First Nations Education:
A Rationale For Centralizing Art, Nature and Democracy in the Public School Curriculum

By

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THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

In the Faculty
of
Education

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SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
Summer, 2007

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Abstract

This thesis begins with and draws inspiration from my own interactions with the natural world, particularly through walking. As I walked, I began to look at the things around me and discovered that nature rewards attention. Indeed, the natural world seemed to start speaking to me as I enjoyed being outdoors. Everything began to appear purposeful and alive, human like me. The beautiful inspiration in nature suffused me with a desire to create. Poetry, drawings and paintings, as well as photography and story all became ways for me to be close to things. This work was healing as a sense of belonging became stronger for me as a result. I am not separate, cut off or alone in the world, but a part of things.

This sense of inclusion for First Nations people in Canada is desperately lacking today. Belonging to a beautiful, worthwhile place is a vital foundation for every human being. Without such a context of personal empowerment we cannot develop fully as painful feelings of disconnection atrophy our natural curiosity and innate intelligence. An education based on the principles of artistic engagement with nature and self-governance has the capacity to be both healing and empowering for First Nations children. Such an education provides a place of authentic context, engaging the creative intelligence of a person in a real, day-to-day democratic community. I feel such a vision offers hope to any person not currently served by public schools today.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this paper to the mysterious life and power that exists in every being, and to the innate creative intelligence all of us possess to experience this connective force as whole, dignified and belonging people.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my teachers, Stuart Richmond, Celeste Snowber and Allan MacKinnon. Your great wisdom about life in the form of the respect, kindness and justice you’ve shown me has developed my self-confidence. I will ever be grateful for the privilege of working with each of you.

Thank you to Alex Sainas for encouraging me to teach again.

Thank you to Paula Roseheart for suggesting I apply to the Art Education program at SFU in the first place.

Thank you to Ian Hooley for so many fruitful discussions, books and articles. Without your support, this thesis would not exist.

Thank you to Bruce Cadorette of Advantage Graphix. I never could have completed the visual formatting component of this thesis without your generous help and expertise.

Thank you to my fine colleagues who have completed the Art Education program at SFU with me. You have given me a sense of belonging and affection in life.

My recognition for this to Vandy Britton, Julia Clark, Bonnie Fordyce, Reg
LaPlante, Larry Davids, Marci Vanick, Debra Melville, Ivet Formanek, Sianna McPherson, Connie McGregor, Claire Murray, Sheree Peacock, Margaret Peterson, Jodi Proznik, Susan Raposo and Charles Scott.

Thank you to my wonderful friends at West 3rd Avenue and Blenheim Street. In our daily exchanges, each of you fill my heart with the joyful feeling that I live among people who care for me. My recognition for this to Deena Kelley, Nanci Ahern, Ingrid Hauss, Lauren, Karen Linkovsky, Pat Parsons, daughters Sveya and Tessa and partner Bruce, Carolyn Letourneau and Dominic Lessard.

Thank you to my encouraging friends who I am lucky to see so often in my neighbourhood. Diana Kubicek, Gordy, Christina, Tanya and Troy and their beautiful daughter Sophia, Lorraine and Michael, and all the wonderful people who make the Blenheim Street Cafe an exceptionally friendly place, I thank you for your support.

Finally, thank you to myself, Amie Wolf, for being such a courageous creator. Your capacity for invention, self-reliance and personal renewal is a tribute to the magical, transformative powers of life.
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Part One: In Full Bloom

The Garden Appears When We Look
Introduction

Native people traditionally rely upon their personal knowledge of nature for survival. This partly explains why all Aboriginal cultures are so artistically prolific. Such abundantly expressive conversations comprise the spiritual foundation of First Nations culture, where personal power is the linking of one’s thoughts and actions to the wider world. This linking is forged through dream, story, song, dance, ritual and visual symbol. In this way, Native art is not ultimately an object or a thing, but a form of knowledge. Indeed, it is the very sacred source of an individual’s necessary relationship with nature.

Despite the destructive impact of our technology, the world is still alive with meaning. But how might we remember the lessons this natural earth has to teach us? The wisdom of our ancestors, people who lived in harmony with nature, is still available for us to know. However, “rather than looking to objectify these traditions, we must search for ways to subjectify them into the language of our own discourse” (Ridington, 2006, p. 245). It is up to us to find creative ways to live and experience these valuable traditions. For this task, scholarly writing conventions are not enough. Just as people in traditional cultures relied on the symbolic languages of arts based communications, re-learning the teachings of nature may be achieved through the application of human creative intelligence.
In Part One of this thesis, I document my own art-based work toward enlivening a relationship with nature for myself. As I looked at things outside of me, I made some surprising discoveries. Most of all I became infused with a desire to create. The world of nature inspired me to invent through song, story, poetry, photography, drawing and painting. It was as if the different forms of art allowed me to explore different sides of my developing relationship with things. I feel that *Into the Lively Air* and *Conversations* are examples of how Native traditions and ways of seeing the world can easily be alive in modern life today.

In Part Two of this thesis, I talk about how the Indian way of knowing through a spiritual, expressive and personal connection with nature ought to be a central component of the public school curriculum. Essentially, this is a proposal for education as a form of dialogue. I go on to look at how much monologue remains in our culture today and how this causes Native people in particular to suffer. Finally, I discuss the monologue of schooling and propose some ideas on how First Nations curriculum might be changed so as to be more culturally suitable. Ultimately, I suggest that cultural sensitivity is not a matter of superficial change, such as including examples of Native culture in a textbook, but a matter of foundational change at the core levels of institutional power. Therefore, a First Nations education strategy involves the democratization of the current public school system in Canada. I conclude this thesis by detailing what this might look like.
Part One, #1: Into the Lively Air -
Starting a Relationship with Nature

"Thought and heart are already with us" (Whorf, 1956, 60).
Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me, so take the lively air
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.


This morning I wake slowly from a dream. I am lying on cold snow, curled up on my side. A presence keeps me warm, spooning me from behind. She slips her small hands into mine. “Walk,” she says. “Walk.”

Later, when I’m awake, I consider the voice that spoke to me so powerfully through a dream. Walk. The message is compelling. I must do it. Yet I don’t know where I’m supposed to walk to or what I’m supposed to find. Following the voice in my dream feels like taking a leap into the unknown.

In the evening I go out for my first walk. I begin from where I am, with one stride out my apartment door. I wander around my seaside neighbourhood in Vancouver until I reach a small park by the ocean. It is a bright, still winter night. The lights of the city are reflected on the water and it’s a full moon. Looking out across the ocean I take a deep breath of cold, salty air and stretch my arms out wide. It’s so beautiful outside.

At home, I sketch a few of the lovely things I’ve observed while walking outdoors.
I see a tree against the night sky,

a rock in tall grasses,

cargo ships at sea,
and a full moon.

As I do my little sketches, I'm discouraged to realize I haven't looked very closely at things. I can't draw very well without having detailed images to recall. I promise myself that I will go for another walk tomorrow and pay better attention to the things I see.
Looking at the Moon

The story of the stars
I want to be it
Forget the telling
I want to know
the tall tales
of the grasses
by heart
and be
the fullness I see
looking
at the moon.

Before bed, I curl up on my couch with David Whyte's wonderful novel, *Crossing the Unknown Sea*. "Self knowledge can be understood as an outcome," he writes, "a bounty that comes from paying close attention to an astonishing world" (2001, 74). What might bubble up in me as a result of looking carefully at the things in my own neighborhood? Whyte promises a bounty of self-knowledge may come as a result. In the dictionary, bounty is defined as a reward that is given generously. I am excited to continue walking tomorrow. Wonderful things are waiting to be discovered.
I walk to the same seaside park I visited yesterday. I go out in the evening again because, somehow, I find things more visible in the dark. I want to give myself over to looking at the world outside myself. With determination I examine the patterns of a leaf and strive to memorize the way the branches of a tree connect. I study the full moon, the clear sky, the still ocean. I forget myself. As I disappear the world appears. It's quite a pleasant experience. Like a magic breath my outward cast attention melts my worries away.

“Be awake, listen, forget yourself. There is something out there, other, it's strangeness beautiful, wooing, unnameable, delectable” (Lilburn, 1999, 12).

**Between Worlds**

The burden disappears along the way
like snow melting
on the lawn
Odd patches only remain
full of holes
from the rain
Soon, they too will be
gone.
I see many puff-ball like orbs full of seeds on a vine,

furry buds sprouting from the smooth bark of magnolia tree

a bird’s nest secure in the arms of a tree,

and smooth, dark brown bark.
However I might try, studying things with my eyes does not seem to bring me closer to knowing them. Instead, what I’m paying close attention to becomes increasingly unfamiliar. New. As if I’d never seen it before. There is ever more to know about a thing. My looking is taking me in the opposite direction of knowing with certainty.

I cannot think of this park by the sea as my place. From where I stand, beneath bare winter tree branches, I am a small, curious visitor, here for a short time only. This park is the place of the great darkening sky, the vast ocean, plentiful grasses and the full moon. As my earthly location looks more and more mysterious, I wonder about myself. Who am I in this place I do not own?

While preparing for bed, I am gripped with a stunning recognition of my ignorance of things. It’s not easy to absorb my smallness. My mind wants to be great and perceives not knowing as a shortcoming. I’ve learned that I should be confident and in control. This is success. I feel contempt for myself. How can I not really know my own world, where I live, at all? My heart hurts. Tears are in my eyes. I’m shocked as grief floods through me.

“Weep at your separation from what is. Such mourning is perhaps what knowing the world and being in it, with awareness, is” (Lilburn, 1999, 22).
Heart Knitting in a Dream

In the night
filled with sorrows
I fight lying down
with trembling heart
to remember
what I have no memory of
but that I know
I have forgotten.
With eyes closed
I knit my heart together
The hollow in a rock
worn by the waves
I warm this place
with my bare hands
in a dream.

When I finally fall asleep, I dream I am wearing a sweater with a ring of red hearts knit into each sleeve.
"As the mind leans into the darkness of God it is slendered by awe, reduced to a good confusion. This is knowing" (Lilburn, 1999, 14).

In the morning, it literally dawns on me that seeing my not seeing is at least accurate. However discouraging, this realization that I know so little of the vast and soulful world is, simply, true. To feel small is the result of trying to understand something that is greater than my understanding. This is a real human experience. Confusion, however awkward it is to feel, is a sign of authenticity. Perhaps this is what Rilke meant when he said, “We know little, but that we must trust in what is difficult is a certainty that will never abandon us” (1986, 68). I decide to call this state of confusion, which I’ve learned is actually a form of awareness, Dancing Clarity.

Dancing Clarity

From the blur
Dancing Clarity
All things may come,
she says.
Each thing
in its own wisdom
Each thing
itself
on its own terms
in its own time.

By listening to the steady sounds of the sea, watching the tiny bird in the branches of the tree and feeling the way the wind is blowing, I’ve developed an inkling of the world as it might be without me. There are other things, wild and separate from me, living their own lives. I have no control here. This causes confusion because my mind makes sense of things in terms of what I may or may not be causing to happen. And in one way I am causing things to happen in my life. But in another way I am a tiny dot set in the context of a much greater, unfathomably complex universe, a little being unconditionally sustained in the immense living web of all life. Conceiving this is tremendously moving for me. I must forgive myself for not being God. I must allow myself to grasp my smallness.

Forgiving Little Eyes

Glad am I to notice
a story not my own
Carried on the breath
of other things

petals
greeting the tips
of the sun
and empty garden pots
day after day

Such a profound wealth given
all the world to love
through forgiving little eyes.

Perhaps I shouldn’t worry so much about knowing or not knowing thing. Perhaps
I should just enjoy the feelings I experience living as a human being in such a
wonderful world.
“We think by feeling. What is there to know?” -Theodore Roethke, The Waking (1953)

Over the weekend I immerse myself in the sensual world of walking. It’s very pleasant. The gifts of buds and bark, lush leaves and canopies of trees, green tunnels and eagles deep in the sky, bird nests and flowing waves of lilting chirps keep me awake at night. It seems I’ve become like a solar panel filled with the wild energy of nature and this power continues to radiate out from me at night. I just can’t suppress the memories of all the beautiful things I have touched to my lips and felt with my fingertips during the day. There is no way I can sleep feeling like this.

I put my kettle on for tea and as it comes to a boil it calls, “Eeeeel!” I’m boiling over too, simmering with love for the vast and gorgeous world. My body tingles and my mind is completely at a loss for applying words to this feeling. Yet these feelings speak. Or rather, they are a place for receiving speaking. A vital collecting place is growing in me, a place that can tune into the talkative stars or the excitement of baby birds an hour before sunrise. It appears that I am so alone in this world, but I’m sensing now that I’m not alone at all. Looking, I realize, is a language more universal than I could have imagined. I have said hello with my gaze and things, all sorts of things, are calling back to me. This is a profound comfort I’ve never experienced before.
“The singularity of existence is only half of the story. All of our singularities are ever in conscious and unconscious conversation with everything else” (Whyte, 2001, 107).

I want to continue this aliveness, this conversation I’ve somehow started with things. Now that it has started, I am sparked with a desire to create. As I have looked at living things they have come into me and I am alive with a need to express it. Words won’t do and are too particular. Art seems like the natural way to go on from here. This is life itself - a picture, a poem, a song, a dance. Perhaps this is the start of the bounty David Whyte promised, that reward given generously in return for paying attention to the world outside. It certainly seems like it.

“Contemplation is knowledge impoverished and embarrassed but that keeps going, toppling into adoration” (Lilburn, 1999, p. 28).

**Ambassador for Beauty**

All the world to love

Let the good flow through me

and let me tell about it

the heart of human creativity
Let me be a light funnel
and call love by name
so that all might recognize it
and so I might not forget it

For at the end of my life
when my bodily efforts
on this earth
fade and die away

it will be this reservoir of beauty
I've set myself upon
which will radiate onward
lastingly as the sun

giving me hope at the end
and diamond strength
my painted home around the moon
my story about the place among the grass

my carving of a shelter in the air
forever lasting
waiting even now
to receive me
Part One, #2: Conversations - Exploring the Connection Between Art, Nature and the Thought World of Native American Indians.

