

# A Culture of Loss

## The Mourning Period of Paper Indians

APRYL GLADUE

*Il existe un état d'esprit particulier chez plusieurs autochtones qui doivent continuellement vivre avec la hantise de la perte: perte d'un parent, perte des arts familiaux, perte des liens familiaux, perte du langage, de l'identité, de la culture. Cet essai très personnel décrit les expériences et réflexions de la fille d'une survivante des pensionnats qui est aujourd'hui avocate au gouvernement fédéral. Elle nous parle de sa vie, de son travail et de son monde qui a été affecté à la fois par l'absence de sa mère vivante et plus récemment, maintenant qu'elle est morte prématurément.*

I was 35 when my mother died. She was 58. I cried for a few days then took up my life again, as it was not so different a life than when she was alive. Mine is a life of loss. It is only in the early mornings or when I found myself in a still house without my children that my mind would turn to her loss.

Loss was the basis of the relationship between my mother and me. I have known this feeling of loss all of my life. It is such a central part of me that I can not distinguish it from other parts of my identity—being short, having brown hair, being raised on a farm, not able to bend the first joint on my left thumb from having cut the tendon there as a child. When I was three, my brother and I went to live with our father's parents, our grandparents, our non-native family. Our mother had left and it was only when we were older that we began to piece together some of the reasons. Many we would never know or understand. Yet, we carried with us, inside us, all the reasons and circumstances of that time. Unanswered questions were a way of life.

We were fed and clothed and given an identity deriving from European pioneering roots. My grandfather was a soldier and a farmer homesteading in northern Alberta. In 1945 he brought his Dutch war-bride home and in succession they raised a son and daughter, took care of his ailing mother, and then their two half-blood grandchildren. It was not that we were taught to see the world

in a different way; it's just that we were only taught one side. We were never encouraged or given the opportunity to know our mother's family, even though our *kohkum* (grandmother) lived in the neighbouring community. We were white, or at least we looked white, but we had a dark secret that was only publicly acknowledged when our school fees for grade nine and ten were paid for through Treaty benefits. As members of the Lubicon Lake First Nation and then of the newly formed Woodland Cree First Nation in 1989, my brother and I were eligible for education benefits. Treaty 8 was signed in 1899 when the Queen's representatives came to Lesser Slave Lake looking to expand the railway and open the West for settlement. Eighty-five years later when my grandparents needed help to pay our school fees, the promises of Treaty 8 were fulfilled in a legally sanctioned act and I, and my brother, became Native. It was only in later years that I enrolled in Native Studies and then law school, in an attempt to further understand my own circumstance and that of my family and my country.

In my adult life I found comfort in identifying with my Nativeness through the lens of school, history, and educational opportunities. I sought out Native classmates, Native courses, Native scholars, Native writings. But my interest in all things Native was confined to the campus. I never brought Native friends home to meet my husband and daughter. I was still uncomfortable with this side of myself. It took many more years and a divorce before I was able to bring more balance to my life and identity, though I still I feel like a "paper" Indian.

Native, Indian, Treaty, First Nations, Métis, Aboriginal, Indigenous. Even within this segment of Canadian society there are so many labels and divisions. There are so many existing laws, regulations, and policies, and new legislation and solutions being proposed daily. There is so much paper. Since the Royal Proclamation of 1763 Canadian Indians have been suffocated with rules and categories and paper. The many variations of the *Indian*

*Act*, the 1969 White Paper, the 1996 Report of the Royal Commission, and on and on. Numerous inquiries, commissions, reports, legislation, and policies record the progress of the Indian “problem” in this country. National policies have gone from assimilation to integration to reconciliation. Reconciliation sounds like a good idea but how will it be possible if we don’t yet understand each other? How can I teach you who I am if I still have open wounds? Where can we even start? Is there any point in questioning how things could have been or should have been different?

to the third anniversary of her own mother’s death, she left us. My mother could not give me what I needed as she was on her own arduous journey.

In many ways I was a tourist in my own life. I never felt like I “fit in.” I accepted funding dollars set aside for Band members and became wary of backlash from the reserve community I was never a part of. I swore an oath to Her Majesty the Queen as I was admitted to the legal Bar. I pursued a career as a civil servant with the Canadian state. I act as legal counsel for the Department of Indian and Northern Development Canada (DIAND) in its capacity

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I wonder sometimes how different I would have been if I had been raised by my mother. I would have been exposed to my Cree heritage and relatives. I would have been taught my mother’s tongue. I would have been lulled to sleep in a moss bag, comforted by the smell of burning sweetgrass. It is only on paper, only sometimes in my writing, that I can touch a reality that never was, that should have been. I am left to ponder why a child should grow up wondering who she really is and where she belongs; why she wasn’t given the things she needed to comfort her. My mother would have given me these things if she had been given the chance to learn them herself.

