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**Being your own best teacher in the light of being an *other*.**

**Christine Stocek**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**Art Education**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements**

**for the Degree of Master of Arts at**

**Concordia University**

**Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

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## ABSTRACT

### Being your own best teacher in the light of being an *other*

Christine Stocek

This study Being your own best teacher in the light of being an *other* is a phenomenological studio and essay inquiry. Its autobiographical content is based on two years I spent teaching eight native women living in a small community in northern Quebec. I combined into collages, selected photographs taken throughout this teaching experience. Ways in which the photographs impacted each other determined the content of the layering of images and the final texts in the collages. A language evolved from the structure of the collages, which fostered my understanding of how I functioned, as a teacher, who my students were, and how I could grow to be the teacher they needed. Few jobs revealed my inner self so ruthlessly. Diverse challenges which caused me to question both who I was personally and professionally resulted in my becoming stronger, more self-defined, and better articulated. This thesis provides me with the words and images to express these experiences.

*“Only those who risk going to far can possibly find out how far one can go.”*

*“We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”*

T. S. Eliot

Dedicated with love to the memory of Heather Mckenzie, a dance teacher who inspired children to dance to their hearts' content and who inspired me to see the opportunity for grace and the possibility of dance inherent in each moment of teaching.

**To the community who welcomed me and all my students who taught me more than I was ever able to teach them, my sincere appreciation and love.**

*“I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine,  
and still stand on the edge of a lake  
and shout to the silver moon, “yes”!*

*It doesn't interest me to know where you live,  
or how much money you have.  
I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair,  
weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done  
for the children.*

*It doesn't interest me where or what you studied.  
I want to know what sustains you from the inside  
When all else falls away.*

*I want to know if you can be alone with yourself,  
and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.”*

Oriah Mountain Dreamer

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

#### **Objective**

My objective in the following studio inquiry and essay thesis is to examine how I have grown and learned through my teaching experiences — **Being your own best teacher in the light of being an *other***. Through the process of sifting through my experiences, living and teaching in a different cultural milieu, I raised defining moments which I then assembled in a series of photographic collages. I began by writing narratives describing photographs I had selected. The photographs and their narratives were combined to create the collages which were assembled into a series of eleven panels. A studio journal was kept. The story of how I constructed the photographic collages, an analysis of the finished work and the learning they elicited were written for this essay, which accompanies the presentation of the panels comprising my thesis.

Each photographic collage illustrates key points on the path of my development, points that embody values inherent in my teaching practice and my growing understanding of who my students were. These experiences, once raised, promote one's self-understanding, therefore one's learning and growth. If key experiences can be raised to a conscious level, their pattern clearly identified, then they may be usefully transferred to different contexts with teaching, learning potential. Once completed, this research process will also serve to clarify and reinforce my ability to

renew, empower and transform myself. The love I feel for my work and my ability to remain effective is maintained in the face of many challenges present in teaching. I can then stand for the possibility inherent in any true educational experience — to transform one's self through one's education.

### **Procedure**

My thesis is a qualitative studio/research project carried out from a phenomenological perspective. "Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations."(Biklen & Bogdan, 1982, p.31). This pertains to my teaching experience in northern Cree communities. When outlining the research objective; **Being your own best teacher in the light of being an *other***, I mentioned sifting through my experiences and raising defining moments assembled in a series of photographic collages. I have elaborated on this process below.

I drew primarily from a large collection of photographs, numbering in the hundreds, taken consistently over a two year period. The photographs were taken by myself and my students. It was my habit to leave my camera(s) out, free for anyone to record a moment they felt worthy. I always had the film processed in duplicate, giving a complete set away to people photographed or to the institution involved. The photographs themselves are snapshots using almost exclusively film for color prints, taken with my Olympus Stylus camera. I did take one role of black and

white prints and one of slides. On several occasions I traveled with disposable, recycled cameras. I especially favored the panoramic format, which was not possible to obtain using my Olympus.

I wrote first person narratives for each photograph selected. In these narratives I strived to convey the meaning of events, objects or interactions. The photographs and narratives represent my point of view or my understanding of someone else's, even when the photograph was taken by a student. When describing a group or individual's experience, I recognize that it is my understanding of the event which I am relating. Point of view, as a research construct in "qualitative analysis has to be self-conscious ....While qualitative researchers tend to be phenomenological in their orientation, most are not radical idealists. They emphasize the subjective, but do not necessarily deny reality "out there"." (Biklen & Bogdan, 1982 p.32).

I selected certain images which struck me as important in my personal and professional development and impacted my ability to carry out my work. Identifying and raising those moments which best served both the art making process and analysis is subject in part to the method assigned to the task and my subjective studio process. The sorting and sifting in order to select certain images to focus on is comparable to *Problem Setting* as defined by Donald A. Schön (1983) in The Reflective Practitioner How Professionals Think in Action. "Problem Setting is a process in which interactively, we name the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them."(p.40)

I next combined the selected photographs and their narratives into the series of eleven photographic collages. Several of the collages are supported by additional elements, consisting of notes from class assignments or student writing taken from my teaching records and souvenirs. The creative art-making process is considered as part of the data analysis, including the sifting or selection process of the data which then formed the body of work for further study. "Theory developed this way emerges from the bottom up, ... from many disparate pieces of collected evidence that are interconnected." (Biklen & Bogdan, 1982, p.29). The collages have a consistent language in their structure, which loosely represents my process of identifying what belongs to my students, from their context, contribution and/or participation, and what came from me. The collages bring to light moments and events which resulted in a broader understanding of who I am and how I functioned in my job as a teacher. Schön's discussion of reflection-in-action states:

When a practitioner reflects in and on his practice, the possible objects of his reflection are as varied as the kinds of phenomena before him and the systems of knowing-in-practice which he may bring to them. .... He may reflect on the feeling for a situation which has led him to accept a particular course of action, on the way in which he has framed the problem he is trying to solve, or on the role he has constructed for himself within a larger institutional context. Reflection-in-action, in these several modes, is central to the art through which

practitioners sometimes cope with troublesome “divergent” situations of practice.” (p.62)

The process I built was multi-layered. I reflected on what I brought to bear on the job and how I carried out my work, as well as how what my students brought to the context impacted my understanding of the nature of my job. This reflective process evolved during the art making and the analysis I carried out. Keeping an ongoing studio journal, which recorded my thoughts on how I was making the photographic collages and my response to them, helped me to understand the significance this work revealed to me. This process then enabled me to make sense of the photographic collages and clearly identify what I had learned in light of my research objective.

### **Background**

The work this thesis draws on dates from 1996 to 1997. During this time I was hired as a teacher by the Cégep St-Félicien for the Cree Regional Authority ( C. R. A. ), to work in three of the nine Cree Nations in Quebec. After the first semester, I chose one community where I settled for the remainder of that time. There I helped to write and was responsible for delivering the college attestation program, **Educators in Native Child-Care Services**. Working in this community was facilitated by the fact that the Youth Council had identified two years previously as one of its priorities, a commitment to establishing day care services and had forwarded a request for support to the C. R. A. The Child Care Advisor working for the C.R.A. in collaboration with the cégep began this

ambitious project which offered licensed child care training to all the Cree communities and built child care centres in 7 of the 9 communities where there were no existing facilities. Here, in this small, isolated, northern Cree Nation, being a white Canadian of European descent was a minority position. It is in this sense that I found myself enjoying the privileged position of being an *other*.

I began in 1996 by traveling through the Cree coastal communities teaching *Communication; Relating to Self*. This course required prospective Early Childhood Educators to examine the formation of self-concepts, their sense of self-worth and self-acceptance. Cree students as future educators identified values addressing traditional and contemporary native issues. Communication, healing processes and the necessary stages towards personal growth were also studied. Due to the nature of the subject matter, teaching this course in the coastal communities during this initial phase of the project was especially challenging and rewarding. It allowed me the privilege of truly beginning to know and understand the women and the community where I later chose to spend the next eighteen months. The women raised many concerns which reflected their culture, their history, the deeply rooted social and personal problems of these communities and their needs, both educational and personal, in an intimate manner. I believe the experience of teaching this course, and the opportunity it provided for me to get to know my students and some of their issues, greatly helped. Our communication and the contribution I was able to make to both the program **Educators in Native Child-Care Services** and to the community in particular was enhanced.



I was responsible for delivering the complete program in the community where I lived, teaching eight women in what was effectively a one room school house. In addition I shared responsibilities with two project managers for opening a new child-care service: including establishing a Board of Directors, renovating the building, equipping the Center, training, hiring and setting up the administration, and various services. This project also included the responsibility for ongoing evaluations, further pedagogical development, teacher training and student needs assessments.

Prior to this job, in 1993, I contributed a brief article on a teaching experience I had with the Cree people of another community in Quebec. The article appeared in Discovering the Image, Aspects Of Art Education in Quebec, a text published in conjunction with the INSEA Congress held in Montreal that year. The article was accompanied with photographic collage work which was exhibited as part of the Congress. My reflections and research into that teaching experience has proven to be very inspiring for me and created the momentum for this thesis.

“Living and working in a culture that is so different from anything that I had previously experienced, I became aware of my teaching process. Fundamental aspects of my teaching, which I had taken for granted, suddenly felt awkward; they manifested themselves in new ways, and required my reconsideration. Even though I had been teaching for a few years, I now felt very green in many ways. This new context

proved to be one of the most challenging teaching experiences of my life.

Ethnicity has been a key question throughout this experience, with implications at personal, professional and political levels of my understanding and practice. I respect the depth of experience the Cree have been dealing with, in identifying their ethnicity and the importance of allowing their culture to live and develop with them. The process of identifying what belonged to my students and their context, has given me a broader understanding of who I am and how I function in the teacher-student relationship....

In the midst of the interactions and activities of each day's class, and in my involvement with the people and events of the community, I found myself reflecting on my past, my cultural formation, my history and my identity at a level I had not asked myself before. I increasingly focused on trying to understand the Cree student experience in my classroom. With a thoroughness and intensity that no other teaching experience had ever demanded of me before, I was confronted with my own identity....

What has this added up to? ... am I a different teacher?... I am much more aware and understanding of who I am and how I function as a teacher. I am more open to the multitude of

differences a sensitive teacher has to recognize. I am better able to identify and give credit to all those fine details: the ones that are crucial to identify after more basic cultural differences are acknowledged, the ones that add up and count in an individual's own development. A teacher's ability to recognize and raise those fine details as valid issues is empowering for students. *Honouring* is a key factor in my experience .... It is what enables me to take my place and to realize my role as a teacher. For me, *honouring* is what is required in intercultural dialogue and in multicultural education. (Stocek, 1993, p.179-181)

### **Intention**

In this thesis, I propose to *Honour* my own understanding of experiences, living and teaching Cree students from a different community in a new job. However once again, I find myself challenged by the process of identifying what belongs to my students and their context, and what I bring to my work as their teacher and as an *other*.

As an artist I know that art reflects personal, social, and political content inherent in our culture. Most importantly here, and what is relevant in this thesis is the assumption that values common to art education (my formal training), have provided me with a method to reflect and learn about myself. It is those values and practices which are inherent in the teaching of any art, be it visual or performance based, basic to a search, a quest, a growth process, vital as a tool for expression, questioning, responding,

which are the focus of this research. I am practicing a method of reflection which mirrors the very values imbedded in my own teaching practice, be it in art education or in any learning situation. The methods I have used in this thesis are not “prescriptive” but “evocative”, not anticipating particular responses or meanings but plans for learning opportunities (Eisner, 1973, p.190).

One of the most effective mirrors for the self is teaching and working in another culture. We gain insight into ourselves when we use our imaginative power to identify with others. Imagination dramatizes the inner workings of our minds and is the undercurrent of human interaction. We empathize with others, with their situations, envision possibilities and enact creative solutions to personal and social issues. Working and teaching with people from a culture very different from my own made me profoundly aware of my own teaching practice and challenged me to grow in my practice. As I evoked their story, I raised my own story; when predisposed I saw myself in a new light and learnt from it. These connections, and others forged by my understanding and my empathy, elicited my learning. Those moments which struck me as worthy of being raised became something more than the sum total of their experience. Through art making and reflection they took on additional roles, creating new paths for new possibilities.

Once my proposal for this thesis was under way, I telephoned one of my students. She agreed to circulate a letter asking each of the students and project managers to sign a permission slip or release which acknowledged

that they had been well informed of my intention to carry out this project and understood its nature. After having read the letter, everyone without exception signed giving me, Christine Stoczek, permission to use the photographs taken during our work together for my research and for the photographic collages. The stories I have written do not shy away from the reality of life in this community. Due to the nature of my job I was privileged to personal information, while I feel I should clearly name the issues involved, some stories are not mine to tell and remain in the realm of the unspoken.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Building and Organizing the Content**

#### **Selecting the photographs**

I began by going through my collection of photographs. I decided to file the complete collection chronologically by semester. I next looked at the photographs for each semester, sifting and selecting those which struck me as significant. Trying to remain open, I resisted the temptation to begin further narrowing down my selection. I included all the photographs I wanted to, not analyzing my reasons. I did not try to define what “significant” meant for me. If I felt that a photo had a story to inspire, I selected it. I hoped they would elicit or explain some kind of learning which had taken place or would take place through this research process.