"In the heart of things, thought thinking itself out from an inner realm"

(Whorf, 1956, 60).
At night, I dream of shapes. I am somehow among these pieces, adrift in many flowing veils, hardly separating the worlds. I am knitting the past into the present with midnight needle and star thread. A light shines over me. It's telling me, "Wake up, wake up!" I try to, but I can't. The star is extremely powerful and bright. I am very afraid. When I do finally force myself awake, I feel its presence with me in the room. The light has come with me into my waking, great and unfamiliar.

"I wake to sleep and take my waking slow. I feel my fate in what I cannot fear. I learn by going where I have to go." - Theodore Roethke, *The Waking* (1953)
Let go into the mystery
Let yourself go
You’ve go to open up your heart
That’s all I know
There is no other place to be
You’ve got to dance and sing
and be joyous and give thanks
Open up your arms to the sun
and let yourself go.

- Van Morrison. *Poetic Champions*, CD

1. **Conversations with Shells through Collage**

I decide to begin my creative adventure toward connecting with things in the world by making a collage of natural items. On a walk by Jericho beach I select broken shells and twigs that interest me. A piece of bone especially captivates me. I pick these items out of the cold earth and drop down into a feeling of contentment. As my senses become engaged I inhabit my body more fully. The coldness in my fingertips, the wind in my ears, the tangy smell of the shells; I am here, engaged and relaxed at the same time. The usual things that preoccupy
my thoughts, such as what to do next and so on, sink to the bottom and
disappear out the other end. My mind smoothes out.

"If you trust in Nature, in what is simple in Nature, then everything will become
easier for you" (Rilke, 1986, 33).

At home I empty my jacket pockets of various sand covered things and rinse
them off at the sink in a strainer. Setting the twigs, shells and bone out on a tea
towel to dry, I start to imagine how I might like to arrange these items in a
collage.

**Various shells collage with pencil**
Rocks collage with pencil

Clamshells collage with pencil
I spend days arranging the items I've collected into different compositions. I look and look at the pieces of shell, knowing them in many ways as I place them in a variety of positions. These shells are incredible. Each time I go to them I find a series of new ways in which they seem to fit together. They change with the light and look different at different times of day. It's mysterious and magic. I don't know what I'm doing or why. But it seems wonderful. I feel alive.

"The world should be possibility or it dies in our hands" (Whyte, 2001, 62).

These broken pieces of shell were once whole. Now, they are in stages of decomposition. Some shells are just shards, others are still hinged together. The shells each tell a story of their own which is part of the big story. I am an expression, a part of a phase of my life at this moment. As I age I change. I live
into certain stories, stories about certain times of life. But the whole story of my
life always exists. When I see an old woman, there I am. When I see a baby,
there I am. The shells teach me this as I work with them.

"An invisible and continuous life
permeates all things, seen and unseen...
Through this mysterious life and power
all things are related to one another
the dead to the living,
a fragment of anything
to its entirety.
This invisible life and power
is called Wakon'da" (Fletcher and LaFlesche, 1911, 134).
At night, I dream that I reach deep into my closet and discover a beautiful green coat. It shimmers, flowing in a luxurious, silky material. I put the coat on. It has been mine all along.
This great green heart
tells her secret
from within the fields
Shadow
and fragments of she'
know.

All time
all things
are here today
Hidden from my eye
like a root.

So this is the way it is
I am what I see
and I am
what I do not see.

If it weren’t for looking
I wouldn’t know
what the skeleton of the bird
dried and bleached white
stuck in the top of the bush
says.

"The statue is broken, the flower fades, the experience ceases, but something
has not suffered from decay and mortality" (Murdoch, 2006, 58).

As I work on my shell collages, I notice that I am striving to create wholeness on
many levels. I have 9 small collages, each featuring diverse natural items such
as feathers, shells and twigs. Each of these mini-collages is a complete
composition in itself. I continue, however, to find a way that these collages might
also talk together. I have many pieces within a piece. I work intuitively, trying to
let the compositions find their own place. I want to listen to them. This takes time. My thinking mind is not so helpful here.

"Mute the urge to achieve a bogus proximity to the world by remodeling it so it gains an easy welcome in the house of consciousness" (Lilburn, 1999, 36).

*Stories of the Story*
Nature Nurture

I am a loose weave

By close looking

I attach

strands of various lengths

to blades of grass

one

at a time.

My eyes go out of focus from listening to shells...
To my way of understanding, my shell collages are visual metonyms - parts that are also wholes. It's possible for my eye to make complete meaning at any point in the piece, as each part of the composition is a meaningful totality in itself. At the same time, however, each part suggests another and connects meaningfully to the entire piece. This is a foundational, universal mode of knowing shared by all of us. We take the pieces that we understand as worthwhile or somehow sensible and fit these elements together into greater and greater systems of meaning. It just goes outward from there.

When we are born we inherit these numinous circles of meaning from the people who have lived before us and strive to understand our lives in relation to the sense we can make of what is already there. Finding a way to invent and fit our own stories into greater systems is a form of personal power. My shell collages do this for me - they are my story and the story of the shells intersecting to make another story. This intersecting story seems to go on to tell the universal story of story making itself. This is really, I think, so amazing. The work has done this all by itself. I am lucky to have learned from it.
Voices of Shells

Conversations

Traveling By Moonlight
2. *Conversations with a Field through Song*

I purchase a small Americano coffee at the cafe by my apartment and notice the morning sun rising over the soccer field across the street. It’s so beautiful and fresh. I have never once walked through that field even though it is only two blocks from where I live. Now that I am deliberately approaching my surroundings with a spirit of exploration and interest, I suddenly see it as a possible place for me to be.

As I walk through the field, a song sparks out of me. I begin to sing about everything I see as I go. At home I remember the words to this spontaneous song as I recall my walk through the field itself. The visual memories of trees, birds and soggy earth cue me to the lyrics I invented as I went along.

*Field Walking Song*

Glad am I for the white body of the gull
Glad am I for outstretched wings
Glad am I for trees pointing to the sky
Glad am I for sky coming out the blue
Glad am I for the jacket warm I wear
Glad am I for tender rain soaked earth
Glad am I for grasses looking up
Glad am I for treetops near the sun
Glad am I for the sun that nears my face
Glad am I for the warmth that's in my hands
Glad am I for the quiet car lined street
Glad am I for I hear the raven hop.

Field Walking Song conveys an acknowledgement found between my body and the body of the field. For a time, the two of us co-existed in mutual experience. This relationship I've forged simply by walking through the field and greeting it with a song has a vitality which my mind can't explain but which I experience as increased liveliness in my body. Each time I sing this song my whole being is remembered to the fresh morning air and the carpet of green grass under my feet. The song has a power for me. It's alive. I feel good when I sing it, like I am involved in a meaningful relationship with something worthwhile. This is how the field has become part of my life.

The rhythm of Field Walking Song is plodding and steady as my walking. The two, alternating melody lines reflect the length and width of the rectangular field. As a song in the Western sense, Field Walking Song is not good. The elements of music are not well developed and I would not sing this song to demonstrate my musical talents. But a power song is not for performing anyway. Traditionally,
Native people never sang their power song to anyone, but guarded it as a private, personal source of strength. In this sense, my *Field Walking Song* is successful as it is an empowering relationship with nature for me.

3. **Conversations with Birds and Trees through Story**

I take a very long walk in my neighborhood. As I go along, I watch the birds and trees I see. The personalities of things seem quite obvious to me right away. The crows, seagulls and buds are a cast of distinct, passionate characters. Their stories are always going on and easy to see. They are definitely doing things. Because of looking I feel that their lives are somehow going along with mine. We appear to be so different, yet the same essential life force is running through each of us.

After looking with an eye to see other beings as persons, I especially have respect for the crow. It’s as if this bird is always finding me now. It sits on the roof right by my kitchen window and calls. It seems I’m always listening for what the crows might be saying and the only way I feel I can convey my connection with crows is by using language creatively as follows: “The crows and I are dreaming the same. I can hear this happening. This is true.” In addition to art and poetry, “myths (also) allow us to communicate about intangible realities that cannot be communicated any other way” (Somerville, 2006,15). The myth I’m
including now, *You Can't Rush a Bud*, expresses my experience of speaking with crows as well.

*Crow Dreams*
You Can’t Rush a Bud

It was a gray winter day. The sky was a seamless, even blanket of cloud. Ruby Eyed Raven perched at the very top of Great Willow to announce as loudly as she could, "Spring is coming this afternoon at 1:11pm sharp. Bring a shiny thing to the Totem Pole at Kits Point to celebrate!"

Princess Seagull perched on the rooftop with pink trim across the street. "Pish posh," she declared. "It's January. Too early for spring." But still, Princess knew strange weather was happening these days. She concluded, "Well, why not," and flew off to find a new glittery thing.

Soon, everyone was en route to the Totem Pole at Kits Point with something shiny. Every bud in the neighbourhood was trembling with anticipation!
Someone had even brought a watch and left it on a bench for all to see. Eagle circled the Pole when the watch flipped to 1:11pm, but only once because she was skeptical. All the animals cheered. But no flowers had prematurely sprung from the buds. Spring hadn't come!

The animals marched off realizing they’d been tricked by good old Ruby Eyed Raven. Great Willow, however, wasn't disappointed for she enjoyed a very even temperament. Princess Seagull was especially crushed though. Alone, she
listlessly wandered along the seawall. "Foolish me to believe the tall tales of Ruby Eyed Raven," she muttered. "Everyone knows you just can't rush a bud."

*Crow spirit at the top of the tree coming into me*

"Imagination is a way of knowing that we can use to gain access to, and explore, numinous realities" (Somerville, 2006, 15).
Late January and I am still walking. My seaside neighbourhood is rippling with buds. I walk for hours and imagine I must see millions of buds in one afternoon. Every tree and every bush is virtually a rolling field of flowers waiting to explode. Dark, purple-brown branches sport hundreds of raindrop pink buds, expansive magnolia trees spray the sky with storms of furry buds, hearty Rhododendrons show off buds big as artichokes, and everywhere tiny snowdrops bravely unfurl their reckless tender faces to the frigid seaside air.

What a beautiful teacher nature is, calling to the deepest part of me, gliding easily past the tiring, mundane tasks of my daily life and coming to dance at the heart of my body, animating my life force. As I look, the season of spring suffuses me. I flow into it and it flows into me. How important it is to allow feeling into our lives as it is influenced by nature. Without this feeling, a sense of meaning can’t be strong. It is the changes in the seasons that tell us it’s time to shift, to go with things. This is very satisfying.

I take a small sampling of six different buds and sketch them at home. Each bud seems to have its own message about patience and time. Something very important is happening even when things appear to be uneventful. The buds teach me that time is a support for me, not an adversary. There is no artificial
pressure or force in the natural universe. There is all the time in the world for what is going to happen. This is the design.

When I approach the buds to paint them, they stop talking to me in a way that I understand. They return my gaze with nothing to say to me that I can make sense of. The buds look unspeakably alien to me. It's quite spooky, actually. I'm suddenly glad these things are small as the tip of my finger. If one of these buds happened to be my size at this moment, I'd likely have a heart attack.
“If you look hard enough at the world you’ll enter a vast unusualness that defeats you. You will be forced to set aside what you take knowing to be” (Lilburn, 1999).
5. **Conversations with Beauty in Pen and Ink**

When I'm relaxed, I'm inclined to notice things around me. I appreciate the beauty in nature when I'm not rushed or preoccupied. These times are very special and often have a memorable, magical quality for me. “A sense of the sacred is present when we feel awe at being alive and conscious of the beauty, the world, and life around us. It is no accident that we often find this in nature” (Somerville, 2006, 59). We need spaces in our lives to contemplate the outdoors and create from the inspiration we find there, not only as a way of making sense of our experiences, but as a way of appreciating the beauty inherent in being alive.

The following drawings are taken from a mini-book I developed based on my own personal fleeting but wonderful experiences with nature. Each picture represents a time when I felt magically part of something much greater than just my own awareness. When I look at these images, I remember the amazing feeling of surprise, the lifting-out-of-myself effect of discovering something incredible going on outside. The art project helped keep me alert to my feelings about the sacred beauty of nature. Today, this stays with me.
Moss Drying On A Fence

Chipmunk Stare
Birds At Dawn

Frost In The Morning
Mist In The Park

Full Moon In The Branches
Sleep Coming For Me

6a. Conversations with Pinecones through Poetry and Photography

For Easter, I collect pinecones and place them together on the top of my bookcase. Closed tightly, their tough little bodies fit in the palm of my hand. At night I hear them speaking. They crack audibly as they open, the heat of the radiator by my bookcase affecting them. Soon, the pinecones have completely transformed. Dark brown and flared open, they appear to be almost twice a big as when I first collected them. I place them outside because it seems they need more room. At morning, I notice that in the cold and the rain of outside the amazing little cones have closed up tightly again. They look exactly as they did on the day I first collected them! I am so excited by their incredible
responsiveness. How intelligent these pinecones are. They teach that my body has an automatic response to things that are outside me, too. Paying attention to what my body is doing, if it is automatically ‘opening’ or ‘closing’, is an important source of knowledge about how I feel. Like the pinecone’s body, my body also tells the truth about the conditions I'm in.

Pinecone Poem

Pinecone opens when warm
and closes again when cold
Pinecone teaches
talk when it's safe
don't talk when it's not
Pinecone shows
it knows
when to open
when to close
when it's warm
when it's cold
Pinecone says
to do the right move
at the right time
That's nature
Good to close
when it's cold
Good to open
when it's warm
Natural
The body knows.

6b. Conversations with Magnolias through Poetry and Photography

*Magnolia Time*

Magnolia teaches
petals hang loose
from the center
any which way
It's the season
to open up
and show the center

Don’t be careful now,
Magnolia says.
Bloom!
Flaunt it,
throw it down,
lay it open.
Magnolia teaches
things start over
new and white
in the summer

This is Magnolia time.
7. **The Gift of Awareness in Sunlight**

I’m exercising at the gym. The sun is just coming up and shines in my eyes. It’s a clear day. Suddenly I realize the sun is speaking by flashing to me as I bob up and down on the elliptical machine. It’s as if I’m picking up a sort of Morse code, dashes and dots of decipherable light flickering between cherry blossoms and my own movement. I try to go still inside so I can hear the message. Almost blinding me with it’s fierce brightness the sun cries out, “Congratulations, Amie! Today you are a little bit more awake.” It’s a true message. I know because it brings tears to my heart. Thank-you life, for the chance to learn.
Summary

The things I have been listening with through arts-based dialogues are conscious. Pinecones, trees, crows and buds all have a sentient personhood. As I’ve applied my creative intelligence to converse with these things, I am moved to notice the beauty there is in life going about it’s many doings, in its infinite forms, each day. I believe art is the perfect way to engage with this mysterious life force inside everything. This is because symbolic, creative languages are not invasive.

