Double Consciousness and Nehiyawak (Cree) Perspectives
Reclaiming Indigenous Women’s Knowledge

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Those very same hands stroke the face of a child
Warrior within, not meek or mild
Every step that she takes is clearing the way
Inspiring a change, for generations today.

These lyrics—from “Okisikówak,” a song written and performed by the Indigenous women’s music trio Asani—speak to the strength and power of Indigenous women.¹ They suggest that, every bit as much as men, women are warriors, fighting for positive change for Indigenous people. The destruction of Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous identity has been a fundamental objective of colonial policies in Canada. Significantly, Indigenous women have resisted the Canadian state’s colonial objectives, holding on to their Indigenous teachings and seeing the importance of passing this knowledge on to future generations. In this chapter, I attempt to shed new light on

¹ “Okisikówak”—the Cree word for “angels”—is the fifth track on Asani’s CD Listen (Outside Music, 2009). A micro-documentary about the making of Listen is available at http://youtu.be/MEz74GCVopc.
questions concerning the subjectivity and mode of resistance of Indigenous peoples. In particular, W. E. B. Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness can help us understand some of the impacts of forced attendance in the Indian residential school system. Drawing on the recollections of my Nehiyaw (Cree) grandmother, I explore how the passing down of Indigenous women’s knowledge through stories is an act of resistance to double consciousness. Residential schools aimed to produce subjects who had internalized the goals of colonial institutions—people who saw themselves through the eyes of the colonizer, seeking recognition and therefore mimicking non-Indigenous ways of being. This systematic program of forced assimilation, I will argue, created a double consciousness within the minds of many Indigenous people that threatened Indigenous knowledge systems. As the stories and teachings of my grandmother illustrate, women resisted the imposition of this double consciousness by passing on Indigenous women’s knowledge, central in which is the relationships of women to the land broadly conceived—including relationships to the air, water, earth, and other nonhuman beings.

Double Consciousness

What does it feel like to be a problem? This is the fundamental question that Du Bois raises. The notion of double consciousness is developed in his seminal text, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois wrote within the context of the early Jim Crow era in the United States, which had its origins in the 1870s, during the period of Reconstruction following the Civil War. The Jim Crow laws—which remained in force until the mid-1960s—created a system of racial apartheid that forced the segregation of African Americans in schools and other public places, on transportation, and in residential neighbourhoods, as well as restricting African American suffrage (Gooding-Williams 2009, 3). In the face of these new laws, the prominent turn-of-the-century educator Booker T. Washington argued that blacks should avoid political confrontation and set aside the pursuit of higher learning and instead develop a program focused on what Du Bois (1903, 42) aptly described as “industrial education, conciliation of the South, and submission and silence as to civil and political rights.” Washington believed that if blacks learned a trade, this would enable them to succeed within a capitalist system, and their entrepreneurial success would bring suffrage. Du Bois was critical of this approach for numerous reasons, including the negative effect that
submission to legislated inferiority would have on the psyche of blacks (see Gooding-Williams 2009, 90–94).

In the opening chapter of The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois poses the fundamental question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” In his view, this feeling arises because African Americans have learned to see themselves as the “white world” sees them:

[African Americans are]... born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 1903, 3)

The sense of “two-ness,” of an internal struggle between two warring selves, is one of the devastating effects of racial prejudice and systemic injustices. As Robert Gooding-Williams (2009, 80) suggests, Du Bois’s initial question can be stated another way: “How does it feel to be denied the normative status of membership in American society through the betrayal of the sublime ideal of reciprocity?” Gooding-Williams describes Du Bois’s double consciousness as “the feeling of seeing oneself from the perspective of the other, or white, world, where that perspective has been conditioned and qualified by the racially prejudiced disclosure of Negro life”—a “revelation of the other world,” implicit in which is “the application of standards-based, evaluative judgments (of ‘measurings’ of one’s soul) to a picture of the Negro biased by amused contempt and pity” (80). Within this racially prejudiced world, black persons see themselves not as they are but instead judge themselves mistakenly, in the way that the white world sees them (81–82). This viewpoint produced a false consciousness, in which African Americans during this era evaluated themselves against standards not of their own making. For Du Bois, then, the answer was not to accommodate but to insist that white Americans overcome their prejudice and grant political and civil rights to African Americans.

