

# **The Metamorphosis of an Oral Tradition: Dissonance in the Digital Stories of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada**

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## **Introduction**

Storytelling, as an oral tradition for Aboriginal<sup>1</sup> peoples in Canada, is considered an ancient art form (Cruikshank 1990). Aboriginal peoples' communities are often founded on stories that are characteristically sustaining: communicating the epistemologies and norms that constitute their worldviews (see Valdés 2004; Dei 2000). Digital storytelling is understood as a form of short narrative told in the first person and enhanced by visual text and symbolic imagery (Ohler 2005; Salpeter 2005; Weis et al. 2002). It is considered an extension of oral storytelling, is welcomed by Aboriginal peoples, and represents a "continuation of what Aboriginal people have been doing from time immemorial" (Hopkins 2006:342), and complements the preferred values and styles of interaction innate to Aboriginal pre-colonial education paradigms (Battiste 2000a and b; Barman et al. 1986).

The metamorphosis of the oral tradition of storytelling into the digital medium creates a sense of audience for the elders who self-profess to be intermediaries from one generation to the next. As John Miles Foley (2008) insightfully suggests, oral tradition and digital technology are the frameworks to the fading era characteristic of the printed page. Digital storytelling situates the elders in the line of public gaze, where once their audience was more immediate and culturally relative. The presumed influence of their stories involves the variation of exposition, the representational language, and the latent relationships between the human and spiritual realms according to Aboriginal peoples' worldviews. The elders' role is to sustain the continuity of belief and so accept the digital as a means to reach a broader audience and illuminate a complex system of interrelated values.

By employing a reflexive ethnographic framework to examine selected digital stories from the Omushkegowuk area in Ontario, Canada, a core interpretation of these worldviews emerged; namely, the presence and exploitation of western colonial influence has caused the profound dissonance experienced by Aboriginal peoples' cultural, civil, symbolic, and spiritual paradigms, resulting from the presence and exploitation of western colonial influence. In turn,

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper the term Aboriginal includes all peoples who descended from various First Nations in Canada prior to contact with Europeans. This does not ignore the fact that each First Nation represents its own distinct historical, linguistic, and cultural traditions. In Canada, the Constitution identifies three categories of Aboriginal peoples including, Indian, Inuit, and Métis.

this paper further discusses how the stories of the elders require a rather imaginative interpretation from non-aboriginal peoples on the cultural periphery of these oral traditions.

### *Context of the Nishnawbe-Aski Peoples*

The Aboriginal peoples of this area have firm beliefs that are rooted to their land and natural resources. Foundational to this understanding are the typical vocations of hunting, trapping, and fishing that are passed from one generation to the next. The Nishnawbe-Aski Nation represents 49 First Nations near James Bay, Ontario, two-thirds of Ontario's land, with a population of 45,000 people. The traditional spoken languages include Ojibway, Cree, and Ojicree. They are ranked 69<sup>th</sup> in the United Nations' Human Development Index and hold the dubious distinctions of having the lowest life expectancy in Canada and the highest youth suicide rates in the world (A. Fiddler n.d.).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The literature suggests that ethnographic research focused upon culture, language, and the identity of Aboriginal peoples "would do well to cultivate the notion of Indians in unexpected places . . . the internet and other communication technologies" (Strong 2005:259; see also Collins 1998; Cruikshank 1998; Dombrowski 2004; Harmon 2002). This project fills a void in the research literature and is a segment of a larger study that examines Aboriginal peoples' oral traditions and various paradigms of teaching and learning (Cardinal & Hildebrandt 2000). It inquires about the communication of Aboriginal peoples' culture, history, and values as told by the elders' stories via digital technology (Basso 1996; Horne & McBeth 1998; Mitchell 2001; Sarris 1993). As a mainstream researcher engaged in a reflexive ethnographic approach, I believe that respect for the solidarity of Aboriginal peoples' beliefs and their uniqueness in the human social world are of paramount importance. The interpretations of the elders, as they were shared in the digital stories, were thus not subject to appraisal and were instead accepted as traditional teachings from which new understandings could be gleaned, particularly from non-aboriginal peoples who are situated on the cultural periphery of these oral traditions.

