even the case for the participant (Jenny) who had spent most of her life in Aboriginal communities. This is consistent with Aboriginal culture having been the subject of assimilation for such an extended period of time, especially on reserves, which were heavily controlled by the Government through “Indian Agents.” It is also a symptom of colonization where people can become completely alienated from their cultural heritage, even on and in their own territories (Little Bear, 2000:84; Fanon, 1963: 182). Emily, Glenn and Raven were all starting from scratch having to discover their heritage later on in life, although all three of them also mention the feeling of being “different” (from the White culture) early on in their lives. Even Buck and Albert, who were raised having contact with their “Native home communities”, were not able to take their First Nations culture for granted, and began learning about First Nations teachings after living in the city for many years.

The last theme that comes out of these life histories is a strong willingness to heal from the past and to overcome the various unfortunate experiences that they endured. Due to “historical trauma”, which over time, has compounded the economic, social, political and spiritual deprivation of Aboriginal peoples, thus creating an artificial link between Aboriginal identities and notions of victimhood. The people who did in-depth interviews however, along with many of other the people whom I had the chance to know and speak with at the *Wapeniag*, did not remain stuck in their trauma. Jenny for instance, speaks of getting her life together with the help of a friend, as does Glenn

when he told his counsellor that he needed to go to rehab “immediately”. Likewise, Albert Sugarfoot speaks with gratitude and joy about moving back to his reserve as a child, even though shortly thereafter both his mother and grandfather died within a short time span.

The healing that has taken place in the lives of the participants, especially surrounding sobriety, appears to be an important pre-cursor to the reclamation of culture. The next chapter, entitled *Postmodern Traditionalism* will examine this cultural reclamation, with explicit reference to how it is negotiated at *Wapeniag* in an urban, pan-Aboriginal environment.

## CHAPTER 4

### POSTMODERN TRADITIONALISM

The central task of this study was to investigate identity at an Aboriginal cultural centre, especially with regard to the multi-*national* make up of the people who work there and attend cultural events and programming. More specifically, is there any evidence, both collectively and individually, that would constitute the emergence of a Pan-Aboriginal identity or culture? That is to say, are the First Nations, Metis and Inuit people at this centre creating a new cultural identity that mixes together aspects from all three Aboriginal groups in a way that creates something new?

The main focus of this chapter is to answer this question using observational field work, in-depth interviews, (and other casual conversations) and content analysis of the centre's promotional materials. One of the observations that has emerged from my research is that the cultural differences between different Aboriginal groups have remained, and if anything, individuals have reinforced their own identities according to which Aboriginal group (First Nations, Metis Inuit) they have come from. I refer to this as becoming 'traditional' and after discussing some of the debates about the word traditional in academic literature, I demonstrate how the *Wapeniag* centre sets up a general framework for traditional values, and how the people in turn respond. Lastly, I discuss the theoretical implications of "urban traditionalism" and try to better flesh out the term.



The three Aboriginal groups have indeed influenced each other in their mutual sharing of culture, but at the same time being mindful of keeping the connection with their own respective teachings and cultures. Where I expected to find individuals developing their identities in such a way that makes use of different cultural flavours from Inuit, Metis and First Nations culture, I instead found people focusing on getting back to their own roots.

The general atmosphere of the centre emphasizes First Nations culture slightly over that of Metis and Inuit, which is a reflection of the proportion of clients and workers who are overwhelmingly from First Nations. Even with this bias toward First Nations, the pattern that I witnessed during my time in the field indicated more often than not, that individuals were striving to become rooted into their own specific or “traditional” cultures.

Moreover, the Aboriginal people in this study become “traditional” in a context that is both urban (physically away from most Aboriginal territories) and modern (valuation that has tension with most forms of tradition), and therefore doubly removed from the original environments where traditional culture for the First Nations, Metis and Inuit played out. Irrespective of this disjuncture in space and time, the climate of the centre is such that people learn to creatively live out their traditional culture in a fashion that does not contradict the reality of living in an urban, modern space.

## **Using the Word “Traditional” in Scholarship**

### ***The invention of tradition***

There are many words, terms and concepts that present challenges for researchers and academics. “Traditional” is one such word. Aside from being such a broad term, it is open to any interpretation both from within *and* between cultures. Using the word traditional can raise questions relating to time lines (how long does something have to be practiced for it to become traditional?) along with age old debates surrounding the chasm between cultural or customary rights and social constructivism, particularly in an Aboriginal context.

Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger’s 1992 collections of essays entitled *The Invention of Tradition* started a debate about the concept of tradition when it revealed certain “ancient” rituals from Great Britain as being less than a few hundred years old (Hobsbawm, 1992). The historical analyses throughout the book pointed to the invention of these traditions for ideological purposes – by outsiders. For instance, one of the writers featured in the book, Hugh Trevor Roper, tells readers that the Scottish kilt was in fact invented by an Englishman around 1730, and not an age old Scottish tradition as is commonly thought (Hobsbawm, 1992: 21).

Hobsbawm’s work was well received by thinkers who levied some of the book’s insights about the recent creation of these traditions in such a way that sought to pose a serious challenge to claims by groups who rely on the legitimacy of tradition for their political strategies.

In *First Nations, Second Thoughts* Tom Flanagan argues that self-governance and land claims by the First Nations are constituted by illegitimate ideas of tradition (he refers to this as the Aboriginal orthodoxy). Part of this Aboriginal tradition or orthodoxy, according to Flanagan, involves invented claims about how long the First Nations have been in the Americas. Arguing that Aboriginals from the Arctic all the way down the South America have an appearance that is “remarkably similar” (2000:12), Flanagan surmises that this supposed undifferentiated appearance equates to less time having passed than previously thought since the entry of Siberian migrants into the Americas<sup>17</sup>. He therefore concludes that Aboriginals, like Europeans, are only less recent immigrants to the Americas and that First Nations land claims are not only harmful to Canada, but also harmful to Indians<sup>18</sup> themselves.

Flanagan’s book is well written and his major points are well researched. His precision and clarity on such terms as “nation,” which he defines entirely in the Westphalian image, is solid and crisp with no fuzzy boundaries about it whatsoever. He has also taken his time to research the anthropological record, and paying close attention to more conservative estimates of artifacts, assures readers that our ancestors have likely not been here for more than three-thousand years. Flannagan’s best strategy by far, however, is his claim that he writes from the perspective of wanting to help Indians – of wanting to save us from greedy Chiefs who wish to keep their people living in squalor.

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<sup>17</sup> It should be noted that while anthropologists and archaeologists argue over how long Aboriginal peoples have been in the Americas, many Aboriginal people will argue that there was no migration and that we have been here since the beginning of Creation.

<sup>18</sup> Flanagan uses the term Indian throughout his work to show his position that we are not nations as the term “First Nations” implies.

I am not qualified to speak directly on the issue of land claims, but I think that Flanagan has seriously misunderstood the Indian meaning of Nation; calling ourselves First Nations does not necessarily presuppose that we want our own countries, or that we are in favour of self-government (although it can in some cases). The term instead merely states the obvious: namely that we were, indeed here *first* (even if the “first” is constituted by a “measly” three-thousand years) and also, that The People who were on this land were separate ethnic groups differentiated through language, customs and modes of production.

As for Flanagan’s shocking, yet amusing claim that we all look the same, I would refer him to any introductory psychology course that teaches students about in-group/out-group perceptions of other ethnic groups. Flanagan is at least partially right in his assumption that people, having been in the same geographic area for long periods of time, will tend to share genetic material – much like the Northern Europeans, from which Flanagan himself descends. (In other words, Dr. Flanagan, we think *you all* look the same too.)

Adam Kuper (2003) takes this argument a step further and criticizes the very idea of “Indigenous” and “Native” as ethno-cultural categories. First he suggests that the extent to which the descendants of “Native” people have intermingled, migrated, and become acculturated to modern society, renders it is nearly impossible to legitimately define who is, and who is not part of this group. He also notes that inclusion into Native groups

in Canada today is based almost purely upon ancestry and warns that this “racialization” of culture is quite ironically, akin to Nazi policies and other far wing ring factions (Kuper, 2003:395).

What Kuper describes here as the racialization of Indigenous people in Canada is largely the policy extending from the *Indian Act*, but this is not the whole story. Being Aboriginal (to Aboriginals) requires having Aboriginal ancestors (perhaps with the exception of the Inuit and *some* of the Iroquois Confederacy *Haudenosaune* whose cultures include adoption) but also, in the event of having mixed ancestry, knowledge of the culture, language and spiritual practices can certainly facilitate acceptance. Aboriginal people have their own ways of knowing who is, and who is not part of the group, and do not therefore need to rely on Federal policies to tell them. Although Kuper correctly remarks on the complexity surrounding Aboriginal membership and identity in contemporary society, his reliance on academic literature written by non-Aboriginals over on the ground anthropological observation (he does after all, call himself an anthropologist) leads me to question his expertise in this area.

I have included these critiques in order to acknowledge, upfront, the possible counterarguments to what I will be presenting in the next two chapters. Despite the backlash to, and in some instances, the well founded critiques of problems and inconsistencies found within Indigenous movements, it is my position, following Jonathan Friedman (1999) that Indigenous people(s) like all other marginalized groups in liberal democratic societies, become politicized in order to have some influence over

our day to day realities. I do not consider this to be “romantic” as Kuper (2003:389) suggests, but rather a necessary strategy for cultural, political and economic survival.

