

The Braiding Histories Stories

SUSAN D. DION
York University

MICHAEL R. DION

Introduction

BRAIDING HISTORIES: Learning From the Life Stories of First Nations People is the title of a writing project that we have been working on for the past eight years. Michael and I are brother and sister. We are (re)telling the stories of our ancestors in response to the need for 'tellings' that will disrupt the taken for granted way of knowing about First Nations people that we see produced and reproduced in educational sites. Michael and I are of mixed Aboriginal (Leni Lenape/Potawatami) and non-Aboriginal (Irish/French) ancestry. We are (re)telling the stories of our ancestors while conscious of our pedagogical and political responsibilities. Through our (re)tellings we hope to contribute to an alternative way of knowing about First Nations people and the relationship between First Nations people and Canadians, a way of knowing that will engage our readers in a rethinking of their current understanding.

Three of the Braiding Histories stories are included in this paper as well as our reflections on the stories. For an analysis of the issues and challenges involved in writing the Braiding Histories stories as a way of unraveling the pedagogical possibilities and difficulties of presenting testimony that bears on post-contact First Nations-Canadian history please see (Re)telling to Disrupt: Aboriginal People and Stories of Canadian History in this volume.

(Re)telling Audrey's Story

What we've learned about the theory of enunciation is that there's no enunciation without positionality. You have to position yourself somewhere in order to say anything at all. . . . the past is not only a position from which to speak, but it is also an absolutely necessary resource in what one has to say. (Hall, 1989, p.18)

Reflections on Loss and Respect

In part, our (re)telling project emerged from the desire to understand and explore our position as people of Aboriginal ancestry. Thinking about our project, Michael and I recognize that our need to speak has everything to do with our position, yet there was an uncertainty about that position. In thinking about our ancestry, we found ourselves confronted with the following questions. Can you be Aboriginal if you didn't grow up within an Aboriginal community? If you had no access to Aboriginal languages, to cultural practices, are you still Aboriginal? What does it mean to be Aboriginal and, more specifically, what does it mean to us? Many Aboriginal people in Canada have been denied their community, and so much Aboriginal culture has been destroyed. To a certain extent, being Aboriginal in Canada means living with that loss. How did we live with that loss? What did it mean for our mother and for us? With these questions, we turned to our mother and began our project with her story.

We recognized our mother's story as one of strength, pride, and respect. We learned about loyalty, hard work, and caring from our mother and saw these as elements of the story of Aboriginal people that we wanted to pass on to our readers. In our mother's story, we also saw the opportunity to explore the policy of forced assimilation and its impact on Aboriginal individuals and communities.

This story is about the impact of systemic discrimination on the day-to-day lived experiences of First Nations people. Being poor is not something restricted to Aboriginal people, but the segregation on reserves and the extent of discrimination Aboriginal people have had to endure is something we want our readers to be aware of. In some ways, what we want to express in this story is very subtle and therefore especially difficult to put into words. In the description of home, school, work, relationship, and family we hope to create a scene of recognition wherein our readers will come to recognize what the loss of Aboriginal language and culture has meant to individuals. This story is not just about loss; it is about a woman being disconnected from her culture and the constant struggle to demonstrate to herself and others the pride that she carries. It is about the desire on the part of her and her children to reconnect with Aboriginal culture and the strength that comes with that.

In its affirmation of beauty, strength, and pride, our mother's story reflects the humanity of Aboriginal people. It also presents her experience of the violence of discrimination and the shame she was made to feel. Engaging with her story and the contradictions of her life, Michael and I and Mom found an understanding of complex family relationships that nurtured old wounds. The story fulfilled a healing role personally and has the potential to contribute to healing on a community level.

The story we tell is of our mother's strength and the discrimination she experienced in Canadian society. We ask readers to consider:

- What does that mean to me?
- What does that mean to my understanding of what it means to be Canadian?
- What does that mean to my understanding of Aboriginal people today?
- How is my experience of being Canadian different from Aboriginal peoples' experience of Canada?
- What is the past that all Canadians are called to reckon with?

In the (re)telling of our mother's story we recognize a significant risk. The hearing of the story is easily limited to the story of one woman's strength in the face of adversity. Is it possible that our readers will refuse to attend to the source of the adversity and refuse to ask: Why the adversity?

Our (re)telling calls the reader's attention to the context of telling. The motivating question from which the story emerges is: Why didn't Audrey tell? The potential for engaging the question is presented to the readers and readers are called upon to consider: What did she not want to tell? Why did she not want to tell? And (drawing on Aboriginal conceptions of story): Why am I being asked to hear this story? What am I meant to learn from the story? Will our readers recognize that the story is not a request to change what happened in the past but to alter what they know and how they know the past?

There is an invitation, an address offered. Michael and I both spent time talking with our mother before writing her story. All three of us felt that telling the story in the first person would help to establish a scene of recognition for our audience, enhancing the possibility for engaging the questions. Writing in the first person draws the reader into her story. The reader comes to know Audrey, her strength and pride and her experience of discrimination. Through Audrey's story, the reader encounters the injustice that has permeated the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. The story opens a space for initiating a 'but wait, something is wrong here' response. The potential for disrupting the 'strength in the face of adversity' theme depends on what teachers and students do with that recognition, how it gets taken up and worked through.

The Story

“We Wanted To Hear Your Stories”

What is dignity?

How do you learn self-esteem?

What is the value of your history,
and what happens when that history is denied?

Mom wrestles with her past
Like a pattern that would not go together

Stitching and ripping and stitching again
Not a single garment but a multi-layered gown
that becomes a baby’s frock and a son’s shirt.

The comfort comes not from wearing the garment
but from remembering
the hands that did the stitching.

The blinds were open, and I could feel the heat from the sun as it cast shadows on the kitchen table. Standing on the inside, I had a deceptive impression of warmth on a cold February afternoon. I had just finished lunch with Mom, and as I cleared the dishes I found myself thinking back to family meal times when I was growing up. Including Mom and Dad there were seven of us gathered around the table, and when supper was finished we would stay at the table talking, listening, and telling stories. Many nights, we would ask Mom and Dad to tell us about what it was like when they were little.