Artistic conversations with nature can’t be reduced or taken apart. Rather, the information gleaned here is whole and complex. This is a means of attaining knowledge that generates both wisdom and love in the sensibilities of a person. It is a more complete understanding of life that grows through a respectful interaction with things, experiencing them while allowing them to remain private, whole and essential for themselves at the same time. I can think of no other more important educational aim than cultivating such reverence for life through personal, artistic expressions of the beauty there is to perceive in the natural world.
Conclusion to Part One

There are many statistics on the effectiveness of art as a way of learning for people who do not share the mainstream cultural values of schooling. And I could give you these now. But to justify the value of art is demeaning as it is a connective spiritual force. I'd like to conclude with a story instead. This story is my own, but it is the great story of the healing power of nature that is available to all of us. For Native people who have suffered such a devastating disconnection from their land, this healing work perhaps is especially relevant.

In the spring, usually around Easter, my Mother returns to her life on the street where she lives as an alcoholic. In the winter she’s usually forced to enter some kind of care as the weather breaks her body down. I’ve come to accept over years of trying that I am helpless to change her situation. But family holidays remain difficult times.

This Easter Sunday, I’m in so much pain I feel that I might not be able to move for the day. I take a bath to try to do something for myself. By the claw foot tub I love so much is a large window. I open it a crack and slide under the hot water. Right away a powerful gust of wind seizes the unlatched window and slams it wide open. It startles me. The cool morning air rushes in over my wet shoulders, bringing me, literally, to life. In the great tree outside are a number of very tiny
birds, flitting about and picking at the moss with their bright, eager little beaks. I see them! They are so small and the branch they’re pecking at looks like an expansive carpet of luxurious green fur under their quick feet. Instantly I am transported. I remember, without effort, to forget myself. Joy-in-life comes to me again.

I dry myself off, dress and step outside into the day. Looking at the blossoming trees in my neighborhood shows me that it is actually a wonderful Easter Sunday. Studying these trees has given me insight into their unique personalities. I know them. Just like people, they are the same, yet unique. And just like people, the more I know a tree, the more I feel affection for it. Indeed, “love is knowledge of the individual” (Murdoch, 2006, 27). Because I’ve been paying attention over a period of time, the trees are now in my life. They are like a family for me. For example, I have an Auntie Magnolia Tree at Alma and W3rd Avenue. This is a picture of her.
Standing close to her trunk in the embrace of her blossoming branches, I feel unconditional love and protection. I can no longer be blind to these things. I have a home and a family, a source of support and comfort for me, rooted and lasting, always hospitable, ever-available. Despite life's disappointments, there is wonderful beauty in the world. This beauty is not selective but available for all of us to gain sustenance and reassurance from. There is always a worthwhile place for us to be in this life, a place that is *In Full Bloom*. All that is required is that we notice the beauty around. The garden appears when we look.
Part Two: Possibilities for First Nations

Education

The Gathering
Part Two - Introduction

As I researched many different authors writing on the topics of Native art, culture and education, it became clear to me that not all cross cultural studies are equally good. Some researchers, despite working at high university levels, do not seem to be aware of the core problem of linguistic colonial bias. In my opinion, much of the research conducted by academics, ethnographers, government agencies and curriculum developers is part of the power structure of ethnocentric monologue. Stuck in the domineering quagmire of disengaging professional jargon presented as fact, these monologues fail to create a space for dialogue where many voices might be heard.

We continue to be blind to the way our language and conceptual thought world contains a colonial bias. This bias tells us that there is a one type of reality or way-of-being-as- fact to which we are culturally and even divinely privileged to possess. Our vocabulary serves as an implicit justification for exclusionary policies and a monologue curriculum. As a result, we unwittingly create structural and systemic boundaries that stop the participation of other voices. We don’t want to change because we enjoy having this power.

However, the people in power who develop curriculum and federal policy would never say this directly. Instead, they sound good in talk about multiculturalism or
a ‘new’ government. No real change at the level of structural, institutionalized power has really happened though. This is why it's said that talk is cheap. We are still in a position to dismiss another’s experience of painful marginalization. As people in power we can continue to justify sidelining many other voices by blaming the disenfranchised person for the problem. Justice McEachern did this when he ruled in 1991 that Aboriginal people have lost their land as a result of their own personal failure to adapt to modern life. This is called 'scapegoating the victim' and it emerges when the flimsy pleasantries of multicultural chat give way to a real struggle for power sharing and justice.

There is much work to be done if we’re to go past multicultural lip service and into the real work of creating authentic dialogue. Authentic dialogue involves a shift in power structures. It's a restructuring, a sharing of who has control and it is beyond tokenism, such as including examples of other cultures in our textbooks. It is the equal sharing of the presses, the opening of the inner circles of privilege occupied by the people who ultimately make the final cut. It's giving up the position of singular authority figure that might give one person or one cultural group the final word. The work needed if we are to approach the dream of making schooling into a truly inclusive form of dialogue is deep. The solution to the core problem is core work. It is not a matter of a superficial infusion of cross-cultural content or talk of inclusion that sounds good. It is the actual power
sharing that comes as we increase our consciousness about the assumptions inherent in our language and worldview.

The world is alive and we are spiritual beings who are driven to find fulfillment in relationship. Not power relationships but equal relationships. It is this belief in the equality of other cultures, people and life forms, bringing us past the limitations of our ethnocentrism and self-centeredness. From here we gain the spiritual riches of connection and love in life that we yearn for. The distracting and illusory material riches of power, position and payment never satisfy us. We find our fulfillment as human beings in justice - the real enfranchisement and participation of all voices. Possibilities for First Nations education as a democratic process toward authentic inclusion offers us a vision of hope for not only for Aboriginal people in Canada, but for all people who wish to live in a world of viable co-existence.
Part Two, #3: Discerning Monologue from Dialogue
The Significance of Thought Worlds

The Western world of knowing and the Native American world of knowing are shaped by very different contexts. Hunters and gatherers in traditional Native societies relied on symbolic, art-based languages as a form of knowledge necessary for surviving in direct contact with nature. The immediate context of their earthly home was vital for Native people. In contrast, our “written language, cut off from the sensual world, has become placeless and contextless, existing independent of circumstances and people” (Abram, 1996, 111). These contrasting ways of life have resulted not only in different languages but in different concepts about time, life and being. These mental pictures about what reality is form a person’s thought world. Such a thought world is not a picture of total reality and truth, but “the microcosm that each person carries about within themselves by which they measure and understand what they can of the macrocosm” (Ridington, 2006, 136).

Thought worlds cannot easily be translated verbally. This is vividly apparent in the writings of Benjamin Whorf, a linguist who attempted to use the English language poetically so as to somehow convey the thought world of First Nations people in his book, *An American Indian Model of the Universe*. “Thought and heart are already with us,” Whorf wrote of the Hopi Indian model of the universe, “in a vital and mental form. They are intellection and emotion, the striving of
purposeful desire, intelligent in character, toward manifestation, a manifestation which is much resisted and delayed but in some form or other is inevitable” (Carroll, 1956, 57-64). This example of Whorf’s writings illustrates just how blunt the tool of language is, even when it’s used so cleverly, when it comes to effectively translating thought worlds cross culturally.

Indeed, thought worlds cannot be simply bridged by linguistic translation. As Whorf has shown, the American Indian model of the universe contains mental concepts that are not reflected in the English language. An idea that we have no word for cannot be communicated verbally. We may think we are understanding otherness by talking about it, but more than likely this understanding is only the making of it into a thing we already know. In fact, otherness is likely unrecognizable as it is truly outside the realm of the thought world we ourselves possess. This making of otherness into something comprehensible is common. “Western culture shows a lamentable failure to imagine other,” Eagleton agrees. “Nowhere is this more obvious than the phenomenon of aliens... creatures with whom we can communicate” (2000, 49-50).

When colonizers impose their language and culture on indigenous people the results are devastating. Mikhail Bakhtin calls this imposition monologism. “At its extreme,” Bakhtin says, “monologism denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and responsibilities. Monologue,”
Bakhtin continues, “pretends to be the ultimate word” (1984, 292-93). Dennis Tedlock proposes that an alternative to monologuing is dialoguing. Dialoguing involves expanding the number and types of voices who might be counted as having an intrinsic right to be included, using their own words, in the conversations that involve them. This growth, says Tedlock, “requires not a series of commands from a single source but an ever widening discussion” (1983, 270). For such a widening to occur, we must have some awareness around the assumptions and biases contained within the thought world we possess.

In the book, *Make Prayers To The Raven*, Nelson writes a chapter on Native spirituality titled, *Principles of the Kuyukon World View*. This chapter is an excellent example of a monologue. In this penultimate chapter, Nelson explains Native spirituality by breaking it into 14 points. He then proceeds to systematically discuss each point in order, further breaking the points into sub-points. This is what can happen when we are unaware of the limitations of our own thought world. Native spirituality has nothing to do with point form. To break it up in such a way that is so familiar to Western readers is a failure to represent it. This is a fine example of the forcing of differentness into a culturally biased system of critically unexamined meaning making so it might gain that easy place in the house of Western consciousness.
Nelson plays the familiar Western role of objective knower who might say, in the way of saying that is particularly his own, the meaning of another culture’s spiritual core.

However, it is not good work to shape the stories and spiritual understandings of other people into palatable forms of information that appear to be acceptable and easily understood. Our personal thought world is not reality but a tool by which we perceive one part of reality. Unfortunately, in the West, we often proceed as if our subjective perception is some sort of superior, factual assessment of the total situation. I feel David Abram describes what Nelson has done here well when he says, “Written words do not bring wisdom but the conceit of wisdom - people may appear to know much when in fact they know little” (1996, 113).

Division Destroys the Culture

Perhaps one of the biggest mistakes we make in the West when it comes to understanding things is the universal application of the scientific method as a way of knowing anything. Much of the writing on Native American culture “reflects the author’s bias as much as it does the aboriginal experience on which it is based. It is formed, consciously or unconsciously, in the discourses of Western religion and science” (Ridington, 2006,150). The meanings we must seek if we are to find our way toward genuinely understanding another culture
must not be scientifically depicted ones but ever-whole ones. We are looking for the sensibility of a thing and this exists in the entirety of it. This is the start of dialogue. Our linear, rational, step-by-step method is inappropriate when it comes to imagining the existence of things outside our conceptual realm.

A thought world is like art. Just as the worthwhile, lively quality of art - that thing which can’t be nailed down or put into words - is found in it’s wholeness and not in just a part of it, so the same is true of a thought world. “A narrow sort of empirical verificationism does not work with the central reflective statements of art” (Lyas, 2000, 197). Indeed, so too should our cross cultural approach require more of us than verbal cleverness and reductionist techniques which are far too easy for us to do, such as point form lists. It seems that the creative use of language in poetry and myth, as well as the visual symbols of art, might be some of the most supportive tools we’ve got when it comes to the complex business of creating space for actual dialogue.

I feel that Christian Feest provides a very salient example of ethnocentric, scientific reductionism in his book, *Native Arts of North America*. Although this book is informative at times, it is mainly comprised of descriptions of Native art such as this one: “Painting is in yellow, red and blue/green, rarely black, and includes groups of parallel lines and bands, triangles and paired curves (bracket or double curves) leaf shapes and other curvilinear design groups may be
enclosed by rectangular or trapezoidal frames. Hatching and crosshatching, rare in parfleche painting are common here" (1992, 56).

Halfway into this book, my mind dissipates into a tide of meaningless, free-floating shapes and random puddles of colour. My passion for the topic of Native Art flat lines and I look out the window in a discouraged state, turning my head slowly as if I were fighting the onset of a coma. I’m exaggerating for effect here, but not by much. What understanding of Native art can a reader possibly make by Feest’s linear, ongoing description of the shapes, the lines, the colours, and so on, as separate, unrelated things? It’s completely, utterly baffling to me how anyone could approach the topic of art, especially the art of another culture, in this way.

Understanding the art of another culture is the discipline of understanding what that art might mean in context. Feest’s approach to interpreting Native Art is so self centered and unimaginative it is banal to the point of being funny. Let’s say I was attempting to explain what ‘cat’ means to someone who doesn’t speak English. Would I say, “Oh yes, cat is a thing which begins with a curvilinear, half moon shape, followed by a definitive circle with a relatively short vertical line to the right and ending with yet a longer vertical line and a horizontal line running through the upper portion of it and forming the shape of a cross,” or would I say, “Oh yes, cat is this thing here, see? A furry, domesticated animal with a rough
tongue who purrs when it's happy, acts kind of aloof, although no one seems to know why, and licks milk out of a dish.” Of course, I would say the latter.

Just like art and a thought world do, the word cat has meaning. It means a thing, a being. The letters are arranged together to symbolize an entire concept, a whole entity. With categories and descriptions of elements, we reduce things to what they are not. “It is not in the individual parts, detached, abstractly considered that a work of art resides. Division destroys the work just as dividing a living organism into heart, brain, nerves and muscles and so on changes a living thing into a corpse” (Croce, 1992, 3, 21-22). Feest has done a disservice to Native art by shattering it up into an assortment of meaningless bits and describing in great elaboration what these components look like to him.

We’ve just gotten too used to approaching otherness in the West in a colonial way and we’re really missing out. “Organic unity means no more than that all the parts contribute to an effect that emerges from them. Merely to list the parts is not to capture that effect” (Lyas, 2000, 73). Such a stiff, linear approach to the matter of understanding art and culture likely discloses a person who is fearful of what they can’t know through methods they’re comfortable with. Such authors have yet to build up the personal endurance and courage necessary to advance past their ways of doing things. For whatever reason, they can’t afford not to feel
safe. However, cross-cultural dialogue requires much more of a person than sticking to what is known.

