

**Web of Stories:
Conversations with Cherie Dimaline**

Lisa Haslett

B.A., University of Northern British Columbia, 2008

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
Masters of Arts
in
English Literature

The University of Northern British Columbia

July 2010

© Lisa Haslett, 2010

“Quilting With Fat Man Pants”
© Cherie Dimaline and Lisa Haslett, 2010



Library and Archives
Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-75106-0
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-75106-0

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.

■+■
Canada

Abstract

As a non-Native scholar researching Native women's literatures, I ask myself some serious ethical questions. How do I find meaning in the texts I study? How do I learn from Native women's writing?

Specific stories can work together to create cumulative narratives. Therefore, I focus my thesis on one specific voice, Cherie Dimaline. I interact with Dimaline's "talk" through her novel, Red Rooms, and through a recorded conversation we had. My interpretation of Dimaline's talk is part of a process that acknowledges complex relationships and encourages dialogue. What I learn from Cherie Dimaline helps me answer the question of how I understand Native women's literatures: consider things in context, make connections from specific yet unfixed locations, recognize power dynamics in terms of race and gender, and learn responsibly from stories.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract		ii
Table of Contents		iii
Acknowledgement		iv
Preface	Quilting with Fat Man Pants	1
Introduction	Connecting the Web	44
Chapter One	Situating the Theoretical Paradigm and Methodology	60
Chapter Two	“Honey, I’m Home”	76
Chapter Three	“A Cloud Cut by Fencing”	97
Chapter Four	“The Native Rosetta Stone”	116
Conclusion	Continuing the Conversation	131
Works Cited		137

Acknowledgement

My conversations with Cherie Dimaline were instrumental in the formation of my thoughts and arguments for this thesis. I would like to recognize her significant contribution to this work and thank her for some great dialogue, without which this would not be possible.

Many thanks to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Dee Horne, and my committee members, Dr. Blanca Schorcht, Dr. Maryna Romanets, and Dr. Si Transken, for their thoughtful feedback and encouragement during the writing of this thesis. I would also like to recognize the many teachers and fellow learners in both the English and First Nations Studies programs who have influenced my thinking during my studies at the University of Northern British Columbia.

I give special thanks to my family and friends for their contributions to this process. In particular, thank you to my parents, John and Linda deHoog, for their love and unwavering support. Thank you to my son, Josiah, for his patience and for being a reality check. Also, thank you to my husband, Micah Haslett, for providing the love and space I needed to complete this work.

Finally, I would like to recognize that my research was partially funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of Northern British Columbia.

Preface

Quilting With Fat Man Pants:

Cherie Dimaline on Red Rooms and Being a Native Woman Writer

The following is a transcription of a recorded conversation between Cherie Dimaline and Lisa Haslett that took place at the Native Women's Centre in Toronto on March 5, 2009. The text has been edited for clarity and length.

CD: So, Red Rooms was written in a week, and the story behind that is that – it's not actually that amazing [laughs]. I wrote the first story – the first story in chronological order – and I sent it to Theytus.¹ I didn't know anything. I spent years in journalism, done all that route, but I finally decided I was going to do this book, and I sent it to Theytus because I had heard, "Oh, it takes forever to hear anything back from anyone. You won't hear for, like, a year. People meet very rarely. You should just send people a sample anyways." So I sent it as a sample chapter, as if the whole book was written. I'm like, "Here's the first chapter; let me know if you're interested." And they called me and said, "Absolutely, send the manuscript. The editorial meeting is on Friday." And I said, "Of course! Of course, I'll get that right over to you." Oh my god!

So, the good thing was that it wasn't that difficult. There wasn't a lot of creation in terms of the stories because they are my family's stories; they are my community's stories; they are stories that I always had. It was just getting them out. And initially there was no Naomi; there was no chambermaid. It was like short stories, completely separate, but somehow linked. So, Theytus took it, they liked it, and they sent me to Lee Maracle, who was like, "Oh no, no, no, no. You need to fix this. There needs to be something." She said, "I understand the implications of what you're saying, but damn Ojibways and your – everything's in circles. I can tell your Grandmother was Ojibway because everything is in a

¹ Theytus Press, Penticton, BC.

circle, but you need to link it physically.” So, that’s when we came up with Naomi. That was Lee pushing me to stitch the stories together, and then Naomi came out of that process. And that process with Lee was an entire year. So, even though it was written in a week, which sounds cool, it took a year of sitting with Lee Maracle, who is – Now, have you met Lee?

LH: No, I haven’t. She’s going to be up at the Symposium though.² I’m very excited to meet her.

CD: She is a tiny woman, but she is huge. She’s huge. And she is not shy. And so, this is the story of Lee and I. She’s one of my heroes. I mean, I’m a Native writer and she is the first published woman in Canada, larger than life and so insanely talented. So Theytus said, “Do you want Lee to be your editor?” Why, of course. Do I want to meet Lee? – of course I do! So I went, and she’s very straightforward. Like, I remember sitting there and I had two pages of what I thought was beautiful – all these metaphors and alliteration towards describing Constance’s lover. And she said to me, “Okay, what are you trying to say here? What is ‘he this and that’ and ‘it was like this and that?’ What are you trying to say? What are you trying to say?” I kept shortening it and she would say, “Really. What is the message?” And I’m like, [shouts] “He’s a dick!” And she goes, “Delete, delete, delete, delete. ‘He’s a dick.’ How hard was that to just say?” [both laugh]

I love her. She’s my auntie now. One time, I wasn’t coming to see her – I was supposed to come and see her every Friday – and she finally got a hold of me and she’s like, “How come you’re not coming to see me? Why are you missing our appointments?” And I said, “Do you want me to be honest?” And she’s like, “Of course I do.” And I said, “I

² Indigenous Women’s Symposium 2009 was hosted by Trent University, Peterborough, ON.

would rather poke my own eyes out with my pen than ever have to come and see you again.”

And she laughed! She laughed at me. She was like, “Oh my girl, it’s so funny. I’ll see you on Friday.” And we were fine after that.

LH: You just needed to establish that.

CD: We just needed to establish it like, “You’re scary and I’m scared of you.” Okay, now we’re good.

LH: So, Lee was obviously one of your major influences then?

CD: Absolutely. Yeah, for sure. I had a lot of – like my favorite writers are...there’s not one Indigenous person among them, which is...people find odd: Hunter S. Thompson is my favorite writer, Anaïs Nin – I named my daughter after her [laughs] – Charles Bukowski, Jean-Paul Sartre. Shakespeare was early – one of the first writers I actually read when I was in grade five; I found Macbeth and my life changed. I came in later, I think; I came into the Native community – the writing of the Native community, my community – kind of in a backwards way. But I think it’s common in this community that people find our writers through politics, because as a Native writer, I’m called on a lot of times to – and this is Lee’s experience and I know she does a lot of community work – but you’re called into the community to speak for your community.

When I went to Saskatchewan, I met Louise Halfe and we met at her very cool house out in the middle of the prairies – completely round. Her whole top floor is like a ceremonial space. It’s beautiful, and she’s this beautiful woman. I just met her and she said, “Can I talk to you for a second?” And I said, “Okay.” We went upstairs and she gave me an eagle feather and she said, “I want to give you this feather because I need for you to remember who you are.” I have a lot of anxiety and I’m always scared to speak. Always. I was giving

readings and breaking out in hives freaking out over these readings – these readings and talkings. And she said, “You need to get over it. You need to realize that now it’s your responsibility to speak on behalf of the women in our community who can’t speak.” And I was like, [louder] “Oh yeah, that makes it better!”

But she took the eagle feather and she said, “The bones of the eagle and the wings are hollow and you need to remember that that’s what you have to be.” You know it’s a huge symbol in our community and the eagle is the creature that flies highest to the Creator and so it holds all this significance for us and, as a carrier of the words, I needed to do the same thing. I needed to allow myself to be hollow so that my community could flow through me and I could take them where they needed to go. So, that changed my perspective a little bit because I couldn’t understand. I was like, “I’m a writer. I’m not a politician. I’m not a leader. I don’t know what’s going on.” And people were saying to me, like Lee, she said, “What don’t you know? You’re a Native woman. You’ve always been Native. You were raised by your mother and your Grandmother in your community. You spoke your language when you were little. What don’t you know? And what you don’t know, you learn as you go.” I was like, “Okay.”

Yeah, it was very, very strange, but wonderful too. And so that is sort of how I came to Lee’s writing, and Louise’s writing, and Maria Campbell’s writing, was in the political realm of going to community meetings and hearing their words and meeting them and then finding out more of what they were about. Yeah...

LH: So when you look at someone’s writing, like Maria Campbell’s for instance, it seems quite different from yours in that yours represents several stories and hers represents one that’s more personal. Do you see that comparison, or how do you see that comparison?

CD: I think that when I'm asked about my characters it's hard for me to see them as separate characters. Every single person that I write about exists. I mean you only write what you know and only say what you understand. My stories are very honest and they're my truths and so, say, the photographer, for example, is a combination of seven of my cousins...and a little bit of my brother. So, every story is very personal to me. In fact, part of the book is directly from my journal, which is bizarre. People would say, "I can't believe you're putting your diary in the book," but I thought, "Well, no one's going to know." But, my family is like, "Hey! Wait a minute!" And it's funny too because everyone back home in Penetanguishene is like, "That old witch up the hill. That's Elsie isn't it?" And I'm like, "I'm not telling you," but of course it is. Everyone knows everyone.

In 2007, I was invited to be part of this Aboriginal writer's retreat, the master's class, for a week. It was Maria Campbell who was running it up in a mountain in BC. It was in Quesnel. We were there and we were on top of this mountain at this old salmon hatchery that had been left. It was myself, Joanne Arnott, Sharon Proulx-Turner, Bren Kolson, Maria Campbell, Harmony Rice – there was a bunch of us. It was the first time I met Maria, and the whole thing was a ceremony; it was a week of ceremony. And writing. The idea behind it was to capture the stories of motherhood, the time between conception and birth, the whole pregnancy experience. And we had circles every night. I was Maria's helper and I spent every night sitting – she would sit on her chair because she was sewing a quilt and I'd sit at her feet. It reminded me a lot of being with my Grandmother. And we'd share a lot of stories. I think what happened in that experience is that I came to understand that within our

community the way that we tell stories –and I think in your questions you touched upon it with oral tradition and also how Thomas King said, “The truth is we’re stories.”³

LH: That’s all we are.

CD: That’s all we are. And that’s absolutely true, within our communities. I think in a lot of ways Maria Campbell and I are very similar in our stories in that it comes from the same place. It comes from your own truth. There’s no other way that I could write, which is, I think, why it took me so long to write this novel that I’m finishing now. I started off thinking, “I want to appeal to more people.” I wanted to look beyond the community. I wanted to move beyond my own community into a broader sort of arena, which was ridiculous when I think back on it because how can you write anything but what you know, right?

LH: Yeah. Were you thinking a larger First Nations group or were you thinking...

CD: I was thinking the world! The world! I was thinking Random House. I’m going to be a superstar! Oh my god. So, I was trying to encompass all of these things and I was trying to be inclusive because what happened was – god, I’m going all over the place. I’m sorry.

LH: That’s okay.

CD: I was invited to Australia to be part of the City of Writers Festival. And they asked me to be there to speak on two issues: one, being a black woman, because in Australia Aboriginal people are black; and on writing such horrible, grim stories. And I was shocked first of all because, my god, I’m a black woman? That’s awesome! [both laugh] And second of all, I was like, my book is grim and depressing? That book is hilarious. When I

³ Cherie Dimaline was provided with possible questions prior to our conversation. The full quote from Thomas King, “The truth about stories is that’s all we are,” is repeated in his book The Truth About Stories.

read my book in the Native community people laugh, and in Australia people are like, “Oh my god, how do you not kill yourself writing this horrible depressing stuff?” I thought, holy shit, I’m depressing? This is funny!

The reason that I got to Australia was because I was at a conference in Saskatchewan and there was a French Canadian professor who was teaching in Sydney. He was doing this presentation on Indigenous literature and he was talking about ghosts in literature. His name is Gerry Turcotte. He’s a friend of mine now, but at the time – I met him after and I said, “Listen, I just wanted to meet you, and it’s nice to meet you and I just wanted to say that I’m really offended by your speech.” He said, “Well, what are you talking about?” And I was like, “Pro-Indigenous? How dare you call my Grandmothers ghosts? Ask any Native person here about their ancestors and try and call them a ghost.” He was like, “I never thought of that.” I said, “This is what you teach in Australia?” And he said, “Yeah. Maybe you better come.” And I said, “Maybe I better.” [both laugh]

Yeah, he’s hilarious. He’s a great guy. He invited me to come to his class and they were learning about my book. Their perceptions of things – for example in the first story where her grandmothers come and visit her, they didn’t know what was going on. They were like, “What is happening? What is going on? Is she in a haunted house? Is she going crazy?” They had no clue. And it took me by surprise because I sort of have this Canadian sensibility and in Canada people understand about First Nations people and our culture. Maybe not, you know...

LH: To a certain extent.

CD: Exactly! It’s that sort of Canadian mosaic, right? They had no clue. So, I sort of went all the way back and I was like, “Okay, in Canada there are three main...” Literally, I

gave them a history lesson...yeah. So, it was totally bizarre. And I totally forgot where I started. Sorry. [both laugh]

LH: Actually, I was going to ask you about that. It's interesting that you bring up the idea of being an Aboriginal person in Canada and how that differs from being an Aboriginal somewhere else. Can you talk a bit more about that? Have you seen any differences between, say, being in Canada versus being in the United States, where some groups actually cross borders but have had different experiences since colonialism happened, especially with the Indian Act and that kind of thing? What kinds of differences do you see?

CD: Right. I think the main difference from my experience is that in Canada there is the Métis Nation, which I'm a member of. There is a Métis community in the United States; they're not lawfully recognized. They have no rights. In Canada we have the status, non-status, on-reserve, off-reserve, First Nations, Métis and Inuit. In the States you're Indian, and there's a blood quotient and they're not accepting of – for example, when I go to the United States, I'm not Native. At all. I mean, people I know, then that's cool. They know my family, they know my grandmothers, they are fine with it. But when I go to Native groups or whatever, they're like, "No, you're white. You have a white father? You're white. You don't understand. Get lost." It's very different.

LH: So it's based on blood quotient?

CD: It's based on blood quotient. And they literally have it down to like, "I'm 67% Cherokee, and I'm 11% Mohawk, and that means that I'm..." It's very crazy.

I think in a lot of ways, I'm envious of their organization: that they have overcome a lot, that they come together a lot better than a lot of Canadian Aboriginal groups that I've witnessed, working in the community. At the same time, I think they are sort of – the border

between Canada and the United States is not a recognized border in our community. We don't recognize that border. It's imposed on us. But in the States, I think that they see that border more than Canadian Natives do. They're very American in their sensibility, which is fine. But, very, very different from us. I mean, an Indian is an Indian in the States. In my book, we were using the term "Aboriginal" and in all the press releases we used "Aboriginal." That's the term that I used, that's the term that's used in Canada. Everything had to be changed for the States. Everything had to be changed to "Native" because in the States the word Aboriginal is offensive because they don't want people thinking they're from Australia, which I thought was really bizarre. People in Australia are awesome people. Are you kidding me? [laughs]

It was actually in Australia when I met with some of the Aboriginal groups there – we look very different, the language obviously, their slang, their land is very, very different. And their experience, I thought, was very, very different, but when I sat down with some of the older people, it was exactly the same. I started telling them – okay, the government, Canada Council, paid for my trip, for my flight over. I was invited by the Canadian Consulate to go and have breakfast. They had Vincent Lam there and Janet Wong and Heather O'Neill and all these important writers and everyone came to my talk. I didn't expect to do this, but I absolutely ripped into Canada because I realized that nobody in Australia really understood the experience of the Aboriginal people of Canada. I was like, okay, I'm just going to tell the truth, and here's the truth. And people were like, "No!" Literally in the audience, [shouting] "No! My god! No! That didn't happen!" And I'm like, "That did happen. That totally happened. The last residential school closed in 1997." The elder lady who was from the Aboriginal community there was telling me about their

experience and we were talking about the reserve system and colonialism and their land treaties and it was exactly the same, to the point where even the sense of humor we shared. I thought it was so different on the other side of the planet, but it really wasn't.

LH: So was it just a shared sensibility, a way of coming to the world that was the commonality?

CD: I think that it was the same experience of forced colonialism in a short period of time and having to adapt to that. For example, she was saying, "People think we're from the interior. Like, use your head. Why would a people, when they have these beautiful, lush paradise lands on the coast, why would they choose to live in the desert where you can't farm, and your animals die. We were forced into the desert." And I said, "Yeah, why would anyone think that people would choose to live on these crappy reserves. That wasn't our original land." That was where we were sent. Oil's found? "Oh, you gotta move." Oh, diamonds now? "You gotta move." It was the same experience with them. I think that it's this very, very quickly moving adaptability. And the only way that you can really get through it all, and stay sane, is to laugh. Really. So I think that that was common.

I know it's horrible, sometimes we'll be sitting here [at the Native Women's Centre] – and this is a really high-risk centre, very ground zero. Lots and lots of different issues come through the centre. Some days we'll sit in here and we'll just laugh because, you know, what are you going to do, right? You have to push through some way. And that's very common in Aboriginal communities. When they're – they say that when there are Native women gathered, there's always cooking and laughing because what are you going to do? And I thought it was the same way over there – and the same way that we held on to our traditions now: a lot of writing, a lot of song, a lot of oral tradition...same thing, same

handing down. There's all these intricate ways we pass stories along and – it's like the Underground Railroad I guess.

LH: Yeah, that's interesting. Can I ask you, how do you see those stories that are passed along in the midst of everyday life, how do you see those as contributing to people's identity? Because as I understand it, oral tradition is something that creates, or helps to constitute, identity for a group of people, and so how do you see that working in a contemporary setting?

[long pause from CD]

LH: Do you see your stories as playing into that dynamic?

CD: The ways that my stories are written are - I do see myself as a writer as opposed to a storyteller. But, that being said, my stories are sort of the written format of the oral tradition. You'll notice in all my stories, at some point, there's going to be a little girl sitting under a kitchen table because that little girl was me. I grew up in the city, and we moved around a lot in Canada, but every summer my mother would send me back home, to my Grandmother and my great aunties. I would sit under the table and they would talk, and sometimes they would go in and out of their language. They spoke Michif depending on how bad the stories that they were telling were. If they were really bad, they were in Michif; if they were okay, they were in English. They would sit there and they would drink those little stubby bottles of beer and they would play cards and they would talk. They knew damn well I was there. I wasn't hiding. I thought I was, but I wasn't. And, it's in that way that I learned about my family, learned about my grandfathers, and learned about the adoption in my family. We don't have status, we never had status, but there was one point where everyone in my family was adopted out to these Scottish families and into the area. My Grandmother was telling stories

about how she lived with these people and there used to be this old man that used to walk in and it took him days and days to get in to the house because he lived on the trap line. She remembered once or twice a year he would come. He could come over when the water was frozen, or he would paddle in, and he would visit. She would never talk to him, she didn't understand his language, and then he would leave. She never knew who he was, but it was her grandfather visiting them. She didn't know until much later.

She would never sit with me and say, "I'm gonna tell you a story." It was me under the table and her talking to her sisters. That's how I learned my history. It's very different with my children. I sort of sit them down, "You need to know this. This is important stuff." Or I write it and I make them read it, or I put it away for them for later. But, the way that I know how to write is the way that I know how to listen, and that's through the stories of these old women in my family.

Actually, when I was trying to finish this damn next book, I went to see Lee. She had read the preliminary, and she said to me, "What's different? Because this is not you." And I said, "Hold on, what do you mean? This is me; this is my writing. What are you saying, I copied? This is the me that's going to make money." She said, "No, this is the you that's not going to get published. This isn't you." And I was like, "What?" So she said, "Okay. When you sit at your computer, who tells your stories?" This is how Lee talks. Oh, what does she mean? Oh my god, what if I say the wrong thing? So I was like, "Ahhhh...What do you mean? Me." She was like, "No, no, no. Who tells your stories? Who's in your head?" And I couldn't understand what she was getting at. And she said, "Who wrote Red Rooms? Who was the voice in Red Rooms?" So, I said, "Well, it was my Grandmother." And she said, "Well then your Grandma writes your stories. Those are your Grandma's stories. So

when you sit down at your computer, you need to ask your Grandma to sit with you. Because if you don't, then you've lost your storyteller." My stories are me, but my stories are my Grandmother's stories. Even though my Grandmother never knew a photographer, my Grandmother had never been to Africa; these are things I've added on to demonstrate a sensibility that my Grandmother gave me through her stories.

So, I think oral tradition is evolving. It's still there certainly, but I think it's being brought into literature. That's how I see mine. I mean, to be quite honest, I've never taken a writing course. I've never studied literature, except maybe that I've read voraciously and always written as far as I can remember. In fact, I got in trouble in Grade 2 for writing in class when I was supposed to be doing Math. But I've never studied it – I have in the sense that I lived with my oral tradition.

I was very lucky my Grandmother lived with me my whole life. She was my roommate. You know, that's where that came from. Actually, the book is dedicated to her – the dedication is "I did it." The story behind that is I always wrote and I thought, one day I'll write a book, one day in the far off future. Then life took over and I did other things for work. I did journalism because it was something like writing, but not real writing. And my Grandmother – my parents were moving to Newfoundland of all places. I don't know why [laughs] They're not from there. They just went on vacation one day. That's my parents: "Hey, it's nice here. Let's move here." [laughs] But my grandmother was still with them. I had moved out by this point. And she was 90. They said to her, "We're moving to Newfoundland. What do you want to do? Do you want to go live with your sister?" – because she was living with them – "Or do you wanna come with us?" And she was like,

“I’ll come with you. I’m up for an adventure. Let’s go.” So she went. And she got very sick – I mean she was in her nineties.

I found out she was sick and I was very, very close with her. The whole time we were roommates – we shared a room – I used to spend all night writing. It would be three in the morning and she would say, “Ah! My girl! Turn the light off and go to bed.” And I would say, “Just five more minutes Grandma, just five more minutes.” She was like, “Ah, god. Come on, let’s go, let’s go, let’s go. I wanna go to bed.” She couldn’t sleep unless I was sleeping. She would always say, “Ah, I hope one day all this scribbling comes to something.” [laughs] And I was like, “It will, it will.” So, my Mom called me and said, “Grandma’s in the hospital. She’s not doing that well.” And I couldn’t get out there.

So, I really, really started thinking about her and I together, and I thought about all those nights that I spent up writing and I thought, “What am I waiting for?” You know, I promised her this was going to happen, so it’s going to happen. So, I sat down and I wrote. And that’s when I wrote the first story. I sent it in and when I got the call that they wanted to publish it, I wrote the rest of the stories, wrote them during the time when my Grandmother was dying. Then I called when it was accepted. I called Newfoundland. It was one o’clock in the morning. My mom answered the phone, “Oh my god, what’s going on? Is everything okay?” “Everything’s fine. But I just got an email from the publisher. You have to get up to the hospital and you have to tell Grandma: I did it.” So she went up and she told her and my Grandmother passed the next day.

So, the book is for her. When I won the award, that award was for her.⁴ Anytime that I write, it’s her. She’s my storyteller. They very, very literally are her stories. The last

⁴ Cherie Dimaline won the Fiction Book of the Year Award at the Anskohk Aboriginal Literature Festival, 2007.

story talks about the woman on the Georgian Bay, strong like sweet grass who would cut you – that’s my Grandmother. It’s a story about my Grandfather and her children. So, she heard about the book and then she went. So I was like, alright. I did it! [both laugh]

LH: If I could focus on your novel again, Red Rooms is a text concerned with First Nations individuals in a contemporary, urban setting. Do you think this type of setting provides unique challenges?

CD: I think it could. This is my Native community so it’s certainly a unique perspective. But I think it provides certain advantages. Here’s why...on the reserve I think it’s easy – and even in Métis communities you live in little groupings, usually near a reserve – it’s very easy to be lazy about your indigeneity. It’s very easy to live as a First Nations person because it’s all around you. At the same time it’s very easy to get lost, to lose the essence of what it is to be Native. I don’t mean that in a bad way for people who live on the reserve, I just think it’s easy to take it for granted. I think in an urban setting you have to be very aggressive, especially in Toronto. It’s multicultural; the dominant society is a mosaic, which is awesome, but it means you need to be strong about who you are and you need to take steps to practice your culture if that is indeed what you want to do. I think if you’re a Native person, it’s really hard not to be cultural.

I think now when people leave the reserve, people on the reserve or in the community are like, “Oh, you’re leaving the reserve. You’re a sellout. You’re a traitor.” The reality is that back in the day when there were Indian Agents going on the reserves, people left the reserve in order to be Native because on the reserve dance was outlawed, singing was outlawed, ceremony was outlawed. So, people came to the city so people could be free to be Indigenous people, to practice their spirituality. And I think in a lot of cities there are

beautiful, vibrant and aggressive pockets of culture, Native culture. In Toronto there is always something going on. There are 32 Native agencies in this city. It's a huge community. For me it's very easy to be around my culture and to appreciate it. I mean, there's 60,000 of us here in the city. It's cool. We're here.

LH: I think you've touched on this already, but then how do you think influences from dominant society affect identity of characters in Red Rooms? – or your own community really. Because you said this is your community...

CD: I think the reality is that we live in the dominant society. Again, in Toronto, it's a mosaic, which is great. I think what happens is that dominant society really is the stream that we travel in, but I think that at all times the canoe that you are in is Indigenous. Do you know what I mean?

LH: That is a great metaphor. [both laugh]

CD: The reality is you can fight the current and try to go upstream, but this is society. This is the way it is. But at all times the vehicle you should be in is something that you know.