My mother was a survivor of the residential school system. As with many survivors, the treatment they received in the schools affected their relationships, their behaviours, and their circumstances. My mother’s relationship with her family suffered at times, and she found herself living a life of poverty, violence, abuse, and addiction. She had lost one child and given up three others before given the chance to raise another. She regularly faced prejudice and racism in small towns, cities, and a variety of institutions. Finally, at the end of her life, she had to face a debilitating liver disease resulting from her addictive past. As is common in our communities, the toxicity of daily life shows up in the health of our people in everything from alcoholism to diabetes. My mother had many problems with her health from childhood tuberculosis to two heart attacks to numerous major surgeries for which she was hospitalized, once for over six months. In April of 2004 she became very ill and was diagnosed with liver cancer and cirrhosis that June; she survived the surgery to remove the tumour in the summer and had a three-week stay in intensive care. In the fall, she was rejected for a liver transplant because the cancer was too far advanced and the next February, one week

as a modern-day Indian agent. I cautiously and tentatively express a political awareness and an Indigenism through safe venues of committee work and workplace duties. I confine my contributions to the theoretical areas of law and policy.

In my work and on paper I can create an identity that is mine alone and has nothing to do with quantum of blood or community acceptance or traditional teachings. I write, therefore I am. I make my way as a woman in a profession seen by many in Indian country as one of the new warriors, fighting for justice with words and legal principles, turning the tables on the British common law, finding spaces for Aboriginal legal perspectives and agendas, being a role model, and trying always to find and follow the heartbeat of my own distant drum.

It’s always been difficult choosing to step into this world without any sense of culture or ingrained identity. In law school I felt they took something away from me that I didn’t have to lose in the first place. I was taught how to think like a lawyer; I was given an inside view and a familiarity with the legal principles that form the basis of our society and institutions and government. That same government employs me now. It is difficult to be an Aboriginal person in this government department where the Crown litigates/defends against Aboriginals; where we as solicitors are the go-betweens among the DIAND and the First Nations, advising on what can and cannot be done with reserve lands and Indian monies. It is difficult because there are many fantastic people here who do an excellent job in spite of the regulatory and historical mess, yet there is much room for change and improvement. There are ideas that need to be talked about, solutions that need to be discovered, policies and assumptions that need to be questioned in order to get the work done and reach the goal of true reconciliation.

I am not a radical person, I was not raised that way, and the words feel funny in my mouth. I only understand a fraction of all the possible arguments and counter-arguments and I'm only a small voice and a tiny cog in this machine. Yet, I do believe that the best way to change the system is from within. This is where the policies are made, the laws drafted, the files managed; it's where the human beings are on the front lines of the Crown-Aboriginal relationship making small daily decisions. I would like to believe that it only takes a few open-minded, sympathetic, properly placed people to change things, to change

guide into the world of my ancestors, I immersed myself in studying largely non-Aboriginal views of Aboriginal Canadian history, politics, and law.

What I know then about being Indian I learned through school and through my job as a federal government lawyer interpreting and applying the *Indian Act* and other legislation applicable to Aboriginal people and their lands. I know about laws and history and politics and I have a unique perspective on legal theory, case law, and government policies as they relate to Indians. All this knowledge has been mostly book knowledge, mostly paper knowledge.

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minds, to change perspectives. I try myself to understand others' perspectives so that I can understand the systemic impulses. Possibly, if we share our common frustrations, we can learn patience and tolerance together. I don't want to be a spokesperson yet I don't want to be invisible; I don't want to be isolated or silenced, yet I don't want to be a government puppet; it's a tough road, requiring skills that I know I haven't fully developed.

In my personal life I want to be able to give my children something more than a culture of loss and legacy of colonialism, of residential school trauma, of a *kohkum* they barely knew, of traditions that their mother lacks the ability and genuineness to guide them in. For what do I know of Native culture and traditions?

What I know of being Native I learned from growing up and going to school in a mixed Native and non-Native rural setting. We lived in a small farming community and commuted to school in the neighbouring mostly First Nations village and then later to high school in the mostly non-Native populated town. Though I knew my mother was Native, the kids at school categorized me as *mooniyaw* or "white-man" because my closest friends were non-Native. I felt more comfortable with the non-Native kids but I knew in the back of my mind that I had closer ties with the Native families of the community; many of their mothers and aunts knew my mother's family and even babysat my brother and me when we were smaller. Unsure of how to make my way in the world, I soon formed my own identity in academics. Rather than being known as the white kid or the Métis girl. I was known as the smarty-pants.