### **Elders as Storytellers**

In Aboriginal peoples' communities, the elders are considered the gatekeepers of wisdom and the conduits for the preservation and renewal of linguistic and cultural tradition (Crossing Boundaries 2006). An elder possesses knowledge of traditional teachings and ceremonies and is able to relate this knowledge to inform others (Stiegelbauer 1996; Waldram 1994). In Aboriginal peoples' communities, oral narratives are recollections told by elders who witnessed or were involved in the subject of the story (Haraway 1991). Traditional stories are told cross-generationally by elders who often consider the accounts as belonging to the community and not to themselves (Minha-ha 1989). The stories are also perceived as socioculturally significant

(Barton 2004; Dei et al. 2000). The elders' "collective memory and critical conscience of past experiences" shape their understandings of the social, physical, and spiritual worlds to which they belong (Dei et al. 2000:46-47). As a longstanding oral tradition, storytelling honors Aboriginal peoples' customs and epistemologies and is perceived as critical for the revitalization of First Nations cultures (Castellano 2000; Iseke-Barnes 2003). Stories provide the intergenerational communication of essential ideas (Lanigan 1998:103; see Iseke-Barnes 2003:218). They also acknowledge the imperial oppression of Aboriginal peoples in Canada and their resistance to colonial rule (Byrne and Fouillard 2000; Harjo and Bird 1997; Huggins 1997).

Stories are also instrumental in furthering an appreciation for the sociocultural behaviors unique to Aboriginal peoples (see, for example, Basso 1996; Casey 1996; Feld and Basso 1996). For Aboriginal peoples, storytelling embeds a sense of community that is related to notions of bravery and survival (Snow 1977). The metamorphosis of traditional stories into digital form fosters the sharing of oral testimonies between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream society (Horsley 2007). Storytelling broadcasts the experiences of the elders to a broader, electronically accessible venue. Digital stories feature the voice of the storyteller and their contribution to public culture through the interplay of text, symbol, and voice (Burgess 2006). Digital storytelling honors the voice of the elders and affirms their cultural and symbolic roles as the gatekeepers of wisdom (Atton 2001). They are examples of "social communication, where communication is not to be understood narrowly as the exchange of information or ideas but as the affective practice of the social" (Burgess 2006:210). The elders share their stories of culturally significant experiences in a publicly accessible forum. Through the use of technical tools, graphic and audio dimensions, and the narrative voice, digital stories offer opportunities for the viewer to identify with the subject and potentially be "changed by them" (Salpeter 2005:20; Weis et al. 2002). The visual component typically consists of photographs or culturally relevant imagery and is meant to lend a visual interpretation of the spoken word (Lafontaine 2006; Qiongli 2006). The digital stories not only perpetuate key traditions in Aboriginal culture, but are also conducive for establishing forums where "vernacular bridges can be built [between generations] that enable them to share, celebrate, and understand different values . . . . Stories are transferable and will continue after the storyteller has departed" (Horsley 2007:267-68). Further, they offer rich opportunities for intercultural learning (Crossing Boundaries 2006). As Candice Hopkins states, "cyberspace has been occupied, transformed, appropriated, and reinvented by native people in ways similar to how we [Native peoples] have always approached real space . . . digital technologies have become a medium for speaking and telling our stories" (2006:343). In Aboriginal peoples' communities, storytellers accept digital media as a means of sharing their distinct experiences and worldviews that impact upon contemporary realities (*ibid.*; Qiongli 2006).

## Methodology

Purposeful selection determined the inclusion of the six digital stories under study, including Fiddler's "The Whiteman Knew Very Little of the Native's Heritage" (1978), Gabriel Kam's "That is One of the Many Wonders" (1977), Helen Mckay's "We Were Taught How to

Do Everything” (1987), Jane Nothing’s “That is What I Know” (1978), Ellen Sainnawap’s “That is How Poor the People Were” (1975), and Peter Sturgeon’s “The Things People Did Long Ago” (1977). The selection was based on three factors: the recording date of the story (from 1975 to 2000 to mark one generation), its status as a recognized and publicly accessible electronic document, and its having emanated from the Ontario context, given that the concept of shared identity is intrinsic to a sense of place (Huff 2006). The selected digital stories belong to the collection entitled *Stories of Our Elders* collection, which is the property of the government of Canada Digital Collections and is currently archived by Library and Archives Canada online.<sup>2</sup> The stories are narrated in Oji-Cree by the elders of the Nishnawbe-Aski region, and were collected between 1975 and 1993. The tapes were transcribed first from Oji-Cree into syllabics and then into English. The stories under examination derive from the *atesokawenan* type (stories of sacred and legendary traditions and events) and the *tepaachimonewa* type (stories based on history and apparently real circumstances).