I remember coming into the cultural community in Toronto - I wasn't involved in my cultural traditions for a long time, until I had children and saw the importance of it. I remember being in a drumming circle at Anishnabe Health, which is a health centre just down the street, and I said to Wanda Whiteford, who was running the drumming circle, "I'm very confused." She said, "What are you so confused about? What is so confusing to you? This is your community, we totally accept you, why are you so confused?" And I said, "Because I'm half white and I'm half Native. And it's very confusing to be part of the colonized and part of the colonizer." And she said, "Knock it off. You can't live with one

foot on the dock and one foot in the canoe because you're going to fall. Get in the goddamn canoe!" [both laugh] She said, "I'm not saying forget about your father's family. I'm not saying that. Just get over it! Get over yourself. Really, be who you are. You know who you are. And forget about it if other people can't see it."

In Toronto – and I don't know if this is the experience in smaller communities – here there's a lot of people that we have who are not Native but want to be part of the community. You know, I think we should all learn about each other, but some people, particularly people who get lost in their own life and traditions, want to be a part of it. They'll say, "Well, I'm Micmaq from Thunder Bay." And there's no Micmaqs in Thunder Bay. So, the community is very suspicious and closed off. Particularly in Toronto there are times when indigeneity comes in and out of style. We'll have people come in and say, "I'm Indian! I'm Indian!" So, people are very closed off. "No, no, no, no, no. These ceremonies are closed."

Anyway, I was always feeling like I had to prove myself, who I am, because I am just a half-breed. But, at the same time people in my community are like, "Oh, everybody knows one of your cousins." Everyone knows everyone right? But that was my own issue. And so that was sort of what I was told. Don't live half and half, but just be you and relax. And again, I totally went off topic there.

LH: Do you think that that moment was a pivotal moment for you then? Did you make a choice at that point to identify with one half of you, or did you just say, "I'm a cohesive whole" and not worry about it anymore?

CD: That is exactly what it was. I decided to be me, and to be whole. My daughter is part black and I remember one time I had called her "mixed" while talking to her grandmother, who is from Barbados. And she was like, "Mixed?! She is not mixed. She is not a cake!"

[both laugh] She said, “No, no. She is she!” That was another moment that sort of clicked in. It’s not a piece of this and a quarter of that. It comes back to my whole argument with this whole blood quotient thing, how ridiculous it is to measure someone else’s blood. Well, how ridiculous is it to make a pie chart out of someone’s identity? You just are who you are and you need to recognize all of it. You know, when I introduce myself I usually give my bio; I usually try to say my nationality, which is – well, I say Canadian because my dad is Scottish and French, but I say Canadian – and Ojibway, Métis, because there is Ojibway in my family and also Métis. And Métis is very different from being a half-breed right? I mean it’s a whole community... So I try to identify everything.

I’m often asked the question, “Are you a writer of Native descent or are you a Native writer and what’s the difference?” Well, I’m a Native woman and everything I do – I mean I’m a Native something, because that’s who I am. But Red Rooms is a story of my community and so I have a responsibility to explain how I’m qualified to tell these stories, because there is a lot of appropriation of voice and other people telling the stories, which is fine but you need to qualify. You know, “I’m not from this community but this story I know, or this is what I’ve learned and I want to share it.” That’s totally valid and great, but if I’m telling stories from a people and those are very specific stories that involve a lot of cultural teaching, even in small ways, I need to qualify that and say, “This is my background and this is my family.” Also because I want people, particularly in my community, to know which perspective I’m coming from, because a Cree woman would tell those stories very differently; a Salish woman would tell those stories very different. So, I want to be sure that I identify my perspective. These are my people and my Grandmother and this is my blood.

In other ways, when I'm writing – for example when I do my journalism – I never wrote something for Chatelaine magazine and said, "Cherie Dimaline, Ojibway writer," because it's irrelevant. Really, in that way, because I'm not sharing those traditional stories or...

LH: Because you're not speaking from that particular perspective?

CD: Exactly. I'm a writer, I'm a person, but if I'm sharing from my culture, from my community, then I need to honour them by identifying who I am.

LH: Right. So, you've talked about how other First Nations people have influenced you, concerning the characters in your book – and I'm trying not to separate characters from actual people because I understand you're drawing from that same place – how do you see the people in your book being influenced by First Nations individuals in the area of identity? I'm thinking particularly of the last story, in that Natalie reads a journal of a Native woman and she is really influenced by it to connect with that community that she hadn't really connected with before.

[long pause from CD]

LH: Do you think that identity just comes from relationship? Like do influences on your identity as a Native woman just come from relationship with First Nations people or...

CD: I think it's hard for me to even separate it in my head, to try to break it down, because I think that as a culture we are very reliant on each other... I think every character in the book has an issue and it revolves around their identity. Part of that comes with this notion to aggressively strive to be Native as opposed to just being Native, and it's also part of this notion of constantly trying to save culture. There's always a big movement in the community of trying to salvage, to carry forward to the next seven generations... [pause]

LH: What do you think is being salvaged there?

CD: You know, it's very hard – it's just such an ongoing conversation in the community, the notion of history being alive and traditions being alive. There's always conversations about marrying outside of the community, of bringing in non-Native people into the community. And that's a very new conversation, because traditionally we always married outside our community. We always adopted people into the community. That's why we were so huge. There was always non-Native people in our communities when they came over. So the notion now that they have to keep this bloodline, stay within the community, only speak the language, I think that people misunderstand. This is very contentious, but I think it's ridiculous to tell your children to marry their own race. I think it's ridiculous to only have children of a certain race in order to keep a culture alive. I think there is a huge separation for me between race and culture. Obviously they're linked, obviously one came with the other, but at the same time, I think that it's something that's alive, its evolving, and for Native people that's scary, that evolution, because they feel like they've given up so much already. But the reality is that Statistics Canada just came out that there's over a million people in Canada who have identified being Native. You know, I don't think we're going anywhere.

I think it might be left over from the residential schools, which was a very aggressive genocide. I think that because those people were beaten out of their language, because it was forcibly removed from them, their traditions, their heritage, their parents taken. I think its post-traumatic stress syndrome. It's like, "Oh my god, I have to hold on to it. No, this is mine." You know, sort of crouching around your bundle, curled fetal position. I think there is a whole generation that is still in the fetal position, curled around this small notion of

what's theirs, of what they can hold on to, of what they can carry with them. But really, the trick is to stand up, to get out of that position, to join together.

So, I think that the characters in the book, they all have issues with their identity. And this absolutely was not intentional. It must be close to my heart because it was repeated in every story, this sense of becoming a better version of themselves through other Native people. I guess often you don't see a good quality in yourself until its reflected back at you in a friend or a family member. I think that sort of commonality and influence is an answer I could give to how these influences other First Nations people.

I think First Nations people – well, that's a lie and Lee would be mad at me. I was going to say First Nations people are humble. [laughs] Ojibway people, as I was told, are too damn humble. But it's in our seven teachings, right? We have seven Grandfather teachings, and one of them is humility. Lee's people on the West Coast, it's in their teaching that it's their responsibility to speak strong and well, to speak for themselves of themselves. If you ever say to Lee Maracle, "My god, Lee, you're amazing." She'll say, "Yep." And she's not conceited. She's not arrogant at all. But she takes that praise. If you were to say that to anyone in this building, they'd be like, "Oh my god, oh my god, no!" It's just one of our teachings. From my experience, to speak up or good about yourself is almost looked down upon. You're to remain quiet, remain humble in your ways. It's our understanding that the quieter you are, the more you'll hear. The more closed to thinking of yourself, the more open to your community. It's like exposing more skin, right? The more you expose the more you'll be able to feel, to absorb. So that's sort of the sensibility of the characters that came through, this idea that they were not okay with every part of them, not comfortable in their own skin, and so they saw it somewhere else.

LH: What role do you think stereotypes play in your novel?

CD: I have no idea really. I love hearing how other people perceive the characters, you know, good stereotypes, bad stereotypes and re-conceptualizing. I love the question, but it made me think I have no idea. I'm very curious to know because, again, I just sort of wrote my truth and the characters are absolutely based on myself, my children. What I did was I tried to create characters that breathed and lived and danced and fucked and fucked up and laughed and fell and got back up. Those are the people that I know, that I love, that I hate and the people that are around me and that's it. I don't know if they're stereotypes and I don't know if they're good or bad and I don't know if they exist.

Obviously, I've heard stereotypes of Native people. We kind of laugh about them. I mean obviously every sort of lie, every slur, starts somewhere. The whole, "all Native people are all drunks." Well, Native people that people see on the streets have drinking problems or have addiction problems, but so do the white people on the streets, and the black people on the streets. I think because people only see those Native people, they don't see the lawyers and the doctors and hundreds of thousands of Native people in these remote areas. They don't see them because they see these representatives of us that are, unfortunately, on the streets. That sort of becomes the stereotype.

I hear that Native women – and I know it's around part of the missing and stolen women, the Stolen Sisters report, they talked about Native women and how they're seen as whores, as these receptacles, and there is no real womanhood beyond that. Or they're mothers. You know, sort of the whore – Madonna imagery and nothing in between. I can imagine where it came from. I imagine it would be easier to attempt to conquer a people if

you didn't consider them human, or real, right? It was easier to rape or hurt or massacre Native women if you just assume and perpetuated this idea that is what they were there for.

LH: So, you were talking about the Highway of Tears, which is really close to home for me. There are some issues of identity that are there for women, like say, putting them on two ends of the spectrum, one side being the Indian Princess and the other side being this whore. Janice Acoose talks about that too. What do you see as key identity issues now for First Nations women, or Métis women, and how does your book reflect that?

CD: I think that the key identity issue from our perspective is leadership. There was a time when the councils were women. If the chief was a man, he was elected by women, he was supported by women. Houses were run by women. I think feminism sort of left that out. I think there was a push, which was absolutely useful, 100% timely. However, feminism didn't really include Native women, didn't understand that our understanding of running the house was a position of power, of honor. I mean, you are in charge of these children? Being in charge of children is huge! That's the future of the nation. That is a position of absolute power. Why would you want to take that away? Why would you want to hire that out? That's bizarre.

So, I think we sort of accepted that idea of having to get out of the house, get out in the community, go work in the factories, go work in stores, do whatever work. And we sort of left those things behind. We also stopped supporting men, whether or not they wanted our support. It used to be they had no damn choice. [both laugh] I think now we're coming back to that. I hope now we're coming back to that. There's a lot of talk about coming back to that, having our hereditary chiefs, who are women, take their rightful places, having councils of women. I think in good years 5% of Chief in Council, Aboriginal leadership, are women.

In good years, maybe 5%. That's horrible! That's sad. And I think that is a big issue for us, that we have to reclaim those roles of leadership. Physically, emotionally, spiritually, we're responsible for bringing the life, and that is the biggest responsibility in the world.

And I think that through this whole image of the whore – I mean, people talk about the whole plague of communities having children out of wedlock, or young mothers. Well, it was never something to be ashamed of. You are so brave to have this child. Let us help you as a community. I was very lucky. I had my first child when I was 16 and I had my Mother and my Grandmother with me. So, my son is a very polite 16-year-old because he was raised by three generations of Native women, which means he absolutely knows how to respect a woman because there was no choice. There was three Native woman and as soon as he stepped out of line...[laughs]. So, I think that's what's missing. I don't think that men have been raised properly, because I think women have stepped out of those leadership roles. And I'm not suggesting that all Native women become house wives. I'm suggesting they become chiefs. I'm suggesting they become National Chiefs, they sit in the House of Commons and represent there. If you look at the Native people who are speaking up now, most of those people are women.

I really wanted to go this weekend to Peterborough [to the Indigenous Women's Symposium]. The women that are going to be there? My god, right? Like, once in a lifetime. There's so much power! And the women in our community are speaking up and I think that needs to be recognized in a larger way. So I think that's a key identity issue for the women and for the whole community.

I think also – I see here at the [Native Women's] Centre issues around motherhood, in that, how do you raise a child traditionally but give them the tools they need to survive in this

global environment? So that's something we're working on here in Native Women's, but obviously all over the country. Parenting circles that include learning your original language, having elders come in and give teachings on how we raised our children. I think even something as important as getting back to breast feeding, which is for all women, not just for Native women. Even in the Native communities we became very hesitant to have that going on, you know, breast feeding – which happened all over the damn world. I don't know if it was colonization, this idea that everyone had to be private and closed off, and also a lot of the physicians that came into the communities were non-Native and people were very suspicious. We now have midwives that have come back into the communities. So, I think motherhood is a really central role, and I think that is absolutely hand in hand with leadership. I think from our perspective, from what I see, those are the concerns.

LH: So, you talked about the influence of mainstream feminism on First Nations communities. Do you see or perceive an Indigenous feminism that's coming out of the community? Something that looks different than what you are describing as mainstream feminism, which didn't include Native women originally?

CD: Yeah. It's funny. Lee's always talking about feminism as opposed to Indigenous feminism and when I was – well, this cursed book that I'm almost done. [both laugh] I said to her, "I think part of the problem is my characters" – there's a lot of non-Native characters – "I'm having a problem with making them come alive." And she's like, "What are you talking about? What do you mean? What are you talking about?" Well, I look very white, my father's white, but I don't really understand white culture, because the culture that I was raised in was very different. I was having a hard time getting in to these characters' heads without having them sound like Native people. And Lee said, "Come on, you know white

people. Don't be an idiot! Were all your teachers Native?" "No, no, they were white." "So, how many conversations have you had? You know how people talk!" And I'm like, "No, no, I know, but I'm just trying to think about how people think." She said, "Well, you read my stories." I said, "Okay, was that based on people you know?" She's like, "No, that was based on all the feminism stuff that I read."

All the feminist books that she was reading, all the speeches that she went to because she'd be invited to things or she would go and try to figure out what's going on in this women's movement. She said all the stories, all the things that happened in white people's houses in her books are based on the stories she would hear the feminists talking about, that happened in their houses. And I was like, "I was wondering why everyone looks like an asshole." She said, "Yeah, I'm not sure if that really happened, but that's what they told me happened in their houses." It was crazy for her, coming from this female-centered society.

I used to have a friend who calls herself an Indigenous feminist. She's Mohawk. And there is a big problem, she is always having trouble with the women in her community who say there is no such thing as a Mohawk feminist. If you are Mohawk, you're a feminist. We are a female-centered society. If you call yourself a traditional person, then why are you repeating yourself? Feminist-feminist, Mohawk-feminist, same thing. So, I think absolutely there is a feminist movement, and I think that goes back to the reclamation of voice and your proper roles within your community. First, once you gather the strength of your community, then you move forward into the world. But I think that it's definitely not called feminism because there's sort of this negative connotation because of that time that the whole feminist movement was happening and we were left out, not welcome. You know, even the whole issue with getting the vote; Native women didn't get it until way after. It was not even an

issue that was brought to the table. As a community we women sort of separated ourselves from that movement. I think what should have happened was more careful observation of that movement, which was something that Lee did - very carefully observed that movement and properly took the best practices to apply to her own life and writing. I think that that's what we need to do in our community in all areas, not just feminism, is instead of moving away from everyone, expose more skin and absorb more. Take those best practices.

Right now in the Native community there is huge Obama-mania. My god, Native people love Obama! Yes they do. Part of it was he was adopted into the Crow family, the Black Eagles adopted him, and so his adopted parents were at the inauguration. And people were like, "Ah! There's Native people at the inauguration." Just that visibility. The fact that he's brown, they don't care that he's not Native. I know he's said that he's - at some point there's a Cherokee person in his ancestry. But that's not even an issue. The issue is that he's visibly a minority and he's adopted into this family - and what was really important was that his adoption ceremony was kept proper, was kept private. It wasn't publicized. I mean, it was talked about, but they never brought cameras in, because you never do that in a ceremony. You know the Minister up here they gave him a traditional name, the Minister for Native Affairs. He got two traditional names, which you do not do. He went to one community and got a name and then went to another community and got a name. They didn't know - anyways, he didn't follow protocol. Barak Obama followed the protocol, the proper protocol. So that was very important to the traditional people in the communities. They were like, "He did it right. He did it correctly. He went through the proper ceremony and my god, he's a visible minority and he's the most powerful man in the whole world."

The inauguration ceremony was very reminiscent, at the opposite end of the spectrum, of the day that we had the radios turned on for the apology.⁵ This place was full. Full. And a lot of the women here are survivors, or there's like a generation of survivors – everyone has been affected by residential schools, everyone in the building. And it was full. You could have heard a pin drop and then you could hardly hear anything because everyone was crying. I think they thought people were crying because this has been so long coming, the apology. It wasn't about getting the apology, because I don't think anyone really accepted it. All these years people were saying, "This has happened to us. This is happening to us." And it was never talked about, like a lot of things that happened. Then to hear it being said back to us, "This happened. This happened and that happened." It was like, "Yes it did. It really, really did!" When it was – it was insane in here. It really was, and it was huge. And the same thing happened when Obama was elected. It was the day after and everyone was in here and everyone was listening to the speech again and everyone was crying. It was like, "Yes! There is a brown man in the White House!" Just that recognition.

LH: That recognition that this community exists and they have a place in the global perspective?

CD: Absolutely. There was a book that Kim Anderson wrote, she edited with Bonita Lawrence, called A Recognition of Being. Just that title, A Recognition of Being, I think sums up 90% of the work and healing that has been done, is being done, in the community. I think a huge part of my book was for my Grandmother who was a Native woman who had no status; she wasn't recognized as a Native woman, so she wasn't recognized, first of all as a Native, second of all as a woman born in 1913. She was in a horribly abusive relationship.

⁵ On June 11, 2008, Prime Minister Stephen Harper gave an apology to Aboriginal people on behalf of the crown for Canada's role in the Indian Residential School System.

My Grandfather was an alcoholic and he was an Indian guide for the cottagers and he made the money. Like, my Grandmother taught me to make bannock, which is a very simple bread, fry bread that is a staple in our community, but it's made out of almost nothing, and bone soup – making soup out of dough and bones, because that's what she fed her children because there was no money; it was a one room shack. The whole story was so common.

Once, when I thought of myself as a feminist, I said, “You should have killed the bastard! You should have left him. Why didn't you leave him?” And she said, “And go where?” I said, “To a shelter!” And she said, “Oh there was a shelter up on the Bay was there?” I said, “Well you should have gone to a friend's house. You shouldn't have stood for that. Why did you stand for that?” And she said, “I stood for my children. I had six kids, and who was I going to go to? My sister who had seven kids? My cousin who had four? My Auntie who was taking care of her dying parents? Who was I going to go to and be a burden?” So I thought, “Hmmm. That's it. You are the strongest woman I've ever met.” And here I was thinking she was being a push over. But, I think that because she didn't have any of these rights that this was her recognition of being. This was her story, that she was a real woman damn it, number or no number, a Native woman 'til the day she died, but never recognized as one, outside of our small community. I just love that, A Recognition of Being. That's what it all comes down to.

LH: The character Constance is really interesting in that respect. She has this sense of invisibility, or she has the potential to be erased. Yet she somehow steps out of that, just removes herself from that system of erasure. How do you see her functioning in that way, or do you see her functioning in that way?

CD: Constance was one of the easiest characters for me to write, which is very odd because originally I didn't know where she came from. The beginning of Constance was "a cloud cut by fences." That was the sentence where she started. I wasn't sure where she was going, what was happening with her, until I started thinking about my own relationships that I had had.

My ex-husband, my daughter's father, is black. I was at a Native women's gathering and this woman said to me, "I find it very interesting that you're married to a black man. How did that happen?" She was from a remote area and she was intrigued. I said, "Well, I used to go out with Native boys and I was always too white for their moms. Then I used to go out with white guys and I was too Native for their moms. So I just married a black man." [both laugh]

I remember the first time I ever, ever experienced racism from a non-Native person. When I was little, I experienced a lot of racism from Native people because my father was white. And I'd go back to my own community and I would literally beat the shit out of all my cousins because they'd be like, "Oh here's the white girl from the city," and I'd be like, "Oh yeah, say that to my face!" [laughs] I'd have to fight my way back into the pack every summer. But the first time I experienced racism that was from a non-Native person, it was with my son's father. We got into a fight and he called me a "red nigger." I thought, "That is so crazy. Did you just make that word up? That is the dumbest, stupidest thing I've ever heard." It really hurt, but it made me realize there's totally something there with sex and power and how people want to place you on this scale so they can control you, or not control you, or however they want to perceive you or mold you into this box so they know where to place you.

So, I think that's where Constance came from, the idea of her being in love with a Native man who is married to a white woman, which is a huge issue in our community. There's this idea that Native women have that when a man becomes successful the first thing he does is he goes and gets a white wife, as a trophy or a symbol of what he can't have and he now can have. He can have everything, he can even have this wife. And I mean, I don't know if there's truth, I don't know what the psychology is, I mean love is love. My parents were interracial, my relationships are. So he [Constance's lover] came out of that idea. Somehow it was an issue for her that this woman was white and that power struggle within sex. And also, I sort of pictured her being half-erased. I kept trying to fill her in and it wasn't working until she sort of almost had to die and come back into it. Then I thought that is what happens to us when we are in destructive relationships. A lot of times you almost have to – not physically, although maybe – have to die in order to be removed from it. She was very funny to begin with.

LH: Yes, she is a very interesting character. The other character that I find really interesting is Marcel.

CD: [smiles] Ah, Marcel.

LH: So, talk about him a little bit.

CD: Marcel has actually become the most popular character from the book. I was asked by the publisher to think about writing a book on him, which I haven't done. I do have a lot of friends who are gay males, so that's where he came from. He was a breeze to write. He was done in maybe two days and he was the one who was the least edited.

There's a lot of homophobia in our community, which is another bizarre thing because they call gay people two-spirited for a reason. They're special; they have this ability

to be both sides of the spectrum and that was very highly respected. Then with Christianity it was demonized and we still hold on to that. I'm invited a lot of times to go to reserves, to schools, and to talk to youth, which are a very difficult crowd. But I always read Marcel because even though there's a part of them that's like, "Ah, gross! That's sick," they always end up liking him. There's something, I think, about Marcel, that's very endearing and almost irresistible. So even though the idea of a gay man is gross to them, they end up liking him, they relate to him, they laugh at his jokes. At the end of it, they are like, "Man, he's dead?" And they're sad and traumatized by it. I'm like, "Who cares, he was just gay." And at that point it sort of makes them think, oh wait he's a person; he's a Native person and he has the same problems as everyone else. For a few minutes they don't think what his sexual preference is. I like to tell his story for that reason. I think he can do a lot of good in the communities for the youth. Plus, he's just a funny guy. [both laugh]

LH: The other thing I find interesting about Marcel is that he finds a portion of his identity through books – through textbooks.

CD: Textbooks and a white man.

For me, I had this idea of being a half-breed. I say that now because that word holds no negative connotations for me. I never really thought much about being Métis but I took a course at the University of Toronto years ago and I was assigned a speech on Louis Riel. I was thinking, "Ah, crap! How boring!" I started reading all this stuff about him and I was like, "What the hell?" I sort of have this notion – my Grandmother actually descended from Gabriel Dumont – he was one of her ancestors. I thought he was cool. That guy spoke Native languages, he was a warrior, he was some kick ass guy. And Louis Riel, he was crazy, like 1/16 Cree and French. So, to me he was crazy and Catholic and I had all these

negative ideas about him, which was – now mind you, he had mental health issues. The point is the symbol of him and what he stood for, what we have to look at historically...holy shit! He delivered the whole of western Canada into the dominion when it could have been annexed to the States. Just learning all this stuff and really getting into it made me very proud. So, it changed the way I looked at it.

I think that's how it was for Marcel. When I was little, I started taking History. I lived in Sault Ste. Marie. Kids on the reserve got to leave the class and go to Ojibway language class. I didn't live on the reserve and I didn't have status. I had to stay in class. And I was like, "That's shitty. I want to be in the same class. All my friends are in that class learning their language and I want to go." I remember feeling down about being this mixed-blood person. And I remember teachers trying to say to me, "What do you mean? You have so much to be proud of." And I was like, "Well, shit. What do I have to be proud of? I don't even have any land. I don't got nothing." So, I think that was part of non-Native people trying to get me to recognize this understanding. The Métis history is very well-documented because really the Métis Nation is young compared to the First Nations; historically there's a lot more information on it.

I don't think people really understand what the hell a Métis person is, especially as compared to a half-breed. I know a lot of people who are half white and half Native and they're like, "Oh yeah, I'm Métis." Well, not really. I don't think Canada quite understands the identity of being a Métis person, but I think the history of it as a Nation is more well-documented. So, that's where Marcel, Jack being non-Native, and the textbooks came from: my own view.

LH: That's interesting. So, we talked a little bit about this before – Thomas King writing, “The truth about stories is that's all we are.” Do you think that story – I'm thinking especially about this type of story, novel, or “fiction” – has the ability to transform reality?

CD: Absolutely. My book is fiction, but I think there's no such thing as fiction. At the same time, I don't think there's such a thing as objectivity in writing. I know when people hear things on the news they think that's the news; that's the facts. Well, the news is somebody's perspective, somebody's worldview. And I always say to these people, “I worked in the media. I know how it works.” You sit in a story meeting and you think about how do we want to do this, what's our audience, who pays for the magazine, newspaper, whatever. The reporter, where do they come from, what's their cultural background? That's all going to formulate the end result and we take it in as a fact. Everything, in a way, is a story. It's somebody's version of what we see. It's somebody's worldview.