When I could, I selected two or three photos of a particular event. I kept as many choices on the table for when I would begin to work on the photographic collages. For instance, several times I included both horizontal and vertical shots, or photos which revealed different details of an event. The prospect of making the collages did factor into my selection process. I did not want to narrow the possibilities for combining the photos in a variety of ways. This maximized my opportunity to discover new meanings when combining the photographs and creating collages which would be aesthetically satisfying.

The first selection totaled 153 photographs. All the photographs, with a single exception, were taken during the period this thesis focuses on. The exception was a photo printed as a postcard. My mother had given me the postcard dating from 1916. It is of my grandmother, at the age of eight, dressed as the Young Hiawatha for the school play.

### **Writing the narratives**

Keeping the photographs organized chronologically, I began to write their narratives. Sometimes I selected a single photo and wrote its story. At times I grouped the photographs depicting a single event, writing about them as a series. In all, 33 narratives were written. I numbered each narrative sequentially with its accompanying photographs and organized them in a binder.

After I had written the first few narratives, I decided that I required a consistent heading and developed their layout. I was hoping this would

help me to focus on describing the content of each photo. I was not writing the narratives, describing each photos' content in the manner I had assumed I would. So I tried to begin each narrative with, "In this photo : you can see....". However, the narratives persisted to evolve as they had begun. Some of the themes about which I wrote concerned preceding events, social context, the students' shyness, the life of a particular student or my feelings, including both the professional and personal struggles I experienced. I rarely wrote simply about the photo itself. I was not unhappy with this, but I felt frustrated. I did not seem able to describe the image in front of me before I began to write about the numerous influencing factors and the memories they evoked. These stories just needed to be told; some photos dictated their narratives and others allowed me to tell stories which were in my head, looking for an opportunity to be expressed. I am aware that in each photo there are numerable other narratives. One photo all on its own could elicit a string of forthcoming narratives. I discovered that it was the sea of influencing factors which I had been swimming in that was the real story, not a frozen moment from a single perspective.

As I continued to write, I found that with each photograph I was repeating myself on several issues. This felt problematic; different photos were impelling me to repeat the same points. I felt that this impeded my progress, so I stopped myself and took the time to write what turned out to be three different essays. When the issues resurfaced, I reassured myself that those points had been made. Sometimes I went back to re-read the essays, verifying if they were inclusive. This proved to be the case each time. The

topics about which I wrote concerned the love I felt for my students, my commitment to my work and professional reflections from my training in art education. Once this was done, I felt free to continue.

### **Coding the content of the photographs and the narratives**

Once I had concluded writing narratives for all the photographs, I needed to begin to make sense of the information in front of me. I decided to go through the photographs, studying their images. I organized them into two color coded groups, evaluating the content as either belonging to me or to my students. Each photograph coded green signified content I categorized as coming from or belonging to me. Yellow signified content which I categorized as coming from or belonging to my students. I stuck color coded stickers to each photograph. 10 were coded green, and 15 were coded yellow. 11 of the photos were coded both green and yellow as the content the image elicited did not yield to being divided in this manner. Photos coded in both colors represented both realms.

At times the photograph was simple to code. For example, if the photo depicted flip chart notes of an assignment I had written, then I coded it green (belonging to me). If the photo depicted people from the community participating in a traditional Cree cultural event, I coded it yellow (belonging to my students). I also considered my intent. If I had organized an event or if I knew it was my doing which brought the action into play, I coded photos as belonging to me. For instance, as their teacher, many of the photos represent students carrying out school assignments in the manner I had taught. However, if a photo had elicited different content,



such as the childrens' or the students' well-being in the community, I then coded it yellow. Much of this type of content is not visible in the photos. Almost all the photographs can be arguably placed in the other category. The narratives written about each photo tipped the balance, helping me to decide how to categorize it.

An example of one photograph, which was coded both yellow and green, depicts a student with children in the Centre animating gross motor activities. She and the children were playing with gym mats and a cushioned cylinder. The narrative written for this photo is titled, "Life isn't all childrens' play". The photo depicts the children and my student participating in activities I had taught the students to animate, using new equipment the program I was teaching provided. This prompted me to code the photograph green. However, the narrative also speaks about the issues I became familiar with during the time this photo was taken. I wrote about my growing understanding of what it meant to be a child living in the community, as well as other social issues which my students raised, thus prompting me to code the photo both yellow and green. There are aspects in each narrative which stem from who my students are, their culture and their community, mixed with content that I brought into play through the program I was teaching, the type of teacher and the type of person I am. The narratives paired with the photos carried a compelling weight in the coding. It is the weight I give issues written about, in combination with the content the photograph depicts, which determines the coding.

I organized this information into a table entitled Photo/Narrative analysis so I could study it. I compared the categorized groups, studying my coding to make sure my reasoning was consistent. In the first column I listed the photos numerically. In the next column I noted the yellow and/or green code I assigned to them. The corresponding title of the narrative came next, followed by a few key words pulled from each narrative which served to prompt the meaning each photograph elicited and was now paired with.

**Photo/Narrative analysis :**

A **G**, or a green sticker, signify content categorized as belonging to me.

A **Y**, or a yellow sticker, signify content categorized as belonging to my students.

#	CODE	NARRATIVE TITLE	CONTENT
1.1	Y	Contemporary Verses Traditional Stories	native values, daily expression
1.3	Y		
1.2	<b>G</b>		empowerment, voice, art, aesthetic response
2	Y	Ongoing Essay	unspoken and spoken lessons, trust
3	<b>GY</b>	Contemporary Art, Aesthetic Response & Hearts	teaching, long memories, secrets, goldfish
9	Y	Self Defining Objects	Cree cultural objects, shyness
4.1-2	<b>G</b>	Yellow Sun & Blue River	my expectations of children,
5	<b>GY</b>	Poupon Bus	government rules & Walking Out Ceremony
6	Y	Baby Wrap	children learning <i>+more</i>

7.1-4	G/Y	Rocks	break communication barriers
8.1-2	Y/G	Life Isn't All Childrens' Play	life for kids, support, help needed, gross motor play
10.1-2	G	Life Doesn't Frighten Me	teaching about self
10.3	Y		public vs. private confidentiality
11.1-8	G	Whole Child	learning how to teach competency based courses
12	G	Playing In The Kitchen	language issues, voice, feelings, acculturation
13	G/Y	Halloween Treat Bowls	Cree language issues culture course
14	Y	Cree Activity Center	Cree activities, exam
15	Y	Bingo	gambling, team crisis, meeting
16	G	Baby Shower	hosting a party
17.1-5	Y/G	National Child Day	public participation
18.1-2	Y	Ice Fishing	hospitality
19.1-4	G	Open House	midway, community responds
20	G	Moms & Tots	making every experience count
21	G	Fellings, Feelings, Feelings	language, voice, empathy, choice
22.1-9	Y/G	After School Program	extended service, new standards
23.1-2	Y	My Kitchen As A Class Room	go,go,go, valentines
24.1-5	Y	Children Playing At My Home	ambassadors for the Cree
25.1-3	G	Spring In Montreal	shyness, visit daycares, home
26.1-2	Y	Tipi Play Centre	spinning tops
27.1-22	G/Y	Summer Practicum	shh! checklist, failed, therapy
28.1-6	G/Y	Home Day Care	more services, trust & loyalties
29.1-6	Y	Walking Out Ceremonies	tradition, wolf

30.1-28	Y	Fish Camp	boat, tipi, cooking, hammock, eggs, camps, walking with the children
31.1-12	Y	A Cooking Tipi	roasting geese, bannock, iron pot
32.1-7	Y <del>G</del>	My Leaving Party	sharing bannock, plaque, voice, choice
33	Y <del>G</del>	Hiawatha	grandmother, imaginary indian apology hearing & heart government

### CHAPTER THREE

#### Creating and Understanding the Collages

##### **Grouping photographs and their narratives for each collage**

I spread all the photos out in their groups, green photos on one side, dual photos in the middle and yellow on the other side. I began the process of selecting photos which, when placed in the collage format, represent my understanding of moments, events, objects, or interactions that combine to illustrate the sea of influencing factors which came into play living and working in this community. Some issues, such as values, are present in each photo. It became a question of selecting and combining the photos from the three categories which clearly conveyed a story. Due to their visual content, other photos seemed to connect powerfully on their own, regardless of the stories which went with them. The poupon bus (a multiple baby stroller), and the bowls are good examples. These I put

together and let their stories inform me. Most often I found myself piling up the photos, wanting to combine many of them in a single collage. This worked well in my mind's eye but did not prove practical; the message and the composition became muddled. I fought against this with almost each grouping of photos. After all the preceding work the first grouping of photos and their stories into the eleven panels happened very quickly and naturally. I trusted my instincts to guide my decisions. I ended up switching around only two elements.

### **Layering in the collages**

Another feature which I worked on simultaneously was the layering of the collages. I felt a need to order or create a continuity in the language of the structure and composition of the panels. I framed photos coded as belonging to me behind the picture plane; receded, they represent how I entered or interrupted the scene. Cultural, social or personal content of photos, coded as belonging to my students, represents the larger context I was working in; therefore, they often occupy the largest surface area. This content is often raised above the picture plane, helping to differentiate it from historical content which rests on the surface itself. When I raise content it emphasizes the contemporary practice of traditional cultural heritage. The surface layer is left free to place symbols of an historical nature, underlining how their continual presence supports the raised events. I used black and white or sepia-toned photos and rubbings to signal when I felt a connection with the timeless continuity of, repeated use of objects, or influence of activities, that impacts the meaning of events.

### **The space I occupy**

I find cutting holes through images or the surface plane, to insert in the background photographs representing what I brought into the context, satisfies the strong statement I need to make. The break or interruption which ruptures the image represents how I felt being a white teacher in their community. It speaks to the cultural conflicts and at times shoulders the positive impact I had, as well as the loss it simultaneously signified. It supports the voice of authority I was given while carrying out my work. I found myself continually planning to raise many of the images which confused the message. I had to stop, go back and evaluate the situation again. I had to keep reminding myself that I was not teaching any more; putting my students on the forefront was no longer my mission. I kept repeating to myself that I was looking for how I could now be my own best teacher.

### **My place shifts**

The main image always belongs to my students. I come into the picture by interrupting the surface plane or field of action. In several of the panels, however, a shift takes place as you find me in a traditional Cree setting, raised off the surface plane, in the space most often occupied by my students. At times my students are depicted in “my world”, occupying the recessed space where I usually enter the picture plane. When this occurs, it signifies that we have begun to know each other, that relationship has grown more complex, and communication from one to the other has improved. We are trying to communicate and participate from each other’s

standpoint. Strong evidence of this is also apparent by the representation of students carrying out school work, depicted in the photos coded as belonging to me and placed in the windows.

### **Where I enter**

The placement of the windows consistently depicts my understanding of how and where I interrupted the action. I made use of several choices. In one work, I cut the windows to come through onto a white ground because, although I was doing my best to interrupt the ongoing action, I could not take responsibility for my students' participation. If or how they wanted to act on what I was advocating required a personal commitment developed in their own time, it really belonged to them. Other windows are cut through on a white ground, allowing the focus to center on reversals where I or the Cree people were participating in each other's context. This corresponded with a lessening of the burden I continually felt, shouldering the loss my presence brought with it. When I am participating in a Cree cultural activity, the image is lowered flush to the surface plane to indicate how our worlds were coming together, compressing the space as we met on the field of action.

### **Internal dialogue**

The meaning of the structure of the language, decisions concerning placement, color, size, or additions, when held up as individual elements in the collages, may seem at times inconsistent. The final decisions concerning the placement, color and size were made taking into consideration how

each element in relation to the others in the collage combines and impacts the internal dialogue and the strength of the overall composition.

### **Collage texts**

These texts are also a collage, written from the narratives paired with each photograph in the panel. How the photographs and their narratives informed each other helped me to select what issues the text focused on. It also elicited new thoughts and informed my understanding of my experiences in new ways. Each text includes passages which refer to my understanding of the content belonging to my students and content belonging to myself. Just as there is an internal dialogue between the photographs and a structure to their placement, so to is their in the texts. Although the sequence which develops each text is determined by the layering of content and meaning I wish to convey, it is not delivered through a structural dialogue imposed on it. I did sort and group the content of the stories for each text. The texts are consistently fixed flush to the surface of each collage.

Each text speaks from the sea of influencing factors under which I was swamped and mirrors the layering built into the structure of each panel. All the influencing factors related in the texts play their role by impacting my decisions, my understanding and my concerns, every morning and afternoon of each day, living and working in this community. Depending on any number of variables, which I was not in control, my focus on one influential factor over another shifted daily. My ability to remain open to their influence created a confusing ambiguity which was often exhausting.



However, on the job I feel that it motivated me to try new things, to take new steps in my personal and professional development. In this way the content of the texts reflects the reality as I experienced it.

The texts speak about my understanding of the voice I had, the space I occupied and the shifts which developed. The placement of each text, printed on transparent adhesive film, helps to place it directly in the field of action. The content of the texts conveys my understanding of the events depicted, how they informed and impacted me. They both support and establish the internal dialogue.

In addition, the texts permit me to convey the emotional impact this work had on me and the multitude of feelings it generated. The texts convey painful moments of despair and fear, as well as moments of hope and achievement. It provided me with a means whereby I could articulate my respect, my love, my passion, and my drive for the work my students and I were doing.