This study departs from the kind of traditional ethnography that calls for the researcher to be immersed in the culture of the subject-community (Strong 2005). Instead, it marshals a contemporary ethnographic practice that entails participant observation in more pioneering sample communities, such as institutional settings and cultural centers (see Bender 2002; Bodinger de Uriarte 2003; Cattelino 2004; Erickson 2002; Karson 2005), wherein the risk of encroaching upon private Aboriginal interests by the researcher is diminished. This reflexive ethnographic approach allowed for the *virtual* engagement and intimate encounter with the oral traditions of the elders. Although essentially being situated on the periphery of Aboriginal peoples’ cultural traditions, the digital stories served as entry points to reflect, interpret, note, and describe Aboriginal peoples’ epistemologies. Reflexive ethnography facilitates this unobtrusive inquiry from a conceptually open-minded perspective.

The multifaceted interpretations of the digital stories were managed by content analysis. On a pragmatic level, the stories were treated as data and subjected to a content analysis that tracked the process and scope of emerging insights (Patton 1980). The transcribed stories ranged from two to five pages in length. The text of each story was re-read and labeled by category, and patterns between categories and across stories were considered. Properties within the categories were distinguished as descriptors that represented the smallest segments of significant interpretation. The stories were then subjected to a second critical reading and the themes were exhaustively compared to the emerging categories and considered for applicability. The suitability of the properties within each subcategory determined their relevance (Avdi 2005; Johnstone and Frith Johnstone 2005). Selected extracts from the digital stories that were key in the formulation of the central interpretation are cited by the elder’s last name and the story’s date of recording.

The qualitative content analysis inductively arrived at four subcategories: the central role of family relations and cultural traditions as described in the stories; the influence of spirituality on Aboriginal peoples’ values; a unique narrative form employed by the elders described as a stream-of-consciousness technique; and the sharing of altruistic truths as a means of enlightening younger generations of Aboriginal peoples. These subcategories and their collective 14

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/205/301/ic/cdc/elders/Frames/index.htm>.

properties were subsumed into a core categorical interpretation described as a depiction of Aboriginal peoples' profound sense of cultural, civil, symbolic, and spiritual dissonance resulting from the presence of and exploitation by western colonial influence. The paper also discusses the altruistic truths and intrinsic value statements made by the elders that require an imaginative interpretation from those who reside on the cultural periphery of these oral traditions.

### **Interpretations and Descriptions**

Interpretations of the stories are based on the written incarnation of the story considered as text, but also on feeling as conveyed through the voice of the elder. The following core categories emerged and are described below.

#### *Cultural Dissonance*

Consistent in the stories are the elders' first-hand accounts of the poverty that was characteristic of Aboriginal peoples' way of life. Typical of others, the elder Ellen Sainnawap very matter-of-factly states, "people were poor long ago . . . I did not think of eating. I guess I was starving" (1975). Profound poverty, according to the elders, was the norm for their migratory way of life, making it necessary to collectively rely upon the traditional practices of fishing and trapping. Although the elders reminisce about particular families who especially suffered, those individuals are not specifically identified because their identity was considered in light of tribal members who sustained themselves and each other through the cultural practices taught by the elders. According to Helen Mckay, to name only one elder, "we were taught how to do everything . . . . We were taught how to prepare food when animals were killed. We were taught how to prepare fish . . . . We were taught how to prepare beaver hides" (1987).