Here's another Lee Maracle story. She told me this story once that her aunties used to send the kids into town and asked them to buy fat man pants. [both laugh] Bear with me here, it's going to go somewhere. They had to go to the Salvation Army and they had to buy the biggest, fattest pants they could find; they were work pants, you know, browns, navy blue, green. And they had to bring them back. They had to pay like five cents a pound or whatever. They would unstitch them and while they were sitting there unstitching the pants, they would make up stories about the men that have worn these pants. “Oh, this guy. This guy's a logger. He ate 16 steaks for dinner, and 24 eggs.” And they'd be unstitching these pants and telling these stories about these men. Then, they would take them and sew them together into this huge blanket. At that time on her reserve – well, in Canada – it was illegal for Native people to fish. They couldn't fish, they couldn't hunt. And there was nowhere

else to get food. You know, they didn't have jobs, they didn't have money and now they were being denied the ability to go and hunt. So basically it was illegal to eat. So, they used to go out at night and do night fishing. All the kids would go out and sit on the beach and they would prop up this blanket – they called it an earth blanket, made out of these fat man pants – they would prop it up with a stick and they would play under there, and all the parents would go out and fish. Then when they would hear something, like the Natural Resources cops, they would pull the stick and it would fall on them so it just looked like ground when they flashed the flashlights over them. You would see nothing, you would just see the ground. And all the kids would be hidden under there. And then, once the coast was clear, they'd put it back up and everything was fine.

When I think of that, I think about how – I think about these aunties coming up with these stories. So I think about the blanket as a metaphor for stories and what a story can do for the community. I think that stories have a way of keeping us together, keeping our kids safe, and making sure that we survive. Our stories are fat man pants. [both laugh] I don't know why she was telling that story; it wasn't even a lesson. She always gives me these lessons when I'm tired and I'm thinking, "How much longer do I have to sit and listen to this?" Then I go home and I'm like, "God! That just changed my life!" So, I think stories, I'm sure for all cultures, stories are very important. For Native people, they're absolutely essential.

When our children tell us stories – I remember being little and coming up with big crazy lies. You know when you're a kid your lies are ridiculous. And my Grandmother would say, "Tell me again." I would say, "Oh and then this wolf came and grabbed my brownie outfit and that's why it's ripped in the back. And then I had to climb the tree to get

away from him. And then there was this eagle...” You know. She was like, “Yes, and then what happened my girl? Then what happened?” We try and encourage it because within this huge big lie is going to be the truth that I was out playing in the woods instead of going to my damn brownie meeting. It’s going to be in there. It’s going to be surrounded by a whole bunch of craziness, but there’s truth in there. So, you try and encourage the children, tell those stories. Tell it. Absolutely I think stories are all we are. It’s our own perspective, right? I mean, they can make us, they can break us. It’s the whole damn world. It’s not just my community, right? Everything’s a story. Architecture’s a story, landscaping is a story, everything’s a story.

LH: So who was your intended audience for the story Red Rooms?

CD: Well, me. Honestly. If I really think about it. I was trying to understand. After the first draft, after it all came out and I saw it and I realized that it had to be worked, then it became for urban, Native people. There are so few stories about urban Native people and 54% of First Nations people live in urban centers; they live off reserve. That’s not even mentioning all the Métis or Inuit people. So, there’s so little.

I mean, people like Basil Johnston are so important – awesome man. First thing I ever heard out of his mouth when I shook his hand in an airport in Saskatchewan was, “So you’re new to this?” And I said, “Yeah.” “How much did you get?” And I was like, “What?” He’s like, “How much did you get?” And I’m like, “Well, nothing really.” And he said, “Get yourself an agent.” [laughs] And I said, “Yes, Grandpa.” I thought it is so awkward talking about money but a lot of times writers really don’t – I mean, you get to apply for grants, all those great things. You get to travel all over the damn place and all I ever wanted to do was travel and write, so I’m happy. He was trying to impart to me, don’t

let people take advantage of you. You're young and a Native writer and it happens a lot.
Just make sure you get a contract. [both laugh]

Anyways, he writes from a place that's very important and it's historically very important to keep that and he's a very very important Native writer, but it's hard to translate that to the urban reality. So that became my audience. In this community I do a lot of work with youth and I was constantly trying to find material that could relate to them. Then I thought, well hell, I wrote this and it's totally – this is where Red Rooms started, this centre [Native Women's Centre]. When she talks about being in the park, it's that park [gestures across the street]. When she talks about Native women doing ceremony, it's this place, it's those stairs downstairs. There are women in here who literally have tattoos on their face for the people they've killed. They've been in Kingston prison for most of their lives. They were there for the riots when the strong woman song was born. There are people in this building, I swear, that have killed abusive men and then held babies at the same time. You know, it's insane the stories that are here. And this is where it started. This is the Centre.

So, that's sort of the audience I was hoping for, was this urban audience. Then I realized after that there was this huge response that I was totally not expecting from the non-Native community. It was non-Native people who really responded to the book even though it was never my intention. This is my thought: "No one's going to pay for this." People are going to be like, "What the hell is this lady talking about?" Unless you're in this community. But that was my own ignorance, because people outside of the community were like, "Wow, I get it." And I was really flattered, really taken aback.

I actually was shopping at Christmas time and I was in this really snooty toy store – I don't know what the hell I was doing in there, buying a six dollar ball or something. I get up

to the cash register and the woman is ringing me through and she took my card and was like, “Are you Cherie Dimaline the author?” It was this old, white lady and I was thinking, “Why would she want to know? Did I bounce a cheque or something? Do I owe this woman money?” And I wanted to lie, but I thought if I lie she’ll keep my credit card, she knows it’s me. So I said, “Yes.” She’s like, “Oh my god. I love your book! We’re doing your book in our book club. We wrote about it to Oprah!” And I’m thinking, “Where’s the camera? Where’s the camera?” This is not real! She has this big conversation with me and I’m totally shocked, couldn’t believe it. I felt really hopeful. I walked out of there and I felt really good. I felt good because I felt hopeful that all kinds of people are hearing these stories – and these are my Grandmother’s stories. These are the stories that came out of this place, the Native Women’s Centre, in the middle of the worst ghetto in Toronto. This woman who works in this big uppity store is reading it and writing to Oprah. Insane. It gave me hope that people will have a better understanding of what reality is in this community and will be more receptive to my own children.

And the Australian thing was very odd for me. I mean, they’re studying the book now in Canadian Literature and Indigenous Studies. It’s also being – I’m sorry, I’m jumping ahead on your questions, but it made me think when I read that question about being studied – it’s being studied at First Nations University, University of Victoria, University of Toronto, and it’s also been added – and this one is the coolest one – York University just added it as the core text for an Aboriginal bridging program that’s being held here. So Wednesdays there’s this class. There’s prostitutes that work, go into the park and get their bag from behind the trees and their books, and they come over here and they come to this bridging program. They’re studying the book. What I think is so funny is the book is about them.

They're my oral traditions but they're filtered through my reality in this place and so really this book is about them, and it's for them, and now they're studying it to get into university.

LH: That's phenomenal!

CD: I know, right? [both laugh] I don't know if it's like this for other writers but you don't think about those things. I write because I have to write. Really. When I was little, my mom and my grandma were always yelling at me, "Get out of the house. All you ever do is sit in the house and read and write and play. Get outta the house. Go take a bike ride." I lived in North Bay at the time, so I was older, like 11, and I got on my bike. So I was pedaling around North Bay and I was thinking, "This is boring. This sucks. I just want to go back." I was in the middle of a good chapter of Anne of Green Gables.

I had a pen with me – I always had a pen stuck in my hair or in my pocket – and I ended up down at the lake shore. I had this great idea for a story and I was like, "Oh my god. Oh my god, I've got a pen. Oh my god, I don't have any paper!" [both laugh] There's no paper on the beach! There's nothing to write on! So I literally write this story on the soles of my shoes and then I rode home on the sides of my feet, pedaling like this [indicates pedaling with outside of feet] all the way home so it wouldn't wash off. I have to write!

Anyways, I'm sure that it's like that for a lot of writers. You don't think about the stuff after, right? You just write. I write all these things and I have these stories in my head and I was thinking, "These are good. These are decent. I'm going to send them in to a publisher and see what happens." But you can't imagine what's going to happen after that. I was thinking, "It's a Native publisher. It's not going to go far." And I'm cool with that. I'm just happy it's getting published. Well, the book is around the world, and I've been around the world as a result.

LH: You thought your family was going to buy a copy and that's it?

CD: Yeah, yeah. I've got a bunch of cousins. I'm going to make at least 50 bucks! [both laugh] Well, my cousins all want one free – but anyways, you don't think beyond that.

Again, I think that was the problem with this cursed book that is finally getting finished because I threw out all my notions of what a book should be. I was trying to write for a market, which you can't do. I mean Lee was like, "You're an idiot. You can't do that. Who are you?" And I was like, "I don't know." So, I rewrote the thing and that's sort of done now. But that's the problem. I mean, Red Rooms came very fast because it was the truth and I wasn't thinking about what was coming next. But when I tried to force it and think of it as a job, it didn't work. A story is a living thing, so you can't create it out of spare parts and hit it with electricity and hope that it walks and moves. It's not going to happen. You never know what you're going to get.

Actually, I had all these preconceived notions with my whole great master plan of how I was going to be a career writer when I was trying to write this [current] book. That all went out the window when I realized it wouldn't work that way. I went to see Lee and she was like, "You're ridiculous. Just write. Ask your Grandmother to come and visit you again, sit down at your computer and write." And I thought, "I'm just going to do that." Just write. All of a sudden there's this old auntie in there - there's always going to be an old auntie – and there's this eagle in there and this crazy shit is happening that has totally made it better. A totally organic process and I'm just here for the ride. It's also a novel, 350 pages right now, so it's totally different. Although, I still do tend to write these little pieces and then I have to pull it all together. It's a lot bigger quilt.

LH: What's the title?

CD: Paper Shoes.⁶

LH: Are you going to go with Theytus as your publisher again? Or have you decided?

CD: I don't know. I might have a choice. I think I have to get an agent. And the publishing industry – it's a bad time to be involved in the book industry because of the recession. People are buying less. I guess for other people books aren't a life line. [both laugh] Can you imagine? If I go to people's houses and they don't have books, I'm totally freaked out. It's like being in someone's house and there's not a kid there or not an animal. It's like, where the hell am I? I can't sleep without books. So, I think I'll shop it around, but I hate the business of writing.

LH: How do you see your work, Red Rooms and your new work, fitting into the greater body of writing by First Nations authors?

CD: It's a hard question. When I met Richard Van Camp he said to me, "Do you know how lucky you are?" And I was like, "Why?" He said, "Because your editor is Lee Maracle. Because you're hanging out with Maria Campbell. Because our royalty is still with us. Because all the pioneers, all the great ones, you can literally pick up the phone and say, 'Hey Auntie, can I ask you a question?'" And I thought, "I'm the luckiest bitch in the world." So, it's very difficult to answer because I'm in league with giants. I have these huge, towering Indigenous literary figures and they're walking around me.

The new book sort of speaks to that urban sensibility again. I think we've been in cities forever, I mean especially after the world wars and people came back and they lost their status so they had to move to the cities for work. So, we've been here for a while, but we've been quietly here. There's a huge presence in cities. I think the fact that I'm speaking about an urban experience using an oral tradition background is somewhat new. I think other

⁶ The draft of Dimaline's next novel has since been renamed The Girl Who Grew a Galaxy.

people have done it, I'm not suggesting that I'm a pioneer in any way. I don't know - I'm just happy to be recognized in and amidst these huge giants. I feel like a little kid. I'm not a child, but I am. They're all like, "Ah, my girl." I'm this new little thing. They're saying, "Let me take you here, and let me show you this, and let me teach you." It's amazing because that's how I was raised in other areas of my life and so now to have that happen to me in writing with all these grandmothers and grandfathers - I'm glad to be recognized.

LH: And what has their response been like, to your work? The urban setting and the characters that are in there seem different than the characters that are revealed in some of the "classics" like, say, Maria Campbell, Beatrice Culleton, those kinds of authors. How has your work been received by other writers?

CD: You know what, I was really nervous about it and especially when I heard Lee was going to be working on it. I thought she was going to hate it. She's going to smash it and I'm going to die. I mean if some nameless, faceless person in a publishing house was like, "I don't think it's for us," I can live with that. If Lee Maracle looks at me and says, "You know what kid? Maybe you better think of another career," that's when I'll think of another career. I'll work at McDonald's. I'm going to take it seriously.

I was really worried, but she loved it and she said the most beautiful thing. She had done her final read through of the book and she started crying. She said, "I am so proud to be a part of this book. I thought of this book when I was in Washington last week and I was receiving this big award, life-time achievement award, and I said to my son and my daughters, 'My life has been a long, slow walk over jagged rocks. God damn it if I didn't dance over every last one of them!'" And she said, "That's what these stories are like."

That was the analogy I used when I was in Australia and I was sitting on a panel of people who were writing. There was a man from France who had written all these stories about war, all war. He was this droning academic who was talking about mass genocide in this monotone. There was this awesome, awesome woman who was talking about the sex trade of children in the Philippines. Then there was me. The panel was about how you write this grim reality. I was sitting on this panel and I asked to go after people so I could understand what really we were talking about. So then, it came to me and I'm like, "Well, I think for a lot of people the subject matter can seem dark, but to me the book isn't the darkness. To me my book is a flashlight that maybe looks into those dark corners, but at the same time it's the light in that darkness." And that's how I am and that's how my community is. You find the light in the darkness. You find your way. Then I used this analogy from Lee about dancing over the sharp rocks. They're there, but hey, you don't gotta step painfully and cry over them, you know?

Introduction

Connecting the Web

My five-year-old son, Josiah, was playing quietly on the floor in our home the other day. From his silent state, he looked up and asked, “Mummy, are Indians real?” I thought for a few moments and asked him, “What do you think?” He shrugged, paused, and then asked, “Are pirates real?”

I realized that he was thinking about one of his favourite stories, Peter Pan. Josiah loves stories. He loves to hear stories about my day, stories about when he was a baby, stories that I make up, or stories from a book. Since Peter Pan is a repeat request in our home, and since Josiah seems very concerned at this developmental stage with determining the real from the imaginary, his questions were not entirely surprising. What was a shock, however, was that I had no idea how to answer his initial inquiry – Are Indians real? We are a Euro-Canadian family, but have friends and extended family from many parts of the world. Josiah knows several First Nations people, but none of them fit the image of the “Indian” in his book. I didn’t feel right about suggesting Indians were real and trying to connect that term to someone he knew. I think if I did try to suggest he knew some “real Indians” he would give an emphatic, “No!” based on what he saw in his book. I found myself remembering the words of Edward Said, Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) and Daniel Francis.⁷ Each has critiqued the stereotypes of the “Imaginary Indian” (Francis 3). In the end, I just told Josiah that Indians and pirates were real, but they weren’t the same as the ones in his story.

⁷ Throughout my thesis, the first mention of a Native North American is followed by his or her tribal affiliation(s), if he or she readily identifies with a specific tribe.

Josiah's question reminds me of the power of stories and their relationship to reality. My thesis is built on the assumption that stories have power. The stories we are exposed to and the way they teach us have a significant impact on our worldviews. Further than that, Thomas King (Cherokee) argues that "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (Truth 2). For King, story and reality are one and the same. Therefore, not only do stories *represent* reality, but form and substance are united so that stories *are* reality. One of the problems with stories like Peter Pan is that they represent Native people in narrow and stereotypical ways – images that have little relationship with lived experiences. In order to avoid reflecting reductive or harmful thinking, I have to ask some serious ethical questions as I consider how I, as a Euro-Canadian woman, make meaning from Native women's writing. The guiding question underlying this thesis is how do I learn from Native women's writing?⁸ The pages that follow illustrate the story of that relationship.

Josiah's query about "Indians" reminds me to consider the people who produce the texts. How can I discuss the complex interconnected spiritual, intellectual, physical and aesthetic sides of "Indians," something denied by representations in texts like Peter Pan? How can I recognize what Emma LaRoque (Métis) claims are "a thousand angles from which to see Native people" (qtd. in Acoose, "Post Halfbreed" 32)? In order to open up a dialogue with Native women's writing, I consider the ways that specific stories can work together to create cumulative narratives. To me, this means that specifics are components of the general, and that by engaging with particular voices I can engage with communities. Therefore, I choose to focus my thesis on one specific voice, Cherie Dimaline (Ojibway and Métis), recognizing that both personal and communal voices can be present in the same utterance. I

⁸ Helen Hoy's How Should I Read These? is an exploration of Native women's writing and how a non-Native may approach the literatures as a cultural outsider. Hoy's work can be distinguished from mine in terms of theoretical foundations and methodology, although some observations and conclusions remain consistent.

interact with Dimaline's "talk" through her novel, Red Rooms, and through a recorded conversation we had. This thesis then becomes a presentation of my interpretation of Dimaline's talk and my learning from it. My writing is part of a process that moves me towards interaction with other Native women's stories and authors; what I learn from Dimaline helps me answer the question of how I learn from Native women's writing. Dimaline's talk hints at possibilities for my response: consider things in context, make connections from specific yet unfixed locations, recognize power dynamics in terms of race and gender, and learn responsibly from stories.

Within academic arenas, non-Native scholars have been learning from and about Native cultures since the first Europeans arrived in what we now call North America. Within the last few decades especially, this learning has been analyzed in terms of ethics. What is an ethical approach to research in Indigenous communities? How can researchers responsibly study Aboriginal ways of being and knowing without re-inscribing relationships based in colonial attitudes and understanding? The debates have ranged across disciplines and suggest varied strategies for ethical engagement with Native communities. Within literary studies, the approaches by non-Native scholars are as diverse as the literatures they study. Sam McKegney distills the approaches many non-Native scholars take to Native literatures into four strategies of "ethical disengagement" (39). McKegney implies that ethical concerns often cause critics to disengage from the literature they are studying. He describes the strategies in four general categories:

1. retreat into silence
2. focus on intense self-reflexivity
3. deal only in the purviews of non-Native critics

4. present only tentative, qualified, and provisional critical statements. (39-41)

McKegney suggests that the lack of balance shown by some critics is their attempt to negotiate the often conflicting theoretical and methodological approaches to literatures from another culture. The tensions between silence and speaking, self and other, theory and story, and West and the rest are reflected in the strategies some non-Native critics take to Native literatures.

Of course, the problem that McKegney is expressing is that many scholars become so concerned with being “ethical” that they disengage from the literatures they are examining. If the literatures are dealt with in such a disengaged manner, then how can meaning be found that adequately reflects the perspectives the literatures come from? Worse yet, if the critical process largely ignores Native perspectives, how much is that process contributing to the continued colonization of Native peoples? Jo-Ann Episkenew argues that “many interpretations of the works of Canadian Aboriginal Literature lack a fundamental understanding of the ideological context in which the works were written” (56). Rather, Episkenew and others variously recognize that some critics of Native literatures interpret texts using theories and methods that are grounded in colonization. Kimberly Blaeser (Ojibway) articulates alternate interpretative methods that arise from Native perspectives: “I have been alert for critical methods and voices that seem to arise out of the literature itself (this is opposed to critical approaches applied from already established critical language or attempts to make the literature fit already established genres and categories of meaning)” (53-4). If, according to Blaeser, the tools for analysis are found in Native literatures, what

does this mean for those of us who approach the literatures from a perspective that may be quite different? How do we understand the tools found in the texts?

Authors like Blaeser could be criticized for suggesting that only Natives can read Native literatures with a high level of understanding. However, that is not what Blaeser and others like her are arguing. Rather, they are suggesting that an ever-growing degree of cultural initiation is needed in order to grapple adequately with the complexities of Native texts. For example, in “Living to Tell Stories” P. Jane Haffen argues that literary criticism of Native texts should not be offered solely by critics with Native blood. However, she does offer a measure of warning for the non-Native; “I am asserting that academic training analogous to any other field is necessary, perhaps even more so, because the ethical stakes are higher when dealing with indigenous peoples, with ideas about us, and with the five hundred year history of colonialism” (28). According to Haffen, ethical considerations demand a rigorous interrogation of theoretical applications that lack cultural understanding.

So, if one argues that non-Native scholars need to understand the perspectives Native texts emerge from in order to engage ethically and fruitfully with them, then how does understanding arise? Armand Garnet Ruffo (Ojibway) recognizes the intimate connection between story and reality in his answer:

For the outsider, then, attempting to come to terms with Native people and their literature, the problem is not to be solved by merely attaining the necessary background, reading all the anthropological data that one can get one’s hands on. Rather, for those who are serious, it is more a question of cultural initiation, of involvement and commitment, so that the culture and literature itself becomes more than a mere museum piece, dusty pages, something lifeless. (174)

According to Ruffo, non-Native scholars cannot understand Native texts by considering them as objects of study. Rather, Ruffo implies that Native texts become personalities in the

interpretive process, functioning as subjects in conversations that work towards understanding for the non-Native scholar. This is not the disengaged approach that McKegney criticizes, but is a decidedly engaged process that connects literature and reality in ways that make the scholar responsible to actual living communities and individuals. A similar argument is articulated in American Indian Literary Nationalism: “We *want* non-Natives to read, engage, and study Native literature....We only ask that non-Natives who study and write about Native peoples do so with a sense of responsibility to Native community” (11).

The idea of interconnectedness is evident in Daniel Heath Justice’s (Cherokee) methodological discussion when he writes, “For me, at this time, the best approach [to ethical Native literary criticism] is about relationships, about attending to the cultural, historical, political, and intellectual contexts from which indigenous texts emerge” (165). The ideas of relationships and interconnectedness become a helpful way for me to conceive of my involvement in this discussion. I can engage closely with Dimaline and her words with an awareness of interconnectedness between and amidst Dimaline, myself, our words, contexts, histories and cultures. By recognizing interconnectedness in my thesis, I am also recognizing my responsibility to Native communities and my own context, as well as my responsibility for my contribution.

One of the things I appreciate as I am learning how to relate to Indigenous systems of knowledge and worldviews is the role of stories. Shaun Wilson (Opaskwayak Cree) claims that “stories and metaphors are often used in Indigenous societies...as a teaching tool” (17). Stories about spider’s webs have been particularly influential in my learning about the interrelationship between stories, storytelling and listeners, and so I would like to reflect on

my understanding of one such story as a way of articulating a conceptual model for my research paradigm.

In Tales the Elders Told, Basil Johnston (Ojibway) shares the story “How spiders came to be.” This story tells about a time after the beginning of Earth when there was a period of hunger for humans. The hunger was not for lack of food; hunters would kill enough for weeks of eating. Rather, the lack was because the food spoiled so quickly. Increased waste produced over-killing and the food sources grew scarce (31-2).

A little six-legged bug called Manitoosh was also hungry. He was having trouble catching the flies he survived on. He went with his brothers (the Manitooshug) to a mountain to ask the Great Spirit for help. Kitche Manitou replied, “I have given you all the power you need. If you use it wisely, it will serve you well” (33). Manitoosh and his brothers left the mountain, still hungry.

One day, the hunters had a great council with Nanabush, who felt sorry for the little creatures. He spoke to Manitoosh; “I have watched you trying to catch the flies. I know that you can make a thread to let yourself down from above. Couldn’t you use the thread to make a trap for catching flies?” (34). Manitoosh spent that whole afternoon weaving his thread, and when morning came the next day, he saw two flies trapped in it. Johnston concludes the story: “From that day on the Manitooshug made nets and caught flies and ate well. From that day on people were also able to keep meat fresh a little longer. And from the Manitooshug they learned how to make nets to catch fish. Because the Manitooshug had helped the people, Kitche Manitou gave each bug an extra pair of legs” (35).

The story “How spiders came to be” illustrates the importance of interconnectedness. It offers a lesson about the unique contributions each of us makes to our world and how those

contributions can affect others in profound ways. As a conceptual model, the spider's web offers me a rich metaphor for how I understand Dimaline's talk and how I articulate my understanding. Each point on the web has a specific function and identity, and connects in complex ways to other points on the web. If you disturb one part of the web, it will be felt throughout. A spider's web is at once strong and sensitive, anchored and connected, creative and syncretic. Because the web is formed in concentric circles, in following a strand you will pass by the same points again and again, never disconnected from them.

The form of concentric circles in a spider's web requires some special attention here in that it also offers a lesson on reading practices. Leslie Marmon Silko (Laguna Pueblo) uses the web as a metaphor in her discussion of the practice of listening to stories in a Pueblo context:

For those of you accustomed to being taken from point A to point B to point C, this presentation may be somewhat difficult to follow. Pueblo expression resembles something like a spider's web – with many little threads radiating from the centre, crisscrossing one another. As with the web, the structure emerges as it is made, and you must simply listen and trust, as the Pueblo people do, that meaning will be made. (48-49)

Silko's advice reflects on the complex structure of a spider's web. Within this complex structure, I learn to put aside linear thinking. As Alanna Brown writes, "from the middle of the web, linear thinking can look self-absorbed, immature, and contrived" (174). In terms of reading practices, this means that I may not grasp meaning in a straightforward way, but if I listen carefully and circle around, my awareness and understanding will come.

Jeanette Armstrong (Okanagan) reflects on her understanding of the spider's web from an Okanagan perspective. She feels the spider's web offers a lesson about how beings can mutually benefit one another, following a "principal of deliberate non-destruction" (Cardinal and Armstrong 18). Armstrong writes:

[The web is] a reminder to be aware of and to be protective of the sensitivity and the relationship between all beings and things, including us. The spider's web is a physical construct which many Native cultures draw on symbolically to imbed this principle in their storytelling as an expression of the creative process concerned with the connectedness of all things. (18)

The idea that one acts in a deliberately non-harmful way, determined to protect beneficial relationships, is something I particularly appreciate in Armstrong's words. These themes are included in the principles that guide my learning: relationship, respect, responsibility, and reciprocity.⁹ Therefore, my learning is guided by interconnected aspects of the meaning making process; relationships based on reciprocity and respect before "facts"; and responsibility for my part in relationship through sharing and giving back to the author, to her community, and to other readers.