Neither Flanagan’s scepticism over the length of time that Indigenous people(s) spent on this continent, nor Kuper’s insistence that “Indigenous people” should not exist as a special interest group, dissuade me from presenting arguments using concepts that are central to the everyday lives of Aboriginal people whom I connected with at the *Wapeniag*. After spending over two years heavily involved and interacting with this centre, not to mention my time in the broader Aboriginal community of Ottawa, and back home in *Mi’kamqik*, I do not feel intimidated by the arguments of my good enemies, whom I would venture to guess, have only seen Aboriginal people on the street, many stories below through the windows in their offices.

I therefore venture, despite the possibility of being implicated in some of the controversies cited in the previous section, to argue in favour of using the word “traditional”. First, as will be presented in the next section, the word traditional carries a lot of cultural currency for Aboriginal people, particularly at the centre where I did my field work. Secondly, I do not worry about the obvious, socially constructed nature of all traditions. This is generally recognized by social scientists and is in fact, the very point made by Hobsbawm and Ranger. It is the meaning, function and aesthetic appeal that makes these constructions powerful for the people involved (Goffman, 1956a; 1967b).

Third, there is something very practical about the nature of Aboriginal traditions; especially in the way that they have been translated into different contexts to compliment changing times. Insofar as particular traditions and notions of ‘traditional’ safeguard the continuation of Aboriginal cultures, I find the subject of tradition extremely worthy of further investigation. Lastly, I see no reason why “invented traditions”, particularly in an Aboriginal context, are any less authentic than much older traditions, which are in fact inventions as well, albeit older ones. If anything, more recently developed “traditions” could prove to be of equal value, as they are linked into everyday contemporary experiences.

***The importance of the word “traditional” for Aboriginal people***

In Aboriginal settings, it is nearly impossible to avoid using the word “traditional” (McGaa, 1995). For the reasons discussed above, among others, the word “traditional” can mean many different things. In Aboriginal lexicons, “traditional” may be used to refer to cultural practices that came before the time of contact. It can also denote spiritual practices and teachings that include but are not limited to hunting practices, sweat lodges, medicine people/shamans, seers, dream interpretation and vision quests. It is also common for the word “traditional” to come up when any discussion of land or land claims are discussed.

Without dismissing the importance of land or land claims to the continued survival of non-urban Aboriginal communities across Canada, there is another sense in which the word “traditional” is used, which transcends land and territory. For both urban and rural

Aboriginal people, to be “traditional” is first and foremost a way of life; it is a world view which shapes, influences and ties together every aspect of a person’s life. Daniel Bearrain, who attended one of the cultural programs at *Wabeniag* regularly, said the following about being traditional:

It’s a mindset that you either have or don’t have; I think that the most important part of being a traditional is to acknowledge the way that all things are related to each other. It also has to do with respecting life and living things. Traditional people read a lot of meaning into things, and they trust that the spirits are guiding us all of the time. It’s like knowing that at all time, things are a certain way for a reason, and trusting in that process. And to me, I think that being traditional is a philosophy that leads action.

Aboriginal people therefore, do not need to be on ancestral homelands in order to practice traditionalism. This is true of the Inuit, as it is also true of the Metis and the First Nations – though all three groups have specific and differing ways of expressing this. This “way of life” or outlook could also be described as a set of principals or values which as it turns out, can be translated and overlaid onto modern, urban culture.

In all three Aboriginal groups – the First Nations, Metis and Inuit, there were built in cultural, or “traditional” values, for instance, surrounding conservation. In hunting practices, all three groups generally adhered to the principal of only taking what was needed in order to protect the resource base. At *Wapeniag*, there is obviously no hunting; however, there were countless occasions when I witnessed people acting out this same value of conservation; especially when it came to not wasting food and water.



In this way, if a person was exercising caution around wasting, the community would recognize this as a “traditional” value, even though it has been taken out of its original hunter gatherer context.

Using a quote from Chief Oren Lyons (Onondaga), Georges E. Sioui captures the timelessness of Aboriginal traditional values and brings some humour to common Euro-American expectations that these traditional values cannot be transposed onto a modern setting:

We have lost our old ways, but the principals we go by are not old: peace is not old, justice is not old, it's what everybody aspires to do. Those are ours(...) Old is in the mind of a person, old is in their education. We're contemporary people. I don't apologize for standing in these clothes today, for that's what I wear. This is me, this is *Hodenosaunee* right now, right here...we don't expect to see Reagan [former president Ronald Reagan] in a White wig” (Sioui, 1995:32).

### **Embracing Traditional Values: It's A Way Of Life**

It is not an accident that so many people who attend programming at *Wapeniag* find themselves walking a traditional path. The centre is strong in its vision for setting up a space where the overarching values and ideas from all Aboriginal cultures are being honoured and promoted. The circle philosophy, the Seven Grandfather Teachings, and fostering a sense of community (through community dinners and gatherings) are just a

few of the ways in which the centre creates the conditions by which Aboriginal people become traditional.

### ***Living in the circle***

The circle as both a physical formation and spiritual/cultural concept holds a position of extreme importance in Aboriginal cultures, particularly for, although not limited to the First Nations (Sioui, 1995:xxi). As covered in chapter 1, Aboriginal worldviews and spiritual beliefs are centred around natural cycles; (seasons, lunar cycles) even time, which is largely understood as being a linear phenomenon to non-Aboriginal people, is understood in Aboriginal worldviews as circular patterns. All things eventually arrive at the same point where they started. Morning turns to afternoon, which turns to evening and night; night of course, always leads back to morning again. A plant which grows from the ground springs up to maturity before eventually weakening and returning back to the ground, and so on.

The sun, the moon and many sacred objects (such as drums, dream catchers and medicine wheels) which have been made in their image, are constant reminders of the circular nature of life. Another important part of the circle philosophy is that it connects and interconnects all things in the universe. The intricate spider web-like weavings of a dream catcher is symbolic of this belief that all life cycles touch and influence the life cycles of all things in Creation.

During prayer times, meetings, ceremonies and even regular cultural programming and activities, the people at *Wapeniag* gather together in circular formation in honour of the cyclical nature of Creation. When people stand in a circle together, everyone is out in the open; people can make eye contact with all others in the circle and no one person is above, below, in front of or behind of one another. Gathering in a circle thus reveals another aspect of traditional Aboriginal culture; that is, a stronger focus on what is communal, as oppose to what is individual, and a leaning toward a non-hierarchical placement of people. While certain positions are indeed acknowledged as being important to the continuation of the culture (Elders, pregnant women and children etc), there is, at the very least, a pretence of equality, in that all people have a role to fulfil within a Circle culture in order for the cycles to continue. The following quote was taken from a policy initiative written at *Wapeniag*:

At the centre of our circle is culture. This is true for Inuit, Metis and First Nations Peoples. Our cultures and our histories are different and those differences need to be respected. We are all connected to the land, Mother Earth, and to the Sky World. These relationships help us to know who we are and how to relate to each other as People and with other fellow travellers on this Earth.

The Circle is by far the most unifying ideology at the centre because it plugs into fundamental philosophies of all three (Inuit, Metis and First Nations) Aboriginal groups. With the many differences between, and even within Aboriginal cultures, the Circle

principal serves as something that everyone can identify with.<sup>19</sup> One of the constant preoccupations for the centre's staff and management is how to bring elements into programming that *all* Aboriginal people can relate to, particularly the Inuit whose culture and traditions are distinct from those of First Nations and Metis groups. Below is an excerpt from a conversation with an Elder, where he discusses how concepts of the Circle/natural cycles connect Inuit culture to that of First Nations:

The commonality between is the understanding of the cycles in nature. And with the uniqueness with the extreme environment that they are in – that's pretty important. But they follow those cycles as well; the birthday of the animals, and the food. They understand the movements, and even their relations with the sun and the moon which are quite different from our [First Nations] but it is still the sun and the moon. They put it into their cultural stories. So that's clearly the same.

When Olive Greybear-Painchaud was asked to reflect upon Circle philosophy in Aboriginal culture, and specifically at the centre, she said the following:

Culturally, there is something about our point of view, and I am tempted to – well I have spent years thinking about this from the point of view of what is the difference between the European point of view and the Aboriginal society here. And I think that part of it is that we see the interconnection of things. A lot of the European society doesn't see that – they don't get that interconnection. For years I thought they did and for years I would have

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<sup>19</sup> The Metis nation uses the infinity sign (seen as a eight in its side or two circles stuck together) to represent the cycles of nature and the continuation of the Metis nation.

conversations and not be able to understand why my conversation would go from here to there. And I think that's what it's all about – that interconnection<sup>20</sup>.

Singing Fire Raven Woman sees the essence of the Circle as being an important part of developing spirituality:

And we are the same kind of people too, so we think pretty much in the same way. We got it in us – it's so little when we are alone, but it expands when we all sit in the circle. That little part in us grows so much with our drums and our singing. So if I hadn't gone there [to the centre] that part of me would still be small.

Explicit references to the Circle are found in much of the centre's promotional materials and on its website as well. Out of seventeen program flyers taken from the centre and analysed in May 2008, four make explicit reference to the Circle. One reference promotes a weekly drum circle, two advertise therapeutic healing circles and one is a children's circle focusing on fun activities and homework. On the Centre's website (containing approximately 41 links) there are eight explicit references to the Circle both in terms of physical circles (programs at the centre) and as an overarching connection between all things (circle as a perspective).