### **Summaries of Each Photographic Collage Listed by Title**

**Note :** Color reproductions of each photographic collage and their text follow in chapter four.

#### **Contemporary vs. Traditional Values**

In this collage, the large photo is fixed flush to the surface plane. It depicts a class project, a tipi structure with traditional Cree values written on slips

of paper and hooked at the base of the poles. Hooked over the top of the poles, additional notes are written which describe how those values are practiced by the students in their day-to-day lives. Cut into this photo is a window where a smaller color photo is placed. This photo depicts content I brought to the context, a sign which I posted the second day of class, reading *Empowerment - finding our voice, taking our place*. Suspended from the lower edge of the board are the traditional values which we studied in class. Even though I constructed the tipi lesson, I feel that I merely elicited information from the students, asking them to look at themselves from a different perspective. The moment was powerfully theirs, the content of the large color photo belongs to my students. The text is fixed flush to the surface plane.

### **Life Doesn't Frighten Me**

I wrote a story in this collage, on the surface in color felt pen. This story was a class assignment which asked the students to rewrite a children's poem, filling in the content with personal subject matter. The event, and how the information was elicited and conveyed, belongs to me. I constructed the class lesson and gave the instructions which the students followed. There is a larger black and white photo which is also fixed flush to the surface and represents content belonging to my students. I chose black and white because I wanted to signal content which depicted the strong connection I felt to the cultural and historical continuity of the moment of our actions. Also, the slogan on my student's T-shirt says, "Save James Bay". I wanted to underline the historical nature of an

ongoing battle. The story is also interrupted by a small color photo which depicts my students writing an essay, an assignment which belongs to me, as it comes from my role as a teacher. There is a text fixed flush to the surface plane; however, it is presented on a separate panel so as not to compete with the story.

### **Goldfish Syndrome**

Raised from the surface plane, is a large color photograph of a student cooking in her tipi. I chose this photograph because I wanted to illustrate how my students' relax and unwind, finding peace and solitude by participating in this traditional Cree practice. The smaller color photos placed in windows indicate content that I own, as students are carrying out lessons animating what I had been teaching. There is a text written in gray felt pen on the surface plane. It is taken from class work where the students were analyzing a text of a native woman's experiences. The text is in gray to signal the long standing, pervasive nature of the problem in the community. Marks in color indicate the way I asked the students to analyze these issues. The text is fixed flush to the surface plane.

### **Baby Wrap**

This collage contains three photographs. The large color photograph is raised off the surface plane. This raised photo indicates content which belongs to my students, i.e., their cultural heritage. It is in color and raised to emphasize my students' participation in an activity which I understood to reflect Cree cultural practices, traditional in nature, but very much part of the day-to-day life. Here one of my students is demonstrating to a child

how to wrap a baby. There are two smaller color photos placed in windows which depict me animating an activity to two different age groups. The surface plane features rubbings of images depicting traditional Cree objects still in daily use. I added the rubbings to unite the surface plane with images which underline how identity is strongly rooted in their cultural history, impacting each day's activities. The text is fixed flush to the surface plane.

### **Rocks**

In this collage, there is a large black and white photograph, fixed flush to the surface, which depicts children throwing rocks into an unseen body of water. I used black and white to depict the timeless and universal nature of the subject. There is a raised silhouette of a Cree child throwing rocks, signaling the active nature of the activity, in this Cree community. Both these photographs depict content which belongs to my students, or in this case their children. In the smaller color photo, placed in a window cut into the black and white, a collection of rocks belonging to me is displayed. On a shelf mounted below the main panel are some of those rocks which the children and I collected. The text is fixed flush to the surface plane.

### **Bowls**

A large black and white photograph is fixed flush to the surface plane in this collage . It depicts a cherished family heirloom belonging to my student. The smaller color photo is placed in a window which cuts into the black and white. You can see the lesson I was teaching — how to work with plaster. We were making Halloween treat bowls. The content came

from me, my presence as the teacher, and therefore belongs to me. The composition was inspired when I found I had several images with bowls. It struck me that it would be interesting to see how their impact informed me. The text is fixed flush to the surface plane.

### **Poupon Bus**

In the large color photograph raised off the surface plane of this collage, a traditional Cree Walking Out ceremony is taking place. This ceremony is very important. Held for each child in the community, it illustrates Cree cultural content, and belongs to my students. In one of the two smaller photos placed in windows, you can see an infant at the Centre, sitting on a mat in the infant play room. The other photo shows children going for a ride in the Centre's poupon bus. Both photos depict activities which have occurred as a result of the work I was doing, and therefore belongs to me; I am responsible for their origin. The remaining surface of the collage features a rubbing of an image of a set of tipi poles, uniting the action on the surface plane. The gray rubbings represent the historical continuity present in the subject of the collage, creating a visual link with the tipi in the color photograph. In addition the gray serves to set up, and contrast with, the contemporary nature of the subjects depicted in the two smaller color photos. The text is fixed flush to the surface plane.

### **Practical Training**

The larger photo fixed to the surface plane is black and white. It depicts content which belongs to my students. I used the image of individuals walking alone or apart from each other to support the text which speaks

about the nature of individual decisions and personal battles. I like the use of black and white here; it signals the pervasive nature of these social issues, and the impact they have had in weaving the historical fabric of the community which today's social context, is heavily wrapped. There are two smaller color photos which are placed in windows depicting lessons the students are carrying out. The content belongs to me; it is part of the content I was teaching in response to the students' questions on how to provide experiences for the children different from those they experienced. *The text is fixed flush to the surface plane.*

### **Reversals**

In this collage, the large color photo depicts Cree cultural content very much in practice today, but I have fixed it flush to the surface plane because I am in it. The student is showing me how to roast a goose. Here I am the student and she is the teacher. For a short time the field of action is compressed as we come together to act on one plane. A smaller color photo is raised off the surface plane, depicting me in a tipi. I wanted to emphasize that as the students share with me their cultural heritage it creates a strong sense of belonging. In the window another color photo depicts my students in Montreal. Here the students are participating in "my world"; this reversal successfully shared, also creates a sense of belonging. This sense of belongingness in each other's context is indicated in the reversed placement of the photos. My students are placed in the window where I place subject matter which I have indicated as belonging to me or coming from my context. I am raised off the surface

plane in the space where I place content brought into play by my students' Cree heritage. The text is fixed flush to the surface plane.

### **Hiawatha**

In this collage there is a large color photo raised off the ground. This photo is placed here because it depicts the childrens' values. These are based on Cree culture, both traditional and contemporary. Also in color, but on the surface plane, written in felt pen, are lines of a poem written by children who live in Montreal. They illustrate the stereotypical ideas children hold today of native people, and how these ideas charmed my students. Set in the window is a sepia tone image of my grandmother dressed as the idealized Young Hiawatha. On the surface plane of the collage are rubbings of this image, which signal the pervasive nature these stereotypes still hold in today's world. They represent content which I own and which is shared by the population at large, as well as by my students. The text is fixed flush to the surface plane.

### **Leaving Party**

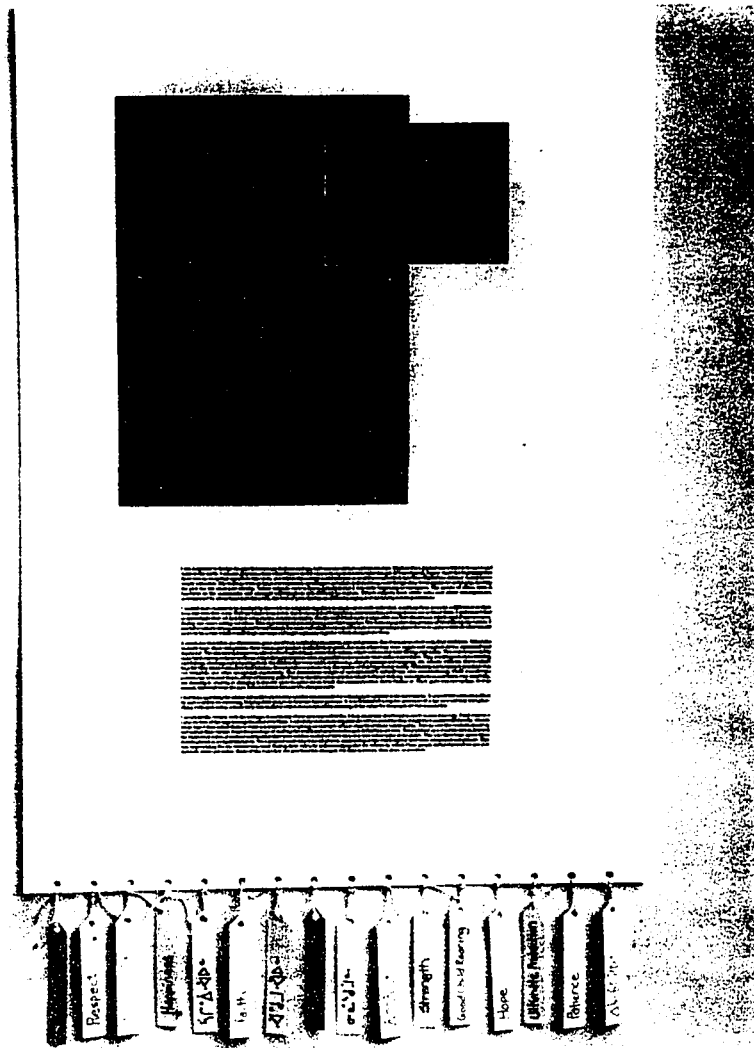
The larger color photograph is fixed flush to the surface; it depicts one of my students rocking her child to sleep in a hammock. The content belongs to her. Raised in a smaller color photo is a picture of me, participating at my students' request in a Cree ceremony which they have reinvented to accommodate me and the particulars of the event. Once again I have reversed the placement; the who, of whom my students are, has expanded the who that I am, effectively contributing to me. The importance of this moment and what it represents, are the reasons I have raised this image. In

the other photo my project manager is presenting me with a plaque. He is honoring me by reading the engraved message out loud in a very non-Cree fashion. I have placed this photo in the window where I place content which belongs to me because he has adapted this style of presentation for this event. During these events and throughout my time in the community, I was very aware of everyone's struggle to acknowledge me, to call my name. In order to recognize their efforts, I have written my name in gray, in Cree syllabics, around the border of this panel, indicating my understanding of the many ways they voiced their appreciation for me. The text is fixed flush to the surface plane.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Plates of the Photographic Collages, Their Texts and Analysis**



### **Contemporary vs. Traditional Values**

color photography, mat board, self adhesive transparent film,

sting, paper.

75 x 49.5 cm.

1998

### **Contemporary vs. Traditional Values**

I felt desperate to bridge the gaps between my students and me, between our cultures and across time. I had made a gradual commitment to come and teach in the north. I can not pinpoint a time when I knew or felt secure in my decision to take this job. If I am honest, I knew since the beginning that there was an unspoken agenda to this work, one which the college could not hire us to address and which the Cree Child Care Advisor would never clearly articulate. My students were at times overwhelmed, unwilling to articulate it themselves, even though they lived amidst its awful grip, bearing the pain for the most part silently. Taboo subjects were a living principal that I was only beginning to recognize. The nature of taboo, how it functions in the community and amongst individuals is still difficult to explain. Taboo subjects have silent rules and silent consequences, accompanied by silent fears and silent pain, the kind of pain that has no difficulty raging and screaming across generations.

I wanted each student to be touched by the work we would do together, to reach out to each individual, enabling them to make a difference in their lives and who they were. Perhaps I have been naive, but it was a naiveté born from determination and sometimes not so blind faith. I understood that as individuals they all had their own stories, numerous stories. On the wall I had made a sign after our first discussion which read *Empowerment, finding our voice, taking our place*. This sign remained posted during our time together. We were engaged in the process of identifying our values. I needed a vehicle strong enough and broad enough for each individual to invest with their own meaning a place for us to make a start on what

would prove to be a ride which would forge our team and begin a journey together which changed our lives.



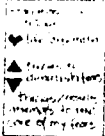
It struck me that often our discussions grew out of two conflicting structures, past and present. Our discussions dealt with Cree traditions. When the students were clear and precise, their voices and posture declared their pride, but most often they were vague and weighed down, oppressed and depressed. The discussion became muddled when I asked them about their values, which values they were living with today. The answer invariably came back raising cultural traditions which they practiced as close as possible in the manner their elders would have. They would speak about hunting and fishing, cleaning and preparing food, the clothes that were made, ceremonies, rites of passage and camping, etc. Clearly with me, this is where they felt they should articulate their identity. However this was in no way the totality of their day-to-day reality. Claiming contemporary practices was not desirable, nor often recognized consciously. The tremendous weight of unmentionable cultural loss was overwhelming. Guilt was always present, my own and theirs, a kind of historic guilt. I had to shoulder mine and that which I shared with my own historic connections, very carefully, not denying it, sharing it, bringing it into the open in order not to break the communication but to further it. Their guilt was not spoken. It was present, inherited from the past, from traditions lost and life changes made.

I had been searching for advice and a Cree elementary teacher recommended a written paper updated in the community. It articulated

values identified by native elders as nurturing, helping their people to become better persons. It was illustrated using the structure of a tipi as a cultural metaphor. Along with each value, a local story was included which demonstrated the meaning of the value for the people of this community.