So the spider's web teaches me that stories may work in complex ways, which are not readily apparent. It also teaches me ways of thinking that may be reflected in my own creative process, including this thesis. I think the spider's web is a conceptual model that reflects many aspects of my learning, including (but not limited to) ethical concerns, complex reading practices, and my place in an interconnected structure of meaning. More than anything, it tells me about the complexity of relationships.

As a conceptual guide, the spider's web teaches me that I am a specific point in relationship to another point, and that we are interconnected by various strands. Therefore, it is difficult to talk about Dimaline's words without talking about their impact on me. Daniel Heath Justice writes that "stories define relationships, between nations as well as individuals, and those relationships imply presence – you can't have a mutual relationship between something and nothingness" (150). From Justice's words I can infer that Red Rooms has

⁹ I am indebted to Shawn Wilson, Jo-ann Archibald, and Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt for their precise language with which to discuss ethical principles for research (and life). These authors variously discuss aspects of an Indigenous and/or First Nations paradigm, including versions of these principals.

something to teach me about my relationship to it. This type of reading recognizes interconnectedness, but allows both Cherie Dimaline and me to be visible as substantial, complex women.

My context and the perspective I bring to my work is an important part of this process. Stuart Hall argues that “we all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context,’ positioned” (222). My experiences and history are important parts of my cross-cultural interactions. Far beyond the scope of this thesis is an infinitely shifting explication of the ways in which my context aligns and diverges from that of Cherie Dimaline. For the purposes of brevity, I will say that I am a 33-year-old Canadian-Dutch-English female academic who grew up in a small Northern British Columbia town in a lower-middle-class family. I am also (among other things) a Christian, a feminist, a mother and a social activist.

My interactions with First Nations people in the town I grew up in, Burns Lake, British Columbia, were marred by strong racial divides in the community, which often resulted in violence instigated from either side. My exposure to positive examples of First Nations individuals or cultures was complicated by my family, who often seemed to view “successful” First Nations individuals as exceptions to the norm. My academic career has given me some useful theoretical tools to unpack some of the assumptions and misconceptions that I carry from my foundational years, but my (un)learning in regards to Canada’s First Nations has been largely from stories. Textbooks and class lectures have been helpful, but the most effective learning has come through relationships, personal narratives, or “fictional” stories, all of which function as a way for me to understand complex cultural nuances and practices. Of course, Renate Eigenbrod argues that as a cultural outsider I am

“excluded from knowing fully” (43), but I am always in a process towards understanding and that process has been populated by a host of voices teaching through story. One of the voices I learn from is Cherie Dimaline.

Dimaline is a 35-year-old woman who was raised near the southern tip of the Georgian Bay in Penetanguishene, Ontario. She now lives in Toronto and has three children. She describes herself as “Canadian,” but then clarifies that she is Ojibway, Métis, Scottish and French (“Quilting” 18). More simply, she identifies herself as a “Native woman” (18). So, while Dimaline represents a particular unique perspective, she also has shared experiences with other Native women that can allow for some generalizations, without denying specifics.

Her novel, Red Rooms, comes from her perspective as a Native woman, and while it may be called “fiction,” Dimaline claims that “there’s no such thing as fiction” (“Quilting” 34). In regards to the novel, Dimaline says, “They are my family’s stories; they are my community’s stories; they are stories that I always had” (1). By discussing her novel as fiction and then claiming that her stories are based in lived experience, Dimaline shows that her perspective does not necessarily distinguish between “truth” and “story.” Much like Thomas King, Dimaline says, “Everything, in a way, is a story. It’s somebody’s version of what we see. It’s somebody’s worldview” (34). According to Dimaline, her stories teach me about her worldview, which is informed by the context that surrounds her. Again, a web-like structure is evident.

Her “talk,” as I have termed it, is the interconnected body of utterances that come from Red Rooms; the documented conversation I had with Dimaline; and casual conversation, phone calls and emails we have exchanged. All these literary and speech

categories can reveal ideology in Dimaline's perspective; I don't see it as important to distinguish how she shares them. Therefore, "talk" and "text" can be seen as interchangeable at points in my thesis.¹⁰ The goal of this thesis is not to define and limit, but to open up and move towards ever-increasing understanding.

So, if I am looking to learn from Native women's writing, why limit my thesis to this woman, this novel? Actually, I don't see my choice to interact in a focused way as a limitation. Instead, I think that specific points of connection can allow for a continual opening up, so that the overall conversation is ever-widening, rather than contracting. This thesis is a snapshot of learning in process. My learning occurs in multiple and interconnected layers, and for me, the clearest way to articulate what is occurring is to focus my story on this relationship. That said, I do not deny the host of influences on both my perspective and Dimaline's that work their way in to our conversation.

In terms of Red Rooms, I chose this specific novel because it is new, intriguing, and offers a variety of multifaceted characters. I wanted my contribution to the conversations about Native women's writing to be focused on a new author. Craig Womack (Muskogee Creek) claims, "Most Native authors of fiction have a greater chance of batting in next year's World Series than receiving critical recognition, even in an Indian literary journal" ("Single Decade" 17). Therefore, I wanted to look beyond the canon of Native women's writing and give critical attention to an upcoming author. I looked for a text that was complex in its construction; Dimaline presents multiple narratives in her novel, and yet still maintains

¹⁰ Greg Sarris defines Mabel McKay's "talk" as "responses to questions, gossip, idle chitchat, and any stories that can become a basis for intercultural and interpersonal communication and understanding" (Keeping Slug Woman Alive 4). In this context, all her "speech activities" are understood as one category (19), limited to oral communications. My understanding of "talk" extends from Sarris' to include literary activities. This does not suggest that there are not differences between oral and written utterances, but I am more concerned with the fact that ideology is expressed in all manners of communication.

threads of similarity, which cause me continually to reconsider my understanding. Lastly, I looked for a text that had a variety of “realistic” characters. Dimaline describes her process of creating such dynamic characters: “What I did was I tried to create characters that breathed and lived and danced and fucked and fucked up and fell and got back up” (“Quilting” 22). What she did was create characters that I could relate to, despite obvious and subtle differences between us.

In articulating parts of the perspectives that Dimaline and I enter conversation from, I am inviting readers to join in the relationship. There is not really an “insider” or an “outsider” in this discussion; we are each “inside” our own worldview. To consider the ways Dimaline and I are interconnected is to collapse dichotomy. However, this does not displace difference. Of course, this thesis is my perspective, but it engages with ideas and stories that are sometimes different from my worldview. The fact that I relate to parts of Dimaline’s stories connects me in intricate ways, and helps me learn, but the interruptions to my thinking, the encounters with the unknown, the differences between Dimaline’s stories and my own are what contribute most substantially to my learning, both in terms of understanding Native women’s writing and my own perspective.

Learning through story is a subjective and engaged process. Because I am working towards ever-increasing understanding, the ways that I make meaning of Dimaline’s talk are not concerned with a “correct” analysis of the literature, as if that would ever be possible. Rather, I work from a definition of “understanding” that includes the concepts of “truth” and “knowledge.” Basil Johnston explains the Ojibway word truth, “w’daeb-awae,” connotes that a speaker is not merely saying something correct or right, but rather the speaker “casts his words and his voice as far as his perception and his vocabulary will enable him or her”

("Is That All There Is?" 100-1). The concept of truth does not reflect absolutism; "the best and most a speaker can achieve and a listener expect is the highest degree of accuracy" (101). Accuracy, in turn, is directly related to experience. The word "to know" in Ojibway is "w'kikaendaun." Johnston explains that when someone says they "know" something using this word, he or she is saying that "the notion, image, idea, fact that that person has in mind corresponds and is similar to what he or she has already seen heard, touched, tasted, or smelled" (101). So the relationship between knowledge and truth is based in experience and is inflected by perception, memory and responsibility. "Understanding" is therefore about expanding my experiences, deepening my perceptions and accepting responsibility for my learning.

In the following chapters, I discuss various aspects of Dimaline's talk and reflect my learning about how I engage with Native women's writing. I have prefaced my thesis with an edited transcription of the conversation I had with Cherie Dimaline at the Native Women's Centre in Toronto on March 5, 2009. The conversation was initiated with the approval of the Research Ethics Board at the University of Northern British Columbia. Dimaline was aware of my intended questions, although we diverged in many cases as she and I conversed. Once I transcribed the conversation, I consulted Dimaline during the editing process, and she approved the final version. I provide the transcription because it is a significant part of my learning, in terms of Dimaline, her novel, and my own perspective. I have chosen to place the transcription previous to my work because I feel that without Cherie Dimaline's contribution to my thinking, this work would not be possible. Further, I want to recognize and validate her words and practice the respect I advocate for in this thesis.

One of the things that I find interesting about our conversation is the role of stories in Cherie's talk; she tells stories and anecdotes throughout. As she does, past and present, urban and reserve, elder and youth, male and female, white and Native, blend into a complex and interrelated world that she attempts to enunciate for both of us. A few times, she refers to a quilt, or blanket in relation to stories, and I think of our conversation in similar ways; she cuts out snippets of her own life, her family's life, her community's life, even political events, and sews it all together. The result is a blanket that functions as a whole, even as it is comprised of related parts.

Chapter one situates the theory and methodology for my analysis of Dimaline's talk. I draw out arguments that claim contemporary theory does not offer an adequate interpretive lens for Native literatures. Many authors advocate for interpretive tools that come from Native communities. Thus, I explore the relationship between theories and stories in Native contexts, and conclude that story and theory can function in similar ways, giving us tools for understanding our world. Therefore, the research paradigm I am suggesting has a very close relationship with Dimaline's talk. In terms of methodology, I figure analysis as a conversation; this recognizes the many voices that contribute to the meaning-making process, emphasizes listening, and attempts to be holistic. In this chapter I advocate for a "way" of listening, through stories; this provides a link to lived experience, which is embedded in social relationships, rather than a conceptual explanation of theory.

In the second chapter, I look at conceptual boundaries in Red Rooms. I trace the story of "the girl" and the ways in which she connects with her identity beyond a narrow "this or that" structure. I look at the role of context in the meaning-making process and recognize the value of making connections despite perceived boundaries. This entails seeking

multiple sites of connection, rather than limiting the relationship. Finally, I consider how the meaning I get from a text changes the constitution of my relational web.

In the third chapter, I focus on the story of Constance to initiate a conversation about unequal power dynamics, gender and race, and the way these converse with each other in intricate ways. Power can result in erasure, sometimes by force, sometimes through complicity. I examine the ways relationships can be harmful if built on limited concepts of identity and how people may “perform” for others as a result. As much as limits are troubled in this chapter, I also stress that regions of opacity exist and that easy assumptions should not occur in the meaning-making process. Finally, I accentuate building relationships with respect and reciprocity, which do not form in uneven power structures.

Chapter four highlights the connections between text, imagination and reality. Through an exploration of the story of Natalie and “T,” I reflect on the role of stories in learning and the authority they can have in lives. I consider indirect learning and how it is facilitated by personal narratives, which “translate” into reality. This chapter stresses the responsibility learners have for their learning. By this, I mean that learners are accountable both for their responses to their learning, and to the communities from which they learn.

Questions about the meaning-making process can be understood in terms of relationships. Despite what some may believe, a non-Native scholar cannot simply approach Native literature in a prescribed manner (i.e. $a + b$ always equals c) and fruitfully learn. The conversation I had with Dimaline, the stories of the girl, Constance, and Natalie and T dialogue with my own experiences to consider stories in context, seek connections, form relationships outside of unequal power structures, and learn responsibly from stories.

Chapter One

Situating the Theoretical Paradigm and Methodology

I am not the first academic to wonder what the best approach to Native literatures is. In discussions of critical approaches to Native literatures, there are a host of voices speaking. The writings from Native critical voices like Thomas King, Kimberley Blaeser, and Janice Acoose argue that prescriptive approaches to Native literatures using contemporary theories produce inadequate interpretations, and in some cases may have dangerous implications. For example, Kimberly Blaeser argues that the use of western theories to interpret First Nations literatures can reproduce the colonization process – with “authority emanating from the mainstream critical centre to the marginalized Native texts” (56). Of course, any reading is limited when one uses theory because one perspective is often sacrificed for the other. However, this can be more problematic in terms of Native literatures, where colonialism, appropriation and cultural loss must be considered.

Thus, authors like Craig Womack, Robert Warrior (Osage) and Janice Acoose (Saulteaux and Métis) variously argue for Native intellectual sovereignty and alternative knowledge-generating systems that emerge from Native communities. Acoose argues: “We must exercise our sovereign rights to take control of our own stories, define our own critical methods and language, and resurrect our respective cultural epistemologies and pedagogies” (“A Vanishing Indian” 47). In light of persuasive arguments for Native intellectual sovereignty, Gordon D. Henry Jr. concludes that “there is no compelling reason for external readings of Native texts through Euro-American theory” (14). While this approach seems rigid, it does suggest that the starting point be Native texts and the respective cultures they

emerge from, rather than approaching the text with assumptions based in contemporary theories. For example, Kristina Fagan (Labrador Métis) notes that the critical assumptions of postcolonial or feminist theorists often read Native literatures as challenging or reactionary (240). The problem with these readings is not the theory itself, but its primacy in the analytical process. Fagan argues: “It is more convenient to use familiar theoretical approaches than to explore ways of thinking and knowing within Native communities” (240).

There are a number of authors, like Thomas King, Kimberly Blaeser and Craig Womack, who argue specifically against the application of postcolonial theories. At issue here is the privilege that contact is given. Defining Native literatures as postcolonial texts suggests that colonialism and the traumas it produces define the literatures. For instance, in his often-cited work “Godzilla vs. Post-colonial,” Thomas King writes:

While post-colonialism purports to be a method by which we can begin to look at those literatures which are formed out of the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor, the colonized and the colonizer, the term itself assumes that the starting point for that discussion is the advent of Europeans in North America. At the same time, the term organizes the literature progressively suggesting that there is both progress and improvement. No less distressing, it also assumes that the struggle between guardian and ward is the catalyst for contemporary Native literature, providing those of us who write with method and topic. And, worst of all, the idea of post-colonial writing effectively cuts us off from our traditions, traditions that were in place before colonialism ever became a question, traditions which have come down to us through our cultures in spite of colonization, and it supposes that contemporary Native writing is largely a construct of oppression. (11–12)

Of course, one would be remiss to deny the effects of contact, but in making it the hinge on which history is hung, texts are read as reactive rather than pro-active; Native cultures are seen as wrapped around the moment of contact, rather than housed in a continuous past/present/future web.

In turn, there are a number of authors, like Bonita Lawrence (Mi'kmaw), Kim Anderson (Cree and Métis), and Lee Maracle (Stó:lō), who critique the use of mainstream feminist theories in analyzing the experiences and literatures of Native women. While each author recognizes the significant contribution feminisms have made to making women's voices heard, they do variously articulate ways that the feminist movement has inadequately addressed the circumstances of Native women. For example, Lawrence suggests individualism is a point of departure from western feminism for many Native women: "Western feminism is so heavily influenced by the notion of the individual rather than the community" (qtd. in Anderson 275). Lawrence notes that ontological differences in the understandings of gender can further alienate Native women from the western feminist movement. Anderson and Lawrence suggest that their communities' traditional values of community empowerment and gender complementarity concern them with continuity of cultural understandings of gender and social roles, rather than the progress towards liberation of women that the feminist movement champions. Thus, while these authors engage in dialogue with the feminist movement, there is a tension between agendas that necessarily nuances the discussion.

It is possible to see an overly separatist attitude in some of the arguments coming from Native authors advocating intellectual sovereignty. Indeed, Womack agrees that sovereignty "has everything to do with inside and outside, with relations across and between borders" ("Single Decade" 75). Some may argue that inside-outside boundaries prevent a non-Native literary scholar from entering the conversation. However, I have yet to encounter a Native author suggesting a completely exclusionary approach in terms of non-Native participation in analysis of Native literatures. For example, in American Indian Literary

Nationalism Jace Weaver writes: “We *want* non-Natives to read, engage and study Native literatures” (11). So, rather than excluding non-Native authors from conversation, advocates for intellectual sovereignty are offering an understanding of a relationship between the inside and outside – one which operates in similar ways to government-to-government relations. This type of relationship acknowledges interdependence and allows for cross-border travel, but suggests a certain amount of caution when travelling.

I think what Womack and others caution against is the application of theories with no allowance for a returned gaze. In explanation, I offer Womack’s interpretation of Greg Sarris (Kashaya Pomo and Miwok): “Sarris creates a two-way dialogue, where Euro theorists are held accountable to Pomo ideas” (“Single Decade” 47). The dialogue regarding Native literatures then allows many voices to participate, as long as each voice is willing to be illuminated by the others. Sarris suggests that this illumination happens at the border of the familiar. Renate Eigenbrod adds to this concept of borders as she discusses her approach to Aboriginal literatures: “I read Canadian Indigenous literatures from an immigrant perspective, but in a migrant fashion” (xiii). For Eigenbrod, travel to a “plurality of continually changing places” (24) is a dynamic process that constantly opens negotiations of borders. Thus, both “sides” of the border are changed by encounters at the un-fixed border.¹¹

If I take the concept of travel here and connect it to my own life, I think about my experiences travelling internationally. A new and unfamiliar place evokes feelings of insecurity. I am unsure of who is in charge, the code of behaviour or “proper” way to negotiate social interactions, or who I can trust to ask for direction if needed. This type of experience results in initial disorientation and frustration for me. That said, I know through

¹¹ Ideas such as migrancy, hybridity and border negotiation have been presented in different theoretical contexts by Homi K. Bhabha. For example, see The Location of Culture.

careful observation, questioning, and taking considerable risk I can negotiate new regions and establish relationships that are very rewarding. Not only that, but challenging my own ignorance and biases weeds out characteristics in my worldview I find distasteful, if not harmful. Boundary-crossing into new areas can be rewarding, as I have found in my conversations with Cherie Dimaline.

Theory is situated within a particular worldview and in turn informs that worldview. Therefore, scholars like Shaun Wilson argue for a form of theory that emerges from the same context as what is being analyzed. Wilson argues that ethical research “follows our [Indigenous peoples’] codes of conduct and honours our systems of knowledge and worldview” (8). Wilson’s statement argues that research in Indigenous communities should be formed in relationship with, and accountable to, the community being researched. Further, Wilson states that research should “[appreciate] and [expand] upon the resources available within Indigenous communities” (16). By this, Wilson means that there should be a primary focus on the community and its theoretical paradigm, with additional resources being pulled into the research only as long as they are in alignment with that paradigm. Wilson presents a convincing argument for dealing with research in a specific Indigenous community. Of course, no single approach is sufficient when it comes to approaching the heterogeneous field of Native literatures. However, the principles of looking for research strategies within Indigenous communities are reflected in my own work.

The research paradigms in Native communities in regards to stories vary. There are many scholars of Native ancestry who study Native literatures, and their writings have been loosely grouped together under the category “Native theory.”¹² While I am less concerned

¹² For example, the Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism has a section titled “Native Theory and Criticism.”

with this type of categorization, the focus of these writers adds to the discussion of my theoretical paradigm. As shown above, some Native authors criticize the types of theoretical applications to Native literatures emerging from a critical centre that potentially silences Native voices. Other authors readily engage with contemporary theory in their analysis. In the study of Native literatures, there are many variations and even disagreements amidst Native critics. However, a few shared assumptions are evident: writing by Native authors inscribes the function and nature of oral traditions onto the written page; in turn, Native literatures maintain the dynamic nature of oral narratives in the written forms.

The history of oral narratives in Native communities is rich and long. While it is simplistic to discuss *a* Native oral tradition (as if there is only one homogenous version), many scholars have considered similarities in and between nations and found a few guiding characteristics: the power of words, adaptability, and the interconnectedness of all things.

In her work Native Literatures in Canada, Penny Petrone argues, “central to the ancient oral traditions was the power of the *word*, spoken, intoned or sung” (9). The dynamic and active nature of words and their position in stories gives them the ability to create both meaning and existence. The personality and life within stories mean that “each telling [is] a unique event” (Petrone 13). Further, the variations found, even in the differing versions of the same story are characterized by change; Elizabeth Grant writes that the dynamic and fluid nature of oral traditions allows for renditions that incorporate historical changes “or particulars of a specific locale” (68). A story that is communicated orally allows for flexibility and change as the need arises. This prevents a story from becoming fixed in an historical context or place, but rather it changes with history and locale, making “the past a continual part of the present” (Grant 39).

Stories do not exist in some fixed place outside of culture but are relational participants in it. Petrone writes that, “it is important to read the stories not as isolated literary narratives, but as part of the socio-cultural and historical contexts of the culture group in which they developed” (12). The relational nature of story is further expressed in the give-and-take between teller and audience. Susan Berry Brill de Ramírez comments, “within the oral storytelling practice, the listener is an active participant whose presence is necessary to the telling-creation of the story” (6). Without the relationship and exchange between the audience and performer, the power of the story is compromised. It is in the exchange itself where meaning is located. The vitality of oral culture “owes its significance, at least in part, to the relational context of language” (Brill de Ramírez 13). The way words operate in tandem, the way interpretation and communication are established between listener and teller, and the value of interconnectedness that presents itself in both the content and form of oral narrative, work together to present a concept of relationship.

Oral traditions attest to the power of words, human adaptation, and interconnections between all things. These characteristics may seem somewhat abstract and so perhaps a concrete look at the functions of stories may add to the discussion. The functions of stories in Native cultures have been discussed by scholars under several different headings. According to Elizabeth Grant’s work on oral tradition, there are four main purposes for a story within a Native context:

1. To teach right relations (74).
2. To convey information about the world (75).
3. To account for particular aspects of the natural world (74).
4. To transmit a sense of tribal values (80).

These examples show some of the purposes for oral narratives, although there are others. Through oral traditions, communities define their beliefs, cultures and experiences, and affirm their diverse identities.

My understanding of the characteristics and functions of stories in Native contexts is influenced by the potential for stories to function in parallel ways in western societies. For example, the story of Peter Pan teaches about relationships of power, accounts for aspects of another culture from a particular perspective, and transmits a sense of western values.¹³ Through this children's story, individuals may place themselves in the world and negotiate relationships and identity accordingly. Thus the difference between western and Native narratives, it seems to me, is not found in the function of story, but the ideology that is being transmitted through story. Therefore, story communicates particular worldviews and can impact our thought processes, conceptions, and actions. With the function of story in mind and an awareness of the powerful role stories play in our lives, it is perhaps easier to understand Thomas King's statement: "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (Truth 2).

Beyond constructing our own reality, stories can help us learn about the realities of other people. Shawn Wilson explains that in an Indigenous perspective, "stories allow us to see others' life experiences through our own eyes" (17). Julie Cruikshank extends Wilson's idea to comment on "the *potential* of stories to make us re-evaluate situations we think we understand" (xiv). Stories, then, can allow us to reframe (potentially divisive) issues so that we can alter our perspectives. Indirectly, stories ask the listeners to identify themselves in the narrative and connect their experiences, letting the listeners draw their own conclusions and

¹³ I am indebted to Antonia Mills for her ideas on how Peter Pan functions as a colonial narrative and how those functions diverge and converge with Grant's summary of story's functions in First Nations contexts.

implicating them in the learning process. Stories help individuals to contextualize their own experiences, enrich their worldviews and even change their social realities. The story of my own learning includes contextualization, enrichment and change. As a student of Native literatures, I have been changed by my encounter with the stories I have read and been told. My theoretical foundations, ethics, and strategies of inquiry in research have been re-contextualized and deepened through relationship with Native women and their stories.

So if story is a way of understanding relationships and if theory is a set of principles that provide a framework for understanding, then theory and story can function in similar ways. Blanca Schorcht writes: “stories are a way of theorizing the world, how it works, and how we should behave in it” (34). The story of theory in my analysis then assumes that Indigenous knowledge and narratives are a source of theory, and critical discourse is embedded in narrative. This assumption breaks down the artificial boundary between theory and story. Conventionally accepted literary theory itself is not the issue here, so much as what is often considered theory and how it is applied. The term “theory” comes from the Greek *theōrea*, “to look at.” The original term connotes viewing of a performance. Therefore, theory can be conceived of as a type of spectatorship, where audience is removed from the drama. The sense of removal that theoretical applications may offer can lead to neo-colonial relational structures wherein the scholar speaks with an authority about a text using theory as an analytical tool. This practice has the potential to delegitimize Native voices – voices that are already theorizing their experiences, largely through story. Julie Cruikshank advocates for the possibility of a returned gaze as she shows a concern with “*how local voices can contribute to theoretical paradigms that frame contemporary scholarship*” (xii).

This type of approach values story and allows for a positive dialogic relationship to form with specific Native stories and voices and those who seek to understand them.

I agree with many Native authors who claim that the tools for analysis can be found in stories. My thesis recognizes that there is theory, or frameworks for understanding, within Dimaline's talk. With this theoretical paradigm in mind, I would argue that a fruitful analysis of Dimaline's talk can come primarily by way of her stories. Therefore, my methodology is centered in the text, with recognition of dialogical relationships between Dimaline, her stories, and me, each positioned within our overlapping contexts. What I am proposing is an interrogative approach to analysis. Further, the interrogation is not one sided, but is multidirectional. Modeling my analysis as a conversation helps me to understand the relationships that are being formed.

The concept of conversation for my methodology is meant to reflect that each "voice" (authors, community members, the text, theory, and readers, etc.) contributes to the meaning of a text.¹⁴ In configuring my literary analysis as conversation, I emphasize the multiplicity of voices involved, the (intended) ability of each voice to contribute and be valued, and the sense of sharing involved in dialogue. I must also recognize the possibility that I am bringing this conversation together in writing and, as a Euro-Canadian, middle-class woman, I may be complicit in suppressing particular voices. It is, however, my assertion that the conversation between differing worldviews is valuable and, in fact, necessary. By sharing conversations, heterogeneous conceptions of reality can be brought together and honoured. By configuring the relationship I have with Native cultures and literatures as a dialogue, I can interrogate my own positionality, engage with people and texts positioned in their own

¹⁴ The social context of language and writing as a social act has been discussed extensively in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. For example, see The Dialogic Imagination.

contexts, and participate in the negotiation of a positive, meaningful relationship, which collapses dichotomy but not difference.