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<sup>20</sup> Sylvie Poirier (2008) discusses this interconnection (relatedness and relational ontology) at length in "Reflections on Indigenous Cosmopolitics/poetic" *Anthropologica*, 50 (1) : 75-85.

### ***The Seven Grandfather Teachings***

The Seven Grandfather Teachings are a set of traditional principals regarding conduct that originally come from the *Anishnnabe* (Ojibwe), although most other nations followed a similar value system. The personal attributes that are strived for from the teachings are as follows: wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility and truth (some teachings include kindness and generosity as well). My understanding of these teachings is that they must be practiced together as a complete way of life, although individuals may find themselves working harder on one or the other, depending upon what struggles they have faced on their individual journeys.

The Seven Grand Father Teachings are especially prominent at the cultural centre as an overarching guide for building, and maintaining a strong community there. In more than one of the common rooms at the centre, these principals are displayed proudly on seven beautiful plaques that hang side by side on the wall. During a meeting at the centre one day, I asked two of the centre's employees what they thought the main inspiration was for the centre, and they both made explicit reference to the grandfather teachings. George Francis-Syliboy said the following:

Those seven grandfather teachings have become such a natural part of the way in which we operate here; when I am with a client, or even talking on the phone to another organization those principals are always coming into play. I think that we just do it automatically now – it's not even as if I get up and decide that today I am going to try to remember to follow them; it just happens because the whole place has been build up on those teachings.

Donna Yorkshire, another employee took an even grander approach to the role that the seven grandfather teachings play at the centre:

Well even though I am not Aboriginal and didn't grow up with these teachings, I think that they have profoundly effected my conduct here. Not only that, but I believe that they are the point of the whole centre; we are trying to achieve health and balance in this community, and it is those teachings more than anything which are guiding that goal – they are both a means and an end for holistic health.

In this excerpt, Jenny Honeypot expresses some of the difficulty she faces with aspects of the Seven Grandfather Teachings:

I need to learn the teaching about humility but it's so hard for me because I associate humility with humiliation – so that particular grandfather [teaching] is hard for me. I keep banging my head on that one – I can't seem to get past it and I think that's what the abuse did to me.

Jenny's comments about the Grandfather Teachings are perhaps the strongest indicator of how their importance within the culture at the community centre. Despite the fact that the teaching on Humility is a trigger for old wounds, she persists in attempting to integrate its wisdom into her life.

Reference to the Seven Grandfather Teachings was easily located in four out of seventeen of the centre's flyers and the website for the Centre mentions the Grandfather

Teachings eighteen times, making use most often of *Respect* and *Honour*. *Respect* was used most often to communicate that the three Aboriginal groups are equally respected and welcome at the Centre, while *honour* was used with reference to honouring the different traditions and customs of each nation/community that makes up the Centre.

### ***Community dinners and gatherings***

The importance of food to the transmission and maintenance of culture is well documented across many different cultures, and the Aboriginal cultures at *Wapeniag* are no exception. The kitchen is the heart of *Wapeniag* as all of the cultural programs and special events/gatherings *always* include a meal component. Mealtime at the centre fosters traditional culture both in tangible and less tangible ways. On a more concrete or practical level, a fair portion of the menu is selected based upon its being Indigenous to North America, that is to say, food that was grown or harvested before the time of contact. Including wild meat, beans, corn and squash, wild rice, berries and local fish, these meal options are meant to remind the community of the traditional food that comes from Aboriginal cultures, as well as to fulfil health aims by offering nourishment that is more favourable to the unique health issues facing Inuit, Metis and First Nation people.

In addition to helping the community to connect with their ancestry through traditional meals, the protocols around community suppers are imbued with traditional cultural practices. There is an order in which people are served: Elders receive their food first to honour them as the wisdom keepers of the culture; next, the women and children are



served in order to honour the life cycle – women as the givers of life and the children as the future. The men, for the most part, wait stoically to be served until the end in honour of ‘warrior protocols’ which dictate their roles as being protectors of the women and children and ensuring that their needs are met.

At a community dinner, *everyone* is expected to eat. To eat with the community is to share, and to belong. Furthermore, all people are expected to assist with all parts of the meal, from its preparation to the clean up. This is yet another aspect of ‘circle culture’ in that it takes the whole community to make a function work properly. This is in contrast to one set of people who ‘do’ something and another group who are the recipients of this action. The genius here is that everyone therefore has an incentive to pull their weight as all people in the circle benefit from co-operation.

The protocols at community dinners and gatherings serve as so much more than just to feed people; these events specifically teach the values of community, and allow for people to live them out each time they visit the centre. Jenny Honeyput reflects upon the importance of learning how to be a community:

Well the thing is, most of us lost our communities and we are learning how to be a community here [at the culture centre]. I think that people come here to be part of it because things are not always so healthy at home. And things are free at the centre, so people might come in the first instance because of that, but before you know it they are part of the family. But the community needs to learn how to be a community, and that means give and take – that’s what they teach us here. And I think people need to learn that, you know? If

you are part of the community, then you need to be in it – you really have to give and take when you are in a community.

Buck Labrador echoes Jenny statements by indicating that he was not *really* part of the community until he worked as a volunteer:

I became part of the community when I started volunteering and giving my time. And I don't feel like I "have" to do it. I go there because I want to help and so many of those kids need role models.

Singing Fire Raven Woman explores themes of reciprocity, and reflects upon the emotional rewards of being in a community:

The other day the executive director came out and said: "Oh, you are back! You will always be part of our family." Even if I do just one load of dishes per day, I feel like I am giving to the centre because it has given so much to me. All of the little crafts I did, that means so much to me. At least I can do stuff like helping the Elders. Like yesterday, I put my stuff aside and started helping one of the Elders – she was so thankful that she gave me hugs. You know, it makes me grow to help them with what they are doing! One of the Grandmothers brought me a little gift and I thought it was so sweet. It means the world to me because I never had a Granny when I was growing up. Even my mother who raised me never bought me a gift before. That's like – I felt love for the first time yesterday. It's a family here.

The community atmosphere that Singing Fire Raven Woman talks about is evident in *Wapeniag's* promotional materials even more so than the other two types of tradition discusses (the Circle and the Seven Teachings). Eight out of seventeen flyers sampled not only had the word community, but were promoting programs that had community building as the explicit highlight (i.e. community kitchen, community garden). The website mentions community eleven times, ranging from ideas of community building, to speaking of the centre as a “community” and acknowledge the different “communities” of Aboriginal people who make up the centre.

### **Reflections: Multiple Traditionalisms**

This chapter has presented quotes and observations that demonstrate how people at *Wapeniag* have a traditional orientation, when conceiving of identities. It is perhaps not surprising in the least that Aboriginal people who participate in Aboriginal cultural activities would in turn show an increased interest for their traditional cultures; what makes this finding new and intriguing is that this type of traditionalism is: 1) taking place in an environment that is multi-tribal<sup>21</sup>; and, 2) taking place *away* from the historical territories of all peoples involved (with the exception of course of the Algonquin whose traditional territory is in fact Ottawa and surrounding areas).

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<sup>21</sup> “Tribe” is more associated to American Indian vernacular however I use it here because the term “multi-national” could be confusing and misconstrued as something else. It is also worth mentioning that Inuit and Metis do not refer to themselves as tribes nor nations, but for the purposes of work I use “multi-tribal” to mean the coming together of many different First Nations as well as the many different people from Inuit homelands and Metis settlements. “Aboriginal” is a perfect synonym for multi-tribal as it includes all peoples Indigenous to Canada however I fear that this too could be misunderstood.

The pre-contact traditional cultures of Aboriginal peoples in Canada took place in spaces which were rural (land based), territorial (a land base that was both defined and relatively demarcated) and generally speaking, much more ethnically homogeneous than urban groups of Aboriginal people today. Therefore, thinking about the implications of being “traditional” in the context of an urban, contemporary multi-tribal setting needs some fleshing out, theoretical and otherwise.

When faced with this same problem, Bonita Lawrence coined “Urban Traditionalism” (1999:438) as a type of traditionalism adopted by Native peoples whose family have been in the city for more than one generation. The main feature of Urban Traditionalism is a focus on the “spiritual aspects of traditionalism” as oppose to the “land based” traditionalism (hunting, trapping, fishing) of the non-urban Native counterparts. I find this term inadequate for a few reasons. First, non-urban based Natives engaged in hunting and fishing would take great exception to the notion that their land based activities are not firmly rooted in spiritual beliefs. Living from the land is both practical and spiritual in a way that cannot be separated by most Native people. The same logic applies to the urban Aboriginal population; the protocols at the centre for instance, are indeed based upon spirituality, but it is a type of spirituality that is at all times practical, and conducive to greasing the wheels of daily social function. Third, not all urban Aboriginals were born in the city as Lawrence’s definition suggests. Some urban Aboriginal people have only recently moved to the city, yet find themselves with the same types of constraints (and freedoms) as the people whose families have been urbanized for a few generations.

I can both understand and sympathize with Lawrence's struggle to define her concept of traditionalism: her problem is exactly one of late modernity; that is, she is attempting to employ the solidity of modern categories in the service of explaining fluid, postmodern identities.