The Souls of Black Folk, as a canonical text, and double consciousness, as an important theoretical concept, have been analyzed by many different
authors. Léopold Senghor takes up the notion of double consciousness by seeing the need, first, to rid the African American and white American minds of the “degenerate black child” and then to replace this idea with an authentic view of African civilization (Adell 1994, 29). As Senghor explains, “In short, it is a question of both an internal and external transformation of the African American. Internally, through education and training; externally, by an increasingly strong pressure exerted on public opinion and on the American government” (Senghor 1977, translated and quoted in Adell 1994, 30). In Senghor’s perspective, double consciousness was created, in part, by the false consciousness of an inauthentic view of African Americans and African civilization.

As Sandra Adell observes, Du Bois recontextualizes the Hegelian view, in which “consciousness, if it exists at all, is always a double consciousness. It is always seeking to reconcile itself with its Other. It is always striving for ‘true self-consciousness.’” As she goes on to point out, “in this philosophical paradigm, the Otherness with which the Negro seeks to reconcile himself is one of the elements that constitutes his essence as a social and psychological being” (Adell 1994, 19). Rodney Roberts (2007, 100) sees in Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness the suggestion that, in contrast to blacks, whites do have a true self-consciousness: “White consciousness is a one-ness. In single-consciousness there is no dependency for self in the relation to some other world, there is no other world—there is only my world.” This reading of the notion of double consciousness shares something with feminist sociologist Dorothy Smith’s concept of the “bifurcation of consciousness,” according to which subordinate groups (such as women) become accustomed to seeing the world from the perspective of a dominant group (such as men). This bifurcation occurs because the dominant perspective “is embedded in the institutions and practices of that world. Conversely, the dominant group enjoys the privilege of remaining oblivious to the worldview of the Other, or subordinate group, since the Other is fully expected to accommodate to them” (Appelrouth and Edles 2010, 321). Judged as inferior both by race and by gender, Indigenous women are doubly vulnerable to the assimilationist policies of a patriarchal state.

**Indigenous Double Consciousness and Residential Schools**

Du Bois wrote during a time when segregation and racial prejudice were a normative reality for both blacks and Indigenous peoples in Canada and
the United States. The Royal Proclamation of 1763, in which King George III claimed British sovereignty over North America, acknowledged the rights of “Nations or Tribes of Indians” to govern themselves and to retain title to their lands. By the time of Confederation, however, these principles had been largely forgotten. As Sir John A. Macdonald reportedly argued before the House of Commons on 8 December 1867, the government should “undertake the onerous duty of the protection of the Indian inhabitants from white aggression, and their guardianship as of persons under age, incapable of the management of their own affairs” (Canada 1967, 200, cited in Milloy 2008, 7). The national Indian policy promoted segregation until these “Indian inhabitants” were civilized enough to be enfranchised and assimilated into the larger Canadian polity. In 1920, a bill was introduced into Parliament that would amend the Indian Act so as to provide for the involuntary enfranchisement of Indians deemed suitable by an official of the Department of Indian Affairs. Commenting on the need to expedite enfranchisement, Duncan Campbell Scott, the deputy superintendent of the department from 1913 to 1932, stated to a special committee of the House of Commons in 1920: “I want to get rid of the Indian problem. . . . Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department and that is the whole object of this Bill” (quoted in Titley 1986, 50).