I cannot simply speak to or about Dimaline, but I must speak with her, allowing for a returned gaze. This is evidenced most clearly in my thesis by moments of self-reflection. I approach the conversation within my own primary framework and acknowledge how that may reflect on my understanding. My understanding and experiences have limitations, but these are not fixed or impermeable. Therefore, I position myself as a learner, willing to engage in dialogue that may disrupt my frameworks for understanding. Just as I acknowledge my context, I must do my best to acknowledge Dimaline's without confining her to my own limited understanding.

By figuring my relationship to Dimaline's talk as a conversation, I am suggesting that we have an opportunity to participate by speaking and listening. One of the most valuable lessons I have been given in my learning is the importance of listening. The development of my listening skills has been guided by variations on the following advice from Jo-ann Archibald (Stó:lō): "We have three ears to listen with, two on the sides of our head and one in our heart" (76). Careful listening, then, is for me about moving beyond the surface meaning of things to the meaning below the surface. Basil Johnston discusses the layers of meaning words may have in the context of his Ojibway heritage. He writes that in his tribal language, "all words have three levels of meaning; there is the surface meaning that everyone instantly understands. Beneath this meaning is a more fundamental meaning derived from the prefixes and their combinations with other terms. Underlying both is the philosophical meaning" ("Is That All There Is?" 100). It seems to me that making meaning from a story,

then, is not just about understanding the words, but about seeing connections in and amidst the words, as well as relationships the words have to larger ideological contexts.

In order to begin to understand the complex layering of meaning in stories, I must listen carefully. This involves remaining silent at points. Dimaline spoke to me about the connection between silence and listening: “It’s our understanding that the quieter you are, the more you’ll hear” (“Quilting” 21). The sense of stillness Dimaline suggests leaves the listener open to hearing beyond the surface to a fuller understanding. Dimaline talks about her own experiences with silence – listening from under the kitchen table to her grandmother and aunts as they talked. Dimaline says, “The way that I know how to write is the way that I know how to listen, and that’s through the stories of these old women in my family” (“Quilting” 12). Dimaline connects her own storytelling to larger familial and community contexts, but more than that, she articulates a “way” of listening: “through the stories.” Listening becomes an activity that connects what she hears to what she writes. Dimaline hears a story and has a “way” of hearing it that produces her own stories.

This “way” of listening is active and participatory. Gerald Vizenor claims that the story requires a listener: “The story doesn’t work without a participant...there has to be a participant and someone has to listen. I don’t mean listening in the passive sense. You can even listen by contradiction” (“Follow” 300). Listening is about interaction; reading is a social act. In my conversations with Dimaline, I have learned to embrace silence while allowing an internal dialogue to occur, seeking ways in which my own knowledge, experiences and beliefs converge and diverge from what is being communicated in Dimaline’s talk. In some ways, I need to listen to how I have been shaped as much as to how stories are shaped.

An active “way” of listening as described above is a part of my methodology for textual analysis. It involves a measure of self-reflexivity as part of the process. This internal dialogue enacts what Greg Sarris terms “strong sense critical thinking” (168). This type of thinking engages my experiences as tools for analysis. “Strong sense critical thinking” is a type of thinking that encourages the inclusion of my own narratives in the critical process. Therefore, my own stories are connected to the analysis. In turn, I am re-visiting my own experiences as I listen to Dimaline and her stories. This “way” of listening allows me to internalize what is being taught, and in turn those lessons emerge in my own writing. Dimaline’s stories have the power to affect my reality and my own stories have the potential to affect others.

If my method of analysis is figured as a conversation (both internal and external), then I seek a balance between careful active listening and speaking. Generally, when I am seeking to understand something, I ask a lot of questions. This has been my approach to Dimaline’s talk as well. The interview format itself enacts an interrogative approach. That said, my learning so far acknowledges that the questioning should come from both sides. Thus, I not only question, but I am questioned in this methodology. At a university, Greg Sarris’ Auntie Anita was asked about her Cache Creek Pomo culture. Her first gesture, when interrogated, was back at the person asking the questions: ““Do you know who you are? Why are you interested [in Indians]? Ask yourself that”” (74). Implicit in this gesture is the suggestion that looking to one’s own context is a necessary part of the process of entering into dialogue with one another. Further than that, Auntie Anita does not allow herself to be merely an object of study, but asserts that she is emerging from a context just as the

questioner is, that they may mutually question one another. Auntie Anita asks the questioner to be responsible for her own participation in her learning.

I think that the participation Auntie Anita suggests is reflected in Jo-Ann Archibald's term "storywork." As the term implies, there is a work, or activity, involved in listening to a story; the listener/learner has a responsibility. Story has a role in indirect education: a story is offered and the listener is responsible for "figuring it out." Elder Tillie Guterrez of the Stó:lo Nation speaks to this point: "You [the storyteller] are helping them [the listener] seek out meaning and reason that lies within all things, to sense their own power and to develop the will to do what is right. If a young person has a problem, often times the elder gives them a story. The story does not give them all the answers. It shows them the way" (qtd. in Archibald 126). My participation in my learning is hopefully suggested by the conversation model, but perhaps it would be useful for me to give a more concrete picture of the way conversation proceeds.

Figuring my methodology for analysis of Dimaline's talk as a dialogue, I suggest an approach that attempts to be holistic. However, the metaphor of conversation is not without its shortfalls. Is a thesis an adequate way of enacting a conversation? After all, the purpose and means by which we enter in to conversation are dictated, and ultimately I lead the conversation by asking a particular question. Also, there are temporal and spatial constraints in this academic pursuit.

Because of constraints, this thesis can only represent a portion of the process of dialogue; it is a snapshot of my learning. It begins to reflect my interpretation of Dimaline's talk, but it does not account for what is not said, or moments of silence. This is worth consideration. What if the frames of reference are so diverse, shifting or troubled that

dialogue is shut down? What if the other is not willing to dialogue? How does this account for social power-relations? While boundaries sometimes become apparent through the process of dialogue, another type of boundary is encountered by way of silence. Literary analysis requires not only attention to what is seen and heard, but also to what is not seen and instances of silence. A focus on the dialogue that is occurring ignores the possibility that there are things absent from the dialogue, either because I cannot hear them due to cultural coding or my own limitations, or because they are not being said. Some authors, like Eigenbrod, generally suggest that listening to silences and learning from them is a beneficial strategy, implying that even silence is a boundary worth crossing. I would add that the silence is sometimes not the permeable boundary Eigenbrod implies. I think further consideration of the boundary is necessary in the case of silence. Perhaps it can sometimes just be left as such, since this type of boundary crossing involves a lot of trust and holds a huge potential for harm.

I agree with Sarris, who writes, “Just because we are conversing with one another does not mean we are understanding one another” (5). Further, Wendy Wickwire says, “I feel that the only way we can come together is to make the connections. Or understand the disconnections. And that would seem to be the really important thing to understand” (qtd. in Chester 29). For Wickwire, dialogue includes not only what we can comprehend, but that which is inaccessible, or silent. Sometimes, all we can do is recognize that we are not relating. Therefore, this thesis is not a conversation that presumes I will arrive at *an* understanding of Dimaline’s talk, but rather that I will learn something from her. After all, encounters with others teach us valuable lessons about both the other and ourselves. While this thesis reflects only a very small portion of the conversation, it begins to tell a story of my

learning. As Craig Womack argues, “though no one can know all the stories, neither can one get by very effectively by listening only to (or telling only) his or her own” (“Theorizing” 367).

Chapter Two

“Honey, I’m Home”

Considering Contexts and Seeking Connections Through the Story of “The Girl”

When I began my graduate work, I gave Dimaline’s book to a friend for her birthday. I had enjoyed the novel so much that I thought my friend would be equally delighted by it. I told her that my thesis was about First Nations women’s writing and that this was a novel I would be studying. After a few weeks, she had finished the book; I asked what she thought. She prefaced by saying she had enjoyed it and then began to look uncomfortable. “This might sound weird,” she said, “but I didn’t think it seemed like a First Nations book.”

My friend’s comment tells me something about the way we define things. The Oxford English Dictionary provides this definition of the word *define*: “outline clearly, mark out the boundary of.” When my friend expressed her feeling that Red Rooms did not fit her definition of a First Nations novel, she was saying that for some reason Dimaline’s writing did not fall within the confines of how my friend identified First Nations texts. Of course that got me thinking about how I did define the text as First Nations and why. It also led me to consider how I define myself in relationship to the text, Dimaline, and her community. The preoccupation with boundaries and how to negotiate them in the meaning making process led to this chapter. The story of room #414 offers me a nuanced critique of firm boundaries, teaching me that context and connections offer me a better way of understanding my relationship to Dimaline’s talk.

“The girl” is the only name given to a young, mixed-blood prostitute who passes through room #414. The story of the girl illustrates the importance of context and connection. In the beginning of the story, the girl experiences disconnection, and the results

are figured negatively. Through a series of mirror moments, the girl sees her disconnection and realizes the possibility for connection. In the end, she is finding a context for her life and is forging connections.

In the beginning of the story, the girl is a woman that exists in liminal spaces. By this I mean that she occupies spaces characterized by in-betweenness, or located on a boundary. This location is sometimes figured in a positive light in the novel, in that it provides the girl protection or a measure of power. More often the results of liminality are negative. The girl either straddles or crosses lines in many areas of her life. Her location, profession and lineage highlight the liminal spaces she occupies.

The setting for the entire novel, the hotel, represents a place of transition, or a line between two locations: home and away. The narrator, Naomi, describes the hotel where she works as “a link in a nondescript chain built to feel like any other link in a thousand other cities” (1). The uniformity of franchised hotels produces continuity for guests who need a sense of familiarity while travelling away from home. However, this familiarity is false. There is no need for “foreign guests” to form a relationship with the specific city they travel to; rather, the consistency of the chain hotel produces the illusion of familiarity (home) without necessitating actual connections (1). Further, the anonymous yet vaguely familiar hotel in Red Rooms is located in a metropolis referred to only as “this city” (2). Both the hotel and the city have no sense of definite location or markers of place, and yet a sense of familiarity allows readers to fill in the blanks from their own imagination and infer specificity where none is given. The location that Dimaline has produced for her novel is at once a nondescript blank slate and yet still remains somehow vaguely familiar and knowable.

At the boundary between known and unknown there is potential for ambiguity, which also makes room for assumptions.

Because the girl is left unnamed, she is open to interpretation; without a name, her identity is slippery. Further, her profession as a prostitute places her in a role that allows for intimate contact without intimate relationship. The girl recognizes that while she is engaged in the act of sex with the men who pay her for her services, she is expected to perform her duties as unobtrusively and anonymously as possible. Although it is not clear why the girl finds herself in the profession she does, Amnesty International's "Stolen Sisters" report cites systematic racism as a prevalent issue that results in Indigenous women working in the sex trade.¹⁵ The disproportionate number of Aboriginal women sex workers in Canada, according to Amnesty International, is attributed to "disruption and discord" in children's lives that include: "a history of physical or sexual abuse, a history of running away from families or foster homes, lack of strong ties to family and community, homelessness or transience, lack of opportunities, and poverty" (22).

Speaking about prostitutes who come in to Toronto's Native Women's Centre, Dimaline says, "the book is about them" ("Quilting" 38). No doubt she was thinking about these women when she wrote the story of the girl. Perhaps it is Dimaline's way of following the advice of Louise Halfe, who told her, "You need to realize that now it's your responsibility to speak on behalf of the women in our community who can't speak" (4).¹⁶ The girl represents an underprivileged Native woman whose profession keeps her on the margins of society. She understands that she is "a hole" to the men who use her (6); the metonym of the point of physical contact functions to highlight the lack of significant

¹⁵ Dimaline references this same report in our conversation ("Quilting" 22).

¹⁶ Similar issues of underprivileged persons who are denied speech are discussed in a different context by Guyatri Spivak in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

connection outside of a physical act. To her clients, the girl has “no name and no face” (6). Her anonymity functions in a few key ways. First, it allows the men to understand her according to their needs. With no face, she can be whoever they want her to be. Second, with no name, she also has no identity outside of her function as a receptacle for sexual gratification. This means that outside of a financial obligation, the clients have no responsibility to the girl. The ease of such a transaction is no doubt what draws the girl’s clients to use a prostitute in the first place: she is at once accessible and anonymous.

The girl not only straddles and crosses boundaries in her location and profession, but also in her lineage. The term “half-breed” is used derogatorily to describe the girl (6), which indicates a particular attitude about what her heritage represents. The term implies a sexual union between two “pure” breeds, resulting in something too “impure” to be associated with one breed or the other. Her lineage is one of transgression: two people crossing racial boundaries. The girl is therefore the embodiment of liminality – at once the fixed boundary between and evidence that the boundary is permeable. Existing at the line between, the girl cannot anchor one side of her identity without denying the other. To complicate things further, the girl knows she is a “half-breed,” but does not know the details of her lineage until much later in the story; the lack of specifics leave her feeling like she does not quite belong anywhere.

The girl’s low self-esteem likely comes from derogatory terms like “half-breed” or “squaw,” which were thrown at her by men “who would just as soon slap her than bother to put on the condom she always handed them” (6). Somehow she has absorbed a negative attitude about her heritage. As a counterpoint, Dimaline discusses inter-racial marriage and says, “that’s a very new conversation, because traditionally we always married outside of the

community. We always adopted people into the community” (“Quilting” 20). Evidently she does not adhere to the idea that boundaries between people should be impermeable nor should crossing those boundaries be construed negatively.

In light of the girl’s location, profession and lineage, I see her existing in a liminal space as she is introduced in the novel. This space is one that produces negative effects in the girl’s conception of herself. The girl finds this space leaves her feeling disengaged in a number of areas: disconnected from a sense of home, disconnected from a healthy web of relationships, and disconnected from history. The overwhelming effect of these various levels of detachment is the image of a girl decidedly cut off from herself. As the girl straddles and crosses multiple boundaries, she reveals a strong sense of homelessness, which is reinforced by images of transience. For example, the girl wears a white shirt, “made grey from a thousand washes in someone else’s machine” (5), and carries a zippo lighter “engraved with someone else’s initials” (5). Together, these images show the girl’s lifestyle is characterized by a lack of permanence. Her job means that she works in hotel rooms. Calling the rooms her “office” (9), the girl reveals that even in a place meant to be a home away from home, she is only working; once her job is complete, she will be “deposited back out onto the rainy corner” (6). She does not have a place of stability and permanence. Existing in hotels, streets corners and moments in between, the girl has no place where she really feels at home.

Of course the concept of home is much more than simply the place where one resides. It is a sense of belonging within a larger web of relationships. This concept of home comes first from its absence, rather than its presence, in Dimaline’s text. The girl is disconnected from a larger web of relationships that could potentially provide her with a sense of

belonging. Instead of integrating into a community, the girl decidedly operates outside of one. She lives in the “dark hours” of her profession (8), comfortable wandering the streets at night – a time when “straight folks” (8) are at home in their beds. In these “dark hours” she makes brief connections with others, those who exist in the periphery of general society: johns, drug addicts, the mentally ill, other prostitutes. The girl does not have significant relationships that could help her feel a part of a larger community.

The girl’s peripheral position to general society is reflective of her relationship to urban Native communities as well. She is afraid to form any sense of affiliation with her “unrelated cousins” (17) – other urban Native individuals – because she is concerned that she would not be understood or accepted. The girl especially fears that she would be expected to talk to an Elder: “How could she form the words and tales of her days and nights to such a respectable person who could never understand what she did or how she lived? What was there on the other side anyways?” (17). This last statement suggests that the girl conceives of her reality in terms of boundaries. She is on one “side,” outside of Native communities and uncertain about what her relationship to them could look like. On one hand she implies a fear of judgment about the life she lives, on the other hand she questions the relevance of Native culture to her experiences. Her fears show that community can be opportunities for constraint and misunderstandings. This keeps her from significant relationships with Native communities just as she remains peripheral to society as a whole.

In as much as the girl is alienated from community, she is detached from significant interpersonal relationships. That is not to say that the girl is free from the desire to have positive intimate relationships, as much as her defenses attempt to keep her from feeling that desire. Her longing is evident even though she continually tries to deny it. Although her job

demands that she keep herself disconnected from her clients as a means of self protection, she still admits: “she couldn’t help wanting to forge a connection in this insignificant room” (6). The connection she wants is not one of physical contact, or even romantic attachment. Rather, she considers sitting across from her current client, the two in matching chairs with a table between them, just like her aunties used to sit around the “plastic-topped table back home” (6). The description of the girl’s aunties, gathered at the table “as if smoking, laughing and sharing brown bottles of beer were a meal” (6-7), highlights the community and connection the girl sensed in the women’s time together. Comparing the women’s social activity to a meal, the girl suggests that the women were engaged in a common activity that provided sustenance of some kind. In the girl’s present circumstance, anonymous and removed from community, she seems to be craving this same sustenance, even though she knows the man she is with in the hotel is not interested in sitting at the table, “sharing smokes and stories” (8). A few paragraphs later, the girl notes that she “hadn’t eaten a real meal since...two days ago” (9). Although the reference here is to actual food, the girl is removed from a place of belonging where food is shared regularly. Following closely after the description of the aunties’ “meal” of laughter and chatter, the girl is decidedly hungry for something more than just a sandwich. She is looking for a place where her inner and outer realities can meet, in relationship with others. She is looking for nourishment.

The girl’s disconnection from relationships with community and individuals is reflected in her disconnection from her history, or cultural heritage. As previously noted, the girl is unaware of the details of her personal history. However, she is also removed from a larger sense of historical continuity by being disconnected from Native communities. The girl sees women at the Native friendship centre, “singing at the full moon or coming out to

offer tobacco at the base of the large tree” (18). As she watches the women make a tobacco offering, she secures her difference from them, “[offering] her tobacco to her greedy lungs and [shutting] out the drumbeats” (18). Drums are significant personalities in traditional Native cultural practices, and I have often heard them described as a heartbeat. In this scene, the girl is shutting out a part of her heritage that is deeply connected to ceremony, life, and relationship. As the girl ignores the drumbeat, she denies cultural practices and the communities they occur in, disallowing any positive impact they may have on her life.

The combination of the girl’s disconnection from history, healthy relational structures, and home produces a clear sense that she does not have a place to belong. Not only that, but the girl seems detached from her inner self. Contained within “the wall that has slowly built itself up inside the pit of her stomach” (14), the girl barricades her inner life away from her outer existence and does not allow the two to meet. This defense mechanism keeps her from relationship with others and herself. She does not know the girl she has become. The girl looks at herself in the mirror of the hotel room and is described as an assemblage of body parts. The detached and utilitarian description of her body gives the impression that the girl interacts with her physical self only as a functional mode of survival. Her skin, hair, cheekbones, eyes, lips and body are described independently, as if the girl is merely a conglomeration of parts rather than a complete and complex person (8-9).

The girl learned the separation of her inner and outer life from a young age, using her body as a source of power and manipulation, as well as a means of protection. She articulates the boundary of protection her sexuality provides her: “It was so easy to get attention from unsupported cleavage while playing volleyball at recess rather than by having to share conversation and thought. She preferred it this way. Her breast, her thighs, her

mouth, these were all things that existed on the outside, in their world, far away from her own” (15-6). Access to her physical body does not equate with access to her inner self. As a result, the girl becomes used to a reality where her inner and outer selves do not align. This disconnection sometimes shocks the girl, who prefers, it seems, to remain ignorant of the protective boundaries she has put in place. For example, as the girl is leaving the hotel, she is imagining herself flying away from the life she lives. She smiles at the thought and catches a glimpse of herself in the reflective surface of the elevator. In that moment, she “[doesn’t] recognize the girl” (14), does not recognize her own reflection. Her inner self is inconsistent with and detached from her reality.

The girl’s interactions with mirrors highlight the ways in which she is disconnected from herself. Dimaline also uses mirror-type figures in the story, which function as a means of comparison and contrast, further revealing the girl’s disconnection. For instance, the girl meets a young woman in a dream. Descriptions of the woman’s skin, eyes, hair, lips and body are reminiscent of the way the girl is described as she looks in the mirror in the hotel room. However, the parallel imagery is divergent in the approach. Whereas the girl is depicted in a detached manner, the woman seems centered and “at home.” For example, the girl is portrayed with skin that “hid the sickness that crept through her blood” (8). While it is unclear what the nature of her illness is, the description of the girl affirms the incongruency between inside and outside. In contrast, the woman is presented as “wrapped in deep layers of material the same colour as the veins that snaked up and down her pale arms” (11). Whereas the girl’s skin hides her inner illness, the woman’s skin is translucent and reveals an inner life that is congruent with her outer reality, evidenced by the consistent colour shared between the veins of the woman and the garments in which she is wrapped. As further

example, there is a moment where the girl re-braids her hair, which is described as “streaked with dye” (9). The manipulation of her physical appearance through dye indicates the girl is dissatisfied with her hair’s natural colour. In contrast, the woman has her dark hair “pulled back tightly into an intricate medicine wheel braid that took up every wave from her head and wove it into meaning” (11). The metaphor of the medicine wheel is potent; the significant and sacred symbol of the medicine wheel teaches a way of being in the world. It recognizes complex relationships, instructs on balanced living, honours process and encourages one to take responsibility for his or her actions and thoughts. The presence of the balanced and cyclical medicine wheel in her description suggests that the woman is deeply connected to traditional Native concepts and ways of being. The woman’s “meaning” gives her substance that is derived from a connection to the past, balance between inner and outer elements, and relationship with the world around her. The girl, however, seems disconnected, concerned only with her own survival in a world that she desperately tries to control.

The substance that the young woman exemplifies performs an important function for the girl, namely to highlight the girl’s lack of connections, balance, and relationships. There are a number of moments where the realities of other Native women become a mirror for the girl in which she sees the inadequacies of her own life. Further, these mirror moments work together to reconnect the girl in areas in which she has been disconnected. For instance, in the girl’s dream the young woman (as a mirror of the girl) and an older woman (who turns out to be the girl’s paternal grandmother) cover her with a cloak, described as follows: “its weight was the weight of all eternity, from time immemorial passed down through slow migrations across eons and down the strands of DNA that brought everything to this

moment” (12). The cloak’s genetic properties and connection to time suggest tradition and history cover the girl. These deep connections to traditional past, present, female relations and a larger circle of relationship is something that the girl has not recognized previously. She finds the blanket comforting, “like the weight of a welcomed lover who has come home after many nights alone” (12).

The last image is very powerful, given the status of the girl in her everyday life. As a prostitute, she functions as partner in illegitimate unions. The men she services are not “welcomed lovers,” but rather “[use] her without emotion” (6). Thus, the reassurance and power of intimacy and “home” function in sharp contrast to the girl’s reality. While the girl feels comfort during her dream, she wakes up in an alley, wakes up to the reality of her life, and “she wept for all she had thrown away before really knowing it had existed...she cried for two days” (12). Her grief comes from the chasm between where she is (disconnected and alone) and where she could be (connected and at home).

The girl’s return home, literally and metaphorically, is enacted in part by her vision trips to her birth community.¹⁷ Here she begins to connect, to find a context for her existence and a place where she belongs. Through her visions, the girl is given revelations that allow her to see the connection between herself and someone whom she has described as “that ‘ole witch” (7). As it turns out, the girl’s “half-breed” status results from her paternal grandmother’s union with a “transient...good for nothing white [man]” (22). The use of “transient” here defines the white man as someone who moves constantly. As a transitory or temporary person, he represents someone who cannot be contained, wandering beyond the boundaries of his society’s expectations for him. Similarly, the girl’s grandmother is in “the

¹⁷ I should interject that it is difficult for me to select a word for the experiences that the girl has in her home community. I chose the term “vision trip,” although I see these experiences as something just as real as if she had made an “actual” trip.

City” (a place configured in stark opposition to the reservation) when she conceives with the man, showing that she is viewed as transgressing the boundaries of her community as well. The product of this union is a son, who eventually lives in the City. The girl’s mother later leaves the reservation and conceives with this son, resulting in the girl. This complex series of perceived transgressions is the genealogy that the girl emerges from, meaning that not only could she generally represent transgression of boundary in her Métis heritage, but also in her specific lineage. Hitherto, she has not known her father’s identity, calling him “a ghost to her” (21). Further, she was unaware of her mother’s own troubled history with “the goddamn city” (21). The girl existed without context, never having made the connection to her parents and their personal histories. Once she understands her parents’ perceived transgression, she finally has a context for her own place in history. In a moment of recognition, the girl sees her child-self appear in a vision of the past, evidencing the emergence of her presence in history.

Perhaps it is the “ghosts” in her family tree that leave the girl feeling like a ghost herself, existing on the periphery of society, detached from substantial relationships. The girl seems to be a ghost-type figure when she visits her Grandmother’s house in her vision. Her invisibility is shown in the way her mother, who is at her Grandmother’s house, walks right through the girl. Also, it appears that “the old woman [does] not see her” (29). The girl’s invisibility reflects the way she has felt, the way she needed to be to survive – unseen. She is with her mother and Grandmother in the vision and yet exists as a spirit, which infers that she is not at home with them, not in relationship with them, peripheral to their existence.