I reviewed this closely with the students. A ceremony of our own was called for. I then randomly distributed to each student four tags. I had written a value on two of the tags leaving the other two blank. I asked the students to consider the values and what they might have meant traditionally. On the blank tags I then asked them to write a sentence or two giving an example of how they lived these values today. One-by-one the students stood up and named their values. I had the privilege of reading the traditional practices for each definition out loud. They picked up a wooden dowel, hooked the traditional value at its base and hooked their own written version of how they live that value today at its point. This was then leant up on three dowels placed in a tripod formation. We continued until they were all placed, constructing a tipi which represented their values past and present. This was empowering for the women who were finding their voice by acknowledging that the values by which Cree people define themselves are still distinctly alive and active. Some of the ways they are practiced has changed, but their presence, their place, is constant.

♥ Life Doesn't frighten me ♥

- ⚡ Bears in the camp
  - ⚡ Mice in the tipi
  - ♥ Life doesn't frighten me at all
  - ⚡ Assignments and school tests
  - ⚡ Dentists with long needles
  - ♥ Life doesn't frighten me at all
  - ⚡ Terrified of leaving home to go to school
  - ♥ Life doesn't frighten me at all
  - ▲ Auto loader to get his/her gun
  - ▼ Got the water in a feast
  - ▼ Elements are 8, 9 and more of
  - ♥ Life doesn't frighten me at all
  - ▲ I don't...
  - ▼ ...
  - ▲ ...
  - ▼ ...
  - ♥ ...
  - ▼ ...
  - ♥ ...
  - ▼ ...
  - ♥ ...
  - ▼ ...
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### Life Doesn't Frighten Me

black & white, color photography, mat board,  
self adhesive transparent film, felt pen

91.5 x 49.5 cm. 37 x 49.5 cm.

1998

### **Life Doesn't Frighten Me**

Finding safe ways for the women, who as students were paralyzed by shyness to articulate themselves, was becoming increasingly difficult. Some students had yet to voice a complete sentence. It would not be until well into the summer that I would be able to identify each of their voices. Writing was also problematic; some students simply could not express themselves. Asking students to prepare simple notes and speak to me was a temporary option but only valid for a few, given their shyness. Sitting with a student for 10 to 20 minutes waiting for a simple reply was common. Only the fact that they never got up and walked out kept me seated with them.

We read a children's story called Life Doesn't Frighten Me, written by Maya Angelou and illustrated by Jean-Michel Basquiat. We considered how to analyze its form, coming up with four categories of statements which we coded, creating a key in order to simplify the analysis. We then rewrote the story, substituting the coded phrases with personal content, which made it a powerful experience for the women and created a safe way to raise issues for group discussion.

When I asked them to select one personal character trait and trace its development over a life span or to map its influencing factors at a given time, the silence was breached. The women revealed dreaded information which I would professionally and morally be required to act on. How could I respect the individual issues and the immediate attention they unquestionably demanded without closing us down? I did not want to

merely pay lip service to it, thereby jeopardizing the respect and strength that would be required by the women in order to see the Child Care Centre take its true place in the community. How would I act within the means and available community resources? How could I gage the willingness or the lack of will to address these issues without suppressing them or sacrifice the trust I needed to build with these women and the community? We needed to build the centre's integrity necessary to deliver the services and mandate entrusted to it.

I went in search of help. Project managers, student counselors, community workers and teachers, Cree, all quietly told me of their similar experiences, but no one offered a solution. A whirlpool was fast forming around me, and I felt its vortex sucking me under. I was floundering in front of my students; they waited, expecting my fate and that of the project to go down, not unlike others before me. I carried on and slowly, together with the students, we began to chip away at the impossible. Beginning with the permission of a single student, her issues, along with my own personal stories, were laid bare for our scrutiny. Background was researched and testimonies of residential school syndrome and healing processes were discussed. Violence, suicide, depression, neglect or abuse of children and elders, unhealthy parenting skills, physical and mental deterioration, dysfunction of the entire family unit and community, personal risk, ostracism, and isolation were all topics of concern. Some of the unspoken was spoken, some of the pain was revealed.



I began to speak about transmission and transformation. As a class we traced the evolution of a value through its many manifestations. We looked at the different levels of governments and their records of achievement. We looked at the family, at how our grandmothers had taught our mothers, and how our mothers had taught us. We considered how the spoken lessons and the often more potent unspoken lessons had been passed down. The students debated what they wanted to keep and pass on to their children and what they needed to reject, change or update. We looked at the professional code of ethics and considered what we would do should we be put to the test? We looked at documented messages from elders speaking out on these issues and at their advice. We gathered the messages and the lessons meant for us. What changes and what issues would we stand for? We acknowledged the challenges already facing us. Negotiating a means to communication and the building of trust would be long and hard won.

Women speaking to women found new courage together; heroes were born and a team was created. Complete with its strengths and faults, we took our first collective step on a path with no known end. We trusted that each step together would be worthy of the effort, praying that we could live up to it and hoping that the benefit would ease the cost it demanded to bring us there.

- ① battered wife → physical danger → physical danger (not)  
 accepted being battered, - esteem, (putting up with it)  
 Speak to no one → isolated, alone, - belongingness + love  
 no friends → - belongingness + love  
 safe → - danger  
 she → - esteem + love  
 argue → - safety  
 make → ? esteem  
 more → - safety  
 bar → more  
 fight → danger  
 yelling → - esteem
- ② She got → - belongingness + love (?)  
 She experienced the first slap, - belongingness + love  
 arguments, - belongingness + love, making up ? esteem  
 no → - safety  
 can → drugs on - choice  
 No → drinking - choice
- ③ Children were born + esteem, not mother + esteem  
 her and → - choice  
 friends? → - belonging  
 for she → not a growth  
 mother → choice  
 physical → - choice  
 best → false choice  
 ④ best → physical danger  
 again and → - safety  
 friends → ? belonging  
 Did not → ? safety  
 common → - love  
 tranquilizers - negative choice  
 continued drinking → - safety, - physical danger, false choice  
 nothing mattered anymore, no esteem, no love.

### Goldfish Syndrome

color photography, mat board, self adhesive transparent film,

felt pen

84.5 x 49.5 cm.

1998

### **Goldfish Syndrome**

With a published testimony of a native woman's experiences as a battered wife, we coded and analyzed the text using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. We noted if choices resulted in actions which raised or negated the woman's well being. In their journals students studied their own choices in order to better understand how some decisions meet immediate needs but do not always result in positive steps in the long run. We called these false choices.

The goal of this lesson was to help the women be more objective. We changed the names in the stories to others in the community and evaluated our personal reactions. As educators the women will have to face difficult situations, hold difficult conversations and report on events where they will find their professional objectivity threatened. Everyone knew all the issues at stake, but tended to form quite different opinions, ranging from very harsh condemnations to sympathetic understanding depending on their relationship with the people in question. This is a sensitive issue, which is highlighted by living in a small community, in ways I do not think I was ever able to fully appreciate.

Communication was compounded by the community's own hierarchy. Students present in the class represented the complete social structure. Some families were not spoken to and did not speak to others. Here in our democratic class I was asking for generations of class distinctions to be dropped. We risked very personal subject matter as potential dinner

conversation for the whole community. Sometimes I would realize that we were speaking about a student's nephew or sister. When working with the board I would face the same situation, every one was related to each other. Objectivity and confidentiality are questions of extreme importance. These courses and this project put people to the test in ways for which I can only partially account for.

Once I confronted a student with an ultimatum. I informed her that she had to choose, "*Join the team or get out*". Joining this team did not afford one the luxury of divided loyalties, nor the comfort of separating family from the work place. In a community this small, one lives only one life; distinctions between personal and professional, private and public are unknown qualities. When you choose to speak or to remain silent you do so from a single stance. In order to commit to the child care team, that was the stand you were required to take. Only my students and the woman in question understood what weight the ultimatum carried. We had to trust in each member of the team to handle issues responsibly. Here leadership meant maintaining the team, listening and addressing everyone's stake in the issues and fostering trust on all fronts. Breaches of confidentiality amongst family members had also meant information was shared across the Board of Directors, amongst the students, the Centre's clientele, the bank and the Band Council. We were reflecting on the importance of professional standards and our values. We considered how values are taught and passed on in the community. The students looked at these issues from a variety of perspectives, as women, as mothers, as students and

as future educators. What type of educator would they be? What would they model and teach the children in their care?

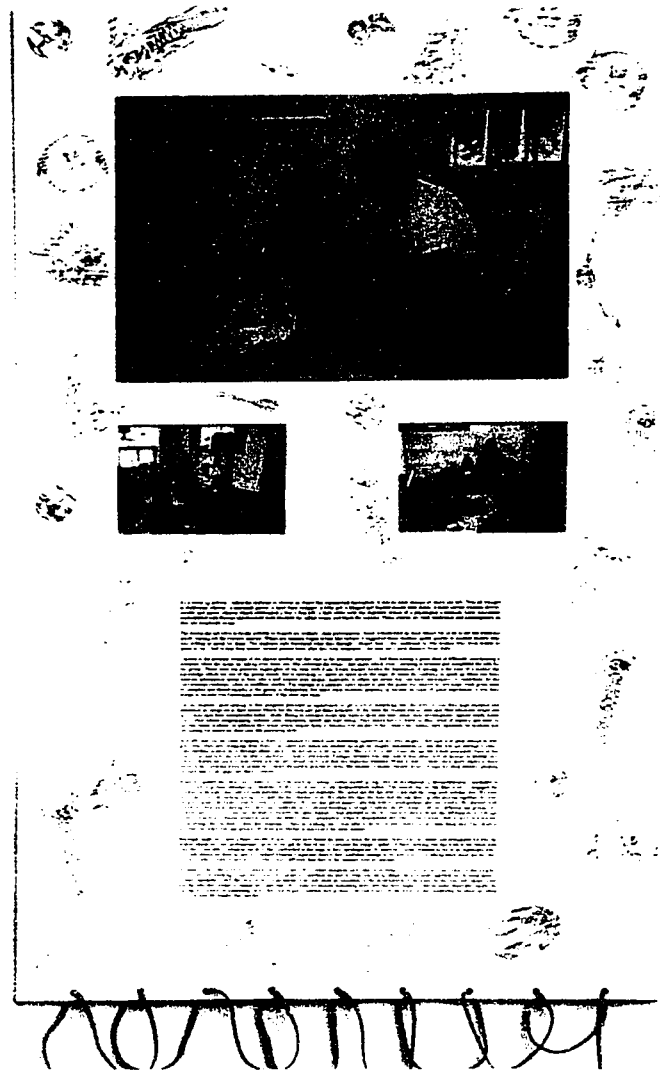
In my opinion, my students and the Crees of this community seemed to have very long memories. People became branded by their mistakes, as if they walked around wearing them protruding from a mask. Some issues were widely gossiped about yet never addressed directly with the person in question. Others were never discussed, yet no one was able to completely dismiss them. Some issues had a long history of being pushed into the category of the unspoken. Several times my students recalled issues which as children they asked about but were told not to discuss, as it would embarrass another, or hurt a third party. It has been my finding that these same issues represented a great deal of personal pain and sacrifice on the part of the person who most often felt he or she was keeping a secret. In fact the most painful secrets were issues from which everyone suffered and knew about, making the silent conspiracy a widespread code of behavior. Standing out in ways other than what was considered popular was not something to value. The pressure of living in a small community was tremendous. Being different was often equal to being at fault or being a failure. Standing out against an issue was soon dealt with by time-honored methods of intimidation and community pressure. Little was ever forgiven or forgotten.

Teasing is also a problem and functions as a major social construct dictating the norms of behavior and mediating the punishment brought on to any who deviate from the communities' expectations. It is especially

potent amongst the children. Voicing one's feelings, respecting the feelings of others and developing true empathy which tolerates difference, supports individuality, and encourages compassion is something I believe all educators need to think about and which formed the foundation for much of what I emphasized throughout my teaching.

As new educators who were struggling with simply handling the group and providing safe, age appropriate activities, these challenges were still beyond their grasp. However one or two of the women who had experience and who had acquired some skills in managing groups of children began to think about their own personal style of interacting with the children in this light. It was these women who understood the emphasis of what I was teaching. They identified a lack in their skills, and a void in their own childhood experiences. They began to explore ways to develop their own skills of animating and responding to the children often empowering the children to identify and speak about their own feelings, by considering a variety of ways to act. Choice was not something my students, nor the children, were very familiar with.

Sometimes I felt frightened by the enormity of it all. I received warnings from a number of people and had to learn to deal with the fact that I was living in isolation, yet visible to all. Like a goldfish, I was on display. In my worst moments I felt my insecurity slowly draining the water from my bowl. I experienced my vulnerability and felt helpless in the face of all these challenges, yet at the same time I found strength in my determination and the determination of my students — together we would carry on.



**Baby Wrap**

color photography, mat board, self adhesive transparent film,

graphite, leather

82.5 x 49.5 cm.

1998

## **Baby Wrap**

As a warm up activity I asked the students to choose an object that represented themselves. It was an adult version of show and tell. They all brought in traditional objects - a tamarack goose, a bear bone scrapper, a little girl's fringed and beaded moose hide dress, a hand carved wooden shovel, paddle and spoon, objects which celebrated a boy's first kill, a hide rattle with the digestive stones of a ptarmigan's stomach, baby moccasins embroidered with flowers and trimmed with muskrat fur, infant wraps, and black fly bonnets. These objects are both traditional and contemporary as they are commonly in use.