This type of sentiment has influenced Canadian policy regarding Indigenous peoples, which operated through a combination of segregation and assimilation. Segregation was achieved through the reserve and pass system: the state moved Indigenous peoples onto separate pieces of land separating peoples from their full territory, and a person wishing to leave the reserve was required to obtain a pass from the local Indian Agent. The primary method used to achieve the state’s goal of assimilation was forced attendance at Indian residential schools, the earliest of which date to the mid-nineteenth

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2 Titley cites LAC, RG-10, vol. 6810, file 470-2-3, vol. 7, Evidence of D. C. Scott to the Special Committee of the House of Commons examining the Indian Act amendments of 1920, p. 63 [N-3]. Enfranchisement meant that a person lost his or her status as a registered Indian. Although policies varied somewhat over the years, enfranchisement could likewise be involuntary if a Status Indian moved off the reserve for an extended period of time, or acquired a post-secondary education, or served in the Canadian military. In addition, an Indian woman who married a non-Indian man lost her status.
The residential school system, funded by the federal government and run by churches, is arguably the most horrific program ever created in Canada.¹

As the final report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples notes, although the residential school system was originally designed for Indian children, it “would eventually draw children from almost every Aboriginal community—First Nation, Métis, and Inuit—across the country” (RCAP 1996, 1:172 [chap. 6, sec. 8]). The system included boarding schools for younger children, aged eight to fourteen, as well as industrial schools for older children, which were established in order to train Indigenous people in various trades. In the opinion of the commission, “the schools—80 of them at the high point—were the centrepiece of the assimilation strategy” (1:172). An essential element in this strategy was the erasure of language. Although early missionaries often favoured the use of Indigenous languages as a vehicle for conversion, students at residential schools were strictly forbidden to speak their native tongue and could be harshly punished for doing so. Instead, they were forced to speak only in English or, at some schools, in French.

In 1894, the Indian Act of 1886 was amended to enable the committal of Indigenous children, by the government, to attend residential school:

The Governor in Council may make regulations which shall have the force of law, for the committal by justices or Indian agents of children of Indian blood under the age of sixteen years, to such industrial school or boarding school, there to be kept, cared for and educated for a period not extending beyond the time at which such children shall reach the age of eighteen years. (“An Act to Further Amend the Indian Act,” RSC 1894, c. 32, s. 11: 138[2])

In addition, the Governor in Council was empowered to make regulations that would punish parents and children for non-compliance:

Such regulations, in addition to any other provisions deemed expedient, may provide for the arrest and conveyance to school, and detention there, of truant children and of children who are prevented by their

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parents or guardians from attending: and such regulations may provide for the punishment, upon summary conviction, by fine or imprisonment, or both, of parents and guardians, or persons having the charge of children, who fail, refuse or neglect to cause such children to attend school. ("An Act to Further Amend the Indian Act," RSC 1894, c. 32, s. 11: 137[2])

These powers were reinforced in 1920, when another amendment to the Indian Act made attendance at residential school mandatory for all Indian children aged seven to fifteen ("An Act to Amend the Indian Act," RSC 1919–1920, c. 50). The violation of human rights inherent in such forced removal of children from their families has since been acknowledged by the United Nations.4

Residential school policy was envisioned by the state as a three-part process of separation, resocialization, and assimilation. First, the state-sanctioned view of Indigenous peoples as “savage” and backward justified the removal of children from their homes and communities. Second, a strict curriculum and regimented program were created with the intent of resocializing children—teaching them to feel ashamed of their culture and to strive instead to be whites. Third, policies were developed to assimilate certain graduates into the non-Indigenous world through enfranchisement, whereby the person would cease to be an Indian in the eyes of the government or society (RCAP 1996, 1:313 [chap. 10, sec. 1.1]).