“How about some tea,” Mom asked, bringing me back to the present. She started to fill the kettle. I noticed that she was leaning against the sink for support. As if she knew my thoughts, she asked, “Do you remember when you were little how we would sit around the table after supper drinking tea and talking? Sometimes we would still be sitting there at 11:00 o’clock.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” I said, struck by the mystery of our connectedness. “You would tell stories about driving the coffee truck and Dad would talk about people at his office. The news of the day was always a good topic to keep the conversation going longer. But, the stories we liked best were the ones about what life was like when you were little. Dad was always telling us stories about his mother and growing up in Quebec.” I paused for a moment to see if she would again continue my thought for me, and then with a bit of hesitation, “Mom, you rarely told us about your life.”

"I didn't know what to tell you kids so I let your father do most of the talking." I could tell from the sound of my mother's voice that this was a sensitive subject. These were not easy questions for her to answer. Feeling a need to go on I asked, "Was it because you were so poor?"

"No, it wasn't that. Your father's family was poor too. But your father's family was white, and I was Indian. When I was growing up, being Indian meant being poor, being called nasty names, and being made to feel as if we were worthless. What kind of after dinner stories would those have made. Remember I always said, 'I'm Canadian.' I didn't want to be Indian."

I paused for a moment to think back. I could hear those words again. It was a disturbing memory, "I'm a Canadian! I'm a Canadian!" There was no pride in her voice, in fact it was almost the opposite feeling I was getting. I struggled with a word to suit the feeling. Her words were not an assertion of pride but a claim for self-respect.

I have lived with these words all my life, and only now am I beginning to understand what motivated my mother to make this claim. Mom always argued "My father joined the army during World War II, and we gave up our Indian status—that meant that we were Canadians." I began to understand the contradiction. Being Canadian meant denying her Aboriginal identity. Other details started to come back to me. "I felt like you didn't want us to be Indian. Whenever anybody said something about our black hair, you insisted that our hair wasn't black, it was dark brown. I always wondered what was wrong with having black hair. It was so confusing because we knew we were 'part' Indian but we didn't know what that meant. The Indians we learned about at school and on TV were noble chiefs and pretty princesses who lived in tipis, rode on horses, and carried bows and arrows."

"Those were not my stories."

"But Mom, we wanted to know, we wanted to know you. We wanted to hear your stories." As I spoke these words I could hear a longing in my voice and recognized my desire to hear her story. I spoke again. "I remember you telling us a few stories about growing up on the reserve, and I remember that you took us to the reserve a couple of times. What was it like for you Mom when you were growing up?"

Audrey's Story

At the end of my day, I like listening to Aboriginal flute music. I turn out the electric lights, light a few candles, and sink into my favorite blue chair. It is an old but sturdy chair, re-covered more than once. I can feel the new, soft, velvety material as my hands stroke the arms. I remember, when you children were young, walking into the living room one of you would immediately jump out of the chair shouting, "Mom's chair, Mom's

chair." I give the arm another soft caress and listen to the relaxing, even soothing sounds of the flutes. The music evokes feelings of connection, and I remember.

I was born on March 28, 1930 to Effie and Victor Tobias on the Moravian Town Indian reserve and was named Audrey Angela. I never could figure out why my mother couldn't have put it the other way around. I always hated my odd sounding name. I thought Angela would have been a much better choice. It sounded pretty.

Our house was set back from the dirt road, past a dried out, scruffy lawn. It was a very small, two story, wood frame house. The ground floor was one big open room. There was a table and a wood stove on one side and a bed for my parents and baby sister Elizabeth on the other side. I slept upstairs with my four brothers and sister. There was a curtain dividing the girls' side from the boys' side. In the summer, it was stuffy and hot, but the winters were cold. Lying in bed with my sister, I would try to ignore the cold, but the flimsy shingles rattling in the wind made it hard to sleep. The closest we came to insulation was the newspaper my brothers and I stuffed into the space between the walls and the roof. In the morning, we would struggle, pushing the rickety old beds from one side of the room to the other. Stretching with all our might with fists full of newspaper, we tried to remember where the gusts of wind from the night before had blown in. The floor was just as bad. In the fall, the whole family would work at collecting dirt to pack around the bottom of the house. This banking was supposed to stop the wind from gusting below the floorboards on cold winter days. But no matter how much newspaper and mud we packed in, it was impossible to keep the cold out of that house.

We grew most of our own food in a large vegetable lot out behind the house. In the spring, the ground had to be prepared and the seeds planted. One of my happy childhood memories is playing "Peter Cotton Tail" in the garden during the late summer. When the garden was in full growth, my sister Joan, who always played the part of Mr. McGregor, would try to catch me and my brother Ken sneaking food out of the garden. If she caught us, she would scare us and we would run away. In the fall, the garden was a lot of hard work. We had to pick the vegetables and store them in the 'dug out.' We would be eating the potatoes, carrots, onions, squash and turnips until just after Christmas when the vegetables would run out, and there was not much to eat. January and February were hungry months. For supper, Mom would cook a pot of macaroni and mix it with a can of tomatoes. At breakfast, we would sit around the table watching her mix flour and water in a big bowl. She would take a wad of the gooey mixture in her hands, roll it into little strings and drop them into a pot of boiling water. I called this stuff "slippery mush." With canned milk and sugar, it was good, but most of the time we had to eat it plain.

There were no jobs on the reserve. My father worked a few months of the year at a sawmill in town, and during the spring, he fished, but there were many months when there was no work. During the winter, I remember Mom was always busy weaving baskets. Dad would go into the bush and cut down a certain kind of tree. Then came the work of preparing the wood for weaving. I remember them cutting and pounding the strips of wood. The strips had to be soaked in the wash tub for a couple of days, and then there was more cutting and splitting. When the strips were the right thickness, Mom and Dad would smooth the edges with sandpaper. Sometimes they would dye the slats to make fancy patterns in the baskets. Grandma taught Mom how to weave when she was little, and Mom taught us. We made laundry baskets, waste paper baskets, and baby cradles. When we had a stack of baskets ready, Mom and Dad would go into town and sell them.