Authentic cross-cultural dialogue involves human complexity meeting human complexity somehow. It is, perhaps the open-ended work of what Lilburn refers to as philosophy. Lilburn explains why such inadequate, reduced approaches to cross cultural dialogue might be developed in the first place. “People shy away from the erotic business of philosophy because they fear to appear foolish or because they fear the ‘stripping’ of the exercise.” Lilburn explains. “They devote themselves to what most people think of as philosophical activity - geometric speculation or otherworldly abstraction or butcher-like analysis or political theory or righteousness - but that is in fact a way to strangle the convulsive erotic energy of philosophy” (1999, 89).

An incredibly wonderful counter example to the reductive job Feest has done is the meaning making system Rothenberg and Tedlock apply in their article, The Shaman As Proto-Poet. Looking at a drawing by Vasiliy Sharemiktal called, The Shaman’s Tent of the Evenks and the Origin of the Shamanistic Rite, the authors carefully comb through the fine details of the picture. Rothenberg and Tedlock proceed to demonstrate a respect for what the picture means to the artist himself. In total, 38 components of the picture are identified by the authors here, but not as curvilinear lines or leaf shapes. Rather, Rothenberg and Tedlock identify the
markings as follows: “1) Podkamennaya Tunguska River; (2) its tributaries; (3) the lands of the Momol clan;” and so on (1972, 181). By doing this, the authors successfully give the reader an understanding of what the picture means to the artist himself.

In Feest’s epilogue to Native Arts of North America, he concludes ironically by noting what he has just done, stating that the cultural heritage of the Indian has “not been transmitted by the decontextualized preservation of artifacts” (1992, 197). Most troubling to me is Feest’s penultimate sentence: “Reconstruction of this original context is an ongoing challenge for scholars” (ibid., 197). The work of contextualizing art belongs to Native people, not to scholars. It seems that Feest, in his professional endeavors, has lost perspective. If he does try to reconstruct this cultural context of Native art in his next book he will only be decontextualizing it further than he already has, if that’s even possible. Reconstructing the context in which Native art belongs is not the work of the scholar. This work belongs to the First Nations people themselves and they will continue to do it in the way they need.

The Monologue of School Curriculum and Pedagogy

The BC Native Studies curriculum is structured so as to appear objective and authoritative. Just like Nelson and Feest have done, the writers use methods
such as point form and bullets to make the document look scientific and objectively factual. However, this reduces the complex areas of human development the curriculum is addressing. What can I do but bang my head on the table when I read these documents: “Rationale for Aboriginal Studies 10-20-30, Program of Studies, p. 1. Goal: to live in balance with the land” (Alberta Education, 2005, 1). Living in balance with the land is not an academic goal, it’s a way of life that must be developed with nature itself. How is a person to experience living in balance with the land from a textbook while seated at a desk? School, I feel, is not the place where such an aim can be achieved.

A divided, categorized, systematic world is not the world of nature and it is not the Native person’s thought world. The curriculum, however, is relentlessly singular, going on and on in the same fashion of, “Understanding the land according to 4.1, 4.2, 4.3....” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 5). An understanding of the land cannot be achieved in point form like this. To me, this is complete madness. And then there are charts like: “Theme 1: Aboriginal Peoples in Canadian Society - Students will demonstrate an understanding of the impact of colonialism experienced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada” (Alberta Education, 2005, 6). This is colonialism itself - the external criteria based in Western thought concepts imposed on people who do not share such a thought world and who must, by law, demonstrate an understanding of it through more externally imposed tests.
One of the most chilling examples I found of unexamined ethnocentric bias is in the article by Gloria Snively and John Corsiglia titled, *Pre-Service Teachers Explore Traditional Ecological Knowledge*. Halfway through this article, the author’s superficial talk about the worthwhileness of multiculturalism, reflected in statements such as, “Every society and culture has its own science and it’s function is sustaining its mother society and culture” (2006, 5), gives way to a shockingly disturbing, unselfconscious colonial attitude.

The curriculum according to Snively and Corsiglia is a monologue at it’s worst. These two authors talk as if the entire domain of the earth sciences is their unique possession and the way things ought to be managed best is a matter of exclusive cultural and racial entitlement. Corsiglia and Snively use six bullets to list “some of the contributions of traditional ecological knowledge” to science and quote a government report which “emphasizes the importance of including indigenous people and their knowledge in planning and managing their traditional territories” (2006,16). The arrogance in this is just hard to take. The authors fit other cultures into ‘their’ science and depict whole other systems of cultural understanding according to how they may or may not be useful. Snively and Corsiglia continue this way to discuss how “traditional societies can contribute in unique ways to scientific knowledge,” stating that “conceivably, Indian traditions could make a contribution to scientific data” (2006, 17). These statements suggest that the earth itself is the implicit cultural territory of the authors.
Corsiglia and Snively implicitly animate ethnocentric attitudes by exclusion and appropriation. The authors do not seem bashful about appointing themselves as experts but carry on as if they are the singular bearers of universal fact. The pair conclude that “science textbooks need to provide well chosen examples of the contributions of traditional science” (2006, 19). It is not the job of any one person to represent another through well-chosen examples in their textbook, or to decide what counts as a contribution. Native people ought to have a platform of their own in which to speak out fully and completely, just as Snively and Corsiglia do.

**Two Books of Cross Cultural Dialogue**

A lovely example of a book that, in my opinion, succeeds in representing Native people fairly is *Inuit Women Artists*, edited by Leroux, Jackson and Freeman. In their short introduction, the editors refrain from imposing their meaning on the artwork and speak descriptively about it instead. From then on, the book is singularly dedicated to representing the life stories of the women artists exactly as they are. *Inuit Women Artists* directly publishes the actual words and art of the women themselves. The book is bursting with originality and authenticity as a result. One example of this is Kenojuak Ashevak describing her piece, *Spirit Helpers*. “It is just from my imagination. I never dreamed of anything like that. It seems like it, but I never really like to draw to make it real” (1994, 106).
I find this book very beautiful and the lives of the women and their work is portrayed authentically. Ashevak’s words here are as she spoke them. They have not been edited or made to conform publishing standards that have nothing to do with Inuit life. The authors, in my opinion, have really gone out of their own way, so to speak, and with their lovely, shining virtue of personal humility, have succeeded in serving as a vessel for the voice of others as it might be heard, as much as possible, on its own terms.

The spirit of a cohesive culture is also successfully conveyed by Robin Ridington, an ethnographer who has lived with the Dane-zaa people of the Peace River area on and off for a period of forty years. His personal attributes of caring, humility and warmth combine with evident personal sensitivity to create a simply wonderful book, which is, in my opinion, a tribute to Native people. Thank goodness there are writers like Robin Ridington. He speaks of feeling privileged to partake in the Dane-zaa culture and gives many examples of how intelligently Native people are successfully working toward their own solutions.

Like Inuit Women Artists, Ridington’s writing is good because he has creatively managed to portray the people in a whole way. There is a flow, a life, in his depiction. He has not gone about his work in a divide and conquer, point-form fashion, but applied an artful approach to exploring other. Rather than interpreting Native voice, Ridington provides many samples of stories as they are
actually told, word for word, by the people themselves. To me, it's obvious that Ridington personally loves and knows the people he is writing about as individuals. In the words of Alvarez, “When a poet is genuinely aroused, you can hear it in the way the lines move.” (2005, 55). I too feel a love for the Dane-zaa people after reading this book – it’s in the way Ridington’s lines move. There is an art to this.

**A Discouraging Letter from the Editor**

There are wonderful books of dialogue today. However, there remains a dangerous and discouraging colonial approach to Native people, which seems to be generally accepted in mainstream media and institutions. *The Province*, for example, ran a deeply disturbing editorial comment this March, 2007 called, *In Our Opinion - Bringing Prosperity to First Nations Will Be Good For Us All*. In this article, The Province’s editors begin by pointing out that “Canada’s First Nations are a largely untapped source of wealth creation for the country, if only their potential was recognized, encouraged and harnessed.” The editors go on to describe the development of the oil sands in Fort McMurray, Alberta as a “bonanza” of employment opportunities Native people are missing as 70% of the Indians in that area are unemployed.
If Native people were working for companies extracting gas and oil, the article enthuses, we would generate extreme wealth for the country in terms of industry. The authors note facts about this potential wealth generation for the nation and refer to a March, 2007 study by the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples. The article concludes by urging Prime Minister Stephen Harper to “get on board” with the Standing Committee’s recommendations. This transformation of Indians into oil and gas employees, the editors conclude, could be best achieved through a rigorous schooling program.

*The Province’s* editorial suggestion that schools could be used to make the Indian into an upstanding oil and gas employees is very disturbing. It seems we have not learned from our mistakes. Residential schools were used only decades ago to transform Native people into good English speaking Catholics. The result was catastrophic cultural devastation. It is wrong to use schools to make someone into something! I’m sure the authors of this article cherish the notion of an education for their own children, which might open doors of possibility and develop personal interests, ultimately resulting in the attainment of fulfilling work. So why shouldn’t the hopes, dreams, preferences and personal desires which education aims to develop in children not be equally relevant and important for Native people to have in their schooling? Because the authors of this article do not regard Indians as equal to them but as less important, less human. To refer to Native people as an “untapped resource” further illustrates
this superior stance. I’m sure the editors of *The Province* don’t see themselves as an untapped resource for generating wealth for an Indian Band.

This article also shows a lack of knowledge about traditional Native culture. North American Indians see the land and animals as persons, as sentient and alive. They have traditionally taken only what was needed for their survival and lived in an integrated, storied world of animal friends whom they respect as persons and attempt to disrupt as little as possible. To work in such the environmentally destructive oil and gas industry, a force alienated from a respectful preservation of the natural world, would be a terribly tragic fate for the modern Indian. Barry Lopez describes the lives of the workers he observed in the Arctic oil and gas industry as being “some of the saddest human lives I’ve ever known. Their dignity as workmen and their self-respect was not whole. Like the land, they were subject to manipulation” (1986, 400). That anyone could suggest this area of work would be a suitable for all unemployed First Nations people is discouraging to say the least.

**Conclusion**

If we see ourselves as no better or worse than others, then we’re obligated to use a format of dialogue as opposed to monologue. “If we accept the validity of other life forms then all hierarchies are wrecked” (Abram, 1996, 48). The belief that
cultures are equal to one another necessarily obligates us to create a space we
authentically share not as objective, removed experts but as participants. “One’s
best hope at true objectivity,” writes David Abram, “is understanding how events
and experiences are interpreted by the widest possible number of sensing
objects.” (2006, 38). We must seek not to make our interpretations of another
person into ‘the reality’ but to step back and allow another person’s reality to exist
as it is. Ideally, we must “represent a Native American philosophical system in
terms of its own conceptual categories” (Ridington, 2006, 157).

Jim Prentice, Canada’s Minister of Indian Affairs, has stated, “Canada’s new
government believes First Nations learners deserve the best possible facilities in
which they can learn and thrive” (The Vancouver Sun, March, 2007). I’m
skeptical as I do not believe Prentice’s ‘new government’ is a reality. In the
research I’ve done so far, I’ve discovered that we are still very much unaware of
the colonial bias inherent in the Western thought world. Ethnocentric attitudes
remain pervasive and institutionalized today. It seems we’re not convinced that
“there can be equally valid but different versions of the truth about something,
rather than one person or body having the full and exclusive truth and others
having no access to it” (Somerville, 2006, 83). If we were, we’d talk very
differently. We’d talk in dialogue. But how, exactly, can we achieve this dialogue
in our speech when our language reinforces such a conceptually biased,
ethnocentric thought world? I am now going to look into this question.
Part Two, #4: Transcending Ethnocentrism

Through Art, Poetry and Nature

Awareness
The Ethnocentrically Inclined Mind

Ethnocentrism is an attitude of cultural or racial superiority. If it were to be articulated, it might sound like, ‘my way is better than your way.’ I recognize a form of this attitude operating in my thinking daily. It is as perennial to my thoughts as the grass. My mind likes the world to suit my expectations of it. Whether it actually does fit is another matter. Isn’t this the way we all tend to be sometimes? It seems to be the nature of mind itself. I hope that through awareness of this force to shape things into the way I’d like them to be, I might see more things the way they actually are. This requires detachment. I can’t need so much for the world to be a certain way. The reward for this type of attention, says Iris Murdoch, is the knowing of reality. And we must try to do this. “As moral agents,” she urges, “we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection” (2006, 39).

Yet self-centeredness seems to be a disposition I take on as easily as my feet fit into my well-worn house slippers. I have to work to manage my mind’s ever crafty ways of bending things out of shape so they’ll conveniently fit into the form I want them to. Iris Murdoch expresses this difficulty well when she writes, “Goodness is the almost impossible countering of a powerful egocentric mechanism” (2006, 53). How might we start to do this work?
Perhaps we can begin to counteract this egocentric mechanism of the mind when we understand just how powerfully enfranchised it is. The abstract alphabet of the English language, as well as our vocabulary and philosophy describing an inanimate earth, can implicitly bring about a feeling of superiority. I'm going to talk about this more, but first I'd like to share a few metaphors that might illuminate how essential it is that we do counteract our egocentrism. Failing to do so cuts us off from the possibility of dialogue as we can't apprehend truth or cultivate the humility necessary for real conversation while self-absorbed.

**The Complexity of Truth**

People who participate in events differently experience them differently. This is why historical texts written from one cultural perspective can only be read as part of the truth. One-sided stories aren't reality. The real truth about an event is in the multitude of perspectives around what happened. This requires dialogue. No single group can have control or an ultimate position of authority if this is to occur. Authentic dialogue requires that all voices that have participated in the happening speak equally about their experience.

An example of this need for dialogue is in the story of the mice and the elephant. The mice each describe the truth of the elephant they're sitting on while in the pitch dark. One mouse, perched on the elephant's ear declares, "It's round and
flat.” Another mouse, riding on the elephant’s rump says, “Are you crazy? It’s not flat! It is downright gigantically bulbous.” Yet another mouse, swinging in the curve of the elephant’s trunk, doesn’t even bother to join in the conversation between such mad mice. Round? What insanity! However, when the light cast by dialogue is turned on, all the mice can see that each of them is having a valid experience and that each of their stories comprises the complex truth of what an elephant is. Part of an elephant is flat, part of an elephant is round, and part of it is a trunk.