The lesson did not serve to be the activity to launch my students' class participation. Some women held up their object for us all to see but could not speak, staring out the window instead. When ten minutes began to feel like torture, I suggested these students speak quietly to another student who was willing to speak for them. The students only translated what they thought I should hear. I was saddened by the women who were unable to speak to me. I had to hear their stories related second hand, after they were translated. This kept me a great distance from them.

I shared in the personal triumph of my shyest student one day later in the summer semester. I had been having a great deal of difficulty coordinating a schedule when she spoke up, taking over from me. She corrected the errors I had made which were confusing everyone and completed the task for the group! These were the precious highlights of my time with them. Every teacher knows the frustration of seeing in the eyes of a student the



knowledge which the rest of the group needs, but is unwilling or unable to share with the class. At times the inability to speak up when you have relevant information seems to bury one's self esteem even deeper, especially if others are aware that you have information to contribute. So the conversation continues, often in needless circles. The triumph of a silenced voice raised to join the group was shared by everyone; trust given must be accepted and shared equally or the group is diminished. For these silent students speaking up became an issue of great importance, it was their pledge to become true functioning members of the child care team.

For my students, participating in this program provided an opportunity to get a job at something they did well. It was their high standard and reputation as caregivers in their homes which for the most part got them accepted. At the onset the women had no idea that their education would add up to more than their considerable family skills. Being an educator would ask them to think and learn about child development, special needs, home visits, after school programming, holistic care, animation, health and well-being. They would have to build on their level of literacy and learn to become better students. In addition this work would require them to become role models in the community, setting new standards for students and advocating for improved child care and parenting skills.

How efficient you are when wrapping a child is a measure by which your mothering capabilities are often judged. This skill is of great interest to little girls, who often play wrapping their dolls. This child will watch my student through the lengthy demonstration, but she will not attempt it today. Cree

children acquire skills through observation. The initiative is left up to her. She will try it only when she has the whole procedure fixed in her mind's eye and feels she will be able to perform it close to perfection. Younger children who take note of less detail will be quicker to attempt new actions. Adults are quick to note when actions are carried out to less than the expected standard. When a child's observation skills improve, there seems to be a slowing down of initiative; a more thoughtful process evolves. My student, a mother herself, slowly wraps the child silently, pointing out each step as she gauges the child's interest.

When we opened the Child Care Centre for the first practical training, I found myself giving a few all encompassing demonstrations. I attempted to cover a lot of ground introducing a number of skills all at once. In one demonstration called "The yellow sun on the blue river", I engaged the children in dramatic play and we manipulated a few simple art materials. We acted out the fast winter sun and the long slow summer sun. We were the frozen river, the rushing spring river and the lazy summer river. We were the rain, the river and the sun dancing and playing together, we were the green grass, the bushes, and the new pine needles. We tore and glued papers, playing with its arrangement and movement. We painted with yellow and blue paint, mixing the colors and mediums as we pleased building a collage. I carried out this lesson with two different age groups, two to three and four to six year old children in exactly the same manner. I had planned to use this lesson to demonstrate the differences in both age groups, expecting to discuss attention span, fine motor control, preparation, when to demonstrate and when to back away, how to involve

everyone, acknowledge the children's ideas and respond to their art making, etc. I was able to do this in part; however, my plan backfired. The children surprised me when both age groups followed and reacted in practically the same manner.

Hindsight might have been a better teacher if only I could have found the time to leave the moment. Sometimes my belief and enthusiasm for who the student educators could professionally grow to be, got the best of me. I confused the image I upheld of them carrying out this work in the future with what they were able to integrate and how they performed at this stage in their development. At times this caused frustration for us all, especially when my expectations set them up and we crashed because I expected them to feel confident enough to try new ways of working much more quickly than they were able or ready to and in ways which were different than they or the children were accustomed to.

My belief in them did however constantly reinforce them. We worked alongside each other in all things. We really needed each other for this program and my style of teaching to succeed. I was very proud to contribute my part to what was taking shape, these women uplifted me. In some areas it seemed expedient to shift the focus of my expectations from individual development to the development of the team. In this way individuals could take the time they needed to attempt new activities. As a team we became something *more*, and that *more* began to realize some observable results. As a group we focused on supporting each other and

**began to address new ground. I strived to provide the structure and leadership the situation called for, to become the teacher they needed.**



*[Faint, illegible text, possibly a title or description of the artwork]*

### **Rocks**

**black & white, color photography, mat board,  
self adhesive transparent film, wood, rocks**

**63.5 x 49.5 cm.**

**1998**

## **Rocks**

In town, I was a curiosity to both adults and children. They often sought me out, repeatedly asking me my name and what I was doing. As I walked down the road I'd hear my name being whispered. Simply as a means to stop me and initiate an exchange in the few English words they knew. The children would call out to me, "What's your name?" . Patiently, every day I'd stop to tell the children my name, often five or six times as each child gathered the courage to speak to me. Smiling my encouragement I'd return the gesture and ask them who they were. I had met a number of the younger children at work. For once they were enjoying the status of being an authority on a subject of great interest to their older peers, who knew little about me or the Child Care Centre. They had heard however that it was filled with child sized furniture and toys and that the grown ups taught you games and sat down to play or eat with you.

In the summer the children ride their bikes out to throw rocks in a lagoon. The lagoon is a body of water on the circuit, a dirt road which circles the community extending a couple of miles beyond the hills and is a popular walk. I had been walking one afternoon with a student and her daughter when we stopped to throw a few rocks ourselves. We were soon joined by a number of the community's children. That afternoon we delighted in throwing rocks, seeing whose made the biggest splash with the most satisfying sound, whose rocks were thrown the farthest or who could skip their rock the most times. Rocks became a great socializer between me and the children, they were a simple subject over which we could communicate and play easily together.

This proved to be true in my relationship with adults as well. When I went on picnics, after we had discussed the views and the food, the conversation turned to the rocks we picked up and turned over, comparing them and filling our pockets. While out on the bay with my project manager, our conversation was eased when we stopped to walk around an island, over my interest in the rocks, their colors and patterns. Easily we'd enter into the enjoyment of the moment this line of conversation provided, selecting a variety to bring back to the community, laughing over the possible uses we invented for them. Often the nature of my conversations with my project managers were very tough going, as we tried to make sense out of the momentum of the work we had committed ourselves to. The simple pleasures of a sunny day, a boat ride and the rocks we collected seemed to be as light and enticing as the summer breeze we were enjoying.

Back at the house where I was living I had been assembling my rock collection on the wooden stair railing. I wanted to keep a piece of those moments where neither language, culture, age, nor pressure of work barred the pleasure and enjoyment of these simple human exchanges. To my delight this collection began to grow as the children selected "beauties" and anonymously left them on the balcony.

As my student, her daughter and I continued our walk around the circuit, the child began to fill her pockets with rocks. Soon both her pockets and mine were bulging, we had no room left for any more and it became

increasingly difficult to walk. My student had a word with her daughter which put a stop to the collecting for the moment. Later when I asked her what she had said, she explained she told her daughter that her Grandfather had placed the rocks there and he wouldn't want them all moved at once.





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### **Bowls**

black & white, color photography, mat board,  
self adhesive transparent film

75 x 49.5 cm.

1998

## **Bowls**

My students were teaching me how to bake bannock, a Cree bread. There are many recipes, and each community has its preferences. Some of the bannock was baked in an iron pot, and the rest we roasted on sticks over the fire. My student told me with great pride that the cast iron pot was a family treasure; it had been her grandmother's and was the first object which she had acquired by trading furs at a trading post.

The inset photo depicts the students making Halloween treat bowls. Halloween is a very popular community event. Although minus the number of pumpkins I am used to associating with the magic of this time, it is still exciting for the children. I used the opportunity this occasion provided to have some fun. I was introducing how to manipulate plaster; it was a new experience for everyone. I did not spend Halloween in this community. My students were going to begin a Cree culture course with a local teacher, so I took the opportunity to travel farther North. Here I was involved in an ongoing commitment with an Inuit teacher training program on self esteem and children's rights.

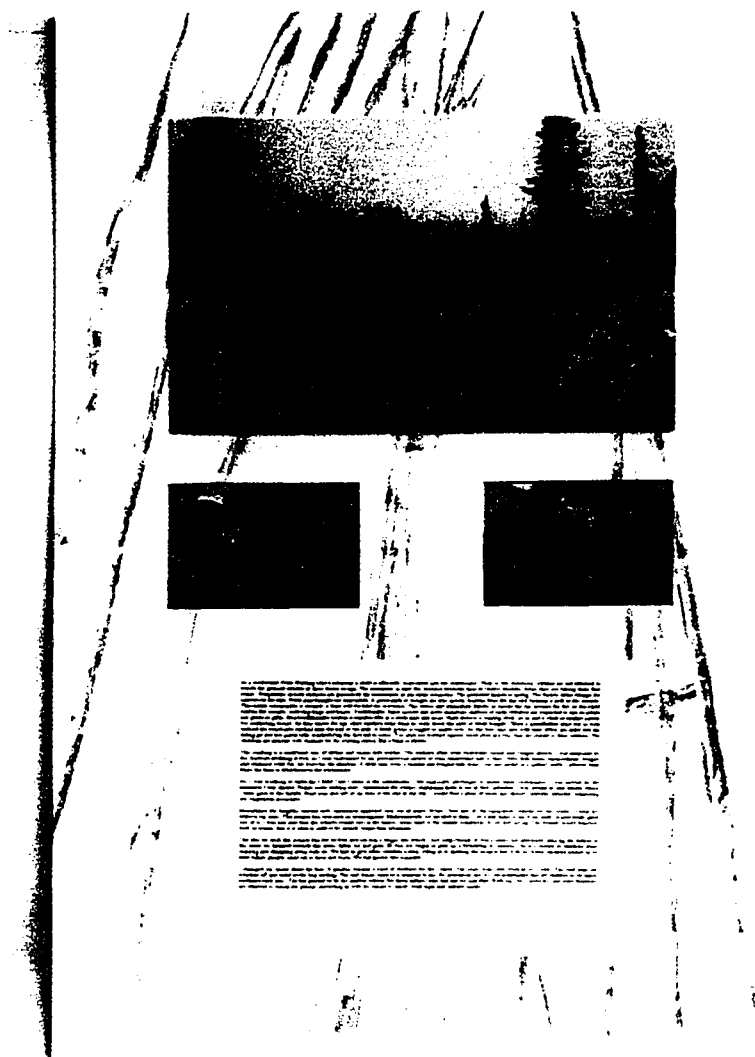
Originally there was not a Cree culture course in the program we were delivering. Previously both cultural values and personal development issues were covered adequately in the courses Communication : Relating To Self, and Communication : Relating To Others. As I taught the Self course, I began to realize that the program fell short of meeting the needs of these students. The courses raised painful issues, posing many questions but offering few solutions. I felt that raising issues only increased the pain

of personal and cultural loss. We needed to make more concrete efforts. Not being Cree, I could not help define the next step for these women, although I felt I had to actively foster it. The way I could best do that was by evaluating the program and advocating for improvements. Therefore, when the necessity to write a new program became apparent, new courses were created to specifically meet our growing understanding of the students' needs.

Adding more courses and developing a new program would not be enough. It did, however, give rise to a commitment to include the students in the courses offered for Cree elementary school teachers. For this I was profoundly grateful. The women who were teachers on the Board of Directors, who were so integral to the educational process in the community and who were very involved in developing the Cree curriculum and teacher training for the Cree School Board, understood the challenges the students and I were facing. These women listened to my worries and modeled for me how to be patient, how to take one step at a time. They were rebuilding their future, and they believed in the future of the Cree culture. It was one of these women who agreed to teach the Cree culture course and who, with support from the others, agreed to continue to include the students in their professional and cultural training and development.

Through the support I received from these board members, I began to see how their strength and determination would slowly knit together the painful tears, over the next generation(s) restoring and recreating the fabric

of Cree culture. It helped to define my perimeters, the margin of space where I could effectively teach and offer my services. I was often overcome by doubts. I knew many critics felt a Cree person would have been preferable in this job. I continually sought approval and permission from members in the community to use the voice of authority my role entailed. I never stopped worrying about being the students' main teacher, their main influence. In the city, students and teachers alike benefit from the melting pot of opinions and culture of others. Here, while I was the other, it was they who were at stake.



**Poupon Bus**

color photography, mat board, self adhesive transparent film,

graphite

76 x 49.5 cm.

1998

## **Poupon Bus**

In a traditional Cree Walking Out Ceremony a child is officially welcomed into the community. Prior to the ceremony, infants are not allowed to touch the ground outside of their home or tipi. The ceremony is held for children between nine to twelve months, when they are taking their first steps . Frequently several children are greeted by the community in the same ceremony. The preferred season is spring. The family often change the canvas on the tipi. Fresh pine boughs are laid inside. A green path of boughs are also spread, leading from the tipi and forming a path to the outside. The entire community is invited; a feast will be held for everyone. The elders and immediate family sit inside the tipi around the fire as the child makes the rounds, receiving hugs and kisses. Traditionally, hand carved and sewn miniature replicas of tools children are expected to use as adults are given as gifts. Boys traditionally receive a wooden rifle in a cloth case and an ax. Girls receive a roasting stick, an ax and a cloth or leather carrier for collecting wood. As they leave the tipi, their mothers help them to walk down the path of fresh boughs. Often a grandfather slips out to hide behind the wood pile stacked near the end of the path. A fresh goose is rigged to topple over. As the boys take aim with their rifles, the elder lets the string go and the goose falls, symbolizing the first kill to come. Toy axes are wielded against wood piles and tiny logs are placed in their carriers. The children are greeted with pleasure by the waiting crowd, and a feast is shared.