In short, residential schools aimed to reshape not only the behaviour of Indigenous people but their very perception of the world and patterns of thought. The goal was to produce subjects so thoroughly alienated from their original language and society that the society would eventually cease to exist. Indigenous ways of being and knowing would be forgotten, and colonization would be complete. This system created a people who ceased to be “actional” agents of their own societies, causing them to behave as the non-Indigenous “other” and mimic non-Indigenous ways of being in order to seek colonial recognition. This goal has rightly been described as cultural

4 The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that “Indigenous peoples have the collective right to live in freedom, peace and security as distinct peoples and shall not be subjected to any act of genocide or any other act of violence, including forcibly removing children of the group to another group” (United Nations General Assembly 2007, Article 7.2).
genocide.⁵ Although, in the end, the state did not succeed in its efforts to eradicate Indigenous societies, its assimilation policies and practices and the double consciousness that these produced posed a severe threat to Indigenous knowledge systems.

**Lillian Wuttunee**

My grandmother, Lillian Wuttunee, was born in 1914 on the reserve of the Red Pheasant Cree First Nation, in the Eagle Hills area of Saskatchewan, not far from Battleford. All four of my grandparents attended residential school, but Lillian, who passed away in 2002, was the only one with whom I had the chance to discuss the experience. As a child she was sent to a residential school run by the Anglican Church. Even though Battleford Industrial School was virtually adjacent to the reserve, she was sent to Elkhorn Industrial School, in Manitoba, over 650 kilometers away. The location was problematic for many reasons. It was far from the territory where she lived, the land where she had learned to hunt, and the land where she knew how to harvest various medicines. The school was also too far away to allow her parents to visit, and most of the children spoke Ojibwe (Anishinaabemowin) as opposed to Cree. This distance and alienation from the other children made the experience a lonely one for Lillian. She regretted being so far away from her family. As she recalled:

> I was ten years old when I was sent to go attend the Indian Residential School at Elkhorn, Manitoba. I learned to speak Saulteaux while I was there for it is similar to Ojibwe and Cree. The children would say as I approached, “Here comes that Cree girl, watch what you say, ’cause she understands.” So they couldn’t talk about me.

> We only went to school for half a day because we also had to work. We did the laundry, washing in a big machine the many long tablecloths.

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⁵ The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada explains cultural genocide as “the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group” (TRC 2015, 1). They elaborate how for over a century “the central goals of Canada’s Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as ‘cultural genocide’ (TRC 2015, 1).” (TRC 2015).
Other days were set aside for darning and mending. When I got older, I was placed to work in the bakery, where we learned to mix the dough in huge vats. I also worked in the dairy, churning butter, sometimes using my hands or using my feet turning the pedals. I was an excellent seamstress from the time I was twelve. It was part of the curriculum that we work as well as learning reading, writing, and arithmetic.

We followed a strict ritual, going to bed at a certain time each night after kneeling to say our prayers. In the morning we would quickly hop out of bed and dress. Each of us had a locker along the wall, about sixteen inches wide. Every Monday morning we would be given salts from big jugs, meant to clean out our insides. I used to hate that, so I’d hold it in my mouth. As soon as the instructor had left the room I would race three floors down to the toilet and spit out the salts.

Boys and girls lived in separate dormitories and during meals ate at separate tables. My sister Maria was the supervisor’s pet, while I used to get spankings from this same woman. Our hair was cut at an angle, and we all had bangs. This hairdo was called shingles.

Somedays I would just sit staring out at the high-board fences that surrounded the school. I was about fifteen or sixteen when I finally left to go back to the reserve. During my stay at Elkhorn I made good friends, Edgarton Thunderchild, from the Thunderchild Reserve, and Helen and Agnes Eaglechief. But it was so nice to go home.