Margaret Somerville also has a wonderful metaphor which she says personally helps her to conceptualize the complex process involved in seeking truth. “I imagine (the thing we’re trying to discover the truth about) in the centre of a big circle, and imagine all the people who are looking at it standing around the circumference of that circle each holding a light. The lights are of different kinds and have different coloured lenses, and a few of them fail to work (their batteries are dead) or they show a distorted image (what they show is not true). The different coloured and different kinds of lights reveal different aspects of the entity we are looking at. These aspects are not the same, but they are all aspects of its truth. Moreover, just as combining blue and yellow gives green, the combination of two or more lights can show us a new reality, different from those shown by each light separately. When these different aspects are so compatible that they can all be combined, we get the white light of ethical insight” (2006, 83).
The white light of ethical insight Somerville is talking about sounds beautiful. But what a complex process of understanding, what a willingness to listen and what sharp, wise discernment are necessary. It can seem impossible to attempt dialogue with others when we don’t even recognize the contextual meaning of another’s speech. “Native Americans have tried to tell about themselves to outsiders who fail to understand their ways of speaking. They resent being interrupted by people who do not recognize the moments of silence that punctuate a speaker’s narrative. They are surprised at what appears to be a lack of respect for the sharing that brings a story into being. They are shocked at having their spirituality regarded as primitive” (Ridington, 2006, 151).

Such misunderstandings result in actions that are not cross culturally respectful. For example, in school, a sharp, quick answer is a sign of alertness. However, in Native culture listening is considered to be an act of co-authorship with the storyteller. Uninterrupted silence in between the words of a telling allows for meaningful punctuations to be made and is also a sign of respect. A Native student’s developed capacity for listening is perceived by mainstream education as an intellectual shortcoming when in fact it is a sign of sophisticated cultural intelligence.

Truth seeking depends on the open, humble willingness of an individual to explore the possibility of other meanings that might seem quite foreign. This
requires the assumption that all people are intelligent and that there are equally
good ways of doing things however unrecognizable they may seem. However,
an attitude of ethnocentrism shuts down this willingness to be open. This
resistance is not an easy attitude to overcome for many reasons. I'm going to
start by looking at how language can build such ethnocentrism into the
conceptual thought world of the speaker.

The Influence of Language

In his work as a linguist, Benjamin Lee Whorf posited that assumptions about
reality are largely built into a person through the language they speak.
Language, Whorf argued, forms the structures by which an individual
conceptualizes the world. Accordingly, "structural differences between language
systems will, in general, be paralleled by non-linguistic cognitive differences"
(Brown, 1976, 128). In this way, Whorf surmised that cross-cultural
understanding is not a matter of merely translating vocabulary but a matter of
understanding the varying mental pictures formed by language which are held by
the speaker to be factual truths about reality.

Whorf went on to say that language might even finitely determine the feelings
and information that can be known or expressed by the user. As such, central to
Whorf's hypothesis is that language functions not just as a tool by which any or
all conceivable human experience might be expressed, but as a device which
defines a limited realm of identifiable experience for the speaker in the first place.
The form of a language and the particular vocabulary offered strongly influences
one’s worldview and may even determine it.

A good example of Whorf’s ideas on the ways language creates bias is provided
by the 1991, BC Supreme Court ruling involving a Native land claim. Justice
Allan McEachern supported his reasons for ruling against a land claim made by
Native people by suggesting that a failure to adapt to the modern world was likely
the reason the Indians had lost their land. This loss, the Justice concluded, was
the fault of the Indian. This judgment reflected a preservation of McEachern’s
own self interest as well as a common ethnocentric bias inherent in the English
language. McEachern’s “judgment revealed a world view and an ideology
appropriate to a culture of colonial expansion and domination. He was singularly
blind to the assumptions of his own culture” (Ridington, 2006, 256). The Justice
assumed that his views were reflective of reality and that the perspectives and
experiences conveyed by Native people in the case were subjective, cultural and
invalid.

Language creates a conceptual thought world. As speakers of the English
language, we’ve verbally inherited a powerful ethnocentric approach to being
among other people and living things. The English language speaks of a world of
objects and things. Our worldview, therefore, is one of an inert earth. This assumption is reflected in the abstract markings of our alphabet, as well as in a verbal philosophy that speaks of other life forms as things we are entitled to control. Ultimately, such a language system of objectification and disconnection from nature reflects back to the English speaker they too are a disconnected object. This leads to the view that one might be objective, that is, an object like knower capable of detaching from context so as to omnipotently perceive factual reality. This sort of objectivity forms a salient justification for colonial power.

**The Significance of Abstract Alphabetical Characters**

In *The Spell of the Sensuous*, David Abram talks about the history of our alphabet and explains how, in its earlier stages of evolution, ideograms, pictographs and characters not only referred to meanings but were, in themselves, representations of natural phenomena. There were two layers of sense making to such communication - one, which was direct, and the other, which was symbolic of the natural world. “An ideogram,” explains Abram, “is a pictorial character that refers not only to the visible entity that it explicitly pictures but also to some quality readily associated with it in the natural world” (2006, 97). Such layers of communication, where a character represents both a meaning and a thing in the environment, is indicative of a cultural thought world of people in connective communication with their environmental surroundings.
Today it appears that we’ve forgotten the traces of sensible nature that originally formed the symbols of our abstract modern alphabet. “Our phonetic alphabet, the written character, no longer refers to any sensible phenomena” (Abram, 2006, 95). We’ve lost an entire layer of meaning in our communication. “How you write,” says A. Alvarez, “shows how you think” (2005, 89). What does our abstract alphabet, the very way we write, say about how we think?

Witherspoon defined written language as a collection of symbolic marks. A symbol, by definition, represents something other than itself, which is visible or invisible. As we use written language to communicate, we are conveying the meaning inherent in the actual written symbols in addition to what we’re saying. In Witherspoon’s words: “Just as a person can’t build a house without materials, so people can’t construct mental images of the universe without symbolic elements. Knowledge is the awareness of symbol, thought is the organization of symbol, speech is the externalization of symbol, and compulsion is the realization of symbol” (1977, 43-46).

If Witherspoon is correct, if the markings we use to communicate are to our thoughts like, say, bricks are to a house, then our articulations and doings are abstract and disconnected from the natural world of things just as our alphabet is. Because the characters in our alphabet are not signs of something else in the sensual world, we are no longer able to recognize nature. “In the West,” writes
Abram, “we have a strange inability to focus on other animals, or anything outside our own speech and our own technology” (2006, p. 298). This inability doesn’t seem too strange when we understand the significance of an abstract alphabet in forming our thought world in the West.

It’s not a surprise then that we do not talk in the English language about animals, plants or landscapes having an important life of their own, a life which matters for it’s own sake and which it is our duty to protect. This attitude of superiority spreads to the way we might treat people who are different from us. “Our obliviousness to nonhuman nature is today held in place,” points out David Abram, “by ways of speaking that simply deny intelligence to other species and to nature in general” (2006, 28). In the words of Karol Sloane: “Humans see themselves, by and large, as separated from the natural world. This separation has also been stratified, placing nature in an inferior position and humans in a superior position” (2006).

The ethnocentric justification of colonial power is very much related to our notion of personal objectivity that is premised on our view of the world as an object itself. Such a paradigm demands so little of our attention is focused outward to the importance of considering other forms of living things. According to our world view, reciprocally formed by our abstract alphabet and philosophy of an inert, objectifiable earth, there are no other worthwhile living things outside of us to
even bother trying to focus on. Yet, as Abram writes, “we’re human only in 
contact and conviviality with what is not human” (2006, 39). How can we begin 
to conceptualize differently so as to recover what we’ve lost?

**Objectivity and Inter-Subjectivity**

In the words of Iris Murdoch: “Our picture of ourselves has become too grand. 
We have isolated, and identified ourselves with, an unrealistic conception of will 
and lost the vision of a reality separate from ourselves” (2006, 46). This reality 
separate from ourselves that Murdoch speaks of is the world of nature. 
Disconnecting from our natural context has been viewed positively as a triumph 
over emotion. By detaching this way, we attempt to demonstrate that we truly do 
have a superior intellectual capacity over other things. This superiority justifies 
power.

This justification of power over things comes with a cost. We must repress our 
sensual, organic involvement with the world and shut down emotion so as to feel 
ourselves as separate from and somehow better than other life forms. We trade 
the spiritual reality of our living, organic and interrelated selves, beings that are 
complex, contradictory and mysterious, for a cut-off, static picture of a 
presumably fixed, factual sort of reality. However, we can never be detached this
way and the universe is not static. As we try to see ourselves as detached, we suffer a dangerous and artificial sense of being completely alone in the world.

We are not objective but acting inside a context just as every other being is. The choices we make are not evidence of total freedom but very much reflective of our circumstances. The view of self as objective is a symptom of a disconnection from nature. We are subjects co-existing in a living web of inter-relationship. Reality is a relational, interpretive concept and truth is distilled from parts of all the stories that constitute context itself.

Able to see the world from many different points of view, the shaman was in intimate contact with the life of things as they are themselves. Shamans are people who have learned to acutely imagine life through the perspectives of different living beings. Not at all based in dominance or control, the shaman’s power seems to be the outcome of a sort of supremely developed humility, a capacity to listen and attend to the world of other things. “The humble person, because she sees herself as nothing, can see other things as they are” (Murdoch, 2006, 101).

As I discussed before, truth is complex and sometimes contradictory. To know a whole elephant one must let go of the notion of an objective, one-person reality and respect the many different perspectives of life that there are. Primarily this
requires humility. Humility is worth cultivating, as reality is inter-subjective. We are part of a much bigger whole, not detached from earth but in it. That's really the way things are. Knowing truth involves dialogue and relationship as opposed to objective monologue justified by an attitude of superiority.

**Art and Poetry - Antidotes to Ethnocentrism**

Whorf’s great desire was that, as speakers of English, we transcend the ethnocentric illusion engendered by our language through the artistic discipline of poetry. There actually is no necessary grammar, no correct vocabulary and no God like way of verbal reasoning, Whorf declared. Language, he urged, is subjective and particular, not fixed and divine. Wouldn’t it be better, Whorf suggested, to break down these notions of one language being superior to another and instead find a way by which all humans might authentically dialogue with one another? To this end, Benjamin Lee Whorf tried to develop an innovative language of inter-subjectivity, a universal grammar called anthropological poetics, which would enable the person who spoke it to freely and without bias comprehend the conceptual thought worlds of other cultural groups.

Such a meta-language of anthropological poetics, Whorf maintained, could cause humanity to evolve to a much higher level of consciousness. In Whorf's own
words, the development of an anthropological poetics might “widen the petty
narrowness of the personal self’s outlook toward the world of unchanging truths
and eternal things” (1956b, 260). A universal grammar of poetics, the linguist
claimed, could possibly “still the activity of personal social reactions and bring
about a tremendous expansion, brightening and clarifying of consciousness”
(Rollins, 1980, 85).

It seems we can’t communicate with or understand other very well through the
fog of our language-induced particularism. The self-centered preoccupation with
ourselves as possibly objective, superior to other living things and separate from
a natural context is a barrier to seeing things clearly. Perhaps this is why we
have poetry and art, so that we can have some hope of understanding one
another. In the words of Colin Lyas: “In our capacities to project words in ways
that the system could never allow us to predict, lies the possibility of our freely
transcending the otherwise determining structures into which we are born”
(2006,169). As human beings we possess a wonderful inventiveness that we
might express artistically. As Whorf explained, art gives human beings a
symbolic, universal language that is transformational.

Abram points out that writing the language back into the land is the basis for a
connection necessary for human spiritual fulfillment. It’s also necessary if we are
to apprehend truth and reality. For this linguistic connection with nature to
happen we have art-based work to do. In Abram’s words: “Our task is that of taking up the written word and writing that language back into the land” (2006, 273).

Writing language back into the land is the notion behind my *Dictionary of Natural Artistic Symbols*. I consciously tried to correlate markings in my artwork with things in my immediate environment. To make pictures comprised of symbols directly representational of complex, natural and spiritual things are to create thought concepts that reflect and support an individual’s relationship to that greater order of things. This is powerful work. In the words of Iris Murdoch: “Great art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self” (2006, 64). The collapse into linear thinking, a one way colonial approach, a self-righteousness and arrogant monologue could not be better treated than by an arts-based inquiry into a personal relationship with the spiritual realm of the natural.
Nature - The Supreme Antidote to Ethnocentrism

Looking at nature is powerfully effective in breaking down the ethnocentric, egoistic Western delusions of cultural superiority. In Somerville’s words, as we pay attention to the world outside we will necessarily start to sense ourselves as being integrally “part of a much larger order of being” (2006, 111). This is the essence of nature knowing. When we are in dialogue with the world of living things we begin to understand ourselves as organic, spiritual beings too. This changes our perspective and influences our behavior. In the words of Iris Murdoch: “True vision occasions right conduct” (2006, 64). This right vision Murdoch is speaking of is the eye that recognizes the intrinsic dignity of every
form of living being. Right conduct, in the words of Barry Lopez, involves “approaching the land with an attitude of obligation, willing to observe courtesies difficult to articulate” (1986, 405).

Dignity is intrinsic to all life forms and to look at nature is to see this. Intrinsic dignity, Somerville explains, “focuses on respect for each and every person regardless of their characteristics - that is, respect for people themselves” (2006, 123). In contrast, extrinsic dignity affords respect to a person for what she might do or say. From this point of view, a person might gain or lose respect based on how she acts - the ceremonies she participates in, the way she dresses, what she eats, who she’s attracted to may make her more or less valuable as a being.

However, a human being is no sort of object to design and neither is the living world a multitude of commodities we might put to use. Life as it manifests in so many different forms isn't a commodity but a subject with “a right not to be designed by another human” (Summerville, 2006, 122). Dignity is the inherent possession of every living thing.