I knew that my family belonged to the Delaware Nation. What I did not know then is that Delaware is the English name given to my father's people. The original name of my father's nation is Leni Lenape. My mother's family belongs to the Potawatami Nation, and she was from the nearby reserve on Walpole Island. I can picture my father and his friends sitting by the wood stove singing in the Lenape language, but I never learned to speak Lenape. My father went to residential school, and when he became a parent, he believed that it was best for his children not to know their own language and culture. He said that we needed to know the ways of the white community. My two older brothers went to the residential school at Muncey Town. Thankfully, by the time I was ready for school, the residential school had been closed down. We went to a small school on the reserve where the Anglican minister was the teacher. He was very strict and did not hesitate to use the strap. He taught us about the Europeans who discovered and conquered the Americas. We read stories about the white settlers who came and built a country out of nothing. The teacher and the lessons made us feel like nothing, as though we were nothing until the settlers arrived. It wasn't true. We had our own good way of living before the Europeans arrived. We knew how to take care of ourselves.

I was nine years old when I first moved off the reserve. Just after WW II began, my father and brother joined the army and were stationed in Petawawa. My mother took the rest of us kids and moved to a small town near Hamilton so that we would be closer to Dad and my brother Albert. There was work for Aboriginal people doing manual labour on the farms in the area. Mom went to work on one of the farms, and we kids went to a school in the town of Aldershot. The teachers at this school were not quite as bad as the minister on the reserve, but still we were made to feel that because we were Indians we were not as good as the white children. The white families owned the farms our parents worked

on, and the tone of the teachers' voices let us know where we belonged on the social ladder.

When my father and brother joined the army, our whole family became enfranchised. This meant that legally we became Canadian citizens. Mom and Dad were eligible to vote, but we lost our Indian status and all treaty rights. At one point, before the war had ended, we moved back to the reserve but stayed less than a year. As non-status Indians, we were not entitled to a house. We lived with Grandma for a while, but we really needed a house of our own. We moved back to Aldershot, and when I was nineteen years old, I left home and moved to Hamilton where I looked for work as a waitress.

After my family was enfranchised, I believed that I was no longer Indian. But being Indian was not something I could put on and off like a pair of shoes. Even if the government of Canada no longer considered me Indian, the people I met in my day-to-day life were not willing to let me forget that I was. In those days, there were places I could look for a job and other places I could not even consider applying. There were stores and restaurants I could go into, but there were many where I would not even think of going. Signs in store front windows read, "No Indians Allowed," and in other places, a look of disgust from the clerks was enough to send me back out onto the street. I finally found a job as a waitress at a restaurant owned by a Chinese family, and I worked very hard. I was determined to make something of my life. I wanted to be a part of Canadian society; I wanted to fit in. I needed to prove that I was just as good or better than the other people I worked with.

I met your father at the restaurant where I was working. Lindy was a regular customer. He was kind, attractive, and he was white. The waitresses were scheming, trying to match Lindy up with one of their pretty friends. But Lindy often sat in my section, and we would talk and laugh together while I served his food. I thought he was just being friendly. He was not Indian, and I never really believed that he would be interested in me. One night as I approached his table Lindy stood up and said, "I have something to give you." When I asked, "What?" he kissed me. I think that our fate was sealed with that kiss. We started seeing each other regularly, and before too long, we were married. I remember the Catholic priest who rather reluctantly agreed to marry us. When the brief ceremony was over, he mumbled just loud enough for us to hear, "It'll never last."

But the priest was wrong. It did last. Life was not easy, but Lindy and I loved and supported each other for over fifty years. We lived in Hamilton until 1965 when your dad was offered a better job in a smaller city. We thought the move to a smaller town would be good for us, so in 1965, we moved to Sarnia. In some ways, life in Sarnia was better, but in some ways it was harder. We were the only family of mixed race living in an all white middle-class neighborhood. Some people were very friendly.

Remember the couple who lived across the street? You kids always thought they were grouchy, but they always waved and said hello to us. Not like the family who lived up the street. They had two little girls about the same age as you, but those girls were never allowed to play with you.

Looking for a job in Sarnia was horrible. When I went to apply, lots of people just told me to get out. But I needed a job, and I kept on looking. Finally, I got a job driving a coffee truck. It was hard. I felt like I was always working and always tired, but we had a home and a good life. I worked at that job for twelve years and drove a taxi for eight years before I retired.

I grew up at a time when Indians were considered savages who had no culture and nothing of value to offer me or anyone else. I was made to feel that to be successful I had to become a non-Indian. At home, at school, or at church I had no opportunity to learn about Aboriginal culture. I knew nothing about Lenape language, history and ceremonies. When you and your brothers and sister asked, "What was it like when you were little?" I did not know what to tell you. But you wouldn't be discouraged. You and your brother kept asking questions. On Sunday afternoons while I was in the kitchen baking with you kids at my elbows wanting to stir, pour and lick the spoon, you two would start again with the questions. My hands were busy stirring, measuring, and pouring but my mind was free to think. Maybe it was the warmth and security in that kitchen, maybe it was the civil rights movement of the sixties and the rise of the National Indian Brotherhood. Whatever it was, while I prepared the cakes, cookies, and pies that you kids would devour, I began to realize that maybe there was something I could tell, that maybe it was important for you to know a little bit about what it was like for me when I was growing up.

It was hard for me, but that was when I began to tell you a few of the stories. When I look at you today, I see a commitment to family, a joy in the telling and hearing of stories and a deep sense of responsibility to our ancestors. This is a part of our Aboriginal culture that was not lost.

Today, I am a widow and live in Toronto, close to some of my family. Each night I listen to the music of the flutes, and I know who I am.

(Re)telling Shanawdithit's Story Reflections on Responsibility and Relationship

Our responsibilities as storytellers do not begin nor end with our audience. In (re)telling the stories of our ancestors, we are responding to “a call to take up an entrusted responsibility”; the stories of our ancestors made a claim on us, and we are responsible for passing on their stories. Our understanding of what it means to be responsible became for us an issue of being honest and trustworthy with ourselves, with our subjects and our readers.

As we began to think seriously about our responsibilities as storytellers, we recognized the need to “come to know” our subjects, and so as we begin each story, we ask ourselves and each other what is it that makes us want to write about this person—why do we think this person's story is important to tell and what is it about this person's story that is calling us to (re)tell? We start each story by researching and reading extensively about our subjects. Sometimes we do this on our own, and sometimes we do it together. What has become important is the conversations we have about what we are reading. It is in and through our conversations that we come to know our subjects.