The clothing is a traditional mix of tartans and moose hide leather. The mothers often wear traditional tartans and fringed shawls. I was surprised

by the Scottish clothing at first, as I was confronted by my preconceived notion of what constituted native dress. New hide boots, embroidered, fringed and trimmed with fur, are worn by the children. A child may wear a beaded and fringed hide dress, vest and jacket or a quilted outfit. Leftover food from the feast is distributed in the community.

As I was working to build the Child Care Centre in the community I felt especially privileged to attend these ceremonies. I was moved by the attention I was shown. People were making sure I understood the events, explaining them to me as they unfolded. I was invited to take photos which I later gave to the family. Food was also left at my door at the end of the day. I would find a plate of bread and dessert carefully selected, respecting my vegetarian principles.

Sometimes the brightly colored new equipment appeared very out of place. When I first saw all the equipment ordered for the centre I could not believe my eyes. The poupon bus was such an extravagance! Diplomatically we decided to keep it on a trial basis to see if we really would make good use of it. I was not sure how the wheels would turn in the heavy, loose sand or the muddy conditions of fall and spring. The wheels would function well in winter, but it is often too cold to be outside longer than necessary.

The day we took the poupon bus for its first test run was a magic day which I will long cherish. It was a sunny hot afternoon; placing the babies in the seats we headed towards the river. After we had gone 20 feet we

began to pick up a following of children. Soon a crowd of children were running and skipping along with us. We had to give other children a turn, riding in or pushing the poupon bus with us. Some children joined us on their bikes; people came out to look and wave. We had grown into a parade.

I changed my mind about the bus. It quickly became a kind of emblem for the Centre. The extra wide tires worked very well. The roof kept the weather off and held up the bug netting. The real bonus came as a surprise to me. By provincial law it is recommended that all children be taken outdoors each day. The bus proved to be the perfect vehicle for those infants who had not yet had their Walking Out Ceremony and were therefore not allowed to touch the ground, providing us with the means to satisfy both legal and cultural needs.





[The text in this block is extremely small and illegible, appearing as a dense block of horizontal lines.]

## **Practical Training**

**black & white, color photography, mat board,  
self adhesive transparent film**

**83 x 49.5 cm.**

**1998**

### **Practical Training**

During the final practical training, problems like at any other time arose. We had in the past taken time out to deal with issues of child abuse, neglect and suicide. Now schedules and plans were upturned daily as we attempted to hang onto a student in trouble. Sometimes she just could not show up, and at other times when she did I had to send her home or pair her with another student. I could not risk her working alone with the children. This woman was dealing with a past which she had somehow miraculously survived but which was now crashing down around her. Unable to cope with the pressure, she retreated, grasping onto any available abusive, artificial support she could. The cost to her self-esteem and to the quality of life for both her and her family was devastating.

During the courses last winter, on detecting special needs in children and implementing intervention plans, we watched a video dealing with issues of incest and child abuse. The case studies presented traced the stories from their detection at a daycare through the court system, therapy and follow up activities. Even I, who had already analyzed the video's content, was once again in tears, as were my students. I didn't need the intervention of some of the women to tell me that this video had struck personal notes in the experiences of my students. As a teacher I had already shared some of my own experiences and in confidence had listened to some of theirs.

Aware of some of the women's own stories and the issues they had to overcome in their personal lives, I opened a very controversial subject. I

asked the students to think about professional help. Having discussed this with my project managers, we had written to the Cree Health Board requesting the support of a psychologist for the students. It was approved; a psychologist would fly into the community once a month and be available for the women who felt it necessary. I was under fire from my own colleagues who did not approve of the extent of my involvement or the close relationship I had established in the lives of my students. In town these issues could be addressed adequately by listening, perhaps adjusting the course schedule and by referring the problem to some one else. Here we had only ourselves to refer to. I wanted to help the women create a team which could offer support to one another in the future. I felt there would surely come a time when this could make the difference between failing the children under pressure or really effecting a positive change in the community. We were trying to build support systems for women who were faced with life threatening, changing choices.

I explained my bias as honestly as I could. That I had followed a course of therapy myself, the women knew. I spoke about how common it was to have professional support. We laughed over the television and radio programs which offered professional advice and the use of therapy as a premise for sitcoms. I joked that in town one didn't have a life if you weren't in therapy. If you wanted to be a person of the 90's, then you engaged in some form of self-help or improvement program.

I informed the students that a female psychologist was available to work with them. I had met her with the project managers. After their careful

consideration, she was approved. What I suggested was that they all have one initial appointment with the clinic, which I could schedule during class time. If they chose to pursue therapy, they could continue during class time; however it would be entirely up to them and at their own discretion. I told them I realized it was not necessary for all of them and should only be done voluntarily. I thought it was a good idea, and I was strongly recommending it, as were the project managers. It was a good way to help those who needed support get it.

The community suffered from a great deal of prejudice concerning psychologists and “therapeutic measures”. My students had told me personal accounts of when their own children had been taken from them. They had been forced out of the community under threat of not seeing their children again, unless they sought help. These nightmare stories abounded; a tremendous amount of damage was done and manifested itself in multiple fears. I did not want to repeat past offences. The students had to face the fact that they, as future child care educators, would share the responsibility for the well-being of the children in their care. Would they be strong enough to deal with issues appropriately?

Some women would have gladly agreed but were scared of family pressure and reprisal. Others told me they were pleased with this chance to speak with someone who could help them deal with the pressure in their lives. They all were afraid of ridicule from their families and were embarrassed. It just didn't due to be seen at the clinic where everyone could quickly deduce what you were there for. I knew the only way this would work

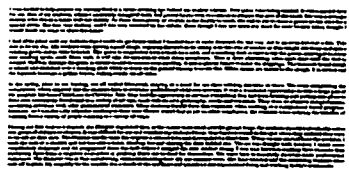
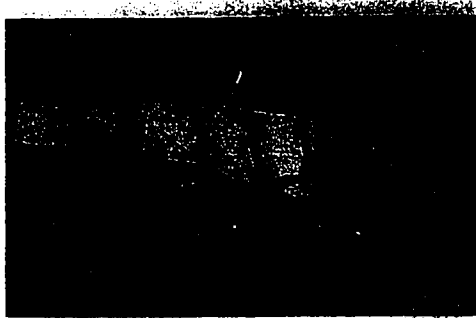
was if they all agreed to go and the decision or necessity of going could be safely laid at my door.

A week later, having had the time to think it over, I was informed that every one had agreed to participate. As a gesture of solidarity, the managers had agreed to attend a session themselves. I did, however, expect some women to develop an illness when it was their turn to go, but this did not happen. The psychologist joined the team, attended some class lectures and agreed to be a resource for the Board.

After many meetings, it was agreed that the current student in trouble could not return to finish the practical exam. If she wanted to continue to work for the Centre, the Board would have to get the "green light" from the psychologist. While I was relieved that we had built in some choices, I would soon no longer be available to advocate them. I put my faith in the women to assume this role themselves. In true Cree style, by an unspoken agreement, we rarely spoke of my leaving. As graduation began to seem like a reality, I am sure the students felt the range of feelings all graduates feel - satisfaction at proving themselves in one context and anxiety in wondering if they would be able to uphold their commitment in the next. When I reflected on the progress they had made, I did not doubt their abilities; I hoped they would move beyond their own doubts quickly, without too much hesitation and confusion.

My pride in our accomplishments and the students' progress was ringed with sadness. I would soon say good-bye to these women whom I had

grown to love and who had become the centre of my purpose over the past two years. As I took my leave after their final evaluations, I told them to look to the children in times of indecision and confusion, to consider what would be in the childrens' best interests; that would serve to guide them when making plans and taking action.



**Reversals**

color photography, mat board, self adhesive transparent film

84 x 49.5 cm.

1998

## **Reversals**

I was invited to help prepare my leaving feast in a small cooking tipi behind my student's home. Two geese were being roasted. It was a special time for me. One of my students, whom I constantly struggled with, had joined forces with two others to prepare this part of the meal. She was a younger student who shared a home with her family. As there were plenty of women in her family to cook, she had as yet to roast a goose on her own for a special event. She was very excited, and I was very touched by her efforts. Even though I had not eaten any meat for over twenty years, tonight I would break my ways to share this honor.

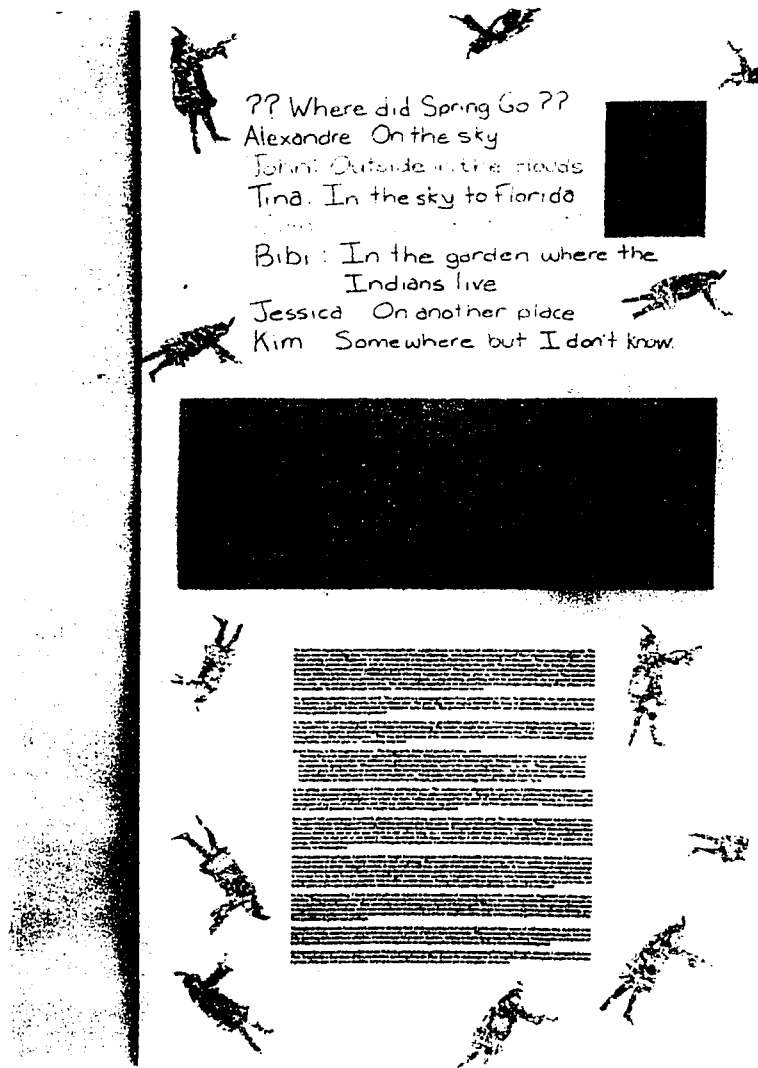
I had often joked with my students that I could not go home before I learned how to make bannock the real way, not in an oven but over a fire. This was to be my day. My students were having a good laugh, enjoying themselves by taking over the role of teacher as they taught me to tap and spin a roasting goose and to bake bannock. The goose is suspended from a hook on a cord, and a roasting stick is used to tap the goose, causing it to rotate and winding up the cord. Done well, it will take 10 minutes to wind down completely. This is done alternating sides each time until the bird is cooked. Halfway through the goose is turned on end to ensure even cooking. A pan is placed below to catch the drippings. The bannock bread dough is mixed and stretched over a roasting stick which is stuck in the ground leaning over the fire. Often raisins are mixed in the dough. It is turned and the bannock becomes a golden brown, baking evenly on all sides.



In the spring, prior to my leaving, we all visited Montreal, staying in a hotel for ten days visiting daycares in town. We were completing the competency which required that the students learn to evaluate professional child care services. It was a wonderful opportunity; to date a large part of the program had been *Child Care by Christine*. Now they had the opportunity to see how everything they had been learning and putting into place in their own community functioned in a variety of set ups, each with its own philosophy, needs and resources. They were to observe and participate, animating activities with other professional educators. Most students benefit from this exposure when working in a competency based program; however, as I was the only educator working in their new Centre which had as yet no other employees, the students were missing the benefits of learning from a variety of people working in a variety of ways.

During our first visit to a daycare, the Director requested that, as the rooms were small and the groups large, the students should individually select one group of children to observe. It was difficult for me as I watched my students freeze; they became rooted to the spot when they realized they were to be left on their own. The Director kindly made the request a second time and then insisted a third time. When no one moved from the corridor, I took the arm of a student and led her into a room, leaving her and closing the door behind me. The air was fraught with tension. I made some conciliatory comment and we progressed down the hall where I nudged the next student along. I was torn between making their excuses thus sheltering them from a negative evaluation or pushing them out to

fend for themselves. We were here to hopefully develop some professional demeanor. The Director was at first unbelieving, misunderstanding how shy my students were. She later relented and the remaining students were sent off in pairs. My empathy for the women was a result of the real fears and anxieties I had experienced living and working in their community.