The Grandmother, however, seems to be aware that the girl is there and that she needs to find her way home. The diction change at this point in the story is very significant. The

girl (who has been referred to in unspecific terms for the entire story, nameless and anonymous) now becomes ““your girl”” (29). As the Grandmother and Mother talk, the Grandmother begins to call the girl “your girl”; the use of the possessive here reflects the fact that the girl belongs to a family and has a place. Repeating the phrase “your girl” several times, the Grandmother’s words reinforce the impression that the girl is no longer just a nameless, faceless “hole,” but rather has a family and a life somewhere outside of the anonymous city. The Grandmother solidifies this impression by looking directly at the girl and saying, “she needs to come home” (31). This utterance of “home” has a profound effect on the girl, who has previously been displaced. Although the girl thought she was invisible, the fact that the Grandmother looks at the girl as she says this highlights again the potential for the girl to move from her transient and invisible lifestyle to a consistent and visible home.

Thus the girl’s visions allow her moments of connection with a larger community and history. These connections suggest a significant impact on the girl’s identity. Previously, she described her body as a “place from which she had removed her [sacred] items” to protect her from the men who “pushed their way into her” (32). Her sense of self had been fractured by her lifestyle. She conceptualized her body as a liminal space, which allowed men physical access but denied them her inner thoughts, clearly delineating sex from intimacy. However, her out-of-body visions remove her from the boundary of her physical self and inversely reconnect her body with her soul. The disconnection between inner self and outer reality begins to heal.

The defense against relationship that the girl has secured with her physical body crumbles; she feels a longing for home that she has not felt before. However, although the visions have a deep impact on the girl, when she emerges back into her reality she doubts

what she has experienced. The girl tries to deny the connections that have begun to form, returning to the hotel to service the client she left behind, hoping to reassert the boundaries within her body again. Imagining herself coming through the door, she says, ““Honey, I’m home”” (33). This perversion of the conventional greeting between spouses reminds her of her illegitimate position. Again, she sees the schism between where she actually belongs and the counterfeit version, now less palatable: “She felt like she hadn’t come home at all” (33).

The character of the man is the embodiment of all the men who had intimate contact with the girl without recognizing her as a person. The significance of his death is difficult to ignore. The girl returns to the hotel and finds the man has died of an unknown, presumably natural, cause. As a link to the girl’s lived experience and an assurance that her visions hold no merit, his death means that she does have a place, that she does exist as a person, that she needs to go home, just as her Grandmother said. His death substitutes for her own, acting as the scapegoat upon which all her false connections and defense mechanisms are thrown. Rather than dying of the life she had been leading, “she [is] released” into a new life (35). The girl is now free to return “home” in both physical terms (to her birth place, mother and grandmother) and in figurative terms (to find a place of belonging and community). While the reader does not see the actuality of her new identity, it is implied that the girl is returning home to the reserve, “running towards it as fast as she could” (36), to see her Grandmother and mother.

The end of the story is hopeful because the girl begins to see herself in context, and is ready to make deeper connections. At the beginning of the story, the girl feels fear, hunger, discomfort, and confusion. Much of her time is spent trying to deny these negative feelings

with the transient comfort of drugs, alcohol and any power she can gain from using her sexuality. So what is the nature of her move from disconnection to connection?

Living in liminal states, the girl straddles boundaries, but further than that, her story illustrates how the systems supporting the boundaries are the problem. For example, as a prostitute the girl is at once anonymous and accessible. Her position is ambiguous because she exists somewhere in between two poles. Therefore, her clients can treat her as a “hole” in which they deposit their own sense of who she is. She can be “understood” without any level of intimacy, devoid of her context, and yet “understood” becomes ironic in a relationship based on non-specifics and ambiguity. In this type of relationship, the girl’s humanity is severely compromised. In my conversation with Cherie Dimaline, she told a story about her daughter’s grandmother, who corrected Cherie when she referred to her daughter as “mixed [race]” (“Quilting” 17). The grandmother said, “Mixed?! She is not mixed. She is not a cake! ...she is she” (17-18). In a humorous way, the grandmother points out how dichotomous thinking dehumanizes.

Dimaline discussed moments with me in which she began to move away from identifying herself in a system of this, that, or something in between. When she identified herself as “half white...half Native,” she felt a conflict between the two halves of her identity (“Quilting” 16). A friend of hers highlighted the ridiculousness of distinguishing halves: ““You can’t live with one foot on the dock and one foot in the canoe because you’re going to fall!”” (16-17). The friend’s advice highlights the problem with systems that ask you to identify with one pole, the other, or something in between: you will fall. Instead, Cherie distills her friend’s advice: “Don’t live half and half, but just be you and relax” (17). So, while the boundaries of dichotomous thinking may provide opportunity for self-protection

and subversive resistance in harmful relationships, Dimaline does provide a critique of this mode of “understanding.”

In as much as dichotomous thinking is critiqued, a different mode of “understanding” is offered. This mode does not involve a simple “neither this nor that” model, but rather recognizes interconnectedness in a complex web of relationships. While the polar points of dichotomous thinking may still be a part of the structure, they are not the entire structure. A more holistic web of connections appears. For example, Dimaline told me the way Lee Maracle defines Dimaline’s identity as a Native woman to her: “‘You’re a Native woman. You’ve always been Native. You were raised by your mother and your Grandmother in your community. You spoke your language when you were little’” (“Quilting” 4). In a later discussion, Dimaline explains how she comes to be identified as a Native in the United States: “The people I know, then that’s cool [they recognize I’m Native]. They know my family, they know my grandmothers, they are fine with it” (8). The connections that Dimaline has to her family, her language, her heritage, is what gives substance to her identification as a Native woman. Dimaline is who she is in a web of connections, one aspect of which is Nativeness as evidenced by her relationships to her mother’s family.

Relationships and connections therefore become a means of expressing context for a person. Without knowing a person’s context, the possibility for understanding is limited at best. In the story of the girl, models of relationships devoid of context are portrayed, and these models infer a sickness in the relational structure. For example, the girl and her client are in a relationship in which neither individual is aware of the other’s context. The man may inscribe his own sense of who the girl is, and the girl, in fact, does the same. Both individuals are reduced and symbolic versions of themselves, lacking specific identity. The

relationship does not allow for any sort of substantial understanding, but rather isolates, and thus limits, the identity of the two individuals from their contexts. From the perspective of the girl, this type of relationship is not only limited, but harmful.

Dimaline acknowledges the relational web that supports her. Various aligning with and diverging from others during our conversation, she negotiates and determines her own identity. This negotiation gives me a way to understand the means by which Dimaline and I enter into dialogue and describe the boundaries of our relationship. As a cross-cultural experience, our conversation exposes borders that could otherwise remain unseen. As Sarris writes, “more often than not it is something strange and unfamiliar that can make us aware of our boundaries” (131). Not only does a boundary show us the beginning of the unknown, it also shows us the limits of ourselves. Dimaline explains the encounter with difference and newness as “exposing more skin” (“Quilting” 27). I appreciate this metaphor of skin as a boundary between the inner parts of us and the outside world. By exposing more of the boundary, we are made vulnerable, yes, but also we show more of who we are and how our core is delineated from our surroundings.

Skin is also a permeable boundary, meaning select compounds can be taken in and incorporated into the body. Dimaline highlights this point in a discussion of mainstream feminism, saying that rather than be afraid, Natives should engage with the ideas and strategies of feminisms and “take those best practices” (27), selectively absorbing what is beneficial. The implication of the metaphor of skin as boundary in cross-cultural contexts means that selectivity allows for new influences in a culture while still maintaining the integrity of the core set of practices and beliefs. Therefore, there is a sense of “absorption,” without the negative connotation of “pollution.”

The encounter with boundaries then provides an opportunity for further dialogue as we draw in and interrogate the moments where permeability occurs and where it does not. Dialogue helps determine what we share and what we do not, and offers us opportunities to “[honour] cultural differences [and celebrate] cultural similarities” (Acoose “Honoring” 219). My own attempt to determine the position and nature of boundaries between Dimaline and me became quickly apparent in conversation. I attempted to enunciate her boundaries for her, in general terms saying “you’re different from this,” to which she would answer “I’m different from that.”

For example, as a way of differentiating Cherie Dimaline’s writing from earlier writings by First Nations women in the 70’s and 80’s, I stated: “Maria Campbell’s [writing] seems quite different from yours in that yours represents several stories and hers represents one that’s more personal” (“Quilting” 4). My attempt to understand Dimaline’s writing as a contrast to Maria Campbell’s (Métis) is met with Dimaline beginning to talk about her characters as emerging from her community and family. After a few sentences she says, “every story is very personal to me” (5), indirectly challenging how I define “personal” in my comparison. Dimaline goes on to re-position herself for me in relationship with Maria Campbell. She talked about a writers’ retreat they attended together. Maria reminded her of her Grandmother, a significant person in Dimaline’s web of relationships. After her story about the writer’s retreat, Dimaline explicates for me her view on my comment: “Maria Campbell and I are very similar in our stories in that it comes from the same place. It comes from your own truth” (6). While the subjectivity of Dimaline and Campbell’s writing may be different, context is what is crucial, what unites them. Again, Dimaline comments on the

personal nature of her stories, renegotiating my definition of both her work, and her relationship to Maria Campbell.

Dimaline's gentle correction of my attempt to enunciate her difference is then followed by her own experience with difference, traveling in Australia. She found an ignorance of First Nations culture and history there that surprised her, saying, "They didn't know what was going on" (7). Then, aligning herself along national lines with me, Dimaline says, "In Canada people understand about First Nations people and our culture. Maybe not, you know..." (7). On one hand, I read this as a kind gesture on Dimaline's part to offer ways that we may understand each other (as Canadians). On the other hand, I have limited understanding. I cannot know if her "maybe not" is added as a direct result of our immediately previous exchange, but I can see that when I qualify Dimaline's words with "to a certain extent," she adds an emphatic, "Exactly!" (7). Her emphasis implies that understanding is only ever partial. Thus, through our conversation, we renegotiate both her position and mine in relationship to one another as we encounter a boundary between us. We make connections that permeate the boundary, which shows the boundary to be unfixed, or even artificial, in the first place.

Connections can unfix boundaries. Conversely, when you make assumptions or deny connections, boundaries and limitations are imposed. For example, when I tried to ask Dimaline questions regarding First Nations women's identity, her talk becomes staggered and she seems lost for words.¹⁸ Her silences in these moments are very telling. I am asking her to explicate identity, a slippery and transient term at best, which is contingent on relationships. Therefore, to ask Dimaline to disconnect from her relationships and explain

¹⁸ This disjointed section was edited from the interview transcript and is replaced simply by a long pause ("Quilting" 11).

herself as an individual identity was a misstep on my part. After her initial silence or disjointed speech, Dimaline begins a story connecting her to her Grandmother and her current community respectively, highlighting for me that her identity is in itself dialogic. If, for example, I relate to Dimaline strictly as a woman, and understand her according to my definition of that category, I limit my understanding of how that category dialogues with other aspects of her identity: Native, mother, writer, social activist. There are many strands forming her contextual web. Conversation allows me to see connections and contexts I may otherwise make assumptions about, keeping me in process towards understanding.

Continually opening up dialogue, then, can improve relationships and “explore what is perplexing” (Sarris 28). It does not, however, lead to universality or relativism. Dimaline talks about the writing of her second novel and her attempts to “be inclusive” (“Quilting” 6). Frustrated with the process, she went to Lee Maracle, who explained to Dimaline the problem: “[the writing is] not you” (12). In an attempt to be “inclusive,” Dimaline neglected to position herself and recognize the relational structure that supports her language, namely her Grandmother. Once her writing was specifically located, the process came easily. Her specific position is the point where her utterances emerge, along with her intended meaning. However, when a reader/listener encounters the utterance, meaning is (re)negotiated. Due to the indeterminacy of language, individual experience changes the meaning of language. Therefore, Dimaline can write her novel from a particular perspective, but a reader who does not share that perspective can still get meaning from it. Dimaline told me a story about meeting a white woman whose book club was discussing Red Rooms. After having a “big conversation” with the woman, Dimaline adds, “I walked out of there and I felt really good...it gave me hope that people will have a better understanding of what reality is in this

community and will be more receptive to my own children” (38). Through this narrative, I see that story and dialogue can have positive social effects; boundaries can be crossed, renegotiated, and displaced in conversation.

So I learn from Dimaline that the negotiation of perceived boundaries comes through making connections from specific yet unfixed positions. This involves being vulnerable, listening carefully, and allowing your own boundaries to be permeable. It also requires someone else. We cannot see connections in a larger context if we never encounter differences. Like the girl, I need those “mirror moments” in order to make connections. That said, if I focus on only one point of connection, then there is opportunity for limitations. Rather, I should look to the larger context of Dimaline and her talk, as well as my own context, and the way that these contribute to our dialogue and understanding. Without understanding the context of a person, you cannot begin to understand the person. Without knowing the person, you de-contextualize his/her words. By removing words from their context, you limit understanding and the meaning-making process. However, I only see a portion of the connections I have with Dimaline and her talk. Further, as my relationship with her is negotiated, my relationship with myself is being reconstituted. Sometimes aspects of larger relational structures are illuminated in our conversation and I learn more about myself. As I encounter meaning that converges or diverges from my own, the thread of my own relational web changes in constitution. Understanding is an on-going, active process.

Chapter Three

“A Cloud Cut by Fencing”

Recognizing Power Dynamics Through the Story of Constance

In the previous chapter I illustrate how context is important. We understand ourselves and others based on a complex web of connections that cannot be reduced to dichotomous positions. The story from room #207 of Constance extends the story of the girl. Identity is contextual, yes, but what happens if the context in which identity forms is rotten? What if relationship forms in absence of respect? In this chapter I will show how the story of Constance reflects on unequal power relationships negatively, characterizing them as relationships that lack respect.

Constance is a Native curatorial expert who is engaged in an illicit affair with a married man, a Native lawyer. The two meet at the hotel on a regular basis, although the hotel chambermaid, Naomi, only seems to notice the comings and goings of the man. Describing Constance's lover, Naomi claims that he is incredibly neat and never leaves the room a mess. Only once, Naomi claims, “did he leave behind something that belonged to him” (90); she discovers Constance asleep in his room after the man had left. Describing Constance as her lover's possession, Naomi recognizes that Constance's identity is intimately tied up in her relationship. The link between Constance and her lover is tenuous, and so the identity Constance has formed around him is also tenuous. As a result, Constance seems “fragile and so tiny” to Naomi, like “one of those porcelain dolls” (91). Comparing her to a china doll, Naomi highlights that Constance is a plaything for her lover, used for a time and then left to sit. Further, a child's doll is ascribed identity according to the wishes of the child

playing with it. Not only that, but when a child does not want to play, the doll is virtually non-existent.

The theme of erasure runs through the story of room #207. Much like “the girl,” Constance is a woman on the verge of invisibility. Concerning her visits with her lover, Constance writes, “*each time we are together I am smaller and smaller. I am so afraid of becoming invisible*” (93). Even as she writes the words, Constance’s handwriting becomes smaller and smaller, reflecting her fear of disappearing in the confines of the relationship. Afraid of invisibility, Constance is also aware that she is erasing herself. By allowing herself to fall into the boundaries of the relationship as he dictates it, she is choosing to be no more than what he makes her. Constance knows that she could walk away, and in turn recognizes that “she was her own captor, the capture not really having anything to do with him” (97). By building her days around the arrival of her lover, Constance denies her own life. Pushing away other relationships, losing interest in her work, and functioning at the level of mere survival until he calls, Constance has become “an attachment to somebody else’s life” (98). Her identity is now deeply connected only to his need of her, and little else.

Constance’s erasure is directly related to the way she has tied her identity to her lover. If she exists only for him, and he only wants her at certain times, or in certain ways, then her existence is contingent on him. Rather than existing in a web of relationships based on respect and reciprocity, Constance lives in a relationship confined to her and her lover. By isolating herself from others, Constance only exists when her lover is around. Since the nature of an affair is one of secrecy and illegitimacy, she is neither free to talk about her relationship with others, nor to give herself completely over to it, recognizing that he is not giving himself to her as she does to him. Therefore, Constance is not only confined to the

times she is with her lover, but her identity is further contained by the nature of her relationship to him. Based on lust and self-indulgence, the affair does not allow Constance to have a multi-faceted identity, but rather she finds “power and importance” only in the moments where her expressions of sexuality are directed towards him (95). Because he appreciates this sexual aspect of her person, she is limited to this expression when they are together.

Constance sees her relationship to her lover in terms of a role that she plays. The performance of the relationship is much like the prostitute’s role. Ironically, Constance denies the very intimacy she desires. By playing a part, she acknowledges that the performance is more important than its substance. At the end of the relationship, Constance acknowledges that “she had lived for this man. The days that she spent away from him she only imagined as filler in between the main scenes of the movie that her life had become” (106). Forming her life as an image to please him, she lives “in very photogenic and gothic ways that he could study or [choose] to fast-forward through from the comfort of his own couch” (106). When Constance chooses the roles she plays for her lover, she no doubt selects from a host of images she has been exposed to through media and pop-culture. The performance of her life is formed around the presence of a viewer, her lover, and exists only for his pleasure. With a viewer come expectations, and Constance strives to fill the expectations of her lover, whether he communicates these expectations to her directly or not. With this type of relationship, it is difficult for Constance to feel that her inner self is an actual participant, but rather her body and performative character become the front at which relationship occurs.

While Constance claims she is in love with her lover, she hears in his words that “she was insignificant and far away from his thoughts” (94). The discrepancy between their emotional commitments to each other further divides Constance from herself. Her love is not reciprocated. She pretends to be involved only to the extent that he is, performing detachment and trying “to seem aloof as she ran fingers across him” (94). The sense of captivity Constance feels in her relationship is self imposed and related to her performance of her role. Because her lover appreciates Constance for her physical beauty and sexuality, Constance invests in these aspects of herself, neglecting others. For example, she describes the bathroom in her house as a “cell” (97), recognizing the constraint she puts herself under by way of focusing on her physical self: “As she brushed her teeth with tartar control toothpaste and applied cream to her face she was actually sticking a knee directly in the center of her own back and pulling tight the strings of a corset that would hold her in and make it difficult to breath” (97). The reference to the corset in the previous passage brings to mind the tight lacing of the Victorian undergarment. Critique of this practice and the exaggerated and sculpted female form that resulted recognizes the corset as a means of shaping female beauty according to a particular standard, a practice that initiates control and manipulation primarily for male pleasure. In much the same way, Constance feels constrained by her relationship and the means by which she enters it – merely as a physical plaything. As a result, Constance feels as if she is “nothing corralled by rules and boundaries” (92).

Not only does Constance find it difficult to identify herself apart from her lover, she also uses his wife as a way of defining her own identity. Positioning herself as the illegitimate “other” woman, Constance figures the wife as a legitimate (self) figure. This is

exemplified by the repeated comparisons Constance makes between the two of them – Constance as the illegitimate, barren mistress, the wife as her lover’s legitimate, pregnant partner. The wife is not someone Constance has met. She only knows what she looks like based on a “creased photograph” her lover keeps in his wallet (94). The photograph becomes a metaphor for the permanence the wife represents, as opposed to the erasure to which Constance feels subjected. The wife’s permanence is solidified by her pregnancy, extending her presence from a mere photograph to an apparition that arrives with the news of the baby. This apparition of the wife looks at Constance’s lover “with such adoration that Constance felt her own admiration for his beauty and power was constructed of cheap tin” (99).

In as much as Constance figures her value to her lover in terms of her physical being, she finds herself lacking when compared to the wife. A description of the wife’s hair, “curled gently like Constance’s would never do” (99), reveals Constance’s feelings of inadequacy. The following passage further highlights the insignificance Constance feels in comparison with her lover’s wife: “the curve of the wife’s breasts [was] larger than her own, but in a more ample, matronly way. Her hips were narrower too, and her feet were small and tapered like a ballerina or a geisha” (99). The images unify to reflect Constance’s insecurity, primarily in regards to her identity, which is so closely entangled with her relationship and its dependence on her physical self.

Beyond the physical contrast between Constance and her lover’s wife, the pregnancy becomes a significant point of comparison. As much as Constance appears to be a sexually liberated and self-sufficient woman, she is disturbed by the wife’s pregnancy and the permanence she believes it represents. Further, the pregnancy draws out characteristics in her lover that anger Constance. As he announces the pregnancy, Constance sees him as a

“braying jackass in his 1950s domestic glory” (101). Configuring her lover as a braggart, Constance reveals her insecurity. She feels diminished in the face of his revelation. Further, reference to the 1950s, a decade characterized by strict representations of gender roles, suggests that Constance views his happiness about his wife’s condition as contingent on the solidification of the ideal represented by the 1950’s family structure. Within this nuclear family, Constance has no place. If a woman from the 1950s was a stay-at-home wife and mother, then Constance remains peripheral, for she is neither wife nor mother. Constance feels herself outside a stereotypical gender ideal, and that contributes to her sense of inadequacy. While the ideals Constance is haunted by may seem antiquated, they are no less pervasive for her. She seems to be trying to negotiate ideals of the past with her present reality, in as much as both are heavily influenced by media representations.

The relationship Constance has with her lover is complicated by gender, but also by race. Her initial introduction to her lover was by business associates who were sure “they had important Native issues to discuss” (96). In as much as “Native issues” brought the two of them together, their connection is solidified by lust and secrecy rather than shared experiences or perspectives. Constance reminds the reader throughout the chapter that while she and her lover may both be of Native descent, Constance feels she remains decidedly peripheral to his life. Their shared heritage does not allow her access to the central circle of his life. Not only that, but he is somehow building legitimacy by virtue of his marriage to a white woman: “This was him building a family with his wife. His docile, stay at home, complacent, white wife” (101). By describing the wife as “docile, stay at home, complacent,” Constance is again alluding to the 1950’s ideal of the domestic woman. And yet this time the description is appended by the phrase “white wife.” The wife is weighted

with value by means of her idealized position, her pregnant condition and her physical body, including her “whiteness.” Perhaps the lover is looking for his own sense of legitimization by way of marrying a white woman. Dimaline mentions in our conversation that there is an idea in Native communities that “when a man becomes successful the first thing he does is goes and gets a white wife, as a trophy or a symbol of what he can’t have and now he can have” (“Quilting” 31). Constance’s lover seems caught in this mode of identification.

Constance’s erasure, peripheral existence, and limited identity threaten her sense of self. By allowing herself to be an object, Constance denies her own subjectivity. Dimaline does not leave Constance in this tenuous position. The wife’s pregnancy is a catalyst for Constance’s self-determination in the latter part of the story. A voice emerges from a spot in Constance’s head, “a spot that was covered in cobwebs and shadowy memories of herself” (102). This voice, evidently shut up and ignored since the affair began, re-emerges into Constance’s consciousness as a “weaker but louder” version of the voice that tells her she is in love (102). The newly emerged voice is comforting to Constance, but brings her distress at the same time because it is asking her to leave the confines her relationship has put on her; it is asking her to self define rather than accept the definitions her lover offers her. Constance wrestles with this new voice until she has a moment of self realization when she sees her reflection in the hotel window.

As Constance notices her reflection, she also realizes that “she [hates] this version of herself” (104): “bent over, clutching at her throat, arm wrapped protectively around her hollow torso, her empty womb” (104). She views her weakness and lack of substance. She now perceives how she has taken on the role of victim, a role she hates. The person she has become in her relationship with her lover is no longer the person Constance wants to be. In

this moment, her lover comes up to stand behind her, “his glass image [melting] into her own” (104). As Constance recognizes the reality of who she has become in her relationship – someone invisible and with an identity entirely contingent on the value her lover placed on her – her moment of self-recognition also becomes a moment in which her lover is removed from his primacy in constituting her identity. Whereas Constance’s identity was once fading into him and she felt herself being erased, he is now melting into her; “He [is] invisible” (104). Now, no longer defining herself according to his needs and wants, Constance becomes the primary identity in the relationship from her viewpoint. This momentous shift not only diminishes her lover, but re-creates Constance’s identity so significantly, that she is like a new person. In effect, a new Constance is re-born in that hotel room, as exemplified by the labour-like pains she endures.

As her new life emerges, his life fades. While once Constance submitted herself to an identity found solely in her lover, she now sees that his identity was just as contingent on the relationship they shared. And now, as she gains new life, he is “dying” from that new life, “fading away” in the presence of her new identity outside of their relationship (106). In many ways, his identity was determined by her erasure; he needed her insignificance to account for his own significance. Because his own life was so constructed and performed, so void of substance, he needed Constance as a way of asserting his independence and autonomy: “She was the one person that kept him from suffocating under his beautifully tailored life” (110). If Constance existed solely for his pleasure and needs, then he had someone in his life that depended on him for existence, rather than him depending solely on his wife and life at home.

When Constance eventually asserts her independence and identity outside of their relationship, her lover is reduced to his “Pinocchio truth” (109): his life has been constructed, in part by his wife, “his Geppetto” (109). By alluding to the story of Pinocchio, Dimaline draws out the idea that the man exists as a puppet, a performer in a larger production, a doll rather than a “real” boy. Just as Pinocchio cannot hide his lying, the lover lives a lie dictated by his need to be seen as “real” rather than just a puppet. As “Geppetto,” his wife has carved out what she needs him to be. Dimaline describes the wife as “the woman who braided his hair for him each morning...like a second spine so that he resembled a man turned inside out. But it wasn’t a secondary support. It was in fact the only one, an outward display of her starring role in the puppetry of his movements” (109). By braiding her husband’s hair, the wife gives him what could be seen as a marker of Native identity. However, this marker is merely an outward performance of an identity the wife somehow wants the man to display, rather than evidence of the “real” man. He does not exist outside of his wife’s needs. Constance is then a means for him to self define according to his needs with someone who will change for him. He replicates the way his wife relates to him in his treatment of Constance. This bizarre cycle of contingent relationships is broken when Constance realizes that she is merely a performer and she would like to be autonomous. When Constance recognizes that her lover is actually someone else’s plaything, much like she is his, she understands that she “couldn’t see herself playing with dolls for the rest of her life, especially if she would have to play nice and return this one to its poly-wrapped package at the end of the day” (109). Leaving him to the performance of his own life without her supporting role, Constance defies the definition of her life as subservient to his. She defies Naomi’s

definition of her as a doll. As Constance chooses to define her own life, rejecting her own role as a doll, her lover loses his life and is reaffirmed as a doll.