In this way, nature teaches us how to relate well to things. Treating our earthly home with courtesy creates a formative basis for dignity in all areas of relationship. Barry Lopez explains that such respectful, reciprocal interaction with the land could even be generated by making a gesture as small as a motion of thanks expressed with the hands. “From that dignified relationship with the
land, it is possible to imagine an extension of dignified relationships throughout one’s life” (1986, 405). Gloria Steinem echoes what Lopez is saying when she writes that “the relationship of humans to nature is the paradigm for our relationships to each other, and also our view of nature is our view of the inner self” (1993, 295). Nature is a supreme teacher of how to be as human beings in this world. Nature is our place and our reference point. It is us. Margaret Somerville conveys this beautifully when she explains, “soil, soul and society are intertwined and complementary” (2006, 66).

It is a powerful point that the areas developed in human consciousness through nature knowing are the very foundational values of traditional Native people who, of course, relied mainly on nature for their knowing. In Native culture the earth was sentient and animals persons. Things had intrinsic dignity and this was obvious to Aboriginal people. This way of seeing resulted in a culture of respectful relationships with all living forms. In this complex reality, the person was a subject among other subjects. For example, animals were revered as equals and often it was thought the animal controlled the hunt, choosing if the hunter would be successful or not. In this great web of life Native people had an understanding of how to act. They had wisdom about who they were, a deep knowing based on direct experience with a big world of things. They were not free to do anything but bound by obligation and a duty to protect other spiritual and equally valuable life forms.
Conclusion - Meaning and Context

When we look at the world as alive with personable life forms we are sparked by a built in desire to create. This capacity seems to be innate to our being as we are designed to live in communication with nature for survival. Experiencing a sacred connection with nature as a spiritual human being automatically seems to move a person to invent creatively. When we feel connected to nature we are propelled to sing, draw and dance. It looks like we are made to spontaneously join in the dialogue of a sentient, speaking earth with all the languages we speak.

Expressing a connection to nature through art making has a power and a joy to it. This state of being in joyful, creative relationship with otherness is the opposite state of ethnocentrism where one collapses into a state of mental isolation and separates out from the life of other things so as to justify having a singular, fixed position of dominance. Art and poetry enable the creative intelligence of human being. It is through these expressive and symbolic modes that we might transcend the biases and assumptions inherent in the English language and communicate in ways that are universally true to human reality. Art and poetry are incredibly powerful ways to transform a world torn apart by war and environmental destruction. Perhaps it is the work involved in developing these symbolic languages that might allow us to one day enter a realm of increased human consciousness, a reality of peaceful co-existence among all life forms.
The creative state of being in spiritual relationship with nature seems to be the common way of life to people in traditional Native cultures. In the next section of this thesis I’m going to discuss how this artistic and inter-subjective approach to life is so powerfully expressed in Native art.
Part Two, #5. Understanding Native Art In Context

Meaning
What It Means To Our People

Understanding the meaning of art to Native people themselves is a journey toward dialogue. In a series of publications on Totem Poles of British Columbia, Chief James Sewid writes about how Native culture is necessarily premised on a respectful, balanced dialogue with other living things. “Our forefathers had a great philosophy of life,” the Chief writes. “They saw the beauty of nature which surrounded them in all its riches and they tried to capture some of this beauty in their daily lives, in their legends, dances and carvings. They marveled at and were awe struck by the grandeur of creation” (Gunn, 1967, 4). Chief James Sewid concludes by expressing a wish to somehow take these meaningful, life respecting values of Native culture into modern life. “We wish to preserve some of this heritage,” he says, “and all that our architecture, art and dances meant to our people” (ibid., 4).

In his closing sentence, Chief Sewid addresses the importance of meaning in terms of an understanding particular to a cultural group. He doesn’t say he wishes to preserve his cultural heritage and what it means. He said he wishes to preserve his cultural heritage and what it means to our people. This meaning, says Chief Sewid, is symbolically contained in architecture, art and dances. The arts are not a neutral form that might be understood just by looking at them out of context. The architecture and dances Chief Sewid is referring to express the
core values of Native culture as they were lived out in the art forms and daily activities of the Native people themselves.

An appreciation for the beauty of nature and a reverence toward a world of spiritual living things is expressed in the artwork of Native people. Not only are the actual art objects themselves expressive of a reciprocal, meaningful bond with a sentient earth, but so is the actual process of creating such work. A good example of this is the way traditional baskets are made. The weaver begins by going out into the forest and pulling up long roots. She thanks the trees for their roots and does not take so many roots that she might cause harm to the trees. Then she builds a fire on the beach, roasts the roots and skins them. At home she uses the roots to weave stunningly beautiful yet strong and useful baskets.

In this way, the weaver's work is not just about the end product of the basket itself, but the primary, respectful relationship with other living things she animates through the particular way she makes the basket from start to finish. First and foremost, her basket weaving cultivates a relationship between her spirit and the tree spirit. This is the greatest purpose to making and doing anything in Native culture - actively sustaining the spiritual core of life by keeping, literally, in touch. The basket weaving is an active honoring of this connection with the tree and the weaver. The beauty of the basket itself is this meaning. If this were a section in
Conversations it would be called, Conversations With Trees and Roots Through Basket Weaving.

In a publication by the Northwest Coast Indian Artists Guild, George Macdonald notes how “Northwest Coast art expresses the relationship of people to the animals and other living things which make up the Universe. Like legends, songs and myths,” MacDonald says, “the art expresses the relationship between people and the forces of nature” (1977, 4). MacDonald emphasizes the importance of Northwest Coast Indian Art by acknowledging the meaning of it to the people themselves. The essential, unsayable, spiritual values of Native culture are expressed directly in their work. The profound meaning of the mysterious transformations constantly taking place between Native people and animals are, MacDonald continues, “incredibly subtle equations which Western eyes can catch only glimpses in ways that are hard for those uninitiated in tribal knowledge to grasp” (ibid., 4). MacDonald concludes that the Northwest Coast Indian Art, rooted in more than four thousand years of history, expresses “a world view of natural harmony, when people don’t exploit their universe but praise it in their art” (ibid., 4).

Native art is a powerful reminder to us of the great wisdom that may be cultivated in the heart and the spiritual fulfillment that is generated by making beautiful, useful things based on considerate gestures toward the natural world. These
things hold a space open for a living relationship, an ongoing respectful
conversation with the spirit of life inside other things. Simply to look at Native art,
which is so powerfully reflective of a non-exploitative, reverent attitude toward
other things is to be reminded of this wisdom.

**We Need All Our Ways Of Knowing**

In the book, *When You Sing It Now, Just Like New*, Jillian Ridington writes about
the modes of knowing she’s experienced living with the Dane-zaa First Nations
people of the Peace River Area. “I write not from a theoretical perspective,” she
begins, “but as a person deeply immersed in the culture and the people” (2006,
3). Jillian Ridington goes on to explain how her close friend Daeda, a Dane-zaa
woman, “taught me how to teach with hands and mind alone without using the
language that I’d always experienced as the medium for gaining or transmitting of
knowledge. She taught me the Dane-zaa way,” Ridington explains, “not by
asking questions or by reading books but by listening and watching, then fitting
the answers together into a pattern that gave me the information I wanted” (ibid.,
3).

I feel that Jillian Ridington’s description here captures the essence of Native
culture. It seems to be a culture of doing and making, not a culture of studying
text or verbally talking about doing and making. Traditional Native culture is, in
many ways, non-verbal. “I realized again,” says Jillian Ridington, “how much of our conversation had taken place in gesture, in the spaces between the words” (2006, 8). Instead of relying largely on the written word and verbal talk to communicate information, the symbolic languages of art are important and profuse in Native culture. Like metaphor, art allows people to communicate creatively with non-verbal things, inventively maintaining relationships with a variety of life forms. Such necessarily non-verbal communications formed the very basis for survival in traditional hunting and gathering societies.

In the publication, *Indians And The Subarctic*, Edward S. Rogers touches on the central role of dreaming and survival in Native culture. “Frequently, during the evening, the senior men drummed and sang their ceremonial songs received in dreams in an attempt to discover where game might be and whether or not they’d have success in future hunts. Also,” Rogers continues, “hunters often received dreams which told them to look for game. In the extreme Eastern part of the area, dreams also gave information as to how the decoration on their costumes should be applied” (1970, 14). Dreams and art were counted on as valid modes of knowing which Native people relied upon for activities as vital as hunting.

Last year my Algonquin step Mother posted me a box of wonderful things she made herself on her acreage just outside Onoway, Alberta. She included preserves, an eagle feather beaded at the tip, and a beautiful, beaded medicine
pouch containing a wolf’s fang and a bear claw. When I asked my step Mom, Debbie is her name, what the medicine bag might be used for she responded, “To help you feel closer to nature.” That was all she said. She didn’t tell me how to feel close to nature, what it would be like or explain what I should do exactly. Debbie simply left it up to me. This was the way she’d been taught by the elders on her reserve.

Debbie teaching me at her acreage home outside Onoway, Alberta. Fall, 2006.

I think it would be wise for us to take seriously nonverbal ways of knowing in our culture. The emphasis we place in school and work on the verbal transmission of facts perhaps ought to be balanced by the inclusion of arts-based, symbolic languages as legitimate ways of knowing too. I feel that we need our intuitive,
creative ways of knowing as well as our verbal, rational ways of knowing. We owe it to our children to provide them with an education that develops as many of their ways of understanding as possible.

**If You Destroy Our Traditions, You Destroy Our Soul**

Traditional Native artwork is powerfully expressive of the relationship between people and the forces of nature. Particularly disturbing and unfamiliar to Europeans, First Nations art rapidly degenerated as a result of colonial contact. “Here was a society which did not fit into their conception of what a society should be” (Dickason, 1972, 36). Unfamiliar and threatening to colonizers, expressions of Native art were aggressively stifled. “18th century Missionaries burned piles of ceremonial paraphernalia,” Feest describes, “and White presumption in general lead to the loss of many unique documents of culture and art” (1992, 19). In 1884, the Federal Government of Canada made the Potlatch Ceremony illegal and even jailed some Kwakiutl Chiefs who continued to produce the pieces of art that were central to the sacred traditional ceremony. All tribal art was banned by law in the 1900’s and it was against policy to teach about such art in schools.

Today, examples of traditional Native art are rare as most was destroyed. “Almost nothing has survived from pre-contact days and what has survived has
been much affected by European trade goods and techniques” (Dickason, 1972, 74). Even the Native art that has survived is often not genuine, tribal art. As Europeans encroached on Native land the traditional lifestyle of Indians changed. Manufactured products became available and traditional arts declined as it was no longer necessary for people to make their own things. At this time, about two hundred years ago, that Native Americans began earning a living by making crafts for a white market. Such art was made to satisfy customers who wanted an acceptable ‘ethnic’ look. Accordingly, rather than reflecting the cultural context of First Nations people, “our collections reflect the taste of the collector rather than being true samples of what Indians regarded as good and beautiful” (Feest, 1992, 19).

Traditional Native art might be thought of as a sort of umbilical cord, a life line of communication by which a person in direct contact with nature needs to make sense of and act effectively in the world. The result of such systemic destruction of art and culture “upon the complex relationships that held the various Indian cultures in balance was disastrous and caused disorientation of the individual spirit” (Dickason, 1972, 37). The primary aim of traditional Native people was to keep on good terms with the world by artistically expressing incredibly sharp observations of their immediate surroundings. To eliminate art to a Native individual is to rip away this very spiritual and essential lifeline to the world of
things. In the words of Odawa painter Daphne Odjig, “If you destroy our traditions, you destroy our soul” (Dickason, 1972, 93).

**Touching Life’s Source**

The way we think of art in the West is not a concept that might be applied so as to truly understand the meaning of traditional Native art. In fact, what we perceive to be Native art may not be that thing at all. “None of the Native languages of North America seem to contain a word that can be regarded as synonymous with the Western concept of art, which is usually seen as separable from the rest of daily life,” Feest explains. “Therefore, it may be possible to argue that no art in the Western sense was produced by the Aboriginal inhabitants of North America” (1992, 9). If Feest is right, if there is no Native art that we can conceptualize, then what exactly are we looking at?

Perhaps what we see as Native art is actually an embodiment of a nonverbal communication that facilitated a necessary and personal relationship with nature. In the words of Henry Moore, “Indian art is something made by people with a direct and immediate response to life. Sculpture and painting for them were not an activity of calculation or academicism but a channel for expressing powerful beliefs” (Clark, Darbois and Valles, 1971, 14). For Native people, art is not an object or a thing that might exist independently of it’s context. On the contrary,
Indian artwork existed in relation to the spiritual meaning in the every day, practical life of the person who made it. As such, every single person in Native culture required this knowledge. “Art was a part of life, like hunting, gathering or growing food, marrying and having children” (Dickason, 1972, 110). The art item was not useful or necessarily valued outside this cultural context.

Realism was also not a concern. Whether the thing actually looked like it might on the outside to the eye was not what mattered. The art was the dialogue between the invisible, inner life of all nonverbally speaking things. Why would this be representational? Beautiful things in Native culture were simply not regarded as commodities. They did not try to look like anything necessarily, but served to make visible the spirit voices that were crucial for a person to hear as a source of knowledge.

The pervasive and critical importance of art to all forms of Native cultural life is hard for us to imagine. The concept of art in our language is not so helpful here. Native art might be understood more as a personal interaction, a useful symbolic representation of a shifting convergence of inter-related voices. This likely describes the reality of a person surviving in direct relationship to nature. “These people lived most their lives in direct contact with a world of animals and guardian spirits. They lived in a world of story and song” (Ridington, 2006, 1). The Native thought world was a world alive with a sense of awe for the invisible,
spiritual life force. It was a supernatural world, a magical world, and most of all it was a world of dialogue. “We cannot penetrate the mysteries of this experience but if our sensibilities aren’t blunted we can feel the visceral shock of creation, primeval and universal” (Clark, Darbois and Valles, 1971, 15).