The engendering of such traditions not only contributed to Aboriginal peoples' survival during their travels, but also served to further their distinctiveness and identity. In many of the stories the elders distinguish the culturally different "Whiteman's food" (as described in Sainnawap 1975) that represented a foreign source of sustenance gathered not by trapping or fishing but by excursions to "the store." Such practices were not only culturally unsustainable according to Aboriginal peoples' customs, but resulted in perceptions of the Whiteman that further alienated Aboriginal peoples from the European presence. Typical of others, Peter Sturgeon admitted: "It seemed that the company got all of our money . . . . We did not know how costly things were. We thought everything was cheap . . . now that I think about it, I see how costly all the company's stuff was" (1977). The elders readily share the feelings of exploitation experienced by their people at the hands of the colonial presence that capitalized on Aboriginal peoples' lack of familiarity with the market exchange of food and goods. As T. Fiddler (1978) put it, "the Whiteman knew very little of the Native's heritage. He did not understand their cultural values." Worse yet, he further intensified the cultural dissonance experienced by Aboriginal peoples.

Moreover, the elders cite the Eurocentric dominance over their educational paradigms as another example of cultural dissonance. There are numerous accounts of how Aboriginal

children were educated by their parents, who modeled not only cultural practices but literacy skills as well: “We were also taught how to read and write in syllabics. The lessons started with easy words and then get harder as we went along. That is how we learned. We were not taught the sounds of the symbols first. That is how they taught us” (Mckay 1987). As a further consequence of colonial exploitation, elders spoke about formal Eurocentric schooling practices that were markedly different than Aboriginal customs: “School was held at the agency cabin for three months. Some of the children left for town schools after they were taught here. My parents did not let me go. We were taught the Whiteman’s language in the school, not the Native language” (Mckay 1987). The elders lamented the loss of linguistic traditions and educational practices that fostered their cultural uniqueness, and their digital stories represent Aboriginal peoples’ beliefs that education should complement Aboriginal values and tradition. The stories are testimonies to the importance that elders invest in the teaching of Aboriginal languages that sustain traditional beliefs and nurture a greater sense of Aboriginal self-identity. Language and culture, according to the stories of the elders, are the principal means for the cross-generational transferral of knowledge to illuminate Aboriginal peoples’ experiences and identity. From this perspective the Whiteman’s language is culturally dissonant. Typical of the other elders, Gabriel Kam shares his resignation to the fact that custom and linguistic displacement experienced by the Aboriginal people have rendered them forever different: “The times have changed from what they were before” (1977). Mckay also suggests the foreshadowing of the hardship experienced by Aboriginal peoples resulting from the cultural dissonance of colonial rule: “My father told us that we would have a hard time in the future and that everything would change. I am beginning to see what he was talking about” (1987).

### *Civil Dissonance*

The introduction and subsequent imposition of colonial rules and regulations also resonated, according to the elders, with a sense of dissonance for Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal peoples, who consider themselves to be “made for this earth,” felt displaced by civil laws that were alien to their culture: “The Natives did not know the rules and regulations that the Whiteman made. The Whiteman did not talk to nor did they give notice to the Natives. They came suddenly . . . . It has not been right for the Natives since then. The Whiteman did that to them” (Kam 1977). The Eurocentric law had, in other words, no contextual applicability or relevance for Aboriginal peoples. The Whiteman’s civil law practices represent colonial arrogance and oppression against unsuspecting Aboriginal peoples. The elders make it explicitly clear in the stories that Aboriginal peoples are well aware of the colonial exploitation inflicted upon them, and lament the Whiteman’s governance that seems to augment their sense of cultural dissonance. The Natives, according to Nothing (1978), “should be able to handle and look after their welfare [particularly because they] have no idea how the [imposed] laws and regulations work for the Natives.” The sense of being regulated by an external governing body is counter to the natural laws and tribal traditions characteristic of Aboriginal culture. In this vein, the elders’ stories seem to indicate a partial succumbing to the sense of powerlessness Aboriginal peoples feel in terms of controlling their futures. The infusion of capitalist interest and the oppression of their traditional culture leaves them resigned to a state of doubt: “What will happen?” asks

Nothing (1978), “I do not know.” Similarly, Fiddler contemplates the perils that the imperial governance represented and regretfully observes that “we had no time to think things through about how we would handle the coming of the Whiteman” (1978). Common in the stories are circumstances where the elders speak on behalf of their peoples to describe the civil dissonance created by colonial rules and regulations. For example, Fiddler cites the blatant injustices of the Whiteman, who “did not tell [Aboriginal peoples] about the laws to be followed. They did not tell the people about the regulations that had to be followed” (1978), yet indiscriminately imposed them.