In order to rescue the concept of traditionalism from the complexity associated with cultural change, I propose that 'traditional traditionalism', or the historical traditionalism associated with pre-contact Aboriginal cultures (fishing, hunting and living off of the land) be coined as *premodern traditionalism*. The type of traditionalism that is identified by Lawrence in her work on urban Indians and in the present thesis therefore can be called *postmodern traditionalism*. The notion of 'modern traditionalism' in this proposed model is therefore circumvented; in fact I would argue that it is quite impossible.

Within modernity's highly structured and mutually exclusive categorizations, there is an absence of flexible interpretations; things must fit neatly into one category or the other: as Scott Lash so aptly puts it: "the 'field', contains a specific and limited set of elements, is structured [and] organizing[ed]" (1999:59). The symbolic transfer of traditional values and 'reading deeply into' which takes place at *Wapeniag* in order for people to practice a new version of traditional culture is something which is specific to the postmodern era. Native people in the modern period by contrast, had to jettison their pre-modern traditionalism (indeed they were forced to) in order to survive both in cities

(one cannot hunt/subsist in a city), and even on reserves/territories which also became organized using modern principals in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Without excusing the racist ideology that accompanied this time period, there is something, very fundamental, that marked the move on the part of the government toward mass assimilation: Euro-Canadian authorities, so entrenched as they were in their modern worldview, *could not conceive* of an alternative where Native meanings and values could be transmuted (from concrete to symbolic) enough as to allow Native people to live in both worlds at the same time, as is done today at the centre. It is therefore not only that the Government despised and feared *pre-modern traditionalism*, but also that they could not envision it existing alongside modernity – it would have appeared to them, and perhaps even to Natives as well, that modernity and pre-modern traditionalism were mutually destructive of each other.

### ***Features of postmodern traditionalism***

It can be said generally, that the postmodern era was brought about by changes including time/space altering technological advances, racial/cultural mixing, and a shift of perspectives which in turn fragmented interpretations of history(ies) and the experiences of people (Smith, 2001:214). In other words, the world became more complicated than it was before. With new options, people and things have become far too complex to categorize using modernity's grids. The dividing lines that once more

clearly demarcated where one thing stopped and another started have collapsed into each other<sup>22</sup>.

With the realization that people are not 'one or the other' but instead are multiple things at once, it has become more common for unusual concepts to co-exist. The synthesis of premodern and modern values for instance, becomes the *direct result* of having already moved into the postmodern period. In this sense, it is important to understand postmodernism as being not only a critique of modernity, but also the very instrument by which modernity continues to exist, only this time in a very different form.

Prominent postmodern theorist Scott Lash is most well known for his concept coined *de-differentiation*. If it can be said that "modernization is a process of cultural differentiation...*postmodernization* is a process of cultural de-differentiation" (Lash, 1990: ix). De-differentiation in this sense refers to the collapsing boundaries that previously created overarching categorizations which people could be neatly slotted into. Lash does not suggest however that this de-differentiation erases difference altogether, but rather the search for meaning has become just ambiguous enough to release people from the prison of ascribed identities.

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<sup>22</sup> There were several socio-historical events that could be said to have contributed to the rise of nuanced identities within historically marginalized groups. In the context of Aboriginal identities, there was a cultural rejuvenation in the 1960s and 70s (spurred by the American Indian Movement) which brought together different tribes and nations. This togetherness in turn necessitated an understanding of not only subtle differences between and within First Nation/Indian groups, but because of the movements' common goals of social justice and cultural reclamation, there was a call for inclusiveness and more understanding surrounding the diverse backgrounds of First Nations/Indians.

It should be noted as well, that the American Indian Movement and its counterparts in Canada are rooted within other social movements at the time including civil rights for African Americans, second wave feminism, the anti-Vietnam war protests, and gay/lesbian rights as well as events that were happening abroad such as nationalist/decolonization movements in Africa and Oceania (Minde, 1996; Gagné, 2008).

Using Lash's concept of de-differentiation for inspiration, I would like to add to the idea of postmodern traditionalism at *Wapeniag* by suggesting that the urbanization of Aboriginal people is a de-territorialization (or put another way, the end of premodern traditionalism) thus the consequence of postmodern traditionalism at the *Wapeniag* then represents a re-territorialization; this is to say, that the centre itself becomes an allegory for the First Nation (see next chapter).<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion, I think of a teaching that was given at *Wapeniag* by an Elder who said: "A tradition is more modern than modern is." She was trying to tell us that traditions are not something of the past, but rather ethics or values which are meant to help people make sense of the present: the ways in which these traditions get acted out must necessary change with the times, but the essence remains, however creatively we need to get in order to bring it out.

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<sup>23</sup> Metis and Inuit people do not describe their communities or territories as being "First Nations" but for reasons of simplicity, I am using the term as all encompassing for a First Nation, Inuit, and Metis community/settlement.



## CHAPTER 5

### THE NEW NATION

One sunny summer morning a few months from the end of my field work, I arrived at *Wapeniag* and found a very curious notice taped to the door of the photocopier room. It had the name of one of the centre's employees complete with the mailing address of the centre written out as if it were a First Nation. It appeared somewhat like the following:

*Lily Ray*  
*Wapeniag, First Nation*  
*Ottawa, On*  
*K2P 1J6*

After looking at the sign for a few moments and having a chuckle over what I supposed was a sentimental joke regarding the feeling of belonging that is so well nurtured at the centre, I continued on with my day. That paper however, stuck in my head for the rest of my field work and reflecting back upon it, I believe it to be the most important symbol for the coming together of all my research. Lily Ray was able to sum up in a few words what took me months of field work to realize! The people who attend cultural programming at *Wapeniag* take on more traditional identities over time, and in this process *Wapeniag* itself becomes our allegorical nation.

## **More Vernacular Complexities**

### ***The cultural impacts on language***

The term “nation” is meaningful in First Nations cultures, and much like the word “traditional”, conceptual nightmares can ensue without being properly defined, particularly in an academic sense. English words used to describe phenomena in Aboriginal cultures generally have broader meanings in Aboriginal contexts, than they do in the proper sense of the English word. Broad Aboriginal concepts, which presuppose a built-in usage of symbolism and metaphors (see chapter 1 on the medicine wheel), became more specific and literal when translated into the English language. For example, the word “medicine” would probably conjure up images of pill bottles and cough syrup to non-Aboriginal people. In Aboriginal cultures however, it refers to the myriad ways in which healing (and even simply a sense of balance) can take place: harvesting/mixing/using plants and herbs, having “psychic” abilities and visions, healing from physical/psychological/emotional/mental trauma, learning particular life lessons, and going through a variety of experiences are all examples of what could constitute the meaning of “medicine.” Everything and everyone has ‘medicine’; that is to say, each organism offers *something* to its environment, whether these gifts or teachings are positive or negative.

The same word is used in many contexts because there is no known term in English that can adequately capture what is central to all North American Indigenous cultures: good health (or medicine) *in the broadest sense* for *any* organism requires balance through acknowledging the interconnectivity of all things. Coming from a context

where all things are connected, necessitates the use of words that can carry enormous space for the different circumstances. This language gap however, says less about differences in vernacular than it does about the diverse ways in which cultures view the world.

***Nation, nation or nation? Which nation are you from?***

At *Wapeniag*, the most common meaning of the term nation is the larger ethnic grouping of Indian tribes. For example, the Cree, Mohawk, Mi'kmaq, Haida nations. There is also a sense of nation as being the community where people, or their ancestors, come from. This is where the term First Nation comes in, so we could, say for example, that Jim Paul is from the Mi'kmaq nation (his ethnic group), and he also comes from Indian Brook First Nation, which would be his reserve, or band. Although it has become politically correct to refer to reserves as First Nations both in the political discourse of the mainstream and with First Nations leaders, it is rather rare, in my experience, to hear a person to refer to their reserve as "my nation." It is much more common for people to say "my community", when referring to their reserve although if asked specifically for the name of that community, is likely that they would add "First Nation" after naming their community. (For example, a person would say: "I am from the Alexis Creek First Nation)

I tested this hundreds of times throughout my field work by asking people what nation they were from. There was not one single instance where I was told the name of their band; even more interesting, I was never queried as to whether I was asking about their

tribe, or their community. People always took nation to mean the larger Indian ethnic group that they belonged to.

The final and perhaps most confusing part, is that nation is also part of the way “Indians” are self-identified and/or labelled as people: If the nation, or tribe is a broad ethnic grouping, the term First Nation or First Nation’s person, is a term that has an even broader meaning. Nation therefore, is incorporated into every level of being. For example, Ida Bear Cloud is a First *Nation*’s person; she is from the Dene *nation*, and her community is the Issipic First *Nation*, Indian band.

For the Metis people, there is also discourse around nation, but more in the broader sense of tribe, or ethnic grouping. The place of nation within the Metis culture is usually taken to mean all Metis people across Canada, Metis groups within each province (i.e. Metis nation of Ontario) or in the more limited sense, Metis people in Canada who can trace their roots to the Red River, Manitoba. I have most often heard Metis refer to their communities as “Metis settlements” or like much like their First Nations counterparts, “my community.”