Native artist Joe Davids tells about the teachings he received while he was like growing up actively engaged in his traditional Clayoquot culture. “My earliest memories,” he says, “involved the teachings of natural and supernatural loves of creation as known by my ancestors” (Indian Artists Guild, 1977, 15). When Davids began learning to work artistically in traditional ways, he says: “I felt I was touching a life’s source and style I could relate and commit my energies to” (ibid., 15). To me, Davids’ words are beautiful and help me to understand what Native art might be. It is, ‘touching life’s source’. Inuit artist Pitseolak Niviaqsi describes her artwork similarly as an expression of a vital, visceral connection with the indivisible greatness of life power. In her words: “This is in every change of the season. Like the early spring, summer, fall where you can see newly formed ice and during the wintertime. During the time of longest daylight. This is all in the different seasons, like all year round” (Freeman, Jackson and Leroux, 1994, 110).
Conclusion

Just like objects of art, people are also best understood in relation to their personal and cultural context. As I’ve just explored, what art means to us is not what traditional Native art is. What a thing means to one person may not at all be what it means to another person. Contextual and historical reference points are necessary for understanding. In my next section, The Postcolonial Dream, I imagine what an educational institution look like if it were truly sensitive to the cultural thought world of First Nations student.
Part Two, #6: The Postcolonial Dream

Belonging
Ethnocentrism is a dangerous attitude of cultural superiority. Indeed, such a self-righteous way of seeing Native people as inferior served as a moral justification for the systemic destruction of Indian language and culture. In 1998, the Government of Canada stated in *Gathering Strength, Canada's Aboriginal Action Plan*, that it was precisely this treacherous “attitude of racial and cultural superiority (which) led to a suppression of Aboriginal culture and values.” This report goes on to say that, “as a country we are burdened by past actions” (Battiste, 2006, p. 3).

Today, Canadians might like to believe that we are living in more enlightened postcolonial times. After all, the government has apologized and said these ethnocentrically motivated actions are in the past. However, I think it is premature for Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice to talk about what he calls “Canada’s new government” (The Vancouver Sun, March, 2007) as ethnocentric perspectives continue to persist actively in our cultural institutions, acting as barriers to many groups of people. The attitudes of racial and cultural superiority that formed the philosophical basis for the Residential Schools have certainly not disappeared. We cannot think of ethnocentrism as a barbaric thing of the past. As Battiste points out, “the instruments of this hegemony and domination are cultivated in language, discourses, disciplinary knowledge and institutional policy and practice” (2006, 1).
It was only in 1998 that the Federal Government released a report titled, *Gathering Strength – Canada’s Aboriginal Action Plan*, admitting “Native societies were disaggregated, disrupted, limited or even destroyed by the dispossession of traditional territory, by the relocation of the Aboriginal people and by some provisions of the Indian Act.” This did not happen in the time Before Christ, this happened recently. It’s really not in the past at all and the last residential school closed less than 40 years ago. This barbaric but entirely modern residential school system separated many children from their families and communities and prevented them from speaking their own languages and from learning about their heritage and cultures.

In the worst cases, the residential school left legacies of personal pain and distress that continue to reverberate in Aboriginal communities to this day. Not only do the legacies of personal pain and distress reverberate, so do the ethnocentric attitudes that were at the root of such schools. An attitude of cultural superiority and exclusivity continues on in the form of “conceptual, institutional, cultural, legal boundaries that are taken forgranted and assumed universal but which continue to act as barriers to Aboriginal people” (Battiste, 2006, 1).

Contemporary school curriculum also continues to be shaped predominantly by colonial attitudes. The justification of one language and one cultural frame of
reference are implicit assumptions of the institution. Not surprisingly, there are very few teachers of Native ancestry currently working in Canadian public schools. Yet we know students are much more likely to succeed at school when their cultural thought world is the same as their teachers'. Predictably, in the year 2000, the Auditor General of Canada reported that First Nations students continue to achieve far below those of non-Aboriginals.

Such distinctly low academic achievement for the 68% of First Nations children attending provincial public schools is alarming. Clearly, despite the money spent toward ameliorating the problem, "contemporary schools have not corrected or confronted the lessons of the residential schools" (Battiste, 2006, 3). Personally, I am very skeptical of the Federal Government's initiative to spend 50 million dollars toward providing First Nations students with premier educational facilities. It is perhaps not the money for buildings that is needed but an actual schooling experience premised on inclusion and dialogue.

This work is ahead of us. I agree with Dr. Battiste when she writes that, for her, post colonialism "represents more an aspiration, a hope not yet achieved" (2006, 1). Postcolonialism is a transformation of consciousness which "translates into constructing new relations, new frames of thinking and educational processes, not as mere products or wishful fictions but as processes that engage each of us to rethink our present work" (ibid., 1). Through less ethnocentric and more
enlightened knowing we may invent new arenas for inclusive dialogue where the production of knowledge is not the dominion of one group into which other groups may fit but the shared enterprise of equally empowered, authentically different cultural groups. This requires real shifts in power far more significant than pleasing sounding discussions on multiculturalism.

Dr. Marie Battiste poses the question, “How can curriculum, schools, teacher education and universities be agents of post colonial education” (2006, 4)? She suggests that because so few people in the system understand the connective, spiritual nature of Native culture, this question is not being adequately addressed. White teaching professionals are unable to grasp what the elders mean when they say such spiritual connections are core to Native learning. Further, students who have been so damaged by systemic attitudes of racial superiority require a healing context. The residential schools, explains Battiste, “broke relationships among the people with themselves, with their own guardian spirits, their parents and communities, as well as with the land and environment” (2006, 6). This is the legacy of Native life today and schools continue to do damage to Native people in their Eurocentric position of dominance.

It’s apparent when considering Native culture that mainstream Western schools proceed in ways that are totally culturally insensitive to Native people. Battiste makes a good point when she urges “education must engage the capacity of First
Nations students, not reinforce their deficits” (2006, 5). The Native thought world is completely invalidated in the institutional context of the school as current practices exclude Indigenous knowledge(s) and ways of knowing traditionally based on cooperation, interconnection, interdependency, sharing and spirituality. What might an educational experience that is in tune with Native culture look like?

A Schooling Respectful of Aboriginal Consciousness

In Native culture, an invisible, mysterious life force is recognized as present within all things. Aboriginal people traditionally were all artists and used symbolic languages to communicate with their immediate environment. Dreams, imagination, myth, story, song, dance and ceremony are crucial means to survival. However, schooling considers knowledge such as dreams and creative intelligence as subjective and therefore not ‘real’ or important. Ways of knowing must be objective and fact based to count at school, such as reading information out of a textbook. Time spent in direct contact with nature, the personal world of dream images and creatively expressed spiritual connections to animals are ways of knowing which are disenfranchised. Often outdoor activities or art classes are withheld as a form of punishment.
The school itself and activities of the school day are largely oriented to deskwork and contact with the land or animals outside is facilitated rarely by the institution. Yet Native people’s lives are traditionally defined by living relationships with the land and with animals. Values of sharing and cooperation, so essential to hunting and gathering people as basic precepts for life, are undermined by a competitive grading system that necessitates, as the bell curve does, that some students fail while others excel. Further, teachers are quick to acknowledge and reward behaviors that are considered rude in Native culture, such as speaking assertively. In the storied world of the Native North American Indian, listening is the basis for bringing a story into being and moments of silence are not moments of emptiness but meaningful parts of the story. By allowing for the speaker to pause without being interrupted, the listener is actually co-authoring the telling.

In schools the teacher is in the position of the knower, the authority figure. Students are expected to follow instructions and complete assignments provided. This goes against life in the bush, where every Native person was expected to ‘little bit know something’ to survive. Individual people in Native culture were respected as being capable of acting appropriately and acknowledged as being autonomous and implicitly intelligent. Stories were the main teaching tools and it was expected that the listener would take what she needed to learn from these non-instructive, imaginative myths.
In Native culture “the movement is not hierarchical, as from the teacher (top) down to the student (bottom) but a movement of power between circles which may represent individuals, family, community, nature, nation and the spiritual which influence and are influenced. Everyone has a place, their role is honoured and respected” (Ridington, 2006, 151). This is problematic as teachers are conditioned to be authority figures and approach the classroom in a colonial model. As Jane Tompkins illustrates in *The Pedagogy of the Distressed*, “I had finally realized that what I was actually concerned with and focused on most of the time (as a teacher) were three things: a) to show the students how smart I was, b) to show them how knowledgeable I was, and c) to show them how well prepared I was for class” (GW Raspberry, 2006, 312).

In the non-hierarchical thought world of Native people, direct experience of the individual and the intelligent sense she formed of this experience was the primary way of learning. To be in a passive position of student taking directions from the teacher is a backward arrangement. In Native culture, “people learn to follow their own experience rather than written authorities or socially sanctioned bosses and teachers” (Ridington, 2006, 217). Deriving legitimate knowing from dreams and animals goes against the way a school regards an individual as a rational, objective entity who operates highly at an intellectual level while separate from things. The complex context of variables and forces, dreams, the invisible life of
things, the spirits of animal persons and roles of guardian elements are not recognized as valid in a mainstream educational context.

It becomes clear when looking at the two ways of seeing things, the Native thought world and the school thought world, that a terrible, soul killing gap exists in these school institutions for First Nations people. It seems sensible, given what I’ve explored about the central, core role of operating in the world as an individual person deeply in relationship to a lively conversation with living things as persons, that schools actively engage in helping people reconnect to nature through personal arts-based inquiry. I think my experimental forays into doing this as featured in Conversations is an example of how this might look. Nature as a teacher is extremely powerful and legitimate way of understanding important concepts.

**Conclusion**

The image of a spider web comes to my mind as a clue for what First Nations education needs to address today. The web is the complex person in a living weave of communications. In this model, it’s assumed that the person is central and complete, self sustaining and powerful in making her way in life. She is wise, autonomous and sufficiently capable of making sense of things, just like a spider is. The weave of this person is connected to four main areas of information -
dreams, nature, art and community hold the web of what she needs for herself in a dynamic, healthy and balanced way.

The spider is like the person that we outwardly see moving in front of us. Yet it is all this complexity of being, the invisible things that comprise a healthy, functioning and whole person, which we must primarily validate as a function of schooling. If we’re to achieve this, we must change our approach to schooling. I’m suggesting that a democratic public school system is the best answer for a new direction in First Nations education in Canada.
Part Two, #7: A Democratic First Nations Education Plan

Equality
Public Education as Self-Governance - Breaking the Cycle of Dependency

We are creative, expressive, spiritual beings. It is in us to invent our lives and we need to do this. Out of a sense of choosing develops a sense of responsibility and pride. People who have the special feeling of being able to make wonderful things happen for themselves enjoy an experience of engagement and fulfillment. Restoring this sense of autonomy and initiative, which comes from personal empowerment, is central to healing the wounds in First Nations communities caused by the colonial experience. Although Residential Schools singularly broke the spirits of Native people by exacting brutal assimilationist policies, I imagine that a different type of school might have the opposite effect and serve to restore the legacy of a Native identity based on personal efficacy, self sufficiency, pride and meaningful purpose in life. There is hope.

Perhaps the greatest way to enfranchise Native people today is to provide a public education based on the democratic principles of self-governance. We need to create a link, a bridge, a way to reach out to people who are feeling alienated from mainstream culture and everyday Canadian life. This is very possible to do. In this final section of my thesis, I will describe in detail the successful practices of Summerhill School and how the principle of self-governance might operate to interrupt cycles of learned helplessness common in Aboriginal communities today. I will also look at how a classroom teacher
working in a conventional classroom environment within a traditional school might employ principles of self-governance to empower students. In particular, I will look at the unique role of art in breaking learned dependency. However, I believe it is critical to first outline in detail the colonial history Native people have suffered in Canada so that you, the reader, might fully appreciate how crucial self-governance as a form of First Nations public education truly is.

The Burden of Shame - The History of Federal Colonial Policies in Canada

In the mid-1800’s, settlers from Europe were arriving in Canada. Many of these people were attracted by the Federal Government’s promise of land. By law, a European male 18 years of age or older was entitled to 320 acres of land. All he had to do was come and occupy it. However, in 1763, Native people had forged treaties establishing that such land was legally their property. But this didn’t matter to the Canadian Government. Officials proceeded to disperse Native peoples’ land as they pleased at this time and the tools they used to do this were law and policy. A clause in the Federal Indian Act prohibited Native people not only from similarly acquiring 320 acres of land by occupying it, but also outlawed any legal action by a Native person in defense of their rights and land. First Nations communities were forced onto reserves, small sections of land that were also poor in resources.
As Native people were forced onto these inadequate reserves, the Canadian Government simultaneously enacted policies of severe cultural annihilation. From 1880 to 1951, the Potlatch ceremony was made illegal and a penalty of imprisonment enforced on any Native person who might attempt to enact this ritual. At this time, Native Chiefs were jailed for developing the art around which the Potlatch was centered. The significance of outlawing the Potlatch was great as it was through this ritual that “the value systems by which coastal Aboriginal societies defined themselves were reinforced” (Helin, 2006, 95). At this time, First Nations people were also legally denied the right to vote in Canadian elections.

Perhaps one of the most effective ways the Federal Government tried to annihilate Native language and culture was through Residential Schools. These publicly funded, church run institutions violently suppressed “aboriginal languages, customs and habits of mind” (Helin, 2006, 97). Bonds with family, community and self were brutally broken in these schools that inculcated a deep feeling of shame in people for being Native. It was compulsory to attend the Residential School and First Nations children were not permitted to go to the public school in their area. Many Aboriginal young people were badly beaten and sexually abused in these institutions that attempted “the social re-engineering of Canadian Indians into brown skinned white men” (Helin, 2006, 99). The last
Residential School in Canada closed in the late 1960’s. At this time Native people were also allowed to vote in elections.

Such assimilationist laws and unjust policies were justified in Canada by a set of mainstream, ethnocentric ways of seeing Native people as unable to govern themselves sufficiently. European ways were considered superior to Aboriginal ways and it was regarded as correct, even Godly, to force Aboriginals to obey the Catholic religion and speak the English language. Since the cultural practices of Native people were seen as primitive and barbaric, the Federal Government did not form policy based on any sort of respectful consideration of First Nations cultural values and opinions.

Today, the legacy of the Indian Act continues to resonate in Canadian Aboriginal communities and a feeling of despair persists among Native people on reserves.

“According to a recent UN report, Canada’s high ranking on the UN human development scale would dramatically drop from 7th to 48th (out of 174 countries) if it were solely judged on the economic and social well being of it’s First Nations people” (Helin, 2006, 103). The following statistics illustrate well the shocking conditions that First Nations people in Canada currently endure.