What I know then of being Aboriginal I learned from books and media and my post-secondary education. I acquired an intellectual understanding of issues and theories in a pan-Aboriginal context. As I did not have a

Words on a page provide refuge but also unintended distance from people and community.

The only things I know about being First Nations I learned from being a member of my mother's Band and having off-reserve voting rights. My mother's people in northern Alberta went from identifying themselves as the Lubicon Lake Band to the Lubicon Lake First Nation. Now, as part of the neighbouring Woodland Cree First Nation who received a settlement from the federal government in 1989, I receive referendum packages in the mail whenever there is an important community issue. On my admittance to the Alberta Bar and Law Society, the Band Council sent a representative who presented me with handcrafted gifts, which I display in my office as a reminder of how close and how distant I am from my mother's people.

Similarly what I know about having Treaty status I learned from receiving certain benefits such as education funding and healthcare. Though these provisions are in the Treaties, the kind of membership and benefits they bring are government-driven and are not meaningful to my identity search. I still have no real connections to the people and the community of my First Nation. Over the years in my search I have found connections with other similarly situated people, students, researchers. I have formed bonds with a like-minded and accessible group, the Métis.

What I know about being Métis, I learned from my new husband and my friends who belong to this wonderful strong and proud community who have merged two cultures. I feel accepted here and at home. I will continue to try to learn what I can about my Cree culture and background. I have the opportunity to do so through my mother's extended family, uncles, and aunts and cousins. Depending on where my journey takes me I may always feel like a paper Indian, and I may never be able to fully reconcile all the parts of my Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal

identity, but with time and through building connections I hope I can become more comfortable with those parts of my identity that were lost.

When my brother and I were separated from our mother, it was not only the loss of a parent that we had to live with, it was the loss of a cohesive identity. It was a part of ourselves that was not understood and not encouraged by our non-Native grandparents. And what about my mother's identity? What about her story? Who is qualified to tell it? From the day she left us, everything that went wrong in my brother's life and my life, our mother would feel guilty about. My divorce, my brother's health problems, his dissatisfaction with his job, my bouts of unhappiness. Besides this self-imposed guilt, there were many other obstacles and challenges my mother faced in her life, some of her own making, others arising from the unlucky fact that she was a Native person in a certain period of history in her country.

In the end, I only had the opportunity of knowing my mother for a short period in both our lives. I will have to learn how to negotiate this grief. This mourning, though not completely unfamiliar, will not necessarily have a recognizable end. We've lost a shared future—a future of family and life events, weddings, births, celebrations, accomplishments. She did not raise me, I was denied this. She cannot now be my adult parent and my direct link to a lost culture; this is denied as well. Perhaps paper Indians are only accorded this legacy of denial and culture of loss.

I and other women with similar experiences must parent ourselves; we must deal with our own loss and the dysfunctions in our families and communities. I wanted a *kohkum* for my children. I wanted so many things that were taken from me before I even knew I wanted them. Perhaps that is why paper Indians, like me, choose to live in a paper world. We find it difficult sometimes to live in a world where nothing is made up, where everything is real, where people suffer and children hurt and mothers die.

I search for meaning in my mother's life story, in her Nativeness, in mine. I must learn what is needed of me. My voice wavers with the weight of it. My tears blur my vision. My anger betrays me. My eyes strain to see who is friend. My ears listen between the lines. My hands work for answers to questions posed at the dawn of my country. My skills and my intelligence guide me through the landscape of misconceptions, mistakes, mismanagement. My quest is for a kind of justice previously unknown in this country, a justice that honours our parents' journeys and gives our children hope.

I was three when my mother left the first time. I was 35 when she left for good. She was too young. Too damaged. Too innocent. And sadly in this post-colonial world, her experience is all too common.

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**T. S. LA PRATT**

### **Niso-Haiku**

Grandmother moon sings  
Your Indian name.  
The red road is clear.

*T. S. La Pratt's poetry appears earlier in this volume.*



*Judy Anderson, "Coyote Women Singing," oil on canvas, 8' x 8', 2007.*

*Coyote's Trick (pg. 51) is an installation about one of my spiritual journeys. The four directions and four circles converge on the heart of the show, a woman's big drum. In Anishnabeg spiritual belief, the drum is the heartbeat of Mother Earth bringing women together to heal and celebrate. The medicines on the drum are women's medicines, the photographs show that women are the support of this drum and the empty chairs suggest that women and children are needed at the drum. Men are also encouraged to sit at the drum to show that they are also needed to support women and children. The paintings embody lessons that have been taught through two traditional Elders as well as holding personal experiences and stories. Most profoundly, this show represents Coyote's (the Trickster character in traditional Aboriginal storytelling) involvement in my life and the tricks played on me leading to the creation of this work.*