Once her lover has left, Constance remains in the hotel room and experiences labour-like pains. She is, in essence, giving birth to herself: a renewed version of Constance that is self-dictated rather than contingent on a co-dependent relationship with her lover. Significantly, part of her birthing process involves reflecting on earlier moments in her life when she constructs her identity according to a relationship with a man. Finding herself attracted to her French teacher as an early adolescent, Constance began “making herself into the kind of girl that needed John” (115). While the word “making” here indicates a certain amount of agency in Constance’s identity development, that development is also contingent on a relationship of power. Thus, her agency is somewhat nullified in that it is not enacted in the midst of a healthy, reciprocal relationship, but rather is constrained by the power dynamics of gender and race. For example, Constance finds that “her fumbling [made John DeVilles] pay attention” (114). Her weakness made him feel a power that created her as desirable in his eyes. This point is solidified when his desire for her falters – in a moment of her strength. When Constance shows her own interest and desire, John no longer feels the power of a pursuer. Constance recognizes that her autonomy caused his disinterest: “She had stopped being the needy. She had taken her own steps towards him, like a separate and capable mind” (118). As an older male, John feels power and a sense of desire when his younger, female student shows weakness. However, when she acts as an autonomous woman, the desire quickly fades. In this moment, Constance recognizes that in order to get the man she wants, and consequently the life she imagines, she must limit her identity in favour of behaviour that suits the man’s needs.

The power dynamics of race are intimately tied to gender. There is indication that Constance feels she is in a peripheral position when she is younger, because she is Native. Bused in from the reserve, a small community on the periphery of the city where she goes to school, Constance spends the bus ride visualizing her future. She imagines living in the city, and a “future based on boys” (113). Thus, Constance sees that her way out of the periphery is intimately tied to men, and not men from her own community necessarily, but “pretty boys” (113) and men like John who wear glasses that are “not from the welfare wall...not like her own” (113). Constance’s reflection on her youth positions her as peripheral in both space and economic status, a position that is contingent on her Indian status and residence on a reserve. She perceives her peripheral position relative to the central position someone like John occupies. John lives in an “inherited two-storey Victorian in the good part of town” (114), a residence that infers generational stability, economic prosperity and social status. Constance sees John’s central and privileged position as desirable, something she could have access to as John’s wife. Imagining herself as married to him, she daydreams of life in the “good part of town” (115) and bringing John “home-cooked meals in matching Tupperware containers” (116). Through her imagination, the concepts of domestic propriety and legitimacy come into the story once again. Constance has determined that the answer to her peripheral position, one she feels is problematic, will come with a man and marriage. However, she finds that Mr. DeVilles’ desire for her does not move beyond physical attraction. Further, his desire for her is contingent on her denying her own autonomy and remaining weak. Constance reflects on these formative moments with a sense of loss, as if outside of a power relationship dictated by gender and race she had lost a means of being desirable and central.

Since it seems that the legitimate or central position that Constance has been seeking is tenuous when based on contingencies, it is no surprise that she feels herself under threat of erasure. If identity is based on relationships of power and performance then Constance's portrayed outer life is never an adequate reflection of her inner reality. She feels that her constructed self is causing her to become merely a lifeless doll, void of substance and existing only for the pleasure of another. However, when she finally sees herself and recognizes her loss, she begins to give birth to a new self. Just before her "birth," she shrinks down into a fetal position, "curled up into herself" (119); this moment highlights her dependence, fragility and smallness. The "birth" of a new Constance follows: "She had an undeniable urge to stretch out as far and wide as she can. Her feet push the folded extra blanket at the bottom of the bed...her hands grab onto the posts" (119). The image of Constance stretched wide over the whole bed produces a sense that she is now taking up space. Rather than being a woman confined and invisible, "a cloud cut by fencing" (92), Constance is now solid – a woman decidedly taking up space, free of the confines that limited her.

Constance's womb had previously been described as hollow, inferring that her experience of relationship was barren. At her birth, however, Constance's womb erupts with laughter, and "she laughs until she is herself again" (120). In as much as she has contained her emotions and spontaneous manifestations of them, her birth releases her emotions and suggests that her joy will now come from within her – as a woman – no longer dependent on a man to conceive (of) life. Further, a voice that had been with her since youth, a voice that denied existence in order for Constance to survive the dehumanizing experience of becoming something solely for someone else's pleasure, re-emerges with Constance's birth. In her

younger years the voice whispers, "*I'm not here. This isn't happening*" (118) at the moment when John DeVilles initiates sexually-charged physical contact with her to satisfy his own need for power. The phrasing reminds me of the disassociation that victims of sexual harassment and abuse sometimes experience. Constance is submitted to the former by John DeVilles, and perhaps the phrase is re-emerging from an even more sinister place in her past that the novel does not directly visit. Maureen McEvoy and Judith Daniluk have suggested that as many as 75-80% of girls in some Aboriginal communities have experienced sexual abuse (222). Given this shocking statistic, it is possible that Constance has experienced sexual abuse as a child. Regardless, because DeVilles pursues her at this point not due to her value and desirability as an autonomous woman, but rather to satiate his own insecurity, this voice denies existence and marks a key moment when Constance, the Constance that is born later, disappears. This voice re-emerges in the hotel room and reminds her that she is playing a role for her lover, that he is not capable of loving her into existence. The voice echoes the same phrase, "*I am not here. This isn't happening*" (119), when the birth begins. At this point it is as if Constance, the performance of Constance, is muttering the phrase as she recedes, wanting to deny that her life was so void of substance. In the end, Constance leaves the hotel room where she and her lover "conceived of nothing but longing and deceit" (112) with the same refrain, "*I am not here. This isn't happening*" (120). In this case the refrain is a final good-bye to the performance of Constance that occurred in that hotel room so many times. In the end, the "I am" in the refrain is imbued with a solidness, a sense of self-sufficiency and joy.

Power dynamics related to gender and race can infect relationships. Also, the sickness of power dynamics does not strictly infect one individual but relationships between

people. Reflecting on this story, I become more aware of how I approach my relationship to Dimaline and her talk. How do I see Dimaline, and how do I position myself? I must be aware that if I position myself based on a structure of power, whether it be in the “weaker” or “stronger” position, then this positioning limits Dimaline’s and my ability to relate. Further than that, it compromises our identity, for we replicate the unequal power that Constance and her lover enact.

The sickness in Constance’s relationship with her lover arises from the absence of reciprocity and respect. He wants access to her, wants her to shape her life according to his needs, and feels no sense of responsibility to give back to her, nor shows any respect for her. The lover takes the fullness of Constance’s identity from her because, in needing him, she allows it. However, the co-dependent nature of the identification process weakens the power structure in that he cannot give up his privilege without compromising his identity. If I accept privilege, then I support a system that limits not only the identity of the women I converse with, but my own as well. Rather than positioning myself in a fixed, simple structure of us/them, red/white, female/male, powerless/powerful, I find a nuanced structure based on reciprocity and respect much more meaningful.

By valuing reciprocity and respect, we negotiate power dynamics. I think that one of the anxieties some Native authors show is that by engaging with non-Natives they will be silenced or compromised. This is a very real threat. Dimaline talks about the fear some Native people feel – that culture is being lost or erased. She implicitly articulates that the fear originates in the “evolution” of culture (“Quilting” 20); people see that things are changing and shifting and they try to hold on to culture tightly. Dimaline says, “the reality is that Statistics Canada just came out that there’s over a million people in Canada who have

identified being Native. You know, I don't think we're going anywhere" (20). Her hopeful attitude proceeds from a perspective that does not invite the fear of erasure and the incapacity that brings.

Alluding to the history of residential schools, Dimaline mentions that many suffered trauma that left them holding tight to their culture: "I think there is a whole generation that is still in the fetal position, curled around this small notion of what's theirs, of what they can hold on to, of what they can carry with them. But really, the trick is to stand up, to get out of that position, to join together" ("Quilting" 20-21). The fetal position Dimaline discusses here is correlated with Constance's "birth" and the moment she gets up from the bed and leaves the hotel room. The story of Constance and Dimaline's suggestion are hopeful because she sees how those who have experienced trauma can "stand up." Since the residential school system in Canada was such a harmful system of power and control, a system that denied full expressions of identity for Native children, a system in which many did not survive, I can understand the concern with trying to save Native cultures.¹⁹ I am appreciative of people like Dimaline, who are willing to take the time to converse with me, who help me learn a way of relating that does not bring any of us harm, who have the ability to hope and heal from a colonial history.

Dimaline notes that some people have a "small notion of what's theirs" ("Quilting" 20-21). I relate this to Constance and her story. Because of her own near-erasure, Constance limits her identity. She has a "small notion" of who she is. According to this notion, she performs her identity within the confines that she allows to be placed on her, confines she

¹⁹ When I use the term "full expressions of identity for Native children," I am considering the broad and interconnected ways that identity was controlled in residential schools: sexuality, gender roles, vocation, religious and cultural practice, language, familial relationships, etc.

feels complicit in maintaining. Rather than be herself, the totality of her being, she settles for functioning as a performance of herself.

Dimaline has discussed the issue of erasure in terms of Native communities. She talks about Kim Anderson's book, A Recognition of Being, and suggests that the healing that has occurred in Native communities so far is largely because recognition is beginning to occur. This also suggests that recognition has/is being denied. Dimaline talks about her Grandmother, a Native woman who did not have status. To Dimaline, this meant that her Grandmother wasn't recognized, "first of all as a Native, second of all as a woman born in 1913" ("Quilting" 28). Dimaline described dialogic relationship between race and gender in her Grandmother's experiences. Almost erased by the Indian Act and its limited definition of "Indian," her Grandmother was also largely invisible because she was a female. Dimaline states that her book is a form of recognition for her Grandmother: "This was her story, that she was a real woman damn it, number or no number, a Native woman 'til the day she died" (29).

Reflecting on Constance's story, I see myself in many places. I recognize the effects of a co-dependent relationship from my failed marriage. Because I can relate to Constance, it is more difficult to "other" her. That said, there are moments of opacity that remind me that her story is not mine, although I can learn from it.

Dimaline tells me a story about her own failed marriage in which she and her (non-Native) ex-husband were fighting and he called her a "red nigger" ("Quilting" 30). She said that it made her more aware: "There's totally something there with sex and power and how people want to place you on this scale so they can control you, or not control you, or however they want to perceive you or mold you into this box so they know where to place you" (30).

Dimaline's discussion of "sex and power" comes from a situation that is evidently affected by race, and my experiences may highlight gender, but my race is largely unrecognized. That said, I can't ignore my race, because in the struggle with sex and power that is played out in Constance's life, there is a white woman, and as Dimaline notes, "Somehow it was an issue for [Constance] that this woman was white" (31).

So, I am beginning to see that understanding is balanced with regions of opacity – regions I may gain some understanding of, but may never "know" according to my experiences.²⁰ There is an example in the story of Constance that highlights this point for me. There is a crow that watches Constance give birth to herself in the last moments of the story. As her lover leaves, she watches him get into a cab. When he looks up at the hotel to catch her eye, she denies him her gaze, looking instead "across the street at the crow that had perched itself in a bare tree and who was watching her with his calm, steady gaze" (110). This is the first appearance of the crow. He watches her give birth, until she stretches wide on the bed, and then catches her eye before flying away (119). This is a quiet but notable presence in the text. I don't know what to make of it. I could infer something about the crow being a trickster character, but perhaps that is a simplistic application of my limited knowledge. Perhaps I am seeing a sign, but I don't know what it points to at this moment in my process of understanding.

I am aware that sometimes meaning is assumed based on limited knowledge, rather than interrogating further and continuing to open up dialogue. I am aware of this, because I know I am in territory I do not necessarily recognize. For example, the story of Constance ends with this line: "Her back disappears behind the wooden door like a sliced moon slipping

²⁰ In this case, I am drawing of Basil Johnston's definition of "know" as described in the introduction of my thesis.

away into the inky night sky” (120). My initial interpretation was concerned with the image of the moon and its connection in English literary history with the feminine, due to a link between women’s menstrual cycles and monthly lunar cycles. My assumption is that the moon in this passage is much like Shakespeare’s “inconstant moon” (Romeo and Juliet 2.1.152), wherein the moon is seen as something constantly changing and untrustworthy.

Then, I was reading through some Ojibway traditional stories and came upon Basil Johnston’s version of the story of Grandmother Moon:

The first of mothers, having given birth to her children, nurtured them to manhood and womanhood. Her purpose and nature fulfilled, she returned to her own world. But before her ascension, she reminded her children that she would not forget them. She would, she assured them, continue to watch over them at night through the moon....By day Father Sun and Mother Earth looked after the children; by night Grandmother Moon shone in the heavens to guide men’s paths. Thus is the primacy of womanhood remembered. (Ojibway Heritage 26)

Once I read Johnston’s story, I realized my interpretation of Dimaline’s words could be much different if they are viewed in that context. Rather than seeing Constance as inconstant and given to perpetual change, I could see her as a symbol of the strength and power of woman, a continual and steady presence. The “sliced moon” that she is at the end of the story would not mean that she is a smaller version of herself, but rather that she is moving towards a fuller version of herself. Her cyclical movement is then read as a constant return, a perpetual healing. This “alternate” reading shows the way that continually opening dialogue can shift the meaning making process. I’m sure there are many possible valid interpretations of the moon in this passage beyond Shakespeare’s understanding or Basil

Johnston's, but my point is that my own interpretations can be broadened with the experiences of others.²¹

So, the story of Constance teaches me that while identity is contextual and dependent on connections, those connections can be formed in power structures that distort and damage the relationship. Her story builds on the critique and analysis of the girl's story. Constance's story illustrates how limited engagement results in shallow and inconsequential, if not harmful, understanding. In turn, Dimaline's talk suggests that connecting with respect and reciprocity can bring healing.

²¹ In our conversation, Dimaline articulates relationships with both Shakespeare's work ("Quilting" 3) and Basil Johnston (36).

Chapter Four

“The Native Rosetta Stone”

Responsible Learning Through the Stories of Natalie and T

When Lee Maracle was asked by Janice Williamson during an interview, “What do you imagine my role as a white literary critic should be in relation to your work?” Maracle gave an answer that I continue to dwell on. She said “I can’t answer that question for you, you see, because I’m not undoing the dilemma you’ve been caught in, and being deprived of me is a serious thing. It’s a serious thing for you to pursue and undo” (Williamson 168). Williamson is not acknowledging her responsibility as a “white literary critic” to determine for herself a positive relationship with Maracle and her work. It is her, not Maracle’s, responsibility, as is evident when Maracle responds, “being deprived of me is a serious thing...for you to pursue and undo” (168). Taking responsibility can lead to a connection.

Maracle’s words tell me that as I seek to make meaning of Dimaline’s talk, I have “serious” responsibilities: I am responsible for the ways I connect texts, my imagination and reality; I am responsible for the ways I understand language; I am responsible for allowing my own context to be informed. The story of Natalie and T is where I learn the most clearly about the link between text, imagination and reality. In room #304, a Native businesswoman, Natalie, encounters the diary of a Native jingle dress dancer, referred to only as “T.” Natalie and T’s story illustrates that personal stories can teach us in indirect ways about ourselves and others by revealing specific connections. The text is thus “translated” into our reality, making us responsible for the learning we have achieved.

Natalie's life – her reality – is intimately connected to imagination: the way she imagines herself and the way others imagine her. She is concerned with being successful, and so uses what she sees as the trappings of achievement in hopes that others will see her as such. Marking herself as a woman who is doing well, she invests in material goods such as \$300 shoes and her \$2400 calfskin briefcase, which “said more about her than her résumé” (123). This briefcase especially is outward evidence of success that Natalie intentionally adorns herself with in order to portray to others that she has reached a level of achievement in her life. Natalie's alliance with corporate accomplishment is done to influence the way that others imagine her and perhaps to help her re-imagine her own life. The signs of identification Natalie chooses are intimately tied to her job and, for her, evidence of achievement.

As much as Natalie looks like she is a successful woman, as much as people may imagine her so, she still feels like something is missing. She attributes her sense of lack to the general chaos of her life. Her home is a mess, her five-year-old daughter has learned to use profanity due to Natalie's impatience, and she seems incapable of maintaining a healthy relationship with the opposite sex. The combination of lack of self-control and frustration with disorder causes Natalie's dissatisfaction. The vague feeling of emptiness that she feels produces the need to fill the emptiness with things like alcohol, something Natalie alludes to when she mentions her “rare sober Monday and Tuesday nights” (123). The suggestion that weeknights are more often than not spent under the influence of alcohol implies that Natalie is self-medicating the vague emptiness she feels, regardless of her apparent success.

In order to achieve what she imagines success to be, Natalie has separated herself from her Native identity and her home community. For example, Natalie's rejection of

traditional practices and community is indicated by her unfamiliarity with the signs of it. She clearly states that the “talk of outfits and drums” in T’s accounts of pow wows “was alien to her” (136). It is an alienation of her own making. Dimaline uses Natalie’s grandmother to represent the “traditional stuff” (136), and Natalie’s rejection of her symbolically represents a rejection of her heritage. As a teenager, Natalie remembers being embarrassed by her grandmother, to the point that she denies any type of relationship with her. Upon seeing her grandmother, her friends ask, “Are you like, Indian or something?” (132). Worried that her heritage would bring rejection, the young Natalie laughs, denies knowing her grandmother and accounts for her presence as one of her mother’s charity cases. This memory shows Natalie’s formative years were spent attempting to fit into dominant society at any cost. The “popular girls” accept her on the terms that she look and act as they do. These girls are threatened by difference, as shown in their confusion and wariness when confronted with the possibility that Natalie is not really “one of them.” Natalie chooses to reject her grandmother, and consequently tradition, in favour of acceptance. This choice ultimately leads to her ability to succeed, but not her ability to find satisfaction.

Natalie left her home community because she felt it “threatened to hold her down” (123). Feeling that her identity within her community was limited and unreflective of her potential, Natalie disassociated herself, went to school and has effectively re-defined herself. In an attempt to avoid limits, Natalie now identifies herself according to her corporate success; in many ways she still appears to be accepting limitations, but just from other sources. Natalie restricts her own imagination by denying aspects of her past, but also by giving media and popular culture authority in her life. For example, the representations in mainstream glossy magazines have taught her a way of looking at herself. In her office the

afternoon before she finds the diary, she is sitting eating a fruit roll up. She wonders briefly if the guilt she feels could be attributed to “some Kremlin-style article in *Cosmo*” (124).

Natalie’s self-image and emotions have been manipulated by images in the media and pop-culture. Dimaline’s use of “Kremlin” here is telling. The reference to the government of the former Soviet Union indicates the formative power of institution and discourse in molding society into the ideal. *Cosmo* is equated with this type of manipulative discourse.

As a metonym for the government of the Soviet Union, the Kremlin represents a communist ideology that assumed it was possible to mold people into ideal forms. One of the ways this was done was by evaluating the validity of ideas and practices according to the Communist Party’s interpretation of Marxism. The practice of Marxist ideology in the Soviet Union, then, involved strict regulation, with enforcement justified by narrow interpretations of ideology. It seems to me that the comparison between *Cosmo* and the Kremlin is an apt one. For me, *Cosmo* represents a narrow interpretation of feminism, championing women who show agency, particularly in terms of sex. However, because *Cosmo*’s content is driven by consumerism, content that could be seen as empowering women is actually producing a form of authority over women’s lives in order to get them to buy something. The way that *Cosmo* gets women to buy is by producing ideal forms of women and holding up those forms as something for women to evaluate their own ideas and practices against. The practice of *Cosmo*’s feminism, then, is strictly regulated, although in indirect ways, through the production of limited images.

Natalie’s consistent intake of images from mainstream media is exemplified by her decision to bring several glossy magazines to the hotel to read. Her experience with *Cosmo* shows that this form of print media has taught her a way of imagining. She feels guilty for

eating a fruit roll-up because Cosmo has taught her something about what to eat and she is not sure that her experience aligns with what she imagines is Cosmo's expectation for her. Essentially, Cosmo functions as an indirect authority in Natalie's life, giving her a standard by which she may measure her experiences.²² Therefore, the text is linked with Natalie's reality; she responds to what she reads. Her ideas of success emerge from these and other such images, limited as they may be.

Natalie's experience with Cosmo shows that the magazine functions as a touchstone for "normal" behavior, indirectly affecting Natalie's perception of herself. In comparison, T learns from her own family in indirect ways. She writes: "My Grandmother taught me about integrity, though I can't recall ever being subjected to a lecture" (128). As T listens to her Grandmother's stories, she learns about the consistent character her Grandmother showed, despite all that changed around her. Her Grandmother's stories function as "texts" for T on what it means to be a Native woman of integrity, without subjecting her to lectures from an authoritative figure. Rather, T listens carefully to her Grandmother's stories and watches her life as a means of learning about integrity.

That is not to say that T feels like she has integrity all the time. When she acts in a way that she feels is a mistake, like having an affair, she feels shaken and fragile. She describes the tenuousness of building a life where inner convictions do not match with outward circumstances: "*I feel like I've built the foundations of my life with little, uneven cubes of glass and now the wind is starting to rage*" (140). Just as Natalie felt guilt for not following the lessons she learned from Cosmo, T feels unsettled when she does not align with how she imagines her life should be based on her Grandmother's stories.

²² In different contexts, the manipulation and absorption of reality by consumerist culture is discussed by Jean Baudrillard. For example, see Simulacra and Simulation.

In as much as there are similarities between the ways that Natalie and T learn from texts and the impact these texts have on the women's lives, their experiences are different. Both women feel uneasy when they do not align with the definitions of success they have learned. However, Natalie never seems to feel successful. She may have the form of success according to her definition, but the substance of it eludes her. On the other hand, when T participates in activities that build up her internal integrity as a Native woman, such as traditional dancing, she feels a sense of acceptance and pride that leave her feeling "*like a champion*" (141). T has both the form and substance of success according to her definition of it. So what is the nature of the difference between their experiences? Where does T's substance come from and why does Natalie not feel that same substance in her life?

One of the key differences is the source of the stories. Natalie learns from Cosmo, an institution that sets up superficial ideals as a means of selling product. In contrast to what Natalie learns, T learns from her Grandmother's stories. These stories may produce regulation, but the regulation is less about limited definitions and more about specific connections. T's Grandmother is a woman with "*all her grandmothers' spirits caught up in her eyes*" (129). When she rejects her marriage and defines the terms of her life for herself, T's Grandmother is described by T in her journal: "*Her voice is different, a single thread in a woven chorus of grandmothers. Her ancestors are resting on her shoulders, fingers combing through gleaming hair*" (130). T's Grandmother shows integrity to her own definitions of success, and she is part of a continuum of strong women. Her agency is at once individual and communal, present and past. The Grandmother's specific connections and experiences teach T a type of integrity that T wants in her life. Thus, while Natalie learns from an

authority that is disconnected from her own life, she does not find substance. Conversely, when T learns from her Grandmother, who embodies continuity, she finds substance.

T writes in her journal that she “[*doesn’t*] want to be an authority on anything” (137). Much like her Grandmother, T is not interested in lecturing anyone from an authoritative position. Her comment is followed by a description of what she does want: to be involved in her community and to relish in the feeling that involvement brings. In doing so, T infers that her idea of success is not contingent on becoming the best at something, or being recognized as someone who knows all there is to know on a subject. Rather, she finds her success in being a part of her community, solid in the identity that brings. This experience of success is something Natalie is not so familiar with, choosing rather to present a veneer of success that is decidedly tenuous, dependent, and inconsistent with her life outside of the office. T, on the other hand, has an internal consistency that does not change with external circumstance. Even though she makes mistakes, like having an affair, she maintains the integrity she learned from her Grandmother. Natalie finds the “not so perfect” aspects of T’s life make her more relatable and help Natalie to feel a “little more comfortable” (139). Thus, by being an example of how to maintain integrity and traditional aspects of Native life despite circumstances, T gives Natalie a way of imagining success in a different way.

When Natalie first sees T’s diary, it is in the bedside table. She opens the drawer and mistakes it for the “stereotypical hotel Bible” (127). The chambermaid narrator has made the same mistake just a few pages before, solidifying the comparison between the diary and the Holy text. This comparison highlights the importance of “the book.” By drawing a relationship between a foundational text of the Christian religion and a personal diary, Dimoline highlights the potential influence, or sacredness, both texts may have. The

mistaken Bible is disregarded as having been left by “Christian crusaders” (121), alluding both to the Holy wars of the Middle ages and to the missionary effort connected to assimilation attempts. As much as Natalie has been affected by the assimilation attempts of media and pop-culture, her disregard of the “Bible” implies that assimilation into organized religion is not important or relevant to her. However, once it is clear that the book is a diary, a personal story created by another Native woman, it is “fascinating” (127). Although T herself writes “*I don’t want to be an authority on anything*” (137), she becomes instrumental in changing Natalie’s perceptions of herself and her community. This creative “authority” emerges from T’s text, not a conventional symbol of authority, the Bible.

The story of Natalie and T becomes for me a story in which authority is displaced. T is responsible for her own learning as the Grandmother shares her life. What T gets out of the process is entirely up to her, although her Grandmother is shown respect for the life experience she shares. T’s Grandmother is a person connected to the generations before her and to future generations. For example, T’s grandmother is described with “*babies at her knee and breast,*” and “*holding grandchildren on wide hips*” (129). Her strength is based on her experiences, her connections and her responsibilities as a caregiver of coming generations. This is in contrast to Cosmo, which depends on hierarchical thinking in order to gain influence and sell products.