I have never heard an Inuk use the word “nation” in their political discourse or in every day conversation, although whenever I have mistaken an Inuk person for a First Nations, by asking what nation they were from, they always simply answered “Inuit” as if to recognize that the Inuit do make up a type of nation. If this were not the case, people would answer: “I am not from a First Nation, because I am Inuit.” Most Inuit

that I met at *Wapeniag* refer to their larger ethnic grouping as Inuit (Inuk for individuals), and call the places where they or their ancestors came from communities or villages. I have also heard Inuit refer to the Four Inuit Homelands which divides the Arctic into smaller geographical parts, with particular reference to some of the cultural and linguistic differences between the Eastern and Western Arctic.

In selecting 'nation' as a term to describe the relationship between the centre and the people who go there, I realize that I am indirectly highlighting First Nations and Metis cultures over that of the Inuit. Due to the many distinctions between the three main Aboriginal groups, it is difficult to find specific terms that are used by all Aboriginal cultures in Canada. What is important about my use of this term is not the word itself, but rather its meaning in this context: the centre is a place that feels like *home* to its members because it is comfortable, welcoming and familiar among many other things. "Home" in this sense means belonging, and being in a safe place. It also includes being around "extended family" (real or imagined) as oppose to a more literal meaning of home. Not everyone's home life is a positive experience, in fact many people's experiences at home are dysfunctional, abusive or, at the very least, impoverished.

I could have also used terms like "village" or "community" to capture the same idea, but I thought that they were less descriptive and had the potential to cause confusion, especially since I have already been using "community" to describe the people at *Wapeniag* throughout. "Nation" has a powerful and distinct meaning in a Native context, although it is confusing due to the fact that the word is used for separate (but

interrelated) concepts, not to mention that it refers also to countries, nation-states or other political communities outside of an Aboriginal context. When using the word nation in this work, I am not implying Weber's (2008) sense of nation, as a governing principal with demarcated boundaries and a monopoly on force; nor am I raising any political ambitions about Aboriginal self governance. My arguments here are much more cultural than political in nature: this is to say that I am using Aboriginal concepts, as constricted as they are by translation, to analyse my findings in a culturally appropriate way.

Finally, Benedict Anderson's (1983) ground breaking work on nations, which he describes as "imagined communities" should always be mentioned in any discussion of nations – political, ethnic, or otherwise. Making the argument that most people in a given nation do not know each other, he concludes that the national bonds between people are based upon a shared perception of commonalities more so than actual, organic connections. While I do not wish to distort, or stretch the context in which Anderson writes (his work examines nation-states rather than First Nations), I find his notion of "imagined unity" very compelling for this project. First, when this concept is applied to *Wepaniag* as a nation, Anderson's variables become crossed; the people there, do, in fact know each other. Second, what is "imagined" then, is not that we are all connected, but rather that we have created a new grouping (called nation), which is quite distinct (both geographically, and ethnically) from the ones in which we were born into.

Following Audra Simpson, who writes from an Indigenous perspective about nationhood on Kahnawake Mohawk territory, and listening to the participants in my research, I envision the ‘nation’ that has been created at the centre as characterized by both identity and tradition(s) and arising from a consciousness as a cultural, spiritual and social community (Simpson, 2000: 114-116).

### **Urban Nation, Concrete Tipi/Igloo**

#### ***The centre creates an ethnic nation***

To speak of an “Aboriginal nation” or an “Aboriginal tribe” in the Canadian context would be an error, indicating that the distinctions between the three Aboriginal groups have not been adequately comprehended. As mentioned in the last section, the Inuit do not speak of themselves in these terms, and the Metis conception of Nation is slightly different from that of First Nations. Having acknowledged this, I will still venture to make a symbolic comparison between Nation as ‘an ethnic group’ and the type of relationship which forms between the three Aboriginal groups at the centre.

The word ‘Aboriginal’ has Latin roots, meaning “original inhabitants” and in Canada it quite logically refers to the descendents of the people who were here first. Although these three groups of Aboriginal peoples (First Nations, Metis and Inuit) are associated with each other through their *Nativeness* to Canada, there has been no other place or time in history, save for the present urban experience, when all three Aboriginal groups have simultaneously come together, to share culture. Further, there are few places outside of urban Aboriginal organizations where the three groups spatially come

together in order to *concretely express* the elements that are common, and distinct, to all three Aboriginal groups.

Where the word 'Aboriginal' has brought the first inhabitants of this country together conceptually, *Wapeniag* has accomplished actual working unity of the Aboriginal peoples who are part of the community there. Although each Aboriginal culture is treated as distinct (even different groups within First Nations are treated as distinct cultures), being 'Aboriginal', and referring to ones' self as 'Aboriginal' thus creates an ethnic category: by extension, this indicates that despite the various differences between Aboriginal peoples, there is indeed something very important that unites us (Barth, [1969] (1998))<sup>24</sup>.

The consequence of experiencing cultural commonalities between the Aboriginal cultures is that over time people at the centre have begun identifying as Aboriginal as they become more reflexive about including all of the Native groups in their discourse. This awareness of what it means to be Aboriginal seems to have strengthened the bonds between all of the Aboriginal cultures resulting in a sense of brotherhood; a brotherhood is that very similar to the way in which people relate to, and speak of their own specific First Nations, Metis and Inuit cultures. In this sense, an "Aboriginal nation" has been created through the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual coming together of the many Native peoples attending the centre.

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<sup>24</sup> Barth argues that ethnic groups maintain their cohesiveness through interactions/negotiation of differences with/between other groups. He looks at groupings of people as a whole, dynamic system paying close attention to how groups are shaped by others.



The main tag line of the centre's webpage reads: "Serving the Aboriginal Community..." On that first webpage the word Aboriginal can be seen four times and there are no break downs of the three sub-categories of Aboriginal peoples. Further exploration of the website reveals many instances where the three distinct Aboriginal groups are mentioned; however, I could not find a single instance where any group was mentioned in isolation from the others.

Even more evocative of Aboriginal oneness than the use of the word "Aboriginal" itself is the centre's symbol which adorns the website site as well as every single piece of program advertising. A Metis sash wraps around a circle of feathers set beneath an Inuksuk. While the sash, feathers and Inuksuk are symbols of the Metis, First Nations and Inuit cultures respectively, their coming together into the centre's brand forms a new icon of Aboriginal togetherness.

As Metis, First Nations and Inuit peoples become more closely associated through the urban experience of being thrown together generally, and the building up of solidarity at Aboriginal cultural centres more specifically, the existence of a singular "Aboriginal community" as advertised in the centre's website becomes a reality. The excerpt below from Singing Fire Raven Woman is an example of how Aboriginalness as an overarching ethnic category, group or nation has trickled all the way down to every day conversations: "I was at a waffle house and I met an Aboriginal man there, and at the time I was looking for a job..." As it turns out, this "Aboriginal man" that Singing Fire talks about was from the same Mohawk nation as her! That she uses the word

“Aboriginal” to speak of someone from the same nation as herself, shows that she accepts that “Aboriginal” is a legitimate ethnic grouping. In this next quote, Singing Fire expands more on how all Aboriginal people at the centre become part of one larger culture:

It’s kind of global – it’s focused on some principals of First Nations but I think that they want to get them all in there as one in a way. They are trying to put the teachings of the cultures all together. Why have three separate sections? Otherwise we might just as well stay like we were before – you’re a Mi’kmaq, I’m a Mohawk...

Singing Fire acknowledges here that our sense of identity has expanded outward in the current era. Her use of the word “before” presumably refers both to “before contact” as well as “before urbanization” or even “before the centre” when there was more of an encapsulation within individual groupings of First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples. When she speaks of the centre as trying to put all of these cultures together, she is indirectly describing the process by which “Aboriginal” goes from being just a descriptive word which conceptually combines Inuit, Metis and First Nations people, to an actual ethnic group with shared cultural meanings.

***The centre is like a First Nation, village, or settlement***

In addition to fostering a sense of collective ethnic Aboriginal identity, *Wapeniag* creates a sense of community and family which is similar to the more traditional Native communities where many First Nations, Inuit and Metis people come from. The centre

has become one of the focal gathering places for Aboriginal people in Ottawa, particularly because there is no other Aboriginal cultural centre *in this particular* part of town where the majority of the Aboriginal population lives. The centre itself therefore has become like an urban reserve (settlement/village) in that it is a physical and emotional site of *Aboriginalness* in addition to offering services which help to meet the needs of its community members.

The ability to identify with a community carries a lot of currency in the everyday discourse of most Aboriginal people, regardless of whether they have an urban or rural background. Therefore, having an Aboriginal space in the city where people can belong to a familiar collective is both comforting and empowering:

When I used to go home to the reserve I thought that I'd died and gone to heaven because everybody there was essentially like me! Darker skin, darker hair – there was that instinctive sense of feeling like I wasn't an outsider. When I took my youngest son there he said: "Dad, I love it here because everybody is like me!" So that's the sense that people are looking for, and to a very large degree this is what the centre creates. We can all share our cultures – they provide the venue for that. (Albert Axehandle-Carvery)

By way of being an 'urban nation' (village/settlement) *Wapeniag* offers something to Aboriginal people from diverse backgrounds: those moving to the city for the first time for instance, have a place that feels uniquely Aboriginal in instances where they feel home sick or culturally disconnected from their home communities. For those who have long been away from their ancestral communities (some may have never been there), it

promotes a sense of belonging that may have been missing all of their lives. Regardless of the reasons why people come to the centre, there are services and supports in place which are offered in a way that is similar to Aboriginal 'rights' that are inherent in home communities: community development, access to culture, assistance in matters of housing, counselling, general life skills, and talking with Elders, to name a few.