Land treaties, as well, are often referred to in the stories. The elders’ voices represent the collective sentiments of Aboriginal peoples in stating that the land was an instrument of further colonial exploitation and civil dissonance (Kam 1977):

The Whiteman promised the Natives that as long as the sun is in the sky, I will look after you when I use your land. The Whiteman’s promises were very good the first time he came. Now you can hardly see the good promises he made about caring for the Natives today. I know that the first Whiteman who made these promises is not alive. Their promises were broken. They do whatever they want and do not keep the promises that were made to the Natives. The Natives do not hold back anything from the Whiteman, they just try to get along. The Native people do not make things difficult for the Whiteman as he lives here on this earth.

The elders cite the overt manipulation of Aboriginal values as the Whiteman couches his promises to the Natives in the discourse of the natural imagery of the sun and skies that are innate to Aboriginal peoples’ worldviews. A common thread woven throughout the stories is the assumption of an imperial presence, of having free license and managerial authority over Aboriginal peoples’ land and laws.

### *Symbolic Dissonance*

A further sense of dissonance is evident in the discussions about the symbolic displacement of Aboriginal peoples’ customs. The elders meticulously describe the gathering of materials, the intricate labor, and the process of assembly involved in building a canoe. As significant as the actual product, however, is the symbolic importance inherent in the sense of community that is implied among the various tribal members who assume an unquestioned responsibility to assist (Sturgeon 1977):

After all this was done, many people would help sew the canoe. They helped each other make the canoe. After it was finished, they were able to use the canoe. This is what they did when they wanted a new canoe. No money was needed, unlike today when you need much money to buy one boat.

This sense of community is fundamental to the construction of the canoe. Like others, this elder makes a stark contrast in his story between Aboriginal peoples’ ethos to work communally for the greater good of their tribe and the market-driven dependence on financial means more

characteristic of Eurocentric paradigms. The point is underscored in Sturgeon's story, as he emphasizes the communal effort required to build the boat and laments the fact that he does "not see them anymore" (1977). Further, the making of snowshoes and the tanning of hides, along with the building of canoes, are consistently described in the stories as frames of reference for illustrating how these cultural symbols of the past no longer represent the same sense of tribal community and spirit of survival that distinguished the distinct identity of Aboriginal peoples.

### *Spiritual Dissonance*

Throughout the *atesokawenan*-type stories, the elders draw upon the image of the shaking tent. Typical of others is the following account by the elder Sainnawap (1975):

There would be an image standing in the shaking tent. It looked like the image of a Whiteman standing there. The people would ask the image for a cigarette. The cigarette looked real to those people who saw this. Animals would enter the shaking tent and tell stories. All the animals would go into the shaking tent that the Indian built long ago. The Native people were able to know many things from the shaking tent. If they wanted to know whether a person died or if someone was lost, they used the shaking tent. If a person was alive, the shaman would say so inside the tent. They said that the shaman would tell if the person was going to die. The shaman would know if someone passed away by talking to them in the shaking tent. All the animals would tell stories. The animals would tell the shaman why the people were unable to kill them at that time, but the animals knew they would be killed eventually. The Natives knew how to look after things well. They also knew how to make each other suffer by using the shaking tent. Even while they were fishing, they would see the image of the Whiteman standing around. Just as if he landed from above. He looked like snow floating by. The image was like a Whiteman standing there.

The tent is described by the elders as a source of divine communication. Unique to tribal spiritual culture, the process of being engaged in the shaking tent was transformative for the human and animal world alike. For the shaman, the shaking tent was the venue where knowledge and wisdom were garnered and eventually shared. As the sage, the shaman could communicate with the natural world in order to better understand the animals' elusive nature during the hunting and trapping seasons. According to the elders, the animal and natural world was highly interrelated to the human realm since the personified animal voice in the shaking tent readily accepted their impending capture and slaughter. The elders' belief that the animals also had something meaningful to communicate in stories underpins the significance of the oral tradition in Aboriginal peoples' epistemology. In the sanctity of the tent, the animals had an opportunity to "talk about their lives here on earth" (Kam 1977). This mystical connection to the animal world was not used by Aboriginal peoples as a means of exploitation to gain an unfair advantage over the animals; instead, the elders describe a mutual respect in a genuine spirit of communication that unites these realms in a spiritual existence. The elders describe a ritual of inclusion belonging to both animals and people.