Shanawdithit is the last known survivor of the Beothuk who are the First Nations people who lived on the land that is now known as Newfoundland. Her family and all those that she recognized as her own died or were killed as a result of starvation, disease, or murder initiated by European newcomers whose actions were motivated by fear, greed, and power for control of the land. Initially we were drawn to her story as a story about genocide. And although we had spent considerable time (re)telling Shanawdithit's story, our thinking about responsibility led us back to take another look.

In our conversations about Shanawdithit, Michael kept returning to talk about her strength and determination. For example, there is a frequently cited story about Shanawdithit in which we recognized a boldness in her spirit that we admired. Shanawdithit was captured and taken prisoner at a time when a group of well meaning English men and women had decided that a few Beothuk ought to be saved so that their culture might be studied before it was completely eradicated. When Shanawdithit was taken to live in St. John's her captors on occasion would take her out for walks. Shanawdithit would attract attention of town's people, and the children would taunt her. When this happened, Shanawdithit would turn and growl at the children who would then scatter, screaming as they ran to get away. Shanawdithit is said to have taken pleasure in this act. A second story is about her death. When Shanawdithit was close to death, she gave two pieces of stone as gifts to her captors. This presenting of the stones is said to have been reflective of

her generous and forgiving nature. I clearly recall the day I heard this story differently. Michael and I were deep in conversation when I said, “It wasn’t a gift. She was not meaning to say, ‘I have a present for you,’ she was saying, ‘This is who I am, this land was ours—you stole it from us, but our presence will always be here. We will always be here.’”

The boldness that we saw in Shanawdithit’s spirit became our scene of recognition, and our (re)telling proceeded from that place. But this recognition of her spirit created a tension for us. We wanted to reflect the horror of Shanawdithit’s experience of genocide but also to reflect her singularity. We made a deliberate choice to move away from the horrific details of her experiences and moved toward her response to and her living with the experience. Michael spoke about the time she spent living with and working for a settler family before she was taken to St. John’s. Her time at the Peyton house was the last time/place that she really had any kind of control of her life, that she is said to have been happy. During this time, Shanawdithit would frequently leave the family home and go into the woods. When she was taken to St. John’s she was a captive. Our fear was that if we told her story at that time/place she would be positioned as victim, and it would be difficult to move our audience away from seeing her only as victim. Considering our responsibility to our subject, we could not write the story that way. And knowing that the story of her time as captive in St. John’s is readily available elsewhere, we chose to tell a different story. Reading about her life while living with the Peyton family, we had a sense of Shanawdithit’s mourning for what she had lost and simultaneously her desire to remember. This guided our writing of her story.

In our writing, there was a real move away from being guided by the question ‘What will the teachers and students learn about this?’ to a move toward “What is important about this person to us—and how can we pass that on to our readers?” Through our process of writing, dialogue, and rewriting, we saw a change in our sense of responsibility to our reader—it was not about giving them details about the name of the river or dates or number of deaths inflicted. It was about coming to know our subjects, and establishing relationship with and between our subjects.

The Story

“Her Solitary Place”

For five of the last years of her life

Shanawdithit lived with a family.

Was it her family?

Shanawdithit wore clothes.

Were they her clothes?

Shanawdithit learned a new language.

Whose language was it?

Shanawdithit was buried.

Was her body painted with red ochre,
was she wrapped in birch bark?

Shanawdithit's Story

Shanawdithit spent the whole afternoon cleaning the Peyton's house. A couple of times she walked out the front door and sat on the steps, resting. Her energy was not what it used to be, and now there was this annoying cough that just would not go away. Shanawdithit had heard this kind of cough many times before; both her mother and sister had suffered with it until they died. Shanawdithit looked up to the sun, there was not a cloud in sight. She stared directly into the shining ball of fire and was momentarily blinded, but she found some pleasure in this forced darkness. *She could see herself in a canoe, paddling up river, with her father in front. The banks of the river were lined with beautiful trees, only interrupted by grassy meadows. It was in one of these grassy meadows that Shanawdithit once lived with her family.* The vision disappeared as quickly as it came. As Shanawdithit stood up, maybe too quickly, she felt a little unsteady. Her unfinished chores waited for her inside.

Shanawdithit used all her strength to squeeze the rag dry; she watched closely as the dirty water slowly dripped into the rusted basin. The lye soap she used to scrub the floor made her hands burn and turned her skin to an ugly, blotchy mess. It was not the same colour as the beautiful red ochre that had once been used deliberately to coat her skin.

When she had finished her cleaning, Shanawdithit took one more long look around the house to be certain everything was in its proper place. She noticed the wood she had put beside the fireplace had been toppled. Probably a mouse had disturbed the delicately balanced stack. It was a trick she had learned from her father when she was a little girl. He taught her how to pile the wood awkwardly, and if the wrong piece was chosen first, the entire pile would fall. This way you would know if some animal had been to your campsite while you were gone. It was a game she enjoyed playing with the children of the house. As Shanawdithit bent over to straighten the stack, the comb from her hair fell to the floor. She stared at it for a moment, remembering her mother, Demasduit, who had given the comb to her the first time she had braided Shanawdithit's hair. She picked it up and tenderly pushed it back into place.

Feeling satisfied that her chores were complete, she left once again, out the front door, down the steps, not stopping to rest. She walked around the house to the back. The clearing behind the house stretched back at least thirty feet. Shanawdithit walked to the edge and began to gently spread the bushes apart as she stepped into the woods.