- Between 22,500 and 28,000 Aboriginal children are in the child welfare system. This constitutes 30 percent of the total number of children in welfare care in
Canada, an astonishing fact when Aboriginal people represent only 3.3 percent of the total national population;

- The chances of a First Nations child going into welfare care is 1 in 17 versus 1 in 200 for non-Aboriginal children;

- A 1999 report in the Vancouver area indicated that, of 4,300 Aboriginal children aged 0-6 years, 80 percent of them live in poverty;

- The mortality rate from injury is four times higher for First Nations children than for non-Aboriginal children;

- The suicide rate for Native youth is five times greater than the general Canadian rate and eight times greater for First Nations women;

- Diabetes is so prevalent in Native communities it reaching epidemic proportions.

- Aboriginal populations are rife with serious substance abuse problems;

- Although Aboriginal peoples account for about 3 percent of the Canadian population, they account for 18 percent of the total incarcerated population;
- Aboriginal peoples in Canada lag substantially behind the mainstream population in levels of educational attainment in every category (Helin, 2006, 110-113, 210).

**The Cycle of Dependency**

These serious, contemporary social problems are exacerbated by the fact that many Native people in Canada are dependent on Government welfare payments. Even Native Bands depend on Federal transfer payments in order to govern. Such economic dependency creates a welfare mentality, or learned helplessness. Instead of doing creative and innovative things to be independent, a person on social assistance loses their critical sense of personal efficacy. I agree with Helin when he says that Native people “have to lose the welfare dependency mindset (and) act now to return the dignity, self respect, self reliance and pride vital to the survival of our ancestors” (2006, 172). However, if cycles of learned dependency are to be broken, real opportunities for authentic, intercultural involvement must exist. This is not just the problem of Aboriginal communities but also an issue of establishing a true system of democracy in Canada.

I think that the process of improving the grim statistics listed above can only be achieved in a broader context of socially just institutions structured for Native
success. Changes must be made if this is to become a possibility. As I’ve just described, Canada’s history of racist laws and policies have prevented such meaningful engagement for Native people. Today, it is our moral obligation as a whole society to create schools for First Nations youth that kindle hope by fulfilling a promise of meaningful participation. A plan for doing this has yet to be developed. In 2005, the United Nations reported that, when it comes to First Nations schooling, it appears that “there is no education system, no education accountability, and no goals or objectives” (Helin, 2006, 211). How might we start to improve this situation?

I think it is wise to begin with a model for schooling which reflects the central precepts of Native cultural life. A spiritual relationship with the land, a high level of interdependency, personal autonomy as well as a reliance on art, dreams, thoughts and subjective feelings for knowledge is at the core of Native identity. “Self reliance, self discipline, complete interdependence, teamwork and moral leadership are fundamental elements key to the past well being of Aboriginal people” (Helin, 2006, 86). These worthwhile values, or fundamental elements, can be central in an education system based on the principles of democracy.

The current system of public education in Canada promotes cycles of learned dependency. Such a top down model, where the teacher plays the role of authority figure, is contrary to traditional culture and fails to allow individuals to
practice authentic personal leadership. It is also counterproductive to what we know about how human beings learn. "The way people learn best is by effectively interacting with their environment," reports US scholar and cognitive scientist Alison Gopnik. "People - including young children - seem to be designed to want to explore and experiment and interact with the things around them" (Macklem, 2006, 36). Indeed, engagement and participation are not only central aspects of a relevant First Nations education. A participatory approach to education is congruent with what we know about the very nature of the learning process itself.

Further, passively following teacher instructions is contrary to cherished notions of active self-determination and moral leadership in a democratic context. Today, we need an education system which is responsive to the context of the information age and that can offer real value to individual students. As technology continues to rapidly evolve who knows what sorts of skills will be required by young adults entering the workforce in ten years. The teacher as disseminator of information originated from the days when books were rare. Today, it's medieval to approach education this way. Schooling based on the principles of self-governance is an appropriate strategy for Aboriginal education, but also a way to tune up an education system that is out of touch with the new realities of the internet.
Putting such an education into action does not involve reinventing the wheel or taking some sort of radical risk. On the contrary, Summerhill School is founded on the principles of self-governance and is successful, established and internationally emulated. Defined as an “Alternative School,” it is what every mainstream school ought to be more like today.

**The Cycle of Learned Independence - Summerhill School**

“We must look carefully to creating a practical new reality that provides Aboriginal people a real stake in their futures” (Helin, 2006, 136).

Summerhill was established in 1921 by A.S. Neill and continues to operate today at Leiston in Suffolk, England, under the direction of his daughter, Zoe Neill Readhead. Impressed by the principles of self-governance he observed while visiting a community for delinquent adolescents in 1917, Neill accordingly established Summerhill as a place where children might discover their interests in the safety of a democratic community. The original founding philosophy of the school is unchanged today. Premised on Neill’s belief in children as intelligent persons who are not only capable of directing their own lives but who necessarily require the autonomy to do so, Summerhill is an ideal model for a contemporary First Nations education strategy.
Two main aspects define Summerhill School. First, all lessons are optional. Children decide to attend scheduled classes. This means that children who do go to classes are genuinely motivated to learn. Also, children experience making real choices about how they live day to day. A wide range of topics are available to choose from and subjects include Math, Science, English, Art, Drama, Music and History as well as Gardening, Bug Study, Airplane Construction, Magic Lessons, Afternoon Walks and Photography, to name just a few. Success at Summerhill has a broad definition that may include academic success if the child wants to develop in that area.

Second, Summerhill is a democratic community and every week the school has a meeting involving everyone as equals in the determination of school policy. The headmaster has one vote, just as the youngest child of five years old also has one vote. Summerhill has about two hundred and fifty rules that are enforced collectively. Disorderly behavior is acknowledged and dealt with in an egalitarian environment in which any person may be called upon to be accountable for their actions. As a result, students develop a strong sense of justice, the ability to listen and understand another person’s point of view, a capacity for moral leadership and decision making, an ease around adults, self confidence, honesty, integrity, friendliness and maturity.
Summerhill is a small, international school of around sixty participants from all around the world. Pupils are admitted as early as five, but not later than thirteen as adolescents do not seem to adjust well to the freedom. Students may board at the school, but local students may stay for just the day. Although homework and formal evaluation is only conducted when requested by the student, Summerhill students exceed national test averages and often go on to university. Importantly, graduates from the school know that academic success isn’t the only thing involved in a happy, fulfilling life. Summerhill is an exceptionally supportive environment and both children and parents report 100 per cent satisfaction with their experience at the school. All children, the school asserts, respond to such freedom and self-government and the model is appropriate even for an inner city school.

Summerhill is an ideal example of how an education might serve to bring out the best, most whole aspects in a human being. It also seems to be an approach to education that is congruent with Native culture and values. Personally, I think it is a great direction for First Nations education in Canada and that schools based on the Summerhill model ought to be developed as soon as possible. In the meantime, the context teachers enjoy at Summerhill is far from the circumstances the classroom teacher faces in today’s public school system. How might an educator in today’s system apply the principles of self-governance in a mainstream classroom?
The Self-Governing Art Classroom

The belief a person may have in their helplessness is learned through a cycle of repeated conditioning. An individual may think, “I can’t do anything to change that,” and then behave outwardly in ways which automatically affirm the belief. This is how we create some of our realities without even being aware that, if we change our behavior to show a different belief in life, we would likely receive some different opportunities. Learned helplessness will prevent us from seeing opportunities even when they are given to us.

**Cycle of Learned Helplessness**

1. **Belief:** I can’t do anything. I’m worthless.

2. **Belief Affirming Behavior:** Refusal to participate or make an effort.

3. **Result:** Failure, punishment, and exclusion.

4. **Negative Feelings:** Guilt, shame, remorse and self-loathing.

5. **Belief is affirmed:** See, I really can’t do anything. I’m bad.

6. **(Back to the Beginning)**
A conventional school environment may play into this cycle, forming and entrenching feelings of despair and alienation in a student. These feelings of isolation and personal ineffectiveness transfer into the perceived identities and possible social realities for students. Children who experience themselves as marginalized in school are likely to continue this experience as a bad habit into their lives outside school. Low grades, a lack of academic success, streaming into classes for less intelligent or promising students, failing a grade, punishment, scolding and coercion all reinforce the ways a person may conclude that they are helpless to do something for themselves. The unresponsive and narrow scope of modern schooling, I believe, contributes greatly to the problem of students dropping out, developing addictions, committing suicide, feeling depressed or behaving with hostility and indifference.

The school art teacher is in a unique position to help a student interrupt learned helplessness. And we must do this. We must be responsible to our profession and act morally and humanely to offer our students the opportunity to experience themselves as whole, worthwhile and capably engaged persons. We must not act so as to reinforce disempowering beliefs. This requires that we broaden our notions of what school is and shift our assumptions so as to suit the real needs and rights of our students. Every child has a right to an education and this must be the process of bringing out the best in a person so they are equipped not only for a job but for happiness too.
Art is a potent form of personal self-expression that, when shared within the meaningful context of an individual’s community, can show a person lost in such a cycle of learned helplessness something very different about themselves. Instead of, “I am worthless,” posting a person’s artwork gives them the message of, “I am worthwhile.” This is why affirming a student’s art is so powerful. It is not really the art we are encouraging so much but the spirit and self-regard an individual might come to acquire in a structured cycle of learned empowerment. Once this self-regard sprouts, a person is well on their way to knowing how to direct their own lives.

**Cycle of Learned Empowerment**

1. **Belief:** I can’t do anything. I’m worthless.
2. **Belief Breaking Behavior:** Exhibiting an original piece of creative work.
3. **Result:** Success, praise and inclusion.
4. **Positive Feelings:** Pride, achievement, efficacy and self worth.
5. **Discovery:** Oh, I can do something. I’m good.
6. **Learned Empowerment - Enter a new cycle of positive self-direction.**
Emotional wholeness manifests in a deep feeling of belonging. When we feel there is a place for us, we act well toward other things. This experience of context is desperately lacking for Aboriginal youth today. How easily schools could do things differently so as to provide First Nations students with a sense of value in who they are. As long as we are recognized for being able to make something worthwhile, we have a sense of purpose and a point to our lives. In the words of Appleton, “The emotionally whole child learns at a voracious speed” (1992, 5). For this to develop, democratic process and personal expression through creative projects must be absolutely central components in a new First Nations Public Education Plan.

My main concern is that a self-governing art class in a mainstream school is destined to be limited in a broader school context of contradictory values and assumptions. There is no way that an area of a child’s school day might have the healing and empowering effects experienced by students immersed in the democratic climate at Summerhill. When everything else children might experience in their school day dismisses such an approach as not reflective of ‘the real world’ it loses power. Also, the pent up, physical frustration caused by hours of forced desk learning always results in an explosive release when removed.
In the words of Summerhill teacher Matthew Appleton: "Traditional schooling, no matter how liberal, cuts children off from the nature within themselves and alienates them from the natural ecology of childhood. At Summerhill, new students follow a pattern of gradual realization that culture no longer binds them, a period of rebellion and breaking out, and finally a period of healing and renewed wholeness that brings maturity" (1992, 1). To do this work in the context of a conservative, mainstream educational institution just isn't possible. However, the Summerhill School Policy offers useful guidelines for the art teacher seeking to engage components of democratic education. They are as follows:

**Summerhill School Policy**

1. To provide choices and opportunities that allow children to develop at their own pace and to follow their own interests;

2. To allow children to be free from compulsory or imposed assessment, allowing them to develop their own goals and sense of achievement;

3. To allow children to be completely free to play as much as they like. Creative and imaginative play is an essential part of childhood and development;
4. To allow children to experience the full range of feelings free from the judgment and intervention of an adult;

5. To allow children to live in a community that supports them and that they are responsible for; in which they have the freedom to be themselves and have the power to change community life through the democratic process (Report of an Inquiry into Summerhill School, 2000, p. 5).

**Conclusion**

Addressing the crisis of low Aboriginal achievement in education is not a simple task. We might wish that the matter could be resolved by including First Nations content in the curriculum. However, an effective First Nations education strategy involves restructuring the foundational operating principles upon which public schools are premised. The model of teacher as authority figure and student as the obedient, submissive absorber of information is not helpful in bringing out the strengths in Aboriginal students. It's also out of date with the realities of the information age.

We must design a system that answers the call of Aboriginal children as soon as possible. This call we are answering is the same call of any person who is alienated due to racist laws and policies. It is the call to belong and to be
included. Essentially, this is a matter of justice. We must assist and encourage First Nations children to become visible, authentic participants in mainstream Canadian society. The practice ground for this broad social inclusion of Aboriginal people is a First Nations education based on the democratic principles of self-governance.
Epilogue - Words of Hope

No matter how dark our situation may be in Canada concerning the schooling situation with First Nations people there is a map toward the light that can be unearthed from within with the right touch of human work. Archbishop Desmond Tutu writes in God Has A Dream that every situation, no matter how desperate it appears, contains inside it the invisible potential to change into something just and good.

This fact of the invisible yet actual transfigurative potential within all things became apparent to Tutu as he sat one day in contemplation of his natural surroundings. “As I sat quietly in the garden I realized the power of transfiguration is at work when something so unlikely as the brown grass of winter becomes bright green again. Or when the tree with gnarled leafless branches bursts forth with the sap flowing so that the birds sit chirping in the leafy branches. Or when the once dry streams gurgle with swift flowing water” (2004, 3). Every single human being contains this natural power too. “The principle of transfiguration,” writes the Archbishop, “says nothing, no one and no situation, is untransfigurable.” (ibid., 3).

This is why there is hope in Canada for a good future in First Nations Public Education. Desmond Tutu was one of the visionaries behind the actual
dismantling of Apartheid in South Africa. This work is possible and we should not give up hope. Just like a tree takes its time in the winter, we can’t force the buds of new life out of the bark. But we can pay attention to the tree and notice when it starts to happen. This is the healing process that takes all the time it needs. When the buds do come they will come and then they will flower. We must trust that we are on our way. Seeing this happen will make it a reality.

Transfigurative Potential
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