Moreover, and of particular significance to this interpretation, the image of the Whiteman permeates this most unique Aboriginal spiritual tradition—in that it is said to have been seen standing in the shaking tent. Unlike the animal presence, however, the image of the Whiteman does not have a voice. Instead, it is described as a silent image and is perceived as a source that provides a commodity—a cigarette. The same image, according to the elders, often reappeared outside the shaking tent when Aboriginal peoples were fishing.

Furthermore, the shaman is distinguished by the elders as a person of privilege revered for spiritual presence. It was understood that the shaman “knew how to use communication through thoughts” (Kam 1977) to discover the welfare of distant persons, and to employ telepathic capacities to communicate with people and examine their thoughts. This is considered, according to the elders, as one of the “mysterious wonders” unique to certain Aboriginal peoples from “a long time ago” (Kam 1977). For Aboriginal peoples, the shaman was thus a viable recourse from whom to seek counsel. The elders depict this figure as a mediator for those in the tribal community who had a dispute with another or were the target of unexplained verbal aggression.

“When religion came,” however, “they stopped using the shaking tent,” says Sturgeon (1973), and this change represented a profound spiritual dissonance within Aboriginal peoples’ communities. Religion, according to the elders, represented an imported ideology that was externally imposed upon them. In the elders’ post-colonial accounts, the jargon of spirituality was replaced with references to religion. Similarly, references to the shaman were replaced by more Eurocentric terms such as ministers and clergyman. Characteristic of the other elders, Fiddler chastises the ministers who forced their presence on Aboriginal communities and justifies the people’s reluctance to “accept any religion [as] the people did not really accept it then” (1978). The elders share their dismay at the spiritual dissonance that affected Aboriginal peoples’ spirituality. Sturgeon’s summary offers a fitting summary of the implications of the colonial presence upon Aboriginal peoples’ spiritual practices: “Before religion they used the shaking tent all the time” (1977).

## **Discussion**

The oral traditions of the elders are critical in transmitting cultural understandings (Huff 2006) and often evoke a sense of moral agency unique to Aboriginal peoples (Entrikin 1996). The stories link images of place and community that significantly contribute to their self-identification. Each of the stories represents fluid, situational narratives that cultivate both a distinct identity and an accompanying dissonance experienced by Aboriginal peoples at the hands of colonial influence. The digital stories evoke a sentimental and profound response for both the teller and the recipient, since they are “a means of becoming real to others on the basis of shared experience and affective resonances” (Burgess 2006:211). From this perspective, the digital stories serve as entry points for mainstream researchers with backgrounds in western epistemology to reflexively interpret, describe, and further appreciate Aboriginal peoples’ traditions. For those on the periphery of Aboriginal culture, digital stories are opportunities to unobtrusively engage in Aboriginal paradigms via a conceptually and theoretically flexible

method (Gaard 1993), while recognizing the implicit cultural sensitivity necessary for any interpretation of Aboriginal customs (Keeshig-Tobias 1990; Ross 1992; Warry 1990).

Inherent in the oral narratives is an underlying impetus that describes a life of service to one's people, family, and spiritual beliefs. This commitment to service, as described by the elders, represents a significant teaching for the younger generations. In other words, Aboriginal peoples' devout commitment to serve immediate and extended family while remaining true to their spiritual beliefs is a prime factor for their sustainability as a culture despite the varied experiences of dissonance already discussed. The altruistic and core values espoused throughout the oral traditions of stories (digital and otherwise) provide a continuity of sense and seriousness of purpose for Aboriginal peoples. Through these stories elders share social and spiritual teachings in culturally significant terms.