Shanawdithit did not know the names of the months, however, she did know that it was late in the summer. The cranberry bush that she

knelt beside was full and ripe. Some of the berries had already fallen from its branches. Picking a few, she rolled them in the palm of her hand. She could feel their plumpness. She popped them into her mouth one by one, savouring the flavour. As Shanawdithit felt the burst of fresh juice she remembered a life from which she had been separated. *She was picking berries with her mother, little sister, aunt, and small cousins. They were searching for the ripe blueberries, partridge berries, and marsh berries that grew in the fields. Together they worked to fill their birch bark containers to the brim. As they worked, Shanawdithit grabbed a handful of berries and as quietly and carefully as possible placed her full container down. She sneaked through the brush and quiet like a fox, pounced on her little sister, squishing the berries into her hair. Shanawdithit looked to her mother expecting a scolding for playing when she was supposed to be working, and although she got the scolding, she also caught a glimpse of a smile. Demasduit had enjoyed watching the childish prank, but her protective spirit was constantly on guard. Shanawdithit listened to the scolding and recognized fear in her mother's voice. Demasduit was fearful the noise of children playing might attract the attention of a white hunter. An encounter with the whites could mean capture or even death. Demasduit spoke to the children of the need to complete their work. Others in the village were depending on them to bring back an abundant collection of berries. While Demasduit spoke, she slyly took a single berry from her container. Turning back to her work, with a smile she tossed the berry to Shanawdithit, who caught it, rolled it around the palm of her hand and tossed it into her mouth. Startled out of the day dream by the loud snap of a branch breaking under her foot, Shanawdithit had to think for a moment about where she was. The time of berry picking with her family was gone, and she was alone.*

This pleasant memory of her childhood brought a small smile to Shanawdithit's lips; it also came with an ache in her heart. Who would listen to her story of berry picking with her mother? Who would remember? This story, with the many other stories that she had heard from her mother and father, would soon be lost, remembered by no one. Shanawdithit looked back at the Peyton house and decided to move on in search of her special place. The sun was beginning to set, but Shanawdithit didn't feel fear, she began to feel more at ease.

Shanawdithit reached the clearing and could see the fallen tree with its huge trunk, covered in a blanket of moss. Moving closer to the tree, she sat down, relieved to be in her favourite place. She felt the damp coolness of the moss and then pulled the moss away to reveal the tree's bark. In Shanawdithit's mind, everything still seemed so clear. She missed collecting the bark from the trees and the work of moulding the bark into utensils and containers. Her hands were always busy. She had especially enjoyed watching her father use the bark to build canoes. Shanawdithit had an eye for detail, and her father would smile as she stood watching as the canoes took shape. Shanawdithit felt tired. Maybe tomorrow she

would collect some bark and make a small canoe for the Peyton children to play with.

It was almost completely dark now. On a previous visit to this place, Shanawdithit had dug a deep trench beside the trunk. With the light of the moon guiding her, Shanawdithit began to remove the leaves and branches to reveal her precious sleeping spot. It was a space just big enough for her to lie down in. She curled up and pulled a blanket of leaves over her body to keep her warm. The coughing started again, and Shanawdithit could not sleep but lay thinking, her eyes grew heavy and closed *and Shanawdithit felt the squirming of her little sister asleep beside her. She could hear the soft breathing of her parents and the buzzing of insects. She opened her eyes and saw the mamateek where her family slept. It was big and round, with long wooden poles bound together, covered with birch bark and deerskin. There was a fire pit in the centre. She shivered again and watched the curl of smoke from the fire rise to the opening at the top. Shanawdithit heard the branches creak and felt the gust of wind blow through the trees; she closed her eyes again and waited a little anxiously for the voice of her mother to come back to her.*

When Shanawdithit woke with the morning sun, she was hungry. Wearily, she raised herself and found the spot on the tree where she had been peeling the bark the night before. This time she dug a little deeper to get at the inner bark; she tore a piece, put it in her mouth, and started to chew. The flavour of the bark was familiar to Shanawdithit. As she sat there quietly, Shanawdithit thought about the painful nightmares that had disrupted her dreaming. *Her father, her uncle, there were no men asleep in the mamateek. There was no food. She saw herself with her mother and sister, weak from hunger. They had left their camp and were walking toward the coast in search of food. Shanawdithit saw the terror in her mother's eyes. What was the price of survival? They had resisted with nearly every ounce of their energy, but sensing it was their last hope for survival, they gave themselves over to the white hunters.*

Shanawdithit could not escape her memories. She saw the faces of her aunts, uncles, and cousins. She recognized the face of hunger and disease and death. The newcomers had made these faces familiar to Shanawdithit. The stories that Shanawdithit heard around the fire changed from stories about her people to stories about the newcomers and the grief, hardship, and revenge they had brought. The men spoke about being robbed of their ability to move freely around their land in search of food. They talked about how the newcomers used their powerful weapons and hunted for more than was needed, stealing food from the Beothuk. The newcomers even used their weapons to kill the Beothuk. Shanawdithit remembered the blast of gun fire and rubbed her leg. She could sometimes still feel the pain from her own wound.

Shanawdithit dug for another piece of bark and remembered that when she was a little girl, there had always been food to eat. During the

summer, they had spent time on the seacoast. In a canoe her father had built, Shanawdithit and her mother would paddle to nearby islands to collect eggs from the wild birds that nested there. Her father and uncle fished for salmon that would be dried on racks in the hot summer sun. In the fall after the caribou hunt, its meat was hung to cure. She remembered visiting the storage mamateeks that stood along the banks of the rivers. Everyone worked together all summer long, filling them with food for the long winter season. There was even time for playing in the river.

The heat from the sun was beginning to get intense. Shanawdithit got up and began to cover her dugout with leaves. It was these trips to the woods, to her special place, that helped Shanawdithit live in a world that was not her own. Shanawdithit knew that she would go back to the Peyton's frame house. She understood that it was not hers. She would return to the family that was not hers, to a language that was not hers.

(Re)telling Mistahimaskwa's Story Reflections Representation and Subjectivity

Each (re)telling is a copy but not a carbon copy. Retelling, like translation, must be done:

so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*. . . A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. (Benjamin, 1969, p.79)

We can never be sure that we know the intention of our subjects. Our hope is to recognize the singularity of the individual and to do so in such a way that the story subjects would recognize themselves in our stories. Wherever possible, we include details of what our subjects said and did and attend to the expressive, emotive aspects of these details as we have imagined them to be.¹ We have to approach our writing conscious of our role in constructing the story. We take care in the intentions and affects that we attribute to the subject and do not focus on generalized characteristics such as "strong" or "brave." We want to reflect the complexities of our subjects as they respond to the events of colonization.

