

# Lived Experiences of an Aboriginal Feminist Transforming the Curriculum

by Fyre Jean Graveline

*Raconter des histoires est une méthode d'enseignement ancestrale. L'auteure, une conteuse, utilise cette méthode pour exprimer ce qu'elle sait, ce dont elle est*

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*They had hired  
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but they really  
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*consciente en tant qu'éducatrice féministe autochtone concernant la perception, les pratiques et la pédagogie mises en valeur par le système d'éducation contemporain dominé par les hommes blancs. Elle établit les liens qui existent entre son histoire, sa voix, ses expériences personnelles et les nôtres et elle nous raconte deux petites histoires qu'elle utilise pour enseigner.*

*In the process of storytelling, speaking and listening refer to the realities that do not involve just the imagination. The speech is seen, heard, smelled, tasted and touched...every gesture, every word involves our past, present and future.... My story, no doubt is me, but it is also, no doubt, older than me. (Trin Minh-Ha 121-123)*

I grew up in the Northern bush country of Manitoba—harsh, untamed, isolated country. As the rebellions and the resistance movements of the 1800s were squashed by the hanging of Louis Reil in 1885, my people were scattered South to the States, and North to the Shield. The Metis are a Nation in diaspora, as are the Acadians of the Eastern seaboard and the Blacks of Africa.

Located throughout the Prairies there were/are pockets of Metis culture, resisting, remembering, retelling the stories of Louis Reil, or Gabriel Dumont, of Jean-Batiste Lagimodiere, my relations, my Elders, and models of Resistance as a Survival

Strategy, Resistance as a Culture. Last year, I attended the first large reunion of the Metis at the Forks; the meeting of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, the old historical trading grounds of the Red River Valley and location of the Red River Settlement. I attended the story telling circles....I listened...I laughed....I cried.... We began to tell the stories of my family, of our Elders, my Aunties, my Grandmother, and my Mother, especially.

Culture is not only the ancestral stories told and retold through the ages, it is also the day to day living out of our lives, our identities, as we are embodied. These stories are excerpts from a collection I am writing about my struggle as a Metis woman, teacher, activist, located within the patriarchal structures of post-secondary educational institutions in Canada.

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One most notable teaching story, one I'm only learning to tell, because of how Hard, how Strong a Feeling I have for it,...the Trickster tale, the dream tale, of a Native run, Native controlled School, done "Our Way," based on Native traditions, administratively and pedagogically. Set in a beautiful, Sacred valley nestled in the precious mounds of Our Mother.

I dreamed this job, although I couldn't see my face, and the vision gave me a chill, chill wind blew through me. I thought/decided/wanted it to be just the fierce wind blowing off the Atlantic. I accepted the surface picture...the lovely valley...the dream...I took a Risk...the Native controlled college was Not...the students were Natives, but it was bureaucratically White...patriarchally white...this was the biggest Heart-Ache, the biggest disappointment of the dream...and as I uncovered/unmasked the oppressive relations to myself/with others, my

classroom became a site of this struggle, of this learning/teaching.

I was teaching the theory of Oppression, around the "Medicine Wheel"...it took all morning.... We had a double class that day, I began the afternoon: Now, does anybody have an example we can work with...a few were mentioned...one woman spoke at length...she Knew about Oppression, and she Had a Story to Tell.

Here she was, a single parent, a full-time student, an Indigenous Native, who worked part-time in the office for the institution. That day at noon, when she went in for her check, she was told that she was laid off. She Was Laid Off, because her recent victory as student council president, made it a conflict of interest. Conflict of Who's Interests? she asked. You can not possibly have Time to fulfill the Duties of both Studies and Politics, and juggle Paid work, Especially being a Mother and all, She Was Told. She protested, I Need the job. Why should They decide what is best for me, anyway? Why should They Decide? Why Should They? Should They?

It was a classic example. A Teachable moment...I listened respectfully to the story as the Gift that it was, and when she was done, I went to the board, we began to Work. If we take this model, the Wheel of Oppression, we developed this morning, I Said, and apply this problem, what do we get: We worked all afternoon. Everybody was energized about it.

It was all drawn out...right there on the board...the sociopolitical, gender, race, class, and historical context of her Personal Problem. We strategized then, given the analysis, how could the picture be changed? How could she get what she needed, who would she have to talk to and how? We/she developed the strategy—how to act on her own behalf. She felt the support of her peers. She

did lobby the Administration, and she did get her job back, she got her job back.