### Hiawatha

Sepia-tone, color photography, mat board,

self adhesive transparent film,

felt pen, graphite

93.5 x 49.5 cm.

1998

## **Hiawatha**

We had been organizing two events in relation to each other, a public forum on the status of children in the community and a children's parade. The children marched declaring their voice in celebration of National Child Day, which remembers the signing of The Convention on the Rights' of the Child, making it Human Rights law. I was overwhelmed at the support the Child Care Centre received for this event. The doors to the Centre were opened to both parents and children with an invitation to make hats and decorations for the parade. We were honored by the Deputy Chief and her grandchildren, who led the parade pushing the poupon bus with police escort! The elementary school children had made posters and banners which the older children helped to carry. Children declared what they wanted to be when they grew up, who they loved and appreciated. They stated their values and even called for their parents to give them more support, to stop drinking, gambling and to be proud of them. As we paraded around the community, more and more people joined us. The older children knocked on the doors of homes where people were sleeping off the effects of the previous night. To me their message was simple - we believe in our future and we need you to.

My grandmother attended a convent school. The postcard is a photograph taken of my grandmother in 1916. At that time she was eight years old and was dressed as the young Hiawatha for the school play. The play they were staging featured *The Song of Hiawatha*, an epic poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, which celebrated the idealized, noble Indian. This

postcard would have been sent to family and friends with the love and pride my grandmother had always engendered.

In March, while I was traveling and teaching in the communities, my grandmother passed away. I was informed during class one morning when I was handed a fax, as I had no phone in the trailer where I was living. My mother brought the postcard back from England after my grandmother's funeral. I was surprised to read in a student-teacher evaluation one of the reasons the women approved of me was, "I didn't know white people cried; I was glad to see they had feelings too." This was the final course of the semester, and the last community I would travel to before I went home for spring break, and I was glad, as I was feeling very tired.

Daniel Francis (1992) in *The Imaginary Indian : The Image of the Indian In Canadian Culture*, wrote;

"Having first of all destroyed many aspects of Native culture, White society now turned around and admired its own recreations of what it had destroyed. To the extent that they suffered any guilt over what had happened to the Native people, Whites relieved it by preserving evidence of the supposedly dying culture. Whites convinced themselves that they were in this way saving the Indians. "(p. 36).... "Every generation claims a clearer grasp of reality than its predecessors. Our forebears held ludicrous ideas about certain things.... but we do not. For instance we claim to see Indians today much more clearly for what they are.... Much public discourse about Native people still deals in stereotypes. Our views of what

constitutes an Indian today are as much bound up with myth, prejudice and ideology as earlier versions were. "(p. 6)

In the spring, my students and I were in Montreal visiting daycares. The students were charmed by one group of children who had written a poem about the disappearance of spring due to a sudden snow storm. One child volunteered that "Spring had gone to the garden where the Indians live". At my student's request I photographed the poem for them. I often felt swamped by the pool of stereotypes we were swimming in. I encountered stereotypes of my own, of who I was and who my students were, from my personal history and from our shared history. Stereotypes my students held of me and of themselves, those we bought into and those we struggled against.

Each time I left a community I carefully planned what I would say and how I would leave the group. We spoke about personal and cultural values. We spoke about the challenges of hearing children and each other into speech, about their silence and disempowerment. We spoke about those times when they withdrew into themselves and kept their thoughts from themselves. We spoke about acculturation. I apologized to them for the pain their ancestors lived with and for the pain which is still active today. As I individually called their names, I apologized for our grandfathers and grandmothers, for that part of our history which destroyed. I told these women that I saw them, that I heard each one of them. I spoke of their courage, their heart and thanked them for honoring

me by giving heart. I asked them to continue to share that heart with each other and as a team to be generous, to be courageous.

When I decided to apologize, I gave it careful thought because in many ways I felt personally uncomfortable with the idea. However, I knew in my heart that some of the women really needed to hear an apology. The women needed to hear the apology out loud, spoken in the presence of their peers and made in person. Perhaps I needed, if only in this small way, to offer if not actually make, amends. It was a message of respect, a message which recognized courage and dignity, a message meant to cross from spoken to unspoken realms of the heart, a message meant to cross generations. It was one way for me to cope with the historic guilt factor which persists. I hoped for those women who had issues still to be addressed, that perhaps this might serve as one possible way to offer another choice. Perhaps this could be an opening on the long path they have yet to take, an historic path, a path taken individually but which embraces community and culture, a path which ultimately leads back to one's self.

In my experiences traveling, I have met people who respond to the conditions of working in the north with resentful, frustrated and often angry attitudes. They are impatient with the lack of motivation, the lack of organization, the seemingly slow and uncoordinated efforts of native people to make a better life for themselves. They adamantly do not shoulder any aspect of historic guilt. When you consider the time, thought and efforts made to dismantle and erase a culture, when you consider the

years of life and death struggles native people have had to fight to maintain their identity, you quickly drop any judgments and preconceived notions you have had of how things should be done, notions which grew from the cultural majority, from positions of power and privilege.

Throughout these events I witnessed students develop their professionalism, their sense of pride and their sense of self worth; they declared with dignity the worthy contribution they had to make to the quality of life in their community. This was also true for the two project managers, we were daily growing more and more effective. I called them the peoples' *enablers*, helping to make things happen for others, fostering the development of leadership and community commitment where the big issues are not ignored but taken head on. It was a vital and revitalizing time.

As I am in the process of writing this text the Federal government has published a notice announcing *Gathering Strength, Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*. It includes a *Statement of Reconciliation, Learning from the Past*. I hope the challenge to work together with aboriginal people to heal the legacies of the past will prove credible, helping everyone to transcend this shame and to recognize true heroes.





Leaving Party  
color photography, mat board, self adhesive transparent film,  
felt pen  
85 x 49.5 cm.  
1998

### **Leaving Party**

color photography, mat board, self adhesive transparent film,

felt pen

85 x 49.5 cm.

1998

### **Leaving Party**

One day in class my students asked me if I would like to go to camp. I said yes, I would enjoy the experience. There was quite a bit of mumbling in Cree amongst themselves, and the subject was dropped. A few days later the question was repeated. One of the students approached me and asked if I would like to spend a weekend at camp. Again I said yes, looking at them expectantly. I was confused; were they extending an invitation or asking me theoretically? Who was asking me? Where were they asking me? The following week the question was again repeated. One of the more outspoken women was standing in front of the most shy student. It dawned on me that this woman was speaking for the other, especially as she herself did not go into the bush and I knew the other woman's family practiced many of the traditional aspects of Cree bush life. Not wanting to be presumptuous, I asked the who, what, where and when questions. Once again I was both stunned and touched by the shyness of this woman. She had never initiated a conversation with me, even after I had tutored her for months individually in my home, yet now she was inviting me to spend a weekend with her and her family.

Once at the family's summer fish camp her father took us on an additional boat trip to pick up supplies from their spring camp. He proudly pointed out many interesting features. I was shown a traditional Cree winter lodge, built with hand hewn logs and chinked with mud and moss. The family had lived here prior to the creation of the community organized as a result of the hydro projects. I saw a frame for a wig-wam, a sleeping structure, wooden forms used to stretch various animal skins and other traditional

objects commonly in use. On the boat ride back, my student apologized to me. Her father, speaking Cree, wanted to tell me many more things; however she was having difficulty translating and speaking so much.

Back on the bay, we made another stop on a very tiny gravel island with a few shrubs and course ground cover. The island was wreathed with circling birds, arctic terns. Carefully the motor was cut, and we were poled to shore. Once on the island I was warned to keep an eye out for dive-bombing birds and to be careful not to step on any hatchlings or nests. The birds used this ground to breed. Scratched out in the gravel and sand were small shallow saucers which just accommodated two or three eggs. I saw hatched chicks in small nests with as yet unborn eggs; some were actually cracking and hatching right before our eyes. After a careful discussion, my student translated for her father who instructed us to look for nests where there were only two eggs. From these we could take one egg, but he would look them over first before we touched them. We collected a handful which my student carefully cradled on the boat ride back to camp. That evening the eggs were boiled and offered for my dinner. Each tiny egg was peeled and then offered to me. No mistakes had been made. For the life of me I don't know how this man knew which eggs to select. I had looked so carefully myself and could see no difference between the eggs which were hatching into chicks and those which could be cooked. They were tiny and tasted of the fish diet the birds lived from. I was very touched and appreciative of their efforts to include me, a vegetarian, in their family meal.

Back in the community, my project manager met us by the river and drove us home. I told her what a wonderful time I had experienced making sure my student and her mother understood my appreciation. Direct conversation with elders was not common for me. I found Cree people were not able to listen to thank-yous; it seemed to make them very uncomfortable. Thanking them through a second person was often more appropriate. I gave my hostess a home-baked banana bread, hoping they realized what a precious and memorable experience they had given me.

At my leaving party students, members of their families, the high school students who had worked at the Centre over the summer, board members and my project managers came for a feast. My students had me passing around pieces of bannock which I had made earlier that afternoon. They insisted I pass it around and carefully explain to each of them how I made it. They closed their eyes and savored it, committing my story to memory as they do when family and friends are served the goose celebrating a young man's first kill. We were honoring a new feminine, vegetarian celebration.

Cree people love giving gifts, plenty of gifts, and after a lot of eating I was presented with an embarrassing amount of them. For me the highlight of the evening came when my manager stood up to make an official presentation. Over the past two years he had prepared several speeches but had not delivered them. Afterwards, feeling frustrated, he would share his thoughts with me and we would find a way for his message to be heard. Sometimes it was posted as a sign or delivered in letters. I listened to the whispers and wondered what was coming next. I was very proud

when I was awarded the plaque, but having the inscription read aloud to me meant more than the plaque itself. These people were calling my name.

I knew that few experiences would provide me with the richness this project had. Few jobs would forge the friendships this work did. Even fewer opportunities would redefine my own self worth, would challenge me and empower me as a woman, a teacher and someone who can stand for the true difference work well done can make in the lives of others. We were all in tears. I knew that even if I did return I would never again hold this privileged position and enjoy the respect, love and friendship which comes from being part of a dedicated, hardworking team, where the results that are achieved make one feel that there is a worthwhile meaning and purpose in life. I know that I deserve to be proud of my work, that others are proud of me, and I take real pride in the achievements and personal growth of this team.

Teaching is more than just giving people a voice — it is giving people a choice.

Included in the appendices is the key (Appendix 1), for a color-coded analysis of the photographic collages which are summarized in a table (Appendix 2). The table includes content organized according to what I have interpreted as belonging to me, in green, and what belongs to my students, in yellow. The placement of each element (photo, rubbing, writing) in the collage in relationship to both the surface plane and each of the other elements is considered. This indicates my assessment of each element's role and how it impacts the meaning. I established this key to code the photographic collages by refining the initial coding process I used to code the original narratives. Once I discovered how well this helped me to understand the structure of the language, I expanded on it further to analyze the content of the new texts. The texts were written, inspired by how the photographs and their original narratives impacted each other: Therefore, this expanded method of coding and evaluating transferred well. I have included this information in the appendices because the process verifies the integrity of my studio research approach and firmly establishes the foundation upon which I drew my conclusions contained in chapter five.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Being your own best teacher in the light of being an *other*.

#### Many more layers

Creating these photographic collages has proven to be a very satisfying experience. It presented me the opportunity to make conscious the layering of many factors that came into play, providing me with the words and images I needed to express my experiences. The creative vehicle, my studio work, has always helped me to reflect on my experiences. The use of layering to convey meaning is a natural extension of my prior studio practice. While painting in encaustic I continually bury images in wax and later scrape away those layers to reveal an internal dialogue. Here this studio inquiry has shed new light on how I have been, and continue to be, my own best teacher.

Ideas, stemming from my most recent experiences up north, my studio work, my formal training as an art educator and prior experiences from a wide range of jobs, all began to surface. This was also true as I was writing the original narratives for the photographs and continued to be true throughout the entire thesis. In order to stay focused, I would write down a single word or phrase on a post-it note and stick it on the wall. I soon had a wall of these notes; however, it did serve to free my mind to continue with my research. Every now and then as this collection grew I'd find myself playing with their arrangement. My office walls now sport layers of cascading, flowering and circular patterns of my once scattered thoughts.

One of the useful skills I learnt up north was how to function on the job in the midst of a sea of influencing factors! I believe that contained in this creative wallpaper are some key issues worthy of developing in further research. They represent both my attempts to make conscious the emerging ideas from this thesis, how to incorporate them within my existing frame of reference, and perhaps some new patterns.