¹ In our (re)telling of Mistahimaskwa's story we have made use of quotation marks to mark direct speech. The words attributed to Mistahimaskwa are taken from Dempsey, H. (1984). *Big Bear: The end of freedom*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press. We have included the page reference in the text but not the author's name. We did this to maintain as smooth a flow as possible in the reading of the story.

This story addresses the transition period—wanting to answer for the students what happened between the time before contact when Aboriginal people lived their own ways on the land to the time when settlers came and “settled” an “empty” land. We begin with the trial as a setting of the stage. The trial is a reflection of the dominant story. There was a massacre, he was the leader, he was responsible, he was guilty, he would be punished.

In my encounter with Mistahimaskwa’s story I was surprised by the depth of wisdom and commitment this man demonstrated in his efforts to maintain control of Cree land, language, and culture. The newcomers were here to stay, but his hope was for a relationship based on respect. Somehow that seemed like a possibility within his grasp. He challenged the system—his work was not only about personal survival or even survival of his immediate followers—Mistahimaskwa had a vision of the totality of what was at stake. The very existence of the Cree as a nation, as a people was under attack. He recognized and challenged the systemic injustice being perpetrated against Aboriginal people of the plains. It was the clarity of his actions in response to the purposeful intentions of the Canadian government that called me to bear witness to his story. The story is particularly useful in its potential to disrupt that part of the dominant story of Canadian history that positions “settlers” as coming to an empty land and building a nation out of nothing. The land was not empty; it was national territory—the land was forcibly emptied of buffalo and people.

Mistahimaskwa’s story speaks to Michael and me in a way that we feel unable to completely enunciate. In responding to the violence perpetrated against a people for the purposes of land acquisition, we give readers access to our anger, pride, and sorrow. We felt the need to reflect the violence, pain, and loss in a way that readers would recognize as a call to bear the weight of the burden of loss. The details of the devastation are carefully told. There is clarity in the actions of the Canadian government that make it useful in terms of naming the oppression, but in its very clarity lay the potential to trigger resistance. I recognized that my scene of recognition with the narrative of Mistahimaskwa would be the very grounds on which non-Aboriginal readers would resist. In the opening address we ask, “Mistahimaskwa was not in my history book. Why did I not hear his story?” This question offers readers a listening position that provides some distance between the events of the story and themselves. This offer is followed up by a request to those who have inherited the land to hear the story. Thus, having been denied access to the story, they are now being asked to accept responsibility for hearing.

One of the challenges of (re)telling Mistahimaskwa’s story was how to deal with the amount of content. This is the story of the long and painful process of starving a nation into submission. Deciding what was critical to include and what could be left out became a major task of the

(re)telling. For example, Mistahimaskwa waited ten years from the time he was first offered a treaty until he signed. The details of what happened during this period were less important than the fact that Mistahimaskwa insisted on waiting to see what the impact of living on a reserve would be for those that signed. His decision to wait was included; the details of what he did during that time were excluded. His decision to wait to sign a treaty angered many of his followers, who held him responsible for the starvation they endured. Although we can understand his reasons for waiting, we can also appreciate the anger of his followers.

We decided to add a map of Canada marked with the original territory of the Plains Cree. Students immediately recognize the physical space represented in the map of Canada, and as such, it provides a visual connection to the story. It also provides a visual confrontation with the recognition that this land belonged to someone else. In our (re)telling, we deliberately place the events of the story in relation to Confederation. It is a means of placing this story within the time frame of the legitimized version of history students are presented with.

The Story

“I Shared Their Anger”

The charge was treason-felony and the verdict was guilty.

Mistahimaskwa, chief of the Plains Cree was sentenced to three years in the Stoney Mountain Penitentiary.

Mistahimaskwa spoke in his own defense:

“I always believed that by being the friend of the Whiteman, I and my people would be helped by those of them who had wealth.

I always thought it paid to do all the good I could.

Now my heart is on the ground.”

Mistahimaskwa fought for the rights of his people

Why was he sent to prison?

Mistahimaskwa was not in my history book.

Why did I not hear his story?

On the morning of April 2, 1885, members of Mistahimaskwa’s band went into the white settlement at Frog Lake and killed nine people. They then traveled to Fort Pitt and, after evacuating the fort, burned it to the ground. At his trial, Mistahimaskwa accepted responsibility for the actions of his warriors saying: “Even as they rallied I called to them Tesqua! Tesqua! (Stop! Stop!). But they would not be stopped. They were angry, and although I did not share their desire to shed the blood of the intruders on our land, I share their anger.”

When Mistahimaskwa spoke at his trial he was not able to tell his story but now speaking to you, to Canadians who have come to inherit the land that once gave life to the Cree Nation, I will pass on to you his

story. It is the story that I hear Mistahimaskwa tell about his life and the events that led up to the attack at Frog Lake, Alberta in 1885.

Mistahimaskwa's Story

Before going out on a hunt, I would go with my spiritual leaders to make an offering at the Iron Stone. At this sacred monument, we would pray for a successful hunt, a hunt that would give life to our people. The Iron Stone was a protector of the buffalo and a guardian of the Cree because as long as there were buffalo there would be food, clothing and shelter for our people. But in 1866 the Iron Stone was taken away. Christian missionaries, who had no respect for our spiritual practices, loaded the Iron Stone on a cart and moved it 160 kilometers north to Victoria mission. When I saw that the stone was taken away, I was angry. I heeded the words of my Holy Men who recognized the removal of the stone as a sign of impending danger. Without the protection of the stone, our Holy Men warned that disease, starvation, and war would overtake our people. The prophecy of our Holy Men came true. Each year, more and more white people came to our territory and their presence became a threat to our lifeways.

We were a hunting people, and our lives were tied to the buffalo. The buffalo was a gift from Manitou to the Cree, and we praised its spirit. We made use of every part of the buffalo: the hides became our clothing, the stomachs were used as bags, the bones and horns were made into tools, and the meat fed our people. I was a young chief, but I had many lodges and people looked to me for leadership. I spoke with our Head Chief Wihaskokiseyin about the prophecy and the declining buffalo herds. We talked about the white hunters with their automatic rifles who killed hundreds of buffalo, taking only the hides and leaving the carcasses to rot. Without the buffalo, we could not survive, but for many of the white hunters, killing was nothing more than a sport.