A beautiful lesson. I was proud, proud of my work. A well worked through, clear and compelling example, right in their Daily Lived Experience....with analysis, action, and a happy ending...well almost...

Untillater, I heard...I heard...There was someone Lurking Outside the Open Window as the lesson progressed, a "Spy" from the "White" Administration...who reported what little she had seen and heard...out of context.

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*I was acting "as if" our ways—circles, stories, rituals—could be used as pedagogy.*

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What I taught then, and in what form, in my classroom, became contested terrain. They had hired a "Native" teacher, but they really didn't want one. They wanted an "apple," a token. They were building their lives and careers on their role as Great White Leaders of the Native Education Movement, a pattern which I had learned to recognize and resist, Recognize and Resist, through my other "separatist" political efforts.

They (the administration) began to mention to me that Maybe I was unhappy there. I was unhappy? That maybe I wasn't Comfortable There, not "Fitting In." I agreed. Not Happy, Not Happy. I was Dis-Enchanted. My workload was too heavy...too heavy...and Things, Things...were not as they had appeared, No. But I was surviving, thank you, and even having good days, or at least good moments in my teaching. I was making nice connections, good friends in the community and learning/teaching lots and lots, inside the classroom and out, out.

In a short time, the message went from I was unhappy to I was leaving...I Was Leaving?...I Had Resigned....I Was Leaving... Maybe Fired... What?...I was leaving because of conflict/complaints from/with students? What? I was confused. What students? When? I was dizzy, I was

sick...It was all happening too fast. Who? Who? Who said? What? To Who? When? Why? Where? What? Who? Who? This is too much for me...What to do? What to do? Grandmothers help me...What to do?

I was acting "as if" I was in a Native environment, where Our ways—circles, stories, rituals could be used as pedagogy, and our History, Experiences and Traditions as content to understand the white patriarchal institutions of social work and education. I Felt Safe. I was Open with my Politics, Open with my Beliefs, my Practices...Open...Teaching from my Heart...

I was Unprepared for the Backlash of White Male Authority...and how the Words and Actions of myself and my students were Twisted and Used against me, Twisted and Used against the students, Twisted and Used against our Traditions. I could not rest...I Could Not Rest....Students were turning against students as gossip fueled the division between administration/students/me. Mostly I withdrew, I withdrew and listened, and waited, and waited, and burned sweetgrass every day, Every Day. I was hurt.

I did go out, to see Elija Harper when he came to town to speak...an inspiration...After, I saw the Elder downtown, a beautiful woman who "worked" at the same Campus, who we lived near when we first got to town....How are you? How Are You? she asked, touching my arm, Concerned. What to do? What to do? I asked, Confused. What to do? If you call a circle, I'll come, she told me.

So I did. I put word out to the community: students, staff, administration, family/community relations, Elders. I especially invited some Medicine Keepers, to Help with the Circle, as I felt too shaken, too empty...I knew I would not be able to Properly Attend to the Process, to give Full Energy to the Circle. I would need to be attended.

Finally, The Day Came.... Everybody was all in a Circle, about 50 in all, a Big Circle, most of my students, some community supporters, and

some staff members. A Medicine Keeper, the husband of a student of mine, a friend, came and burned a Special Sage Smudge in their Traditional Way to Open the Circle. A Pipe Carrier, my student and friend, brought his Medicine Pipe. He offered Blessings to the Four Directions and passed the Pipe giving us each the opportunity to create our Own Circle of Personal Responsibility Within the Greater Circle today.

A Talking Feather was passed to the Elder, who spoke first, as is the Rite of the Elder. She spoke from her Heart, giving us her example, of her Concern for me, for her grandchildren—my students, for her community, for the School, for the beautiful valley that is their home...showing the Interconnectedness of all of us in the circle Today. She said We should Speak Openly of Our Hearts and to Voice our Part in the Story, so that we could all see the Web of Interconnectedness holding us together during this time of struggle.

Moving to the East, in a clockwise position, the Traditionalist who burned the Smudge, spoke next about the rules of Circle. "Everyone speaks in turn," he said, the circle going round, and starting round again till everyone has spoken what needs to be said....When I come to circle I talk about my heart...this is what we talk about here. We talk about our own

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*I was unprepared for the backlash of white male authority.*

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selves, and what we know, each of us." And he did...and we all did...