Even if physical and sexual abuse were absent (or not revealed) in a residential school experience, cultural genocide persisted. For Lillian, the experience of residential school entailed emotional trauma the effects of which persisted into adult life, becoming visible in patterns of behaviour that suggest underlying conflicts about identity and self-worth. In her reminiscences, I observe illustrations of what Du Bois terms double consciousness in some of her actions. For example, while she and her husband, Gilbert, would speak Cree to each other, they made a point of speaking English to their children, even though their older children were fluent in Cree having spent their formative years in the Red Pheasant Cree community. In 1942 when it was time for the older children to start school, they moved from the reserve into Battleford, and Lillian began to spend a lot of time going through

6 My grandmother dictated these words, and all those that follow, to my mother, Loretta Jobin (née Wuttunee), on 27 February 1993, in Edmonton. My mother later transcribed them, and they are used here with her permission.
magazines looking at the latest fashions among white Canadians. Similarly, she would read books on proper table settings and etiquette. Lillian explains:

Now, coming right off the reserve, I had to learn many new things myself. I immediately bought books to learn table etiquette and to teach myself how to dress in proper fashion. My minister came to me to invite us to a picnic (I didn't know what a picnic was). I dressed my children for this, putting a little suit with a white shirt on my son, while the little girls wore pink silk dresses. I was pregnant at this time. When we arrived at the picnic, everyone was dressed in shorts or blue jeans. I was angry with my minister for not telling me how to properly dress my children. I would not mix with the other women; instead I sat by myself, for I was in a bad humour. I never made the mistake of wearing wrong clothing again. Little did I know I had been enjoying picnics every day, as well as having a siesta under the trees near our home, when we had lived on Red Pheasant reserve.

Such anecdotes, sometimes retold at family functions, could simply be understood as endearing stories that explain an aspect of Lillian's character. Viewed in the light of Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, however, these stories, and others like it, point to the conflicts that result from the internalization of the standards of another culture through the forced attendance in the Indian Residential School System.

Through the experience of residential schools, Lillian was, as Du Bois put it, “gifted with second-sight” in the Canadian world. With this “gift,” she saw herself, and received a sense of her worth as a woman, mother, wife, and human being, through the eyes of the white world. Sewing current fashions and mimicking white social norms allowed her to measure her soul “by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” When children arrived at residential school, not only was their hair immediately cut, but their clothes were replaced with uniforms. As sociologist Renée White points out, “Destabilization of national identity can occur by simply transforming the meaning of dress” (1966, 104). As she goes on to explain, in the process of acculturation, a person adopts the cultural markers, such as dress and manners, of the colonizing other, whether by necessity or by choice; in this way, markers that reveal the person’s original cultural identity become “less visible and thus less reprehensible to the eye of the oppressor” (105). Perhaps Lillian’s desire to dress and behave “in proper fashion” was a coping strategy, her attempt to be viewed and accepted by white Canadians as a fellow human being.
At residential schools, children were imbued with a false consciousness: they were taught to regard white people as superior and to see themselves through the eyes of white disapproval. Viewing the world through the
veil of this false consciousness, Indigenous peoples experienced a sense of inferiority. Frantz Fanon (1963, 228) writes that, given the belief in the superiority of the white man, the only destiny for a black man was to be white. Similarly, the only hope for Indigenous peoples was to succeed as far as possible in becoming white. The goal of residential schooling has indeed been described as “killing the Indian in the child.” As the Aboriginal Healing Foundation explains, “In the context of residential schooling, ‘killing the Indian’ meant dis-connecting children physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually from their language, culture and their communities and also, but most painfully, from their own sense of identity as being Indian” (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2005, 44).