Four years after the Iron Stone was taken, smallpox erupted in the Cree camps and spread like a prairie fire across the plains. Hundreds of our people died, and those that did survive were too weak to hunt. I was afflicted with smallpox when I was a child, and this time I did not get sick, but many people in my band died. When the worst was over, I sent scouts out in search of buffalo. When the scouts returned, they described what they had witnessed. Our land was desolate; entire families had been eliminated. They saw abandoned camps where the only signs of life were the wolves gnawing on the corpses of men, women and children. I listened in horror to the stories of my scouts, and the prophecy echoed in their words.

Fall came, and we thought the worst was over, but because we had not been hunting through the summer, we could not move north to the

protection of the woods. We were forced to spend the winter on the prairies in search of food. That winter, the herds did not come north, and we had to travel far to the south. There were a few scattered herds around the Hand Hills, and a large gathering of Cree had assembled there. Many council fires were held and we talked about our conditions. We heard reports that the Hudson Bay Company had sold Cree land to the Canadian government, and there was a lot of talk about what we would do. I met with Chiefs Little Pine, Wihaskokiseyin, and Kehiwin. We did not know who or what the Canadian government was but they must have heard about our meetings. They sent Missionary John McDougall with a message of friendship and goodwill. Our Head Chief Wihaskokiseyin expressed our response saying: "We heard our lands were sold, and we did not like it; we don't want to sell our lands; it is our property and no one has the right to sell them (p.44)." He asked McDougall to tell the Canadians to come and meet with us. They refused, and our concern turned to anger. We were being ignored and our lands stolen from us.

In the fall of 1872, the buffalo disappeared, and we were once again forced to spend the winter on the plains enduring harsh conditions with insufficient food to sustain our people. Some members of my band left in search of buffalo, hoping to kill a stray. Others returned to hunt and fish in the lakes north of the North Saskatchewan River. I moved the remaining members of my band into the South Saskatchewan River Valley where we found some protection from the winter and a few buffalo. That year, there was a frantic search for food. I can still see the thin wasted bodies of my people who were forced to eat their horses and dogs. There were times when we were so hungry we tore our tipis and boiled the bits of hide to make a watery soup. I thought again about the prophecy of our Holy Men. We had known starvation before the white people came to our territory, but the buffalo had never before been so scarce.

We had lived side by side with the missionaries and the Hudson Bay Company men for many years. But this thing called the Canadian government was a mystery to us. Some of the younger Cree warriors wanted to fight. Many times, I had to speak to my warriors. I told them that we would not win against the white soldiers with their automatic weapons and that fighting with the newcomers would not solve our problems. Each year, more settlers were moving west, occupying our lands, killing our game, and burning the woods and prairies. We needed an agreement with the newcomers that would protect our land and the remaining herds of buffalo for our people. Again, George McDougall came to speak with us, and this time, he had gifts to distribute. He told us that the government would meet with us the following summer, and in the meantime, they wanted us to accept gifts of food, blankets, and ammunition. My people were starving, but I told McDougall, "We want

none of the government's presents! When we set a fox trap, we scatter pieces of meat all around, but when the fox gets into the trap, we knock him on the head. We want no baits! Let your Chiefs come like men and talk to us" (63). It was not easy for me to walk away from food when my people were starving, but I would not be bought off with a few pounds of meat when our land and our freedom were at stake.

The following year, agents representing the Canadian government came to meet with us. But the agents had no intention of listening to our demands. They came with promises of food and medicine to those of us who would sign away our land and agree to live on what they called an Indian Reserve. The agents said that the buffalo were disappearing and that Indians would have to give up hunting and make the change to an agricultural way of life. Our Head Chief Wihaskokiseyin had come under the influence of the missionaries, and he agreed to sign a treaty, but Chief Poundmaker was unmoved by the offers. He spoke for those of us who would not sign. He told the government agents, "The government mentions how much land is to be given to us. He says 640 acres, one square mile for each family, he will give us. This is our land! It isn't a piece of pemmican to be cut off and given in little pieces back to us. It is ours, and we will take what we want" (69). Conditions were desperate, but I was not prepared to accept the government's deal. I wanted a treaty that would protect the land and the remaining buffalo for the Cree. The treaty that the Canadians were offering was no more than a rope around our necks. It would be the end of our freedom and turn the Cree into prisoners in our own land.

My band was growing. I had 65 lodges, more than 500 men, women, and children. Wihaskokiseyin was still considered the Head Chief, and even though I had a larger following, I deferred to the elder. We were close friends and often consulted one another. Wihaskokiseyin would say that I was a dynamic and effective leader and that my band was destined to do great things. But the white newcomers had a different impression of me. The missionaries saw me as a pagan because I would not convert to Christianity. Government officials saw me as a troublemaker because I would not accept their gifts and sign a treaty. They were angry when I spoke to the Cree and warned them not to sign their treaties, but I was not afraid to voice my opposition to the Canadian treaty system. The treaties did not provide a fair exchange for surrendering our land and our freedom. We had no guarantees that we would escape starvation if we could not adjust to farming. I wanted something better. The buffalo were almost gone, and I knew that eventually I would have to deal with the Canadians, but as long as there were buffalo on the plains, I would not sign away our freedom. At the summer gathering, I told the government agents that I would wait four years, and during that time, "I would watch to see whether the government would faithfully carry out its promises to the Indians who had signed their treaties" (85).

I met with the leaders in my band and told them that we would travel south in search of the remaining herds. We would wait four years and watch what happened with those bands that had signed treaties. I was not willing to give up our land until we had assurances that our conditions would improve. Again, I had to argue for peace. My war chief, Wandering Spirit, was anxious to fight. I had gained the reputation as a leader who would not give in to the whites and had attracted many young rebels to my band. My son Imasees was one of the most rebellious. He, like Wandering Spirit, was anxious to show the Canadians that the Cree would not give up easily. I managed to persuade my followers to hold back. I told them about a battle in my younger days when we were at war with our traditional enemies, the Blackfoot and the Peigans. Our enemies had been armed with automatic rifles given to them by white traders. And again the prophecy came back to me. War was the third element of the prophecy. It had been a warning. We had suffered great losses in our last battle with the Blackfoot, and I did not want to go up against the rifles of the Canadians. My warriors listened, and we moved south.