As the circle progressed, it seemed to be bogging down, bogging down...two people had Spoken and Left the Circle, Left the Circle...Without Listening...Without Listening to the Others Speak. This is considered Very Rude behaviour...

And the Medicine Woman came

with her Eagle Feather Fan, and she Swept the Air Clear, she swirled and twirled, swirled and twirled, and she Flew around the Circle and Moved the Air and changed it and Charged it...the pain lessened..... ssssshhhh.....the air lightened.... ahhh.....I/we could breathe easier... ahhhh.....we all felt better.... She worked as we worked...she worked as we worked....we worked as she worked....to create new positive energy

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*"Circle Talk"  
creates space for  
"First Voices" to  
speak with power.*

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out of this horrible, horrible time, out of this struggle. Let us each learn the lessons that we need to know, so that we can walk on our path with clear knowingness of our past experience.

We all talked, for as long as we were able, As Long As We Were Able...the Energy was ebbing...YAWN.....time went on...I/We were getting Tired. Then, my student and friend, wife of the Pipe-carrier, and Mother of three of my other students, had the Talking Feather. She spoke the Collective Consciousness, the Voice of the Circle: I'm tired, I need a hug. I want to close the circle...Does anyone here still need to speak? She held out the Feather...No one needed to speak...All had been said, All Had Been Said, for now...

The closing began, She turned to her daughter and hugged, moved on to her partner, and all around the circle, as she did the circle followed her, her daughter, then her partner, then all of us in turn, all circling, all circling, all hugging, hugging and talking, talking and crying, crying and laughing, and the Medicine Woman was Flying....

As you face each person to Connect: hug, handshake, speak, any or all, you say whatever you need to say or do, what You Need to Say or Do, and move on. Then as the circle, circles back, each person faces each other person once to talk, and once to listen. It was beautiful...we felt Community in that Circle....Community that I carry in my Heart today.

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Many of these Sacred tools I have Carried myself and used in my classroom: the Smudge, the Talking Feather. I Call the Directions, I love Circle Work....I Love Circle Work...I had been applying it as pedagogy, had used it in political collective building, had experienced in healing ceremonies, and conflict resolution for others, but this Circle was For Me, With Me, Intimately About Me, My Self-in-Relation to Others, my Sense of my Self as a Person, as a Traditionalist, as a Teacher, was called into question.

I stood strong on tradition and called on support from that base. In my Greatest Need, I felt the Power of that Circle, that Collective Knowing...of generating a Circle with that much Help: the Smudge, the Pipe, the Elders, the Medicine Keepers, the Feathers, and all the Family members who knew the Power of the Circle, and Knew through Experience, how to Intensify it, through words...the power of Voice...to Speak from the Heart...and Silence...to listen...to pay Mindful Attention, to really Hear what each person has to say, what Each Person has to say.

The Circle remains a Central pedagogical foundation of my classroom practice—"Circle Talk" a beautiful way to allow Voice, creating space for "First Voices" to speak with Power, with Authority of Daily Lived Experience, as an Act of Resistance. Circle is a place where All Voices Can Speak, if they wish to. Un-interrupted, Un-analyzed, Un-argued, Un-challenged.

It is Aboriginal belief that, We All have a Story to Tell, but I've learned, especially since using Circle in mainstream universities, that not All Voices/stories have the same teachability: not All are rooted in the same Consciousness, History, Experience. Sometimes, giving Voice, giving Voice to my identity, my politics, my Aboriginal consciousness, paradoxically, can be a lesson in silencing, of me or others. In the classroom, having circled, smudged, called the directions, and opened the Talking

Circle, I am in "Aboriginal consciousness," but in a Western University. OOPS...can be dangerous ground....

I did one day, in asserting my Circle Voice, inadvertently Silence many of my students. I had been feeling upset/angry/hurt about how Class was proceeding, and had decided that rather than Swallow It, and try to continue to affect change in subtle ways, I would "Speak Out" about my feelings In Circle, as is the Aboriginal Way. Students were being, in my estimation, Highly Disrespectful, and were generally Not Paying Attention to the process. While I recognized this to be in part related to their Western Consciousness, I felt little Effort was being made to even Understand the Expectations of Circle, and saw this Ignore-ance as an Act of Privilege.