In as much as Natalie seems to have an awareness of the negative impact of Cosmo, her consistent intake of images from mainstream media and is exemplified by her decision to bring several glossy magazines to the hotel to read. However, once she finds T’s diary, she “throw[s] aside her tabloids” (127) and begins to read T’s story instead. This symbolic choice by Natalie, to toss aside representations which are disconnected from her experience

in favour of representations produced by someone like her, is an important moment in the story. Rather than connecting to a text that breeds a harmful self-image, Natalie connects to T's diary, and learns from it much the same way T learns from her Grandmother's stories.

Natalie has left her family and home community in favour of a life of her own making. In contrast, T remains connected to her family and does not see herself as an independent individual. T speaks of her grandmother with admiration and love, writing, "*I am lucky enough to be born into this extended family*" (129). She thinks of herself in the context of family, specifically her Grandmother and the integrity she had, despite circumstance and expectations. T participates in traditional activities such as pow wows, moccasin making and jingle dress dancing, but she also watches Disney movies and talks about Beyoncé (133, 145). T engages with media and pop-culture, but her feelings of belonging and satisfaction come from her family, her heritage, and aspects of traditional life. Her passion is clearly stated in her writing: "*I would rather die than not be Native*" (132).

T's passion creates a longing in Natalie, a feeling described as "homesickness but, oddly, for a place she doesn't really know" (137). Natalie recognizes something familiar in T, something she has never known, but wants. T's text functions as a key to deciphering the longing Natalie feels, a translation of traditional into contemporary. Natalie found her Grandmother, as a representative of tradition, to be irrelevant and unable to solidify her sense of belonging. However, T has found a way to accept the "old ways" and still live in a modern, urban setting. The relevance of tradition to her contemporary life brings T a sense of satisfaction that Natalie has not yet known.

The terminology of translation is used by Dimaline to explain the relationship between tradition, literature and contemporary life. Natalie expresses the value of T's diary

to her own life: “This book full of mundane domestic details and barbed and luscious insights were the very key to her life. She felt as if she had stumbled upon the Native Rosetta Stone” (142). This metaphor is a powerful expression of the value of stories told by Native women. The ancient Egyptian artifact, the Rosetta Stone, was a critical key to the process of translation for scholars who struggled to find meaning in early hieroglyphics. The text on the stone is three translations of the same text, two in hieroglyphics and one in classical Greek (“Rosetta Stone”). Because the latter was translatable for scholars, previously undecipherable hieroglyphics could be interpreted. Ancient history was contextualized as translators were able to look at how signs were used and proceeded to determine the meaning of the signs.

When Natalie compares T’s diary with the Rosetta Stone, she is commenting on the diary as a critical key to her own process of translating ancient tradition and heritage into her contemporary existence. What she once saw as irrelevant, or indecipherable, now holds the possibility of relevance and meaning. She has the key to interpreting the signs of meaning within tradition and can now work to translate that into her own life. T’s diary provides Natalie with experiences she can understand, as a way into a heritage to which she was thus far unable to relate. Although Natalie is unfamiliar with the signs of traditional life T expresses, she finds several relevant “me too” (149) moments in T’s diary, which create a connection. Natalie feels that “this girl lived a very different life, yet there were still some similarities between them” (133). Through a bond to T, Natalie is able to see an association with meaning that is entrenched in her heritage and tradition.

However, the connection to her heritage is not solidified by the end of the book. T’s representation of herself has brought Natalie to a point of recognition, but she still feels a

lack: “Memories that were not her own sailed on blood and water and settled into her cells. Something was missing” (150). This is the second time that Natalie has referred to the “blood memory” T’s diary evokes (137), memories of something she has never known that are calling to her through T’s diary. Natalie sees what she has been missing: “And now, finally, she knew what it was. It was this, it was T. Her life, her thoughts, her community, the constant embrace she found herself in no matter what was happening across the pages of her days made [Natalie] want to live differently” (150).

Recognizing that the longing T has awakened can have fulfillment, Natalie puts down the diary, with its inconclusive end. Natalie feels that she “has to find the end of the book, she has to know about the *grand and beautiful conclusion*” (152). T has shown her that satisfaction will come with involvement in community, acceptance of tradition, and relationship with others like herself. T’s writing evokes a feeling of connectedness that Natalie recognizes when she sees Serenity Johnson’s photo on the front page of the morning paper. Realizing it may be T’s daughter, Natalie feels a “surge of pride” for this girl, whom she “[knows] so well through her mother’s writing” (152). The journal writing of another woman has brought Natalie to a place where she feels linked to a reality greater than herself and she longs to move that from the page to the real world.

So the story of Natalie and T tells me about the intricate connections between text, imagination and reality. It also shows me ways texts tie to ideology. Because of these associations, Dimaline’s talk is not just an isolated voice, but rather is a particular voice in relationship with a variety of narratives. She speaks in her own voice, but from a social context that informs her. Her influences emerge from both Native and non-Native sources. For example, amidst her literary influences, there is “not one Indigenous person” (“Quilting”

3). However, her maternal grandmother and aunties told stories when she was younger that became a way for her to learn about her family (11), and she is heavily influenced by Native women like Lee Maracle and Maria Campbell. Dimaline recognizes that these voices work together in relationships that support her own utterances. Rather than her relational structure functioning as a relativistic melting pot of chatter, she recognizes that there are particular voices in relationship with cumulative narratives, or embedded “truths” (5). For example, much like T, Dimaline privileges her Grandmother’s voice. Dimaline says, “My stories are me, but my stories are my Grandmother’s stories. Even though my Grandmother never knew a photographer, my Grandmother had never been to Africa,²³ these are things I’ve added on to demonstrate a sensibility that my Grandmother gave me through her stories” (13).

Drawing on her Grandmother’s “sensibility,” Dimaline combines the embedded “truths” she learned as a young girl to create characters that are sourced from a context of familial relations. The photographer, whom Dimaline asserts her Grandmother has no commonality with, is “a combination of seven of [her] cousins...and a little bit of [her] brother” (5). Thus, Dimaline recognizes that her writing proceeds from a context that is specific, relational and personal. That said, she does not see it solely as the product of personal “truths.” She identifies a serious moment in her life when she is reminded that her responsibility extends beyond herself. Louise Halfe admonishes Dimaline: “You need to realize that now it’s your responsibility to speak on behalf of the women in our community who can’t speak” (4). Dimaline uses this example to explain that she does not just speak for herself, but allows her greater community to “flow through” her (4), identifying the possibility for both personal and communal voices to be present in the same utterance.

²³ These are particular details from her novel.

If communal and personal voices can all be present in Cherie Dimaline's talk, then I am not just in conversation with her, but am dialoguing with a host of others. Her talk can function as a mode of "translation." Like the Rosetta Stone, her words can give me insight into how to interpret signs of meaning that are found in her stories, but also in her larger context. I reflect on how her stories (re)create my framework, particularly in regards to her writing and community. Dimaline's talk shows me the value she places on the role of story in creating her framework; in as much as she defines herself as a writer rather than a storyteller ("Quilting" 11), the bulk of her talk during our conversation is story. The way she connects ideas and stories can tell me (opaquely) about her internal dialogue and the context in which she relates to me. If I listen carefully, and engage with the moments that disrupt my own internal dialogue, I can participate in what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as "active understanding" (280-1), in which grappling and rigorous interrogation continue the process of dialogue. Story is an effective way of learning, and invites readers to identify their assumptions in the narrative and connect their own experiences, drawing their own conclusions.

Since we dialogue from different perspectives, it is not surprising that there would be mistranslations. Specifically, there are instances in our conversation where I misunderstand Cherie Dimaline's talk and she takes the opportunity to indirectly correct my assumptions. For example, during a trip to Australia, Dimaline finds a connection with the "older people" within the Aboriginal community ("Quilting" 9). When Dimaline says, "I thought it was so different on the other side of the planet, but it really wasn't," I follow with the question, "So was it just a shared *sensibility*...that was the commonality?" (10). Her answer is, "I think it was the same *experience*," and she goes on to discuss examples of colonial disruption to

indigenous community continuity (10). By replacing “sensibility” with “experience,” Dimaline resists my attempt to collapse indigenous groups into sameness, but instead suggests that what they share is colonial impositions and the effects of such encounters.

Further on in our conversation, I return to focusing on Red Rooms and ask Dimaline if she thinks that the contemporary, urban setting “provides unique *challenges*” (15). “I think it could,” she replies, and then goes on to qualify, “but I think it provides certain *advantages*” (15). Again, Dimaline reframes my assumptions with her talk, shifting the negative connotations I suggest with “challenges” and showing me that her perspective looks at the situation of urban First Nations as advantageous. Through our conversation, Dimaline allows me to see the ways that our perspectives align and misalign by her indirect negotiations of language between us.

In as much as Cherie Dimaline’s talk can then function as a means of “translating” experience and culture for me, the process is imperfect and holds the possibility for error. Not only that, but there is a measure of meaning that it may not be possible to translate. Dimaline comments on this possibility by telling a story about her Grandmother and auntie’s talk. As a little girl, Dimaline would sit under the table and listen to the daily conversations between her Grandmother and aunties. Dimaline says: “They spoke Michif depending on how bad the stories they were telling. If they were really bad, they were in Michif; if they were okay, they were in English” (11). When her family did not want her to know aspects of their history or community, they adjusted their talk so Dimaline would not understand. Even though her family restricted access for her, she took what she did comprehend and formed a framework for her life. Through the stories her Grandmother and aunties told, Dimaline “learned about [her] family” (11).

Dimaline talks about the way her writing draws on her own “truths” (“Quilting” 5). Her talk also foregrounds the responsibility that people have to the communities from which they learn. Because her writing, in particular, is drawn directly from her community, Dimaline says: “I have a responsibility to explain how I’m qualified to tell these stories” (18). By identifying her “perspective,” which she defines as contingent on her people, her Grandmother and her blood (18), she respects her relations and community. Dimaline’s talk here reminds me that if I am going to draw from a community, then I am responsible to that community and for indicating the relationship that I have to it. Further, the end of Natalie and T’s story illustrates that responsibility should provoke a certain amount of action. Natalie learns from T’s story and in the end it provokes her to seek a connection beyond the text, to encounter T and her life in increasingly more involved ways.

Cherie Dimaline’s words illustrate the connections between text, imagination and reality. Stories have a measure of “authority” in our lives, and thus the source of the story may affect the outcomes in our realities. I learn how relationship with personal stories can teach us, provide continuity with the past, challenge assumptions and renegotiate relationships. Personal stories help us move beyond limited definitions of others to specific connections with particular voices, which are part of cumulative narratives. Through these connections, dichotomies between cultures can be collapsed, although differences are still evident. We are responsible for our own stories, and we are responsible for the stories we hear. Hopefully, this sense of responsibility produces positive actions that affect social realities.

Conclusion

Continuing the Conversation

The process of learning from and about Native women's writing is not a simple activity. It is a process that acknowledges complex relationships, encourages dialogue with stories as personalities, and seeks balance between elements such as form and substance, global and local, specific and general, inner and outer, oral and written. This thesis is a presentation of my interpretation of Cherie Dimaline's talk and my learning so far. My research has been guided by this question: how do I ethically learn from Native women's writing? Through Dimaline's novel, Red Rooms, and my conversations with her, I have learned to consider things in context, make connections across perceived boundaries, recognize power dynamics, and learn from stories. These lessons are further inflected by an affirmation of the values that guide my learning: respect, reciprocity, relationship and responsibility.²⁴

Dimaline's talk offers me a form of indirect instruction that implies answers to my guiding question. Through my documented conversation with Dimaline, I have found some contexts for Red Rooms. Dimaline speaks about learning from difference, being vulnerable, healing from past hurts, finding connections through stories and humour, and the interconnectedness of gender, race and culture. These themes arise in various ways in the stories of the girl, Constance, and Natalie and T.

The story of the girl provides a critique of firm boundaries and binary thinking. Her circumstances illustrate that both generalizations and limited relationships can be harmful. Accordingly, I argue that in order to learn from Native women's writing, I should consider

²⁴ Again, I am indebted to Shawn Wilson, Jo-ann Archibald, and Verna J. Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt for their precise language with which to discuss ethical principles for research.

stories in ever-broadening contexts rather than trying to place restrictive, fixed boundaries around the literatures. In terms of this thesis, this means beginning with the Dimaline's talk and spiraling out. Subsequent studies may extend this dialogue into broader theoretical realms.

Constance's story reminds me that inequality can ruin fruitful meaning-making processes. Power can create associations that are contingent on maintaining uneven dynamics. Constance is virtually erased in such a relationship, and her story illustrates how power can be a dangerous thing. Unequal power dynamics may therefore deny dialogic relationships between gender, race, culture, social status, and other complex categories with which to understand people. Instead, Constance's story illustrates that healing begins when we define ourselves in a respectful manner with the intention of giving back, in structures of shared power.

Natalie and T's stories demonstrate the connections between text, imagination and reality. Stories provide indirect instruction, which can displace authority, implicating the learner in the learning process. Similarities may give the reader "me too" moments with which to begin to understand. However, diverse perspectives in stories may not allow for a perfect "translation" process. That said, the learner can draw his/her own conclusions about the implications of the stories. Therefore, the learner is responsible for his/her response to stories, which could include seeking connections beyond the text.

In as much as Dimaline's stories thwart attempts at a singular reading, they do work together in interconnected ways. For example, Dimaline's characters are not narrow representations of Native women; they defy limitations and stereotypes. At the same time, the girl, Constance, Natalie and T all show interconnected concerns with their identities as

Native women. As they re-negotiate their identities and relationships, they illustrate that fixed boundaries and definitions are constructed. Kateri Damm (Anishinaabe) predicts the effects that writing like Dimaline's has: "Indigenous literatures will resist boundaries and boxes. In reality, more of our varied voices will be raised in art, literature and music and the definitions of who we are will be forced to change. Our different voices will create new harmony. More importantly we will open the borders to each other" ("Says Who" 24). Damm recognizes that a variety of different voices can unfix boundaries and work together to build connections.

The complex and varied voices that Dimaline connects in her talk expand the way I understand Native women. As a child, I may have learned narrow stereotypes from stories such as Peter Pan, with homogenized, insubstantial portrayals of "Indians." The image of the Indian Princess, in particular, has been compounded and solidified by numerous representations in media, pop-culture and literature. As I read works by authors such as Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm, Marilyn Dumont, Eden Robinson and Cherie Dimaline, I make connections that continually open up to broader understandings of Native women and their stories.²⁵ Therefore, Dimaline's talk "honour[s] a *roundness* in women – something that has always been there, and does not need to be constructed, invented, dictated or performed" (Mcglennen 116). This helps maintain dynamic and full conversations that are less about limitations and constriction, but more about specific, multiple connections.

Dimaline's stories provide links to lived experiences, which are embedded in social relationships. The interconnected structures of these relationships have strands of similarity but, like the spider's web, branch and spiral in complex ways. In interviewing Dimaline and

²⁵ For example, see Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm's My Heart is a Stray Bullet, Marilyn Dumont's A Really Good Brown Girl, and Eden Robinson's Monkey Beach.

reading Red Rooms, I connect my own experiences and learn. In the process, my perspective incorporates new elements and re-negotiates relationships as a result. Shaun Wilson writes: “If research doesn’t change you as a person, then you aren’t doing it right” (83).

Writing about methodology and reading practices that involve looking in and expanding out cannot enunciate a final and fixed analysis, but rather enacts the dialogue in a particular moment and assumes it will continue to proceed from there. Lee Maracle writes, “Most of our stories don’t have orthodox ‘conclusions’; that is left to the listener, who we trust will draw useful lessons from the story – not necessarily the lessons we wish them to draw, but all conclusions are considered valid” (Sojourner’s 11). According to Maracle, I am responsible for my own conclusions regarding Dimaline’s stories. Ultimately, my initial question, how do I learn from Native women’s writing, determines the conclusions I draw. Hypothetically, if I ask a different question, I may come to different conclusions. For example, in future studies I may well consider sexuality, the construction of the male Native, or how Red Rooms dialogues with the work of Maria Campbell, who Dimaline claims writes from the same perspective as she does. There are many regions to open up dialogue into and move towards ever-increasing understanding.

Greg Sarris’ Auntie Violet had this to say to a group of students regarding the teachings of her mother, Cache Creek Pomo medicine woman Mabel McKay: “All of this is like a book to us, Mom’s teachings, her stories. We’re still reading it. We won’t be finished until we die. You want to finish the book, say what it is, and go on. Am I saying anything to you? We read to understand, ask questions” (73). Violet’s words illustrate that learning is an interrogative process that continues all through life. This thesis is also process-driven, rather than product oriented. This reflects Red Rooms, in which the stories of the girl, Constance,

and Natalie and T finish with open endings. Each woman leaves the hotel, but as readers we are not given the “grand and beautiful conclusions” (152); we do not see how their stories end. Even the novel in entirety, which is a framed narrative, does not close with the re-entry of the narrator, Naomi. Rather, the story is left open-ended. This is an invitation for readers to draw their own conclusions, based on their experiences, and to seek out connections beyond the story, just as Natalie does when she finishes T’s diary.

Quoting Carl Urion (Dearborn River Métis), Jo-ann Archibald notes that “the meaning derived through First Nations discourse requires constant thinking about and playing with ‘levels of metaphor and implication’” (18). Having read Red Rooms cover to cover multiple times, and listening to my conversation with Dimaline over and over, I am impressed by how my reading practices have allowed Dimaline’s talk to speak to me anew every time. New layers of meaning expand like the spider’s web. Dialogue with Cherie Dimaline and her writing invites us to (re)negotiate a meaningful relationship that allows us selectively to cross and push boundaries while recognizing differences.

Alanna Brown writes, “Stories initiate dialogue and reinforce the sense of community even when issues appear to be divisive and complex” (174). I want to thank Cherie Dimaline, who really has become a friend, for her stories and for some great conversations. We have talked about literature and Native women, yes, but also about parenting, family dynamics, sex, public speaking, creative impulses and more. She has indirectly challenged some of the erroneous ways I conceived of Native women, but also ways in which I conceived of myself. I can now more readily talk about differences without distancing myself. I also connect my experiences to her stories and identify moments of disconnection.

She has given me metaphors by which to approach other stories, as I continue to dialogue and make connections from here.

Works Cited

- Acoose, Janice. "A Vanishing Indian? or Acoose: Woman Standing Above Ground?" (Ad)dressing Our Words: Aboriginal Perspectives on Aboriginal Literatures. Ed. Armand Garnet Ruffo. Penticton: Theytus, 2001.
- . "Honoring Ni'Wahkomakanak." Womack 216-233.
- . "Post Halfbreed: Indigenous Writers as Authors of their own Reality." Armstrong 27-44.
- Akiwenzie-Damm, Kateri. My Heart is a Stray Bullet. Cape Croker, Ont.: Kegedonce, 1993.
- Amnesty International. "Stolen Sisters: A Human Rights Response to Discrimination and Violence Against Indigenous Women in Canada." Amnesty International Canada. 2003. 5 July 2010 <<http://www.amnesty.ca/campaigns/resources/amr2000304.pdf>>.
- Anderson, Kim. A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood. Toronto: Second Story, 2000.
- Archibald, Jo-ann (Q'um Q'um Xiiem). Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008.
- Armstrong, Jeanette, ed. Looking at the Words of our People: First Nations Analysis of Literature. Penticton: Theytus, 1993.
- Bakhtin, M.M. The Dialogic Imagination. Austin: Texas UP, 1981.
- Baudrillard, Jean. Simulacra and Simulation. Trans. Shelia Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor, Mich.: U of Michigan P, 1994.
- Bhabha, Homi K. The Location of Culture. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Blaeser, Kimberly M. "Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Centre." Armstrong 51-62.
- Brill de Ramírez, Susan Berry. Contemporary American Indian Literatures and the Oral Tradition. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1999.
- Brown, Alanna Kathleen. "Pulling Silko's Threads Through Time: An Exploration of Storytelling." American Indian Quarterly 19:2 (1995): 171-9.
- Cardinal, Douglas and Jeanette Armstrong. The Native Creative Process. Penticton: Theytus, 1991.
- Chester, Blanca. "Storied Dialogues: Exchanges of Meaning Between Storyteller and Anthropologist." Studies in American Indian Literatures 8:3 (1996): 13-36.

- Cruikshank, Julie. The Social Life of Stories. Vancouver: UBC Press, 1998.
- Damm, Kateri. "Says Who: Colonialism, Identity and Defining Indigenous Literature." Armstrong 9-26.
- "Define." Def. 3. The Oxford English Dictionary. 4th ed. 1994.
- Dimaline, Cherie. Red Rooms. Penticton: Theytus, 2007.
- . "Quilting With Fat Man Pants." Personal Interview. 5 March 2009.
- Eigenbrod, Renate. Travelling Knowledges: Positioning the Im/Migrant Reader of Aboriginal Literatures in Canada. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 2005.
- Eigenbrod, Renate, and Jo-Ann Episkenew, eds. Community: A Roundtable on Canadian Aboriginal Literature. Penticton: Theytus, 2002.
- Episkenew, Jo-Ann. "Socially Responsible Criticism: Aboriginal Literature, Ideology, and the Literary Canon." Eigenbrod 51-68.
- Fagan, Kristina. "'What About You?': Approaching the Study of 'Native Literature.'" Eigenbrod 233-253.
- Francis, Daniel. The Imaginary Indian: The Image of the Indian in Canadian Culture. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 1993.
- Grant, Elizabeth Ann. Hearing the Page: Teaching the Sound of Oral Traditions in Native American Written Texts. Michigan: Bell & Howell, 2000.
- Haffen, P. Jane. "Living to Tell Stories." Henry 27-41.
- Hall, Stuart, and Paul du Gay, eds. Questions of Cultural Identity. London: Sage, 1996.
- Henry Jr., Gordon D., Nieves Pascual Soler and Silvia Martinez-Falquina, eds. Stories Through Theories/Theories Through Stories: North American Indian Writing, Storytelling, and Critique. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2009.
- Hoy, Helen. How Should I Read These?: Native Women Writers in Canada. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2001.
- Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism. 2nd ed. Eds. Michael Groden, Martin Kreinwirth, and Imre Szeman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2005.
- Johnston, Basil H. "Is That all There Is? Tribal Literature." An Anthology of Canadian Native Literature in English. 3rd ed. Eds. Daniel David Moses and Terry Goldie. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford, 2005. 98- 105.

- . Ojibway Heritage: The Ceremonies, Rituals, Songs, Dances, Prayers and Legends of the Ojibway. 1976. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1994.
- . Tales the Elders Told: Ojibway Legends. Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1981.
- Justice, Daniel Heath. "Go Away Water!': Kinship Criticism and the Decolonization Imperative." *Womack* 147-168.
- King, Thomas. "Godzilla vs. Post-Colonial." New Contexts of Canadian Criticism. Ed. Ajay Heble, Donna Palmateer Pennee, and J.R. (Tim) Struthers. Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 1997. 241-48.
- . The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative. Toronto: Anansi, 2003.
- Kirkness, Verna J., and Ray Barnhardt. "First Nations and Higher Education: The Four R's – Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity, Responsibility." Journal of American Indian Education. 30 (1991): 1-15.
- Maracle, Lee. I am Woman: A Native Perspective on Sociology and Feminism. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1996.
- . Sojourner's Truth and Other Stories. Vancouver: Press Gang, 1990.
- McEvoy, Maureen and Judith Daniluk. "Wounds to the Soul: The Experiences of Aboriginal Women Survivors of Sexual Abuse." Canadian Psychology 36:3 (1995): 221-234.
- McGlennen, Molly. "Ignatia Broker's Lived Feminism: Toward a Native Women's Theory." *Henry* 105-120.
- McKegney, Sam. Magic Weapons: Aboriginal Writers Remaking Community after Residential School. Winnipeg: U of Manitoba P, 2007.
- Peter Pan. New York: Mouse Works, 1991.
- Petrone, Penny. Native Literature in Canada: From the Oral Tradition to the Present. Toronto: Oxford, 1990.
- Robinson, Eden. Monkey Beach. Toronto: Vintage, 2000.
- Ruffo, Armand Garnet. "Inside Looking Out: Reading 'Tracks' from a Native Perspective." *Armstrong* 161-176.
- "Rosetta Stone." Encyclopædia Britannica Online. Encyclopædia Britannica, 2010. Web. 6 July 2010 <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9064120>>.
- Said, Edward. Orientalism. New York: Vintage, 1978.

- Sarris, Greg. Keeping Slug Woman Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts. Berkeley: U of California P, 1993.
- Schorcht, Blanca. Storied Voices in Native American Texts: Harry Robinson, Thomas King, James Welch and Leslie Marmon Silko. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Shakespeare, William. Romeo and Juliet. Ed. Jill L. Levenson. New York: Oxford, 2000.
- Silko, Leslie Marmon. Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit: Essays on Native American Life Today. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1996.
- Spivak, Guyatri. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture. Eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1988.
- Vizenor, Gerald. "Follow the Trickroutes: An Interview with Gerald Vizenor." Survival This Way: Interviews with American Indian Poets. Ed. Joseph Bruchac. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1987. 287-310.
- . Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance. Hanover: UP of New England, 1993.
- Weaver, Jace, Craig S. Womack and Robert Warrior. American Indian Literary Nationalism. Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 2006.
- Williamson, Janice. Sounding Differences: Conversations with Seventeen Canadian Women. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1993.
- Wilson, Shaun. Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods. Black Point, NS: Fernwood, 2008.
- Womack, Craig S. "A Single Decade: Book-Length Native Literary Criticism Between 1986 and 1997." Womack 3-104.
- . "Theorizing American Indian Experience." Womack 353-410.
- Womack, Craig S., Daniel Heath Justice, and Christopher B. Teuton, eds. Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collection. Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 2008.