Four years later when the last of the buffalo were gone, pressure to sign a treaty was great. My people were starving, and many families had left my band and signed a treaty under other chiefs. I travelled north to see for myself what the conditions were like for the Treaty Indians, and what I saw sickened me. Two thousand Treaty Indians were camped near Cypress Lake, their skin teepees rotting and falling apart; families were living in makeshift shelters of cotton cloth and tree branches. Many people were emaciated and in rags, their moccasins worn out, their horses sold and even their dogs gone to make stew. The transition from hunting to farming was not made easily, and the Canadian government had not kept its promises yet, as chief I had to make a decision. Those bands that had signed a treaty received some support, but because I had refused to sign, my band received nothing. Tensions were rising and still the consequences of signing weighed heavily. I was haunted by the words of the prophecy. I had taken the warning seriously and worked to prevent the loss of our freedom, but my people were dying, and my first priority was to them. I signed my adhesion to Treaty Six on December 8, 1882.

Signing the treaty increased the tension within my band. Many of my warriors were angry. They were angry at me for not signing earlier and for not arranging a better deal. They wanted to know why they were still starving. Again, many of my young followers wanted to fight. I knew that we could never win a war against the newcomers and believed that the only way to pressure the Canadians into honouring their promises was to unite. I believed it would take the power of a united Aboriginal assembly to force the Canadians to keep their promises. I travelled to other reserves, met with their chiefs, and organized a Grand Council at

Poundmaker's reserve near Battleford. During this council, the leaders of twelve bands sent a message to the Canadian Government protesting its failure to keep its promises. But the government continued to ignore us. We had agreed to sign treaties and live on the reserves, but we were not willing to sit by and watch our people die from starvation. After the failure of the gathering at Battleford, many of my followers dispersed. I was left with a hostile core of young warriors, and their resentment smouldered through the winter.

In the spring of 1885, my people rebelled. I was away from the reserve on a hunting trip and returned late on April 1, 1885. Word had arrived only that day that Louis Riel and the Métis had been successful in a battle at Duck Lake. I knew nothing about the attack until after the first shots were fired at Frog Lake, and although I counselled for peace, my war chief was in command, and I was unable to stop my warriors.

Even after the Iron Stone was taken, I always hoped that we could live in peace. We were not put here by the Great Spirit to shed each other's blood nor were we meant to control each other's lives. I believed that one day Canadians would recognize our rights to the land and respect our traditional lifeways. Did my faith in the newcomers cost me the trust of my people?

Conclusion

Writing the *Braiding Histories* stories, Michael and I created a project that provided us with the opportunity to investigate and "learn from" the lived experiences of Aboriginal people. (Re)membering and (re)telling the stories of our ancestors, the project became for us a labour of self-understanding. Through our research and writing we came to recognize ourselves in relationship with Aboriginal people, and shared our stories in the hope of contributing to a new and just relationship between Aboriginal people and Canadians.

While the stories are for us a source of affirmation and connection, they call attention to a history many Canadians would rather forget. Our (re)tellings were purposefully written with the intention of offering readers an alternative listening position. Turning to Aboriginal conceptions of history and story, reconceptions of cultural representation in the field of anthropology, and conceptions of testimony and witnessing, we began to think about and understand how relationship, attention to detail, and concerns with representing the suffering of others were critical to our project of retelling. Building on the strength of our relationship, Michael and I composed stories that would offer readers the opportunity to recognize themselves as something other than "perfect strangers" in their relationship with Aboriginal people. Sharing detailed stories of the lived experiences of Aboriginal people and their response to colonization, we hoped to initiate a recognition that, as individuals and as

Canadians, our readers share a history intertwined with the stories of Aboriginal people. It was our intention to offer stories that would initiate attachment to, and implication in, the stories of colonization, calling for a responsible response.

The work of writing the *Braiding Histories* stories was an important first step that provided the space for exploring loss, celebrating reconnection, and recognizing the possibilities for continued learning from Aboriginal world views and value systems. (Re)telling the stories of Aboriginal people we were often surprised by the extent to which writing offered us ways of connecting. While completing the research for our stories, we found traces of ourselves that affirmed our sense of being part of a community. In our work we attended to what happened, what was done to Aboriginal people, and importantly, how Aboriginal people responded.

In our research and writing process we often found ourselves confronted with the task of (re)telling from texts written by non-Aboriginal writers. We searched their stories and “found in translation” the strength and humanity that had been subverted by colonization. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) writes, “colonized peoples have been compelled to define what it means to be human because there is a deep understanding of what it has meant to be considered not fully human, to be *savage*” (p.26).

Engaging previously hidden histories in an effort to honour the lived experiences of Aboriginal people we came to understand not only the position from which we speak, but also that the stories of “our ancestors” are a resource for what we have to say. Writing the *Braiding Histories* stories we joined an ever growing community of indigenous writers who are using writing to

make sense of our own world while also attempting to transform what counts as important in the world of the powerful...Part of the exercise is about recovering our own stories of the past. This is inextricably bound to a recovery of our language and epistemological foundations. It is also about reconciling and reprioritizing what is really important about the past with what is important about the present. (Smith, p.39)

Knowing the past helps us to understand the present and create a more just future. The project of (re)telling contributes to our understanding of the need to continue listening and learning from and with Aboriginal people.

References

- Benjamin, W. (1968). *Illuminations* (Harry Zohn, Trans.). In H. Arendt, (Ed.), New York: Schocken Books. (Original work published 1955).
- Cameron, W. B. (1926). *The war trial of Big Bear*. Toronto: Ryerson.
- Dempsey, H. (1984). *Big Bear: The end of freedom*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Fraser, W. B. (1966). *Big Bear, Indian patriot*, Alberta Historical Review. Spring 1966. Calgary: Historical Society of Alberta.
- Hall, Stuart. (1989). Ethnicity: Identity and difference. *Radical America*, 23 (4), 9-21.
- Marshall, I. (1996). *A history and ethnography of the Beothuk*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Marshall, Ingbord. (1996). *A history and ethnography of the Beothuk*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Miller, J.R. (1996). *Big Bear (Mistahimusqua)*. Toronto: ECW Press.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
-