Due to *Wapeniag's* location in a part of town where it is easily accessible to much of the Aboriginal population it is not unusual to see clients and community members on a daily basis either for cultural programming, or dropping in to say hello and spend time with staff or other clients. The majority of people who come to the centre are regulars, and thus nearly everyone knows each other very well. People know each other so well in fact, that there is a discourse about "family" often used to describe the relationships, and general culture of the centre:

One of the things that – I guess it's a philosophy – but it is an extension of what the centre is, is to say "yes, it's important where you come from, but in another way it's not because we are all family now." I am an unabashed supporter of this centre's ability to create a sense of family no matter where you are from. (Albert Axehandle-Carvery)

The 'family ethic' at the centre goes beyond popular discourse; just as the old adage that "it takes a village to raise a child" says, it is common practice for clients and staff to hold, feed, play with and generally care for children at the centre. Particularly after people have been coming to regular programming, a sense of shared responsibility for

the well being of the children is evident. Child care worker, Tina Gload had this to say about the sense of family in her program:

One of the mother's here – I am not sure of her background – but her children have an Inuit father, and she has been really great about trying to teach them their Inuk culture. There is another mother in the group who is Inuk and I hear her talking to this other woman's children in Inuktitut all of the time. They all try to help each other's children to learn the culture.

This passage demonstrates the parents being invested in the development of other children in the community. With people spending so much time together in programming (at least twice a week with a potential of up to five days a week) it is common enough for deep bonds and sentiments of family to develop. Beyond this however, the desire to see children learn their ancestral languages as in the case illustrated by Tina, shows that parents at the centre feel a sense of long-term commitment in preserving and promoting culture at the centre.

Tina continues with some thoughts about the sense of community at the centre:

People don't just drop in and get one on one counselling from workers. Everybody gives to each other, and it goes in all directions – if it only went one way, the clients would not get half as much out of it as they do now. Everyone is a teacher here. The parents share stories with each other and they find out all about what they have in common as parents.

Tina's comments reflect that the community ethic of sharing and the relatively equal exchange of knowledge between people is more of a leading force at the centre than more mainstream social service models which tend to emphasize one way transmissions of information from worker to client, thus stressing professional boundaries over familiar bonds.

A parallel can also be drawn between *Wapeniag* and its reserve, village and settlement counterparts in terms of being a place where First Nation, Inuit and Metis cultures are taught. The majority of well respected Elders for instance who have come to the *Wapeniag* either as visitors or more permanent employees have strong roots in their ancestral communities: most of the ones I encountered in my field work have knowledge of their Aboriginal languages, traditional teachings from their communities, and in most cases, have highly specialized skills in one cultural area or another (i.e. sweat lodge ceremonies, craft making, knowledge of the medicines). Having grown up and lived in their respective communities gave them the opportunity to cultivate more traditional aspects of their people's ways.

In the past, the urban counterparts to those brought up on First Nations, in Inuit villages or Metis settlements had less of a chance to develop this same in depth cultural knowledge being that they were farther away from their home communities. With *Wapeniag* having a large focus on traditional Aboriginal cultures however, the programs and services offered give the urban community members many of the same opportunities to learn about culture(s) through exposure to their languages, arts and craft

making, forms of traditional cooking, ceremonies and frequent exposure to different Elders, not to mention learning how to function in a community setting. Just as reserves, villages, and settlements can serve as places of ‘traditional training’, so too does *Wapeniag* in its capacity as an urban nation.

In March 2009 I analyzed all of *Wapebiag*’s program flyers for cultural content. Out of a total of sixteen posters advertising programs and special events, eleven of them were directly related to the traditional cultural teachings from First Nations, Metis and Inuit perspectives. These flyers included six references to learning about First Nations culture, two advertisements about Inuit cultures, and five posters making reference to learning about at all Metis, First Nations and Inuit cultures.

At this point in time, I can only think of one Elder associated with the centre who has come into his position despite not having strong links to his ancestral community; however, I would fully expect that within the next generation there will be a number of urban Elders who will have received their cultural teachings from Aboriginal cultural centres in cities. Judging from the seven participants alone in my in-depth interviews, there were only two who had lived on their reserves off and on, one who had visited his home reserve a handful of times, and four who had never once been home to their ancestral communities. Out of these four participants who had never been to their home communities, there was one who knew that she was Mohawk but did not know for

certain which territory her family belonged to, and the other participant was not even sure of his nation, although his mother's maiden is common among Mohawk people<sup>25</sup>.

One of the limitations for learning traditional Aboriginal culture at the centre is the vast differences between Aboriginal cultures (First Nations, Metis and Inuit) even within groups (for instance, Plains Cree, Swampy Cree, James Bay Cree in Ontario, James Bay Cree in Quebec). While there are a number of Elders and teachers from many different Aboriginal groups who offer teachings at *Wapeniag*, it would be impossible for every single Aboriginal community in Canada to be represented equally in these teachings. The consequence of this is that individuals will sometimes receive cultural teachings from Elders and teachers who are from a different nation. For instance, *Anishnabe* (Ojibwe) cultural teachings inform much of the overarching ethic at the centre, and there is a Mohawk teacher and a Mi'kmaq Elder<sup>26</sup> who are involved in most of the centre's programs. What I have observed about this however, is that the Elders are very careful to pull out common themes from their teachings that they think many different Aboriginal people will be able to relate to. What has been lost on individual history is made up for in the tolerance and understanding that comes as a result of having to constantly focus on what is common between all of the Aboriginal groups.

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<sup>25</sup> There are several reasons why some Aboriginal people cannot identify where they come from, ranging from being removed as young children from their families to having come from families that tried to cover up their heritage. There are also cases where people have become so mixed with other cultures that their Aboriginal heritage is difficult to trace. Still others may not be of Aboriginal ancestry at all, but wish to associate themselves with Aboriginal cultures.

<sup>26</sup> I didn't sense much discordance about the types of Elders who teach at centre from Metis or First Nations people, but I did hear complaints every once in a while from Inuit, who wanted to see more Inuk teachings at *Wapeniag*. As a staff member now, I understand that it is hard to connect with Inuit Elders, most likely because there are already so busy with the many Inuit specific agencies in Ottawa.



While the centre has the disadvantage from its reserve, village and settlement counterparts of having to grapple with the complexity of teaching/sharing culture(s) in a multi-tribal/multicultural setting, it has the huge advantage over a lot of rural Aboriginal communities of being a healthy and safe environment for all community members. Olive Grey describes this feeling of safety:

It's like when you look at us...there was some young woman at the kitchen table the other day and she was so sweet – smiling at people and doing her best. But she was just shaking, you know, really shaking! And there's so many of us who go in there like that – just doing the best we can. And in some ways I see the place like a refugee centre because so many of us have been destroyed – beaten up and our spirits worn down! It's a place where we can go to get better. And sometimes just sitting there and shaking is a good place to be. You need somewhere to go where people won't be mean to you.

The high incidence of social problems such as substance abuse, violence, unemployment and poor health on First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities is well known and well documented (Campbell, 2007: 59; Richmond et al, 2008: 1424; National Council of Welfare, 2007:1; Kehoe, 2006: 537). Urban Aboriginal people do indeed face similar types of social issues however *Wapeniag* itself serves as a space that is almost completely sovereign from most of these problems. It is a space of Aboriginal health and safety in a holistic sense, and while some of these problems are given acute care, they very seldom are allowed to breach to boundaries of the centre.

It is extremely rare, for instance to see anyone who is under the influence of drugs or alcohol at *Wapeniag*, and while subtle instances of lateral violence<sup>27</sup> sometimes go undetected, outright threatening and/or disrespectful behaviour is not tolerated. Judging from my observations in the field, I do have the impression that unemployment is an issue for some of the people who access services at the centre. Five out of the seven people who took part in in-depth interviews, for instance were unemployed; however, out of the five who were unemployed, four of them worked for the centre as volunteers, with two in particular who, at that time worked an amount of hours that would be comparable to a full time job.

The example of unemployed people working as volunteers exemplifies how a social problem is channelled into something healthy – that is, giving to the community which in turn reaps benefits such as recognition/gratitude for these individuals who are volunteering. This recognition in turn increases self confidence not to mention staves off boredom and provides incentives for people to engage in healthy behaviours during and around the time that they are working (staying sober, not swearing, practicing the Seven Grandfather Teachings, being exposed to Aboriginal cultures).

The décor of the centre itself paints a picture of Aboriginal wellness, cultural pride and community. Nearly every space in the centre is a celebration of being Aboriginal; positive messages emanate from posters, art work and sacred objects (drums, rattles, inuksuks, Metis sashes) which constantly remind people that they are somewhere

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<sup>27</sup> Lateral violence, as defined at *Wapeniag* is when people from a historically disadvantaged groups deal with the pain and frustration of subjugation through lashing out at each other. Examples of this are: gossip, intimidation and sometimes even physical violence.

familiar and that they are safe to, and in fact encouraged to express their Metis, Inuit and First Nations culture(s).