I had spoken twice about it in Circle, but the message had not been heard. I began to discuss it with Others..." They are Just Like That," I heard..." It's not Just Your Class." I knew Respect was a much needed lesson in this Community. I prepared a "speak-out," and during "Circle Time," "Spoke From My Heart" about my Feelings: about how I Had Been Experiencing class; How my/our History was contributing to my Feelings/Experience; how I had been Dreaming about the Class; and the Ways I felt They were Showing Disrespect to My/Our Ancestral Traditions. I let them Know that I was Beginning to Feel like we were Appropriating Tradition, rather than Honouring It, and if attitudes/behaviour did not change in Specific Ways I would continue to cover content, but We would not be using Circle.

My "speak-out" was a very profound experience for everyone, including me. Students talked about it for weeks...it was the talk of the school...except in class. The following week, I passed the Feather, giving opportunity for Voice. Out of thirty some, only a few spoke, the Black and Aboriginal students, and one white male...none of the others. They were silenced. I was surprised, but did not

respond except to say, "I did not mean to silence you."

Outside of Class, they talked and talked...they talked to last Circle's students, to Aboriginal students. What did she mean? What did she mean? Maybe She's Just Angry, and Taking it Out On Us, some said. She's right, I did it myself, some confessed. Some students understood that Silence was necessary to learn to practice Proper Conduct in Circle.

One student wrote me a poem, and agreed to share it with you. Some continued to be their same old Rude selves.

As I reflect on it, I first thought maybe what I had

said was Profound, so provoked Silence. Maybe it was, I wrote it down, so I still have it...But what was Really profound for me was realizing: What Silenced Them was not necessarily My Aboriginal "Voice" teaching them respect for Tradition, but the Power Invested in the Professorial Voice. That's what was important to the students—that I, the Professor, Had Said It....that's what made it school talk....

Being Silenced often as a student, had very much affected my teaching style, my vision of "good" teaching...so, I was shocked. Shocked at Myself to be thinking about Silence/Silencing as a positive thing...a good lesson. I have since contextualized the idea, and know it to be rooted in Aboriginal pedagogy. Not the Act of Silencing, but the Power of Silence. Of quietly Observing, Not Questioning...or Asking Why...why? why? just sitting quietly...usually out in nature...and being In silence, learning by observation.

I am learning to recognize "cultural difference" between students and myself, to be more clear about Expectations...before the Conflict arises. I am learning from my teaching...lessons about life...about Who-I-Am-In-Relation...to my stu-

dents, to my professorial authority, to my Aboriginality, to my feminism.

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This is the way I understand these Experiences to be...my History to be. Others might understand it to be different...and tell the stories different. These stories are mine, my Voice....I've told them true...true to me. True to what I know....what my ancestors knew...they told me. I experienced it...reflected on it...and I told them, the stories. I Teach and I learn, I learn and I teach...I tell and I listen, both the teller and the listener are necessary to the story.

We are all Interconnected in the Great Web of Life...Come, Speak with me...share your Knowingness, your Story, your Voice, your Experience...Speak your thoughts, your desires, your feelings, your actions....Tell me, What is Our Community? What is Our Diversity....Speak.

One student, Maura Donovan, wrote this poem right after my speak out, and saved it for me till after the course was over. She has agreed to submit it with this story for publication.

So  
you've decided  
to tell it to us  
like it is

Someone said  
Courage  
is acting in the face of fear...  
I'm sure fear  
wasn't the only  
thing you felt—  
the only barrier to action  
...but perhaps one of many

Well, you know  
it's hard to hear  
And I'm sad, defensive, guilty...  
will it sound patronizing  
If I say  
I'm glad you did it  
Thankful you have the courage, conviction, strength  
to say what white people—me in-

cluded— need to hear  
Thankful you are willing  
to do this work with us...  
as oppressive and angering as it can be  
...as we can be...  
because  
it needs to be done  
And  
I'm strengthened and humbled  
by your feelings, your words, your  
actions

We talk of white privilege  
And yes I do have it, use it, live it  
But it's a privilege to be here in this  
room  
To be part of this  
To be challenged  
changed  
enriched  
and challenged again

I guess this is what I have to say  
right now  
when I tell it to you  
like it is  
for me.

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