Physical dislocation occurred with the removal of children from their families and communities. Significantly, it also often meant removal from home territory and a break in relationships normally renewed through practices on the land. Following this physical separation, “emotional disconnection was achieved by teaching children that the parents, grandparents and Elders they so loved were savages, and their own bodies and racial characteristics were sinful and dirty” (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2005, 45). Spiritual disconnection resulted from the forced assimilation of Indigenous children into a new religion, coupled with amendments to the Indian Act that outlawed traditional ceremonies. Forbidding children to speak their language and participate in their culture created mental disconnection. One effect of this mental disconnection, and an important aim of assimilation, was to stop the transfer of Indigenous knowledge to further generations. This process of disconnection left some survivors with deep-seated feelings of confusion because they felt that “being Indigenous was wrong” (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2005, 47). In turn, this sense of ontological wrongness produced a false consciousness, in that survivors’ understanding of their Indigenous identity was based on the warped views of residential school authorities, agents of the Canadian government, and the Canadian public. The stories of these survivors do not end here, however: resistance to assimilation and efforts to heal the double consciousness have occurred and continue to occur. As an important part of this process, residential school survivors and their descendants are reclaiming and sharing Indigenous knowledge.
Resistance Through Storytelling

For many Indigenous people, the response to assimilation and cultural genocide is not to struggle to merge the assimilated and the Indigenous self into one; rather it is to reclaim the Indigenous self and then to move forward in what Taiaiake Alfred (2009, 16) calls “a self-conscious traditionalism.”

While Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness is helpful for diagnosing the “problem,” my grandmother’s story cannot be fully understood in this way. In the life story she recounted, Lillian found it important to share Nehiyawak (Cree) teachings, teachings she wanted me, her other grandchildren, and members of the community to know. This knowledge includes teachings about territory and how we are connected to the land.

Along with sacred stories and legends, personal stories, such as those told by Lillian, are one of the often-recognized styles of storytelling in Indigenous oral traditions (Wilson 2008, 97–98, citing Cree Elder Jerry Saddleback). By recounting the teachings she received from her grandmother, Lillian contributes to this collective narrative memory: she passes these teachings along to me and her other grandchildren while also linking us to our great-great-grandmother, who once recounted them to her. Songhees scholar Robina Thomas (2005, 240) talks about how important this sense of connection is to her: “My Grandmothers’ stories are the essential core of my being. The stories are cultural, traditional, educational, spiritual, and political.” As she explains, storytelling “also taught us about resistance to colonialism—our people have resisted even when legislation attempted to assimilate our children. All stories have something to teach us. What is most important is to learn to listen, not simply hear, the words that storytellers have to share. Many stories from First Nations tell a counter-story to that of the documented history of First Nations in Canada” (241). The literature on oral histories points to their living nature. As Julie Cruikshank (2005, 27) argues, these histories cannot be relegated to a “freeze-dried” past: they are continually reanimated by the specific nuances and wisdom imparted by the storyteller. Oral history should be seen as a social activity (Cruikshank 1998, 41), which gives us tools to live well.

7 Alfred (2009, 16) writes: “I am advocating a self-conscious traditionalism, an intellectual, social, and political movement that will reinvigorate these values, principles, and other cultural elements that are best suited to the larger contemporary political and economic reality.”
My grandmother’s stories illustrate a type of teaching and learning very different from the one offered within the somber walls of residential schools. These teachings stem from her knowledge of the ways of her people, her connection to the land, and her identity as a Cree woman. Despite the forced assimilation she experienced at residential school, my grandmother hung on to the knowledge she learned from her own grandmother and passed that knowledge on to her granddaughters, thereby weaving five generations of Wuttunee women together. Lillian understood the need to protect and reclaim the knowledge collectively held by her Cree ancestors. Her recounting of that knowledge is an act of resistance to assimilation, one that insists on the importance of collective narrative memory. As she explained:

My father’s mother, Marie, first taught me to set snares. She was the younger of the two sisters that my grandfather had for wives before he died in 1904. When the missionaries came to the reserve, he was told he could only keep one wife and so Marie moved into a separate house. It was behind my parents’ home, but when it caught fire and burned down, she moved in with us.

I used to follow behind her as she gathered medicines and listen as she told me what they were used for. I was very young and can only recall her saying, ayîkotâsima [This is Frog Pants] and this is good medicine. She would wrap the different medicines in a little calico cloth, and just by smell alone she could tell the names of the different roots and herbs. She also used to dig for Seneca roots, which she would tell me she was going to sell to Chinese people. Having being taught to taste the leaves and barks on the bushes of the berries we picked, I could tell you blindfolded a chokecherry from a raspberry or Saskatoon bush.