Unfortunately, the overall environment at the cultural centre also shares some of the less desirable attributes with reserves, villages and settlements: lateral violence and gossip is one of the most common problems that people face when attending *Wapeniag*. People are often heard saying that much like other Aboriginal communities, there is very little privacy in terms of people's social lives both within and outside of the centre. The community at *Wapeniag* is even more complex than usual Aboriginal communities in the sense that its membership is far more ethnically diverse, with the three main groups of Aboriginals, plus 'Others' who do not quite fit into the main categories due to being of mixed ancestry or of non-Aboriginal descent altogether<sup>28</sup>.

Light eyed, fair haired Aboriginals sometimes find themselves having to justify their ancestry to other clients, and I have heard of the occasional friction between First Nations and Inuit as well as discrimination from both First Nations and Inuit toward Metis, mostly due to their association with European culture. I have also had the sense that non-Native employees, volunteers and visitors have felt like whipping posts at

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<sup>28</sup> There are non-Native people who work, volunteer and attend programming at *Wapeniag*. Most of the clients who access services there have a connection to Aboriginal culture because their partner or children's other parent is Aboriginal, or because they have adopted Aboriginal children. Once in a while non-Native people with an interest in Native culture will come to a program and to my knowledge, they have never been asked to leave, although I will hear people comment under their breath about it, particularly older, crankier clients who have been coming to the centre for many years. It can be difficult to tell when there are non-Native people at *Wapeniag* because Aboriginal people can look Black, White and Asian, in addition to looking more "stereotypically Native." I have spoken with non-Native employees at *Wapeniag* and based upon what they have told me, their jobs are made very difficult by the fact that they are never quite accepted completely by both staff and clients.

times for angry Aboriginal clients (and even employees) expressing frustration at historical inequalities.

Sexuality can also be a tense issue. Despite the fact that there are many workers and clients at *Wapeniag* who identify as two-spirited<sup>29</sup> there have also been instances where homophobic remarks have been made:

Okay, right now I will speak as a two-spirited Native woman: sometimes in our community the boys will be judgemental. They will go: “Oh look at the dyke!”...this happened while I was at the centre. It was from two boys whose mother worked there and it happened at a special event. I thought at the time that the centre was a safe place – it shouldn’t have happened although the matter was taken care of after. (Singing Fire Raven Woman)

Aside from occasional discrimination, the majority of conflict that arises at the centre stems from usual tensions (personality conflicts) that are present in any small community. People spend a lot of time together and often need to find ways of resolving conflict in order to move forward. Most of the time these types of issues are resolved over burning traditional medicines in a talking circle with an Elder and the two (or more) opposing parties. It is not unusual to see tears as people tend to express themselves in a very open way; the direct consequence of having such highly charged

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<sup>29</sup> At *Wapeniag*, two-spirited is a term for gay and lesbian Indians, although I have heard/read other interpretations of the term, for instance, that it refers to have a balance between male and female energy. The idea of “two-spirit” teachings is very hotly debated in the overall Aboriginal community in Ottawa, although there is a lot of moral support for two-spirited people at *Wapeniag*, mostly because there are so many two-spirited women there, not to mention other sympathizers (half-breeds, non-status Indians etc.) who have also felt the sting of not belonging.

emotional purges seems to be that issues are settled quickly and people are able to heal, and move on from personal differences.

I have attempted to compare the community which has formed at the centre to more traditional types of Aboriginal communities, namely First Nations, Inuit villages and Metis settlements. The majority of my analysis has relied upon a sense of belonging and being connected with others, and also based upon the centre as an actor which takes some responsibility for its members in a way that parallels with certain responsibilities of a band council, for instance.

At the present time, I have not heard of any talk either in the literature, or in Aboriginal political circles about the legal or political possibilities of “urban multi-tribal reserves” (villages/settlements) however, this question has come up for Aboriginals in New Zealand and is worth reviewing for the purpose of this analysis.

### **Other Urban Nations: Urban *Iwi* and Informal *Marae* in New Zealand**

New Zealand’s Indigenous people, the Maori have been undergoing rapid urban migration since the end of WWII. Voyle and Simmons (1999:1037), estimate only a quarter of the Maori population were urban in the pre WWII era as compared to 80% as of 1999. The vast majority of Maori tribes (referred to as “*iwi*”) are based on and around a specific land base where the group is said to have ‘sprung up from’ (Sharp, 2002: 21). Traditional *iwi* membership was historically based specifically on kinship, or as it is said among Maori, “sharing bones” meaning that everyone in the *iwi* has

descended from the same common ancestor. Maori could not 'marry into' or change their iwi; to be considered Maori in fact, is not to have a certain number of Maori ancestors, but rather to be able to trace oneself back to the one ancestor around whom the iwi has been created (Sharp, 2002: 21).

Each iwi has an assortment of buildings and structures belonging to the tribe and perhaps most importantly, the *marae* which is a traditional meeting place for Maori ceremonies. The history and traditions of each iwi are very specifically oriented to the common ancestor to which the entire tribe traces its heritage. Proximity to one's own iwi therefore, was inextricably linked to the practice of Maori traditions and the mass urbanization of Maori after WWII was painting a bleak picture for the survival of Maori culture.

In 1965, a *marae* called *Te puea*, which is located near an urban centre, made a radical decision to open its doors to all Maori people living in the Auckland area. Later that same year, the first pan-tribal *marae* started to operate marking the beginning of the non-kinship based urban iwi (Walker, 1990:210).

Following this development, Andrew Sharp theorizes that Maori find themselves in any of three legitimacy clusters (2002: 25): first, they exist as an ethnic/racial group of Indigenous people; next, along ancestral tribal lines; and, third through cultural associations built upon consent (2004:15). The formation of the non-kin based urban iwi is predicated upon the notion of consent, and makes use of both moral and legal claims

to legitimacy on the basis of providing services to Maori, and seeking general betterment for the group (Sharp, 2002: 18).

Sharp's legal criteria of Maori 'clusters' mirrors some points presented in this chapter, that there are Aboriginal 'nation-al' identities on macro and micro levels from ethnic group, to tribal affiliations, and lastly to family-like connections at the centre. The point of departure between my own observations and Sharp's framework would be my insistence that 'Aboriginal' as an large ethnic group only becomes an everyday reality (way of identifying oneself) in the urban context where spaces are created for all three major Aboriginal groups to have the experience of being together and knowing each other's cultures. This does not seem to be the case in New Zealand as the Indigenous people there are more closely related<sup>30</sup> than in Canada.

Urban Maori have also managed to form more informal types of 'city tribes' in order to infuse Maori traditions into their every day lives. Part of Natacha Gagné's (2004) doctoral dissertation about the experiences of urban Maori, explores the idea that the homes of Maori in the city (referred to as *whare Maaori*, literally Maori houses) become like a *marae*: a place of sharing where Maori people are welcomed and cultural traditions are upheld whenever possible:

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<sup>30</sup> For instance, Maori speak the same language and all Indigenous New Zealanders are considered to be Maori regardless of differences from tribe to tribe. This is contrasted to the Canadian context where there are many different types of Indigenous groups.

The *whare Maaori* [Maori house in the city] is thus about identity and going back to what one is, and can be at the very core of people's identities. It is about *whaanau*, [extended family] real or imagined: it is about the *tiipuna* [ancestors/grandmothers and grandfathers] who have been there before oneself; it is about memories kept alive in the house (Gagné, 2004:128).

In this passage Gagné reflects upon how Maori use 'urban Maori houses' to connect with their own personal/historical identities, while at the same time forging connections with 'imagined *whaanau*' which is to say that a new sense a family is created in tandem with the re-affirming of older kin-ship based cultural traditions. Gagné's observation supports the arguments presented in this chapter about the emergence of family values at the centre between clients, as well as with the discussion in Chapter 5 about the relative absence of tension between living in the city on one hand, and practicing traditional Aboriginal values on the other.

Examples of Maori 'urban nations' coupled with my own observations in the field demonstrates a larger pattern of Indigenous people(s) using creative strategies to marry their cultures with the realities of living in modern, industrialized spaces. The final section will try to locate these strategies within the context of Scott Lash's organic and spectral postmodernism which has served as my main theoretical lens for this work.



### **Reflections: More Postmodernisms**

Lash understands postmodernism as dividing into two somewhat opposing camps: organic, and spectral. Organic postmodernism, which he favours, is a critique of modernity by way of a return to ‘the particular’ (this is to say, particular differences in relation to culture but especially in small communities), an appreciation for collective thought and action, and a sense of living within earthly cycles as oppose to modernity’s quest to tame the natural world. This brand of postmodernism also spurs a return to traditionalism(s), and a rational treatment of the meanings that underpin them (Lash, 1990b:153-156).

The other type of postmodernism termed “spectral” by Lash is the more well known variety pioneered by theorists like Baudrillard; Lash argues that this so called “critique of modernity” is in fact only a hyperextension of it; an “implosion” where society becomes an arena filled with shallow representations of symbols thought to represent an “original” of something else which no longer exists. It is, for all intents and purposes, like the Pollock in grocery stores that is sold as “crab meat” except that in this example, actual crab meat would no longer be available. He argues that where spectral postmodernism is based upon “simulacrum” (a somewhat false experience of something; a convincing yet shallow illusion), organic postmodernism is rooted in real experiences of life; where spectral postmodernism is characterized by playfulness, superficiality and futuristic thinking, organic postmodernism is predicated by rationalist reflection, communitarianism, and the return to roots (Lash, 1990b: 153).