In many regards, the elders represent the cultural conscience of Aboriginal peoples, and through the vitality of voice and exercise of passion exhibited in the stories they personify the affective and motivational dimensions necessary for the sustainability of their worldviews and epistemologies. In the process, the elders allude to various images that provide insight into culturally specific behavior (Sexton 1992) or have spiritual value (Montejo and Campbell 1993). The stories are considered "a living aspect of the popular imagination, [and] therefore [provide] valuable passwords or master keys into the understanding of certain social realities" and their spiritual implications (Harss and Dohmann 1992:429). As an example, the elder Sainnawap describes Aboriginal peoples' proficiency during their migration and explains "that long ago people were able to walk on water. That was one sure thing the Natives did. That was one of the wonders the Natives did before the Whiteman arrived" (1975). This elder, and others, make specific reference to the metaphysical capacities of the forebears of present-day Aboriginal peoples. Yet, like other external interventions that led to experiences of dissonance, the exploitation of the colonial oppressors negatively affected their mystical prowess (see Carson 2002; Montejo 2004; Thom 2005).

Like the elder Sainnawap, Kam classifies and accounts for Aboriginal peoples' "mysterious gift to know things" from a time "long ago" (1977):

If a person was away from his home and if they wanted to know if anything happened to him, they would ask a shaman who knew how to use communication through thoughts to find out how he was. The shaman would know how he was because the missing person could be heard talking as if he were alive. If the person died, the shaman would know how the people died by asking others that were still alive. They would tell what happened to the person. The shaman would relate to the people when that person would be back. That was another one of the mysterious wonders of the people. Another mysterious wonder was the use of thought communication to ask people why they teased a person. The shaman could be heard talking to the other person as he interrogated them. That is what he used it for.

The shaman's gifts could dispel false and erroneous information for those concerned about the welfare of another. Within the perplexing mystery of these gifts, the shaman represented the continuity between the human and animal world while exercising a judicious blend of influence in an environment conducive to harmonious relations between the hunted and the hunters.

These mysterious gifts were not exclusive to the shaman. According to the elders, prior to the arrival of European settlers Aboriginal peoples could transcend the physical realm (Kam 1977):

When the Native person wanted to go somewhere else, he was able to do so, just by thinking. He did not use a plane as we do today. He was able to fly by himself. He had everything. One time there was a man who went to the store to get supplies. He had two dogs and a sled. While he was inside the store it snowed heavily. The dogs had a hard time pulling him home on the ground, so he walked over the clouds with his dogs where it was good to walk. The people he visited on his way to the store could hear him as he yelled to his dogs as he went by. That is how they knew he went home. He landed right at home. They do not know what he used. There was no plane. He only used his powers. This was another one of the many wonders that the people used long ago.

The onus in all accounts of such mysterious gifts is on the proper use of these powers lest they be taken from the wrongdoer. From a mainstream perspective, these firmly entrenched beliefs signify the profound connection to metaphysical spheres. They expose the consequences of colonial rule that led to various experiences of dissonance experienced by the Aboriginal peoples. Not only were their policies and practices devalued, but their core values as Aboriginal peoples were unduly intruded upon.

For a non-aboriginal person situated on the periphery of Aboriginal culture, an interpretation of the values communicated through the stories of the elders is very insightful. For example, Fiddler draws upon the image of a man transformed into a *windigo* that self-mutilated himself and posed a threat to others in the community (1978):

The people saw that his teeth were growing longer. The old man ate his lips, his fingers, and his hands. The people realized he was turning into a *windigo*. They thought that if he gets bigger, he will eat them too. They knew that there would be no one left if he gets loose. The people realized that if they did not prevent him from becoming a *windigo*, he would eat them all. They knew that they had to save themselves. The Natives knew that they had to kill that *windigo* being.

This elder employs erudite verbiage that can be misleading and spurious for those who are conceptually narrow-minded and intolerant of cultural differences. Significant for this analysis is the elder's choice of an anecdote that depicts a Native in inimical frames of reference and describes the *windigo*'s physical alteration into a disproportionate form. The story of the *windigo* is a culturally rich one for the Aboriginal peoples of this land; conversely, it is quite possibly intentionally exclusionary for those who are not familiar with Aboriginal worldviews. In effect, this story, and others like it, use the medium and the message to further distinguish between Aboriginal and mainstream worldviews. The altruistic values communicated in the stories are not intended by the elders to be subject to mainstream judgment. To impose a western value system upon the culturally sensitive images explored by the elders would obscure the point of the story. An imaginative interpretation keeps the contextual awareness intact, is thoughtful and careful,



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