

Spiritual Beginnings of Indigenous Women's Activism

The Life and Work of the Honourable Thelma Chalifoux, White Standing Buffalo

JUDY ISEKE, LEISA DESMOULINS AND THE HONOURABLE THELMA CHALIFOUX

Les histoires de compréhension spirituelle et culturelle et sur ses relations avec les communautés. L'activisme de Thelma ainsi que celui de tant d'autres améliorent la vie des peuples autochtones. vie des femmes autochtones nous aident à comprendre leur militantisme. Une grand-mère Métis, Thelma Chalifoux (White Standing Bull) partage ses expériences de travail auprès des communautés, au Sénat canadien et à l'Institut Michif.

Métis women's stories help us understand the important roles of Indigenous women in communities and the ways that their work has and continues to contribute to the well-being of women, their children, and grandchildren, and indeed, to all members of communities. Métis grandmothers, as significant members of Métis communities, play many roles in relation to their own and other Indigenous nations. Through interviews with the Honourable Thelma Chalifoux, a well-known Métis grandmother and Elder, community activist and educator, and the first Indigenous woman appointed to the Canadian Senate, we are reminded about the important work that Métis women undertake as mothers and grandmothers, and their important public roles in communities and political positions that create positive change in communities.

We begin by locating ourselves and the collaborative, Indigenous methodology engaged for the research. Judy Iseke is a Métis researcher and scholar from St. Albert, Alberta, Canada, which was once a strong Métis community but over the years has changed into a mixed urban center. She is a descendant of the Métis families who are said to have founded this community. She is Canada Research Chair and Associate Professor at Lakehead University where she

teaches courses in Indigenous Education at the graduate level and she is also an adjunct professor in the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Her academic work is focused on Métis Elders and the power of storytelling traditions.

Leisa Desmoulins, a recent doctoral graduate, works as a research officer for Iseke's storytelling project and teaches in the Faculty of Education. Her doctoral research focused on Indigenous youth's identifications with public schooling. Her connections to Indigenous communities include membership in the Ojibways of the Pic River First Nation, through marriage, and ally work with the urban Aboriginal community of Thunder Bay.

When Judy met with Thelma and her daughter, Sharon Morin, they discussed whether Thelma would be interested in being involved in a project about Métis women's lives and work. She was very interested. Judy was preparing a grant application to get funding for the project and she spent time with Sharon going through files and materials that outlined Thelma's many contributions. Sharon and Judy pulled together a file that outlined the many roles and responsibilities that Thelma had fulfilled in her years of activist, educational, and political work. Judy reworked this file and submitted the funding proposal listing Thelma as collaborator on the research.

Methodology

When Judy returned to visit with Thelma, she brought a digital video camera, lighting, and audio equipment. She set up the equipment and asked Thelma to tell her

about her life and work. This took place over four days, during which Thelma shared many of her experiences with Judy. This paper reflects only a portion of Thelma's life and work. Judy has returned four times to discuss the film with Thelma to ensure that she was being honoured in the film. Thelma watched several versions of the film as it developed and provided feedback.

This paper is based on a film script that Judy wrote and developed into a 44-minute film "*Grandmothers of the Métis Nation*." The film focuses on the life and work of