As I was writing the proposal for this thesis, I found myself turning over in my mind many of my teaching values. I have carried with me and transferred to each new teaching context my growing understanding and appreciation for values inherent in the field of art education. My training as an art educator is central to the teacher I have become. My experience in the field of art education trained me to respect each individual student subject to my voice of authority, to insist on or provide a means where-by each student commit themselves to their education, that they become active in determining its nature and responsible for their own learning. It is a teaching practice which allows for history, theory, practice, exploration, experience, individual understanding and interpretation to occur simultaneously in diverse and memorable ways for each individual. This inspires learning about the self, one's abilities, skills, ideas, understanding, personal place and contribution within a continuum of evolving and reoccurring ideas which contribute positively to the state of the human condition and one's own self-esteem. It is these very values which grew from my own education that I attribute to enabling me to take up the challenges this project manifested. These values involve stepping into, not away from an un-mapped process. They uphold flexibility, living with



duality, risk taking, beginning a project where the path was as yet undefined and the expected outcomes one was striving for could and most probably would change as one progressed. These values require the pursuit of knowledge and skills in a variety of domains. They encourage one to put something personal at stake while remaining professionally accountable. These values allow one to admire successive approximations of a desired result, praise and encourage the process but are not afraid to evaluate the final product. They embody creativity, intelligence, framing questions, carrying out critical and productive evaluations, and problem solving. All these values have been a part of my education and, while they are not exclusive to art education, I believe they have been a vital component in my own training and form the base for my own beliefs as an art educator. My work in the north involved teaching in the field of early childhood education but as in art education these values were vital components in how I carried out my work, they were not secondary to another subject; they carried the subject.

In the panel text Hiawatha, I wrote about part of the message I delivered as I left a community. In this message I spoke about courage and heart. I first read about these values in relation to teaching in an abbreviated article by Parker J. Palmer called "*Good Teaching: A Matter of living the Mystery*". This article spoke directly to my heart and inspired me to make it a subject of discussion in many other courses I have taught. It is an article that speaks about the value of getting to know your students, letting who they are become a real part of the course's subject matter. Palmer writes about

the difficulties of earning the trust of your students; he writes about empowerment, courage and heart in a very compelling manner.

Before I began this latest project working in the north, my teaching practice embodied some of the values Palmer wrote about, and I aspired to the rest. Evidence of this is apparent in the introduction to this essay, where I quote myself questioning and reflecting on a prior teaching experience in the north. As I used Palmer's article as a topic for class discussion, I grew professionally and personally over those two years; I began to see evidence of the manifestation of those and other values in my teaching practice and in the work of my students. The photographic collages and this essay document my efforts to recognize my growing understanding of how this has taken place.

### **The significance of worthy challenges**

What strikes me now as important is the significance I accord to all these experiences, even to the fragments still stuck on my office walls. It is the possibility of the worthy lessons they may hold that is significant. When I was striving to build the photographic collages, I was concerned with doing justice to the events they represented. Once again it is the significance I attach to them. I also felt this significance for my students, the children and their families, which led me to feeling the significance of my contribution to the community. It is part of my motivation, part of the drive I experienced, to do my absolute best in this job. This significance also forced me to question the "who" of who I am. Values which I did not even question prior to working here came under scrutiny. Some

transferred, but others did not. It is not the discovery of one's narrow-mindedness which is at issue; broadening one's understanding and compassion, along with the release of fear which goes hand-in-hand in this process, is significant. It is the value I place on challenging myself to keep growing and learning, and the rich benefits I perceive, through continual self-evaluations or self-monitoring, that create the drive, motivating me to persist. The nature of being a teacher challenges me to become my own best teacher; good teaching is a reciprocal process.

### **Diversity and adversity**

Teaching a group of students who are of a different culture, and with whom basic communication is a challenge, presents many benefits. As I addressed the challenges facing me I became increasingly aware of these benefits. Overcoming these challenges resulted in my being able to provide a better service as a teacher and was reward in and of itself. The added bonus of learning something about myself and developing new or improved professional and personal skills also served as a powerful motivator. With each challenge met, a deeper understanding of who my students were resulted, and simultaneously a multitude of new questions manifested themselves. The momentum I needed to persist, in the face of these ever increasing challenges, was fueled in an additive fashion by the accumulating benefits. It was a very intense experience.

Few jobs reveal the inner self so ruthlessly. Living and working in this context left absolutely no room for self-deception. I was often afraid; fear unexplained is a powerful deterrent. The stress and anxiety which I awoke

with each morning pushed me to dig deep into the core of my heart, to find the will or courage to help me carry on. I used to leave for work early, walking along the embankment looking for some peace which would calm my nerves. The morning sunlight filtered down over the hills and spilled across the river, long before the sun itself appeared above the horizon. This resulted in a soft, timeless, amber glow which was truly inspirational. The cold crystals of snow and frost are weightless in this dry atmosphere and float suspended in the golden glow of the morning's light. It was a magic time, time suspended just for me. I prayed to be the teacher my students needed and to somehow find the words that each individual needed to hear that day. I have discovered how the richness of both diversity and adversity can combine to push me forward, opening new possibilities where none presented themselves before. It was a time when I could hope that I was capable of achieving this work, both the spoken and unspoken mandates.

### **Learning as other**

We all know how painful it is to have thoughts or feelings locked inside ourselves when we are unable to communicate. We especially feel pain when we are misunderstood. Once we do communicate, the message or meaning is frequently mistaken for something else. When we feel people have understood us, it is often because they have *tried on* what we are saying for themselves, connecting it to their own experiences; therefore, they are able to relate to us.

I risked sharing some of my stories with my students, modeling one way to communicate, in order to foster trust and to begin to build a safe environment for straightforward communication. Once this began to take place, I continued to build a means to communicate through empathy. Given the opportunity, I *tried on* their stories.

Learning about yourself in relation to other people does not ask that they understand you; rather, as you attempt to form an understanding of who they are, by comparison you learn about yourself. As you consider their issues, you hold them up from the only possible position you can —your own. You take notice of similarities and differences in others because they show themselves as something in keeping with, or apart from, your own experience or understanding. As you take note of how these aspects manifest themselves in your experience, you are required once again to evaluate yourself. The sum total of your knowledge becomes richer, as you must take into account and evaluate those aspects of yourself that have gone either unnoticed or which now appear different in view of this new light. When you are living in a different culture, aspects of who you are, which you have not thought about or have taken for granted, are highlighted in this fashion.

When the people with whom you communicate also learn about themselves by listening to you and *trying on* your stories, the experience becomes a very rich and powerful one.

### **Public and private integrity**

Living and teaching in a small isolated community allows little room for the privilege of maintaining a private self separate from a public self. The who that you are with friends, family, colleagues and people in the community has to all stack up. Your integrity is at issue.

You can be as rough around the edges as you please, but at the core you must be well-balanced. I understand that life requires us to fill a variety of roles. When the distance between the selves is stretched becoming too great, it can be confusing and painful. If you can build a strong central core from which all the selves your life asks you to be are well stacked, you will find that, as you maintain and expand on the integrity of this foundation, you will be able to respond to any variety of demands and choices life offers, safely and successfully reaching new heights.

While for me the experience of being an *other* shed light on some truths; it also revealed some of my imperfections. Understanding who we are can be very powerful if we are able to rise to the challenge this knowledge presents. These experiences provided me with the opportunity to get to know and work with a group of women who daily faced these challenges. Together we found that good teaching offers more than just giving people a voice — it offers people a choice.

### **Teaching is more when...**

It is too easy to talk about things I have not experienced, to judge concerns I have not felt, or to speak about what one should do when I myself have not been tested. It is easy to teach facts, to provide

information and to offer theories. I have found that teaching becomes a much more significant and meaningful exchange when, as a teacher, I am able to speak from my experience and stand for what I am teaching, proving it by my actions when put to the test. My willingness to share both my successes and my failures exposes the limits of my experience.

Teaching eight women, six hours a day, five days a week, challenged my personal and professional perimeters by inciting me to break down those safe borders. This job asked me to eliminate barriers which I previously upheld as necessary professional standards of performance in the traditional teacher-student relationship. Dismantling all those barriers, which I had grown so fond of and really thought were necessary in order to maintain the highest standards, made me very insecure and extremely uncomfortable. I was often afraid that as I crossed these lines I would jeopardize either my professionalism or my personal life. Being vulnerable requires trust. Stepping out into the unknown requires faith. Believing in the worth of what you are attempting requires passion. Together with my students we achieved this, and the momentum of our work soon moved long past anything which one could achieve alone. In this new context I had to rediscover what I understood the role of a teacher to be. It meant a commitment to speaking with the students, risking my ability to manage being student and teacher at the same time. It meant sharing with them responsibility for the group, probably the most challenging aspect of this entire experience and one which I came to realize was both my own and my students' greatest teacher. It was a process which enabled me to bring

my work on this project to a close. The students became aware that they too, could be and were their own best teachers.

Some of my colleagues advocated a more cautious attitude, one which avoided risks and asked less from the project. However, as I weighed the issues for myself and especially for my students, I found myself taking a stronger stand in new territory, asking far more than I ever imagined I could. More was at stake than I was ever able to shoulder previously. The dissolution of former expectations of the borders of my public and private selves did not mean jeopardizing one for the other, but fostered the adoption of a stronger stand. Often I found that when I let go of my fears, I was able to raise our expectations and reach a higher standard of performance that was exhilarating. For me this has resulted in being a stronger, more self-defined, better articulated, whole person. I am a better teacher because of it.



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## Appendix 1

### Color Coded Key for Analysis of Photographic Collages

#### Belonging to me:



Color photographs placed in a window or content in a text which indicates that I am responsible for adding to, or bringing about the nature of the present action due to who I am and the role I am fulfilling.



Content which more precisely is identified as part of my own historical, cultural background.



Content which signifies a reversal; here the students are participating in what I understood *they considered as "my world"*.

(successfully shared this creates a sense of belonging).

#### Belonging to my students :



Black and white photographs and text thus coded indicates a strong feeling for the continuity of time, through historic and Cree cultural connections.



Color photographs which are raised and text which describes traditional Cree cultural practice that is very active in present day-to-day action.



Color photographs placed flush to the surface indicating a meeting of past and present Cree cultural content.



Content which signifies a reversal; here I am practicing traditional Cree activities (successfully shared this creates a sense of belonging).




























May belong to either my students or myself:

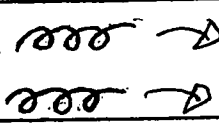
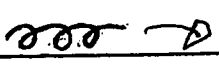






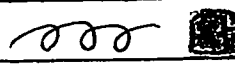

















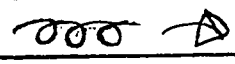













Additions to the collage, other than photographs or text, that also account for corresponding content in the text.

Appendix 2

Table Summarizing the Content Analyzed in the Photographic Collages

<b>Contemporary vs. Traditional Values :</b>	
Photographs :	↑ color 13 1/2 x 9 fixed flush  color 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 placed in window
Text :	 ↑  ↑  ↑ ↑
Additions :	 → traditional values written on Ind. Slips & tied to lower edge
<b>Life Doesn't Frighten Me :</b>	
Photographs :	→ Bew 9 x 13 1/2 fixed flush  color 5 1/2 x 4 1/2 placed in window
Text :	   → ↑
Additions :	  story rewritten by the students in color felt pen
<b>Goldfish Syndrome :</b>	
Photographs :	↑ color raised 9 x 13 1/2  color 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 placed in window  color 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 placed in window
Text :	 →  ↑  ↑ ↑   
Additions :	text from students class analysis of a native women's story in grey
<b>Baby Wrap :</b>	
Photographs :	↑ color raised 9 x 13 1/2  color 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 placed in window  color 4 1/2 x 5 1/2 placed in window
Text :	 → ↑    ↑ ↑  ↑ 

<p>Additions:  → Black &amp; white rubbings of traditional Cree objects</p> <p> → string looped along bottom edge as wrapping</p>
<p><b>Rocks:</b></p>
<p>Photographs:  → Black &amp; white 9 x 13 1/2 fixed flush</p> <p> smaller color horizontal placed in window <sup>↑ raised color cutout silhouette</sup></p>
<p>Text:  →  →  → </p>
<p>Additions:  → shelf with collection of rocks displayed</p>
<p><b>Bowls:</b></p>
<p>Photographs:  → Black &amp; white fixed flush 9 x 13 1/2</p> <p> 4 1/2 x 6 color placed in window</p>
<p>Text:  →  →  →  →  →  → </p>
<p><b>Poupon Bus:</b></p>
<p>Photographs:  color raised 9 x 13 1/2</p> <p> color 3 1/2 x 5 placed in window</p> <p> color 3 1/2 x 5 placed in window</p>
<p>Text:  →  →  →  → </p>
<p>Additions:  → rubbings of tipi poles</p>
<p><b>Practical Training:</b></p>
<p>Photographs:  → Black &amp; white 9 x 13 1/2 flush to surface</p> <p> color 3 1/2 x 5 placed in window</p> <p> color 3 1/2 x 5 placed in window</p>
<p>Text:  →  →  →  →  →  →  → </p>
<p><b>Reversals:</b></p>

Photographs: ↑ color flush 9 x 13 1/2

↑ raised color 6 x 4 1/2

↑ color placed in window 6 x 4 1/2

Text: ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑

### Hiawatha :

Photographs: ↑ raised color photo 6 1/2 x 17

↑ sepia color in window 4 1/2 x 3

Text: ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑

Additions: ↑ color felt pen poem written by children in Montreal.

↑ Hidwathud rubbings

### Leaving Party :

Photographs: ↑ color photo 9 x 13 1/2 fixed flush

↑ 3 1/2 x 3 3/4 color raised photo

↑ 3 1/2 x 3 3/4 color photo placed in window

Text: ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑

Additions: ↑ myndre in grey, written in Cree around needles