Despite Lash's dislike for spectral postmodernism, I find that it has equal value for analyzing the ideas presented in this chapter alongside its organic counterpoint particularly in contextualizing the way in which I have described people's awareness of an "Aboriginal nation" or "Aboriginal ethnic group" at the beginning of this chapter.

In reference to spectral postmodernism, Lash argues that it implodes what is different into the same (Lash, 1990b: 155) and in this sense leads to the triumph of universal over particular. Coming back to my arguments earlier in this chapter about the development of an "Aboriginal ethnicity" in people's consciousness, I would tend to agree that indeed something different (Metis, Inuit and First Nations) was imploded into being the same (Aboriginal). However, the implosion of 'different' into 'same' in this case, was not a zero sum transition as Lash's argument implies; but rather a process where the commonalities between different Aboriginal groups are being internalized and then publicly/privately acknowledged in a way that contrasts, or *differentiates* between Aboriginal cultures and the culture(s) in broader Canadian society. In this sense, the implosion that Lash speaks of is, in this case study, a strategy of creating 'sameness' for the ultimate goal of having difference recognized on a grander scale (Barth [1969] (1998).

I envision this process as a series of circles inside larger circles; the circle called "Aboriginal" has not erased the hundreds or thousands of other circles of smaller Native groups, but rather has simply moved them all into a larger conceptual circle within the whole Canadian framework. Inside the Aboriginal circle, I do not see an implosion of

‘sameness’ but instead, yet another universe of circles which contain the different Inuit, Metis and First Nations cultures, sub-cultures and identities.

The second major point of this chapter is that *Wapeniag* has become like a First Nation, village or settlement: in short, that it has come to resemble the more traditional communities where Aboriginal groups come from, can be located in both of Lash’s postmodernities. First, it links up with the spectral understanding of the simulacrum. It can be said that centre is a symbol or a ‘sign’ which imitates or acts out the functions of Aboriginal communities. *Wapeniag*, is like the “Pollack” (imitation crab meat), where First Nations, Metis settlements and Inuit villages are the “real crab”. Over time however, a community develops which fulfils many and the same functions, emotional and administrative as the “authentic” rural Native communities.

The result of this is a circle or loop that begins with “real” followed by a simulacrum which in turn becomes something real again. I would argue that this process of the real becoming a simulacrum becoming real again is something that is much older than notions of postmodernism itself, especially when remembering that most rural First Nations, and Inuit communities are themselves only a modern creation of the Federal Government. In this sense, we could say for instance that even a contemporary rural First Nation is a simulacrum for the communities of mostly (but not entirely) nomadic peoples which existed before contact.

I also see connections between organic postmodernism and my “new nation” argument. Organic postmodernism emphasizes the positioning of Others (those who are different from mainstream society) as being equal, or put another way, that these ways of being different provide viable alternatives to sameness or universality. This is the case with *Wapeniag* providing a community alternative to the ubiquitous individualism that is so evocative of cities in general, as well as providing an alternative as an ‘Other’ *within* the context of how most First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities are set up as very specific tribal entities.

Finally, Lash argues that organic postmodernity makes room for authentic difference to be recognized in particularized communities. My exploration of the centre as both a real and imagined Aboriginal nation suggests that difference and sameness, authentic and otherwise, are both necessary counterpoints in achieving the flexibility that is needed for culture(s) to continue existing, and moving forward within the context of a constantly changing social and political landscapes.

## CONCLUSION

Today, more than half of all Aboriginal people in Canada (Inuit, Metis and First Nations) live in cities (Peters et al., 2005:400). Urban Aboriginal cultural centres, which were once meant to offer support during the transition to living in urban centres, have come to fulfil additional functions in the contemporary period, particularly surrounding issues of identity. The topic of identity at Aboriginal centres is complex: there are the different groupings of Aboriginal peoples (Metis, Inuit, First Nations), a diversity of backgrounds (urban/rural upbringings), experiences (raised by parents or adopted) and even ethnicities (mixed, not mixed) in the individuals who visit these centres.

The *Wapeniag Centre for Aboriginal Culture*, which has been the case study for this project, provides assistance for, and conveys a sense of familiarity to Aboriginal people who are new to the city, just as it equally teaches, and gives culture back to the people who have either lost touch with it, or never had it to begin with. *Wapeniag* thus restores Aboriginal cultures, and the people who are the recipients of this reclamation respond by identifying more strongly with their roots, through internalizing and living out the traditional values and ways of life.

Away from ancestral territories (with the exception of the Algonquin), and in the middle of a city, *Wapeniag*, and the people who make up the community there have had to devise creative ways to enact these traditional identities, mostly by extracting the ethic from the heart of traditional values and replacing it into activities that are more amenable to urban infrastructure. I have coined this premodern/modern fusion

*postmodern traditionalism* and I have implied that its natural fallout is the creation of an “urban nation” where individual/group ethnic identity is upheld (First Nations, Inuit, Metis identities recognized) but encapsulated within a larger Aboriginal family. This is a very progressive development because no time in history outside of the current contemporary urban context has seen all of the Aboriginal groups together in the same community.

The re-mapping of Indigenous groups and nations spurred by urbanization and consolidated through cultural centres like *Wapeniag* would completely change the relationship that Indigenous people have with the state. Funding for reserves and other remote/rural Aboriginal communities has always come from the Federal Government (Peters, 2006) whereas much of the funding for Aboriginal cultural centres falls under Provincial jurisdiction. Regardless of what changes are to come, if the adaptations and accommodations for cultural survival and traditional identities seen here are any indication for urban Aboriginals, then we can expect that a brand new era in Indigenous nation building is to come.

*M'sit no'kmaq*

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**APPENDIX A**  
**ETHICS APPROVAL**



# Université d'Ottawa University of Ottawa

Service de subventions de recherche et d'éthique Research Grants and Ethics Services

October 11, 2007

Natacha Gagné  
Sociology and Anthropology  
University of Ottawa

Dorothy Reno  
International Development and Globalization  
University of Ottawa

**Re: Sage and the City: A Case Study of Identity at an Aboriginal Urban  
Organisation (File # 09-07-02)**

Dear Professor Gagné and Ms. Reno,

Thank you for your response to the REB's questions re your project. Please find enclosed the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (SSH REB).

During the course of the study, any modifications to the protocol or forms may not be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. You must also promptly notify the REB of any adverse events that may occur.

This certificate of ethical clearance is valid until October 10, 2008. Please submit an annual status report to the Protocol Officer in October 2008 to either close the file or request a renewal of ethics approval.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me

Sincerely yours,

Catherine Paquet  
Assistant-Director Interim (Ethics)  
For Peter Beyer, Chair of the SSH REB



# Université d'Ottawa University of Ottawa

Service de subventions de recherche et d'éthologie Research Grants and Ethics Services

## **SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD**

### **CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL**

This is to certify that the University of Ottawa Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (REB) has examined the application for ethical approval for the research project **Sage and the City: A Case Study of Identity at an Aboriginal Urban Organisation (File # 09-07-02)** submitted by Dorothy Reno of the Globalization and International Development program and supervised by Natacha Gagné of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. The members of the REB found that the research project met appropriate ethical standards as outlined in the Tri-Council Policy Statement and in the Procedures of the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Boards, and accordingly gave the research project a Category Ia (Approval).

This certification is valid for one year from the date indicated below.

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Catherine Paquet  
Assistant-Director Interim (Ethics)  
For the Chair of the Social Sciences and Humanities REB  
Peter Beyer

October 11, 2007  
Date



## **APPENDIX B**

### **INTERVIEW SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

#### **Participant profiles:**

- 1) Age
- 2) Gender
- 3) Occupation
- 4) Nation, group or community
- 5) Marital status/family situation (i.e. kids?)
- 6) Province of birth
- 7) Status or non-status Indian
- 8) Length of time lived in Ottawa
- 9) Born on or off reserve

#### **The Centre**

- Why did you decide to start coming to this centre?
- How long have you been coming here?
- Do you access services/programs at other centres?
- Did you already know people who were coming here?
- What does the centre offer you?
- What have you learned from coming here?
- What are the things you like/dislike?
- Do you attend on a regular basis, or do you come in for specific purposes?
- How do you think this centre helps to build community in Ottawa?
- How do you think the centre has accommodated the different groups of Aboriginal people?
- Has coming to the centre changed the way that you express your identity, or think about the identity of others?
- How you changed the way that you self identify since being part of this centre?

#### **Identity**

- Which group are you from? (Metis, Inuit or First Nations)
- How do you think of yourself as an Aboriginal person? What is your preferred way to identify?
- How do you find living in the city if you were not born in a city or town?
- What do you think about having three categories of Aboriginal people?
- Do you feel close to any other particular tribe aside from your own?
- How do you relate with the other two categories of Aboriginal people (i.e. if you are Inuit, how do you relate to Metis and First Nations)
- What do you think are some of the similarities/distinctions between the different groups of Aboriginal people?

- What are some things that you have learned from different tribes/groups?
- What do you think are some of the complexities surrounding Aboriginal identities?
- What is the relationship between the three main Aboriginal groups?
- If you were born in a city, do you think that has affected the way that you identify?
- What in your opinion has been the role of the state in shaping Aboriginal identities?
- How has your identity changed over the years?

**I will also ask the participants if there are any other issues they feel are important on the subject of Aboriginal identities.**