My grandmother chose to record this account for her descendants. She understood the importance of natural medicines and the knowledge that her grandmother carried as a Cree woman. Her story of how her grandmother taught her to set snares also demonstrates that Indigenous women played a vital part in hunting and hunting-related activities: these functions were not the sole prerogative of men. This is important, as the significant roles that Indigenous women play in hunting are too often ignored (Kuokkanen 2011, 227). Her narrative speaks to a different lived experience, one that is not outside the norm within my grandmother’s world view. Lillian shared a few other hunting stories:
I was alone for five years before my sister Maria came along. I used to entertain myself by snaring rabbits. When I got a little older, I would also set traps on the lakes for muskrats and then wade in the water to retrieve my catch. One time, I was setting a trap and I forgot to set it off before slinging it over my back. It caught me right on my bum. I screamed and cried and jumped around until my grandmother heard the commotion. “What’s the matter, nosim?” she asked. “I’m caught, I’m trapped. It’s got my bum,” I howled. This caused quite a few laughs to the people on the reserve for years to come.

I was quite the little hunter. I also trapped a weasel. It was yellow-brown for it was during the summer. I couldn’t have been too old for it looked ferocious to me, and I didn’t dare go too close to it in case it scratched me, so instead I decided to get my father. “There’s something in my trap,” I said to him. “I don’t know what it is but it’s a wicked animal.” My father tried to keep a stern face and agreed to go and see it with me. When he got to the trap, he held the weasel with a stick while stepping on the trap with his foot to release it. The weasel’s fur was useless to us in summer for to be paid anything the fur had to be white. I would hunt for everything, even gophers, and I helped to clear my uncles’ fields of them.

As a young girl, my grandmother not only learned how to hunt, but she took pride in her skills. Her words also speak to the importance of humour and learning about humility.

Sharing personal stories is one way that Indigenous knowledge can be passed on; another method is through the sharing of Indigenous legends. Stories about Wîsahkecâhk, the trickster, are often considered sacred stories. These legends share teachings about ways of being in the world, ways of interacting with other humans and animals, and ways of being in relationship with the land. My grandmother’s nohkôm (grandmother) shared Wîsahkecâhk stories with her.8 These are my grandmother’s words:

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8 According to tradition, these stories were to be told during the winter. Lillian wanted these stories shared. When thinking through the ethics of publishing her Wîsahkecâhk account (and after talking and receiving approval from advisors, including a Cree Elder), I felt reassured when I found that a version of this legend was already in print, one told by the Rock Cree of northwestern Manitoba (Brightman 1989, 31–32) and it reminded me of the reach of Wîsahkecâhk legends throughout the expanse of Cree territory.
My grandmother always wore black. A black skirt and blouse, moccasins, and a black handkerchief tied around her head. She spoke only Cree. She still had good eyesight for I remember she could spot an insect from across the room.

“Nohkôm,” I’d tell her, “you are so beautiful.”

“Kayâsês nôsisim,” she’d answer. “Long ago, granddaughter, I used to be a beautiful young woman.”

“You’re still beautiful, nohkôm,” I’d reply and ask her to tell me a story, which she would do only in the winter, for she said it was bad luck to tell them in the summer.

“Okay,” she’d answer, “but first sit there until I finish smoking.”

I would watch as she filled her little clay pipe with tobacco and stare as she took each puff, waiting patiently for her to finish so that she could tell me a story. Finally she’d begin:

Wisahkecâhk was walking in the woods when he heard some laughter. Being inquisitive by nature, he followed the sounds until he came across a flock of little birds.

“Why are you laughing, brothers?” he asked them.

“We have headaches,” they answered, “and so we are throwing our eyeballs up into the trees.”

“What happens then?” Wisahkecâhk asked his feathered friends.

“We have only to shake the trees and our little eyeballs fall back into our heads, and so we cure our headaches,” they answered him, for everything had to answer Wisahkecâhk when he talked to them.

“I have a headache too,” Wisahkecâhk said.

“Oh, you must not say that just for the fun of it,” the birds chirped. “Or something bad will happen to you,” they added.

“I understand,” Wisahkecâhk said, before adding, “but I do have a headache.”

The little birds did not believe him and so said, “We’re warning you. You must not do this for nothing.”

Wisahkecâhk did not listen to the birds’ advice. Instead, he threw his eyeballs up into the trees. Just then a fox was walking by and when Wisahkecâhk shook the tree to get his eyeballs back, the fox caught them in his mouth and ran away. Wisahkecâhk didn’t really have a headache and now found himself without eyes. Being blind now, he stumbled to the different trees and touched their bark.

“Brother,” he asked, “what kind of tree are you?” Each of the trees he touched identified themselves and told Wisahkecâhk what kind of medicinal powers their bark, leaves, and roots were good for. Finally,
Wisahkecâhk reached a spruce tree and, after feeling its bark, asked, “What kind of tree are you, my brother?”
“Minahik,” the tree answered.
“You are just the tree I need,” Wisahkecâhk cried out in happiness. He climbed into its branches until he found its resin. He put it into his mouth and began to chew it until it finally became soft. From that he rolled out first one and then another eyeball and placed them into his empty sockets. He thanked the tree for giving him their medicine so that he could see once more.

The story is indeed full of layered meanings. It speaks to proper (and improper) relations with other living things. It also speaks to Indigenous knowledge of the natural world and the availability of an abundance of medicines. In her account, Lillian explains the significance of one aspect of the knowledge found within this story, “Now, it wasn’t until I reached my seventies that I finally understood what that story was all about” (1993). She explains the specific medicinal knowledge found within the story. She went on to say:

My grandmother never explained the curing part to me for I was just a child. Instead she told it to me like a story. The next night I would say to her again, “âcimow nohkôm” [Tell me a story, grandmother]. “Cêskwa” [Wait a minute], she’d answer and she would go through the same ritual of smoking her pipe before beginning.

As a child she understood certain teachings within Wisahkecâhk stories, and as she grew older and her knowledge increased, her levels of understanding became apparent. This is part of the magnificence of Indigenous stories and the abundance of knowledge included within.

Conclusion

Settlers in settler-colonial countries have a home or mother country; for Indigenous peoples in Canada, we have no other home than this land. The primary objectives of Du Bois have been achieved; there are no longer unequal political and civil rights in America like those under the Jim Crow law. For Nehiyawak (Cree) people, although forms of self-determination have been achieved through acts of resistance, we have not achieved a post-colonial reality. The land left is only a postage stamp of our prior homeland. The gendered racism within settler colonial countries like Canada has resulted in a type of Indigenous double consciousness that has been amplified for
Indigenous women. However, assimilation techniques like the Indian residential school system in Canada did not erase Indigenous knowledge or the importance of passing this knowledge on to future generations. Storytelling is one method that Indigenous peoples use to pass on this knowledge. Connection to the land and medicines found in nature are a few of the many important lessons contained within the stories my grandmother shared. Oral histories and storytelling are two ways to resist colonial attempts to erase Indigenous history and connection to territory. We need to tell more Indigenous women’s stories: telling Indigenous stories affirms Indigenous identities, Indigenous ontologies, ways of being in the world, the complex roles of women in stewardship of the land, and our important roles in governance. Storytelling is one way to stand against double consciousness, by asserting the value of Indigenous women’s knowledge systems. The history of opposition and struggle against colonial oppression has accomplished important gains; perhaps most significant are the psychological benefits achieved through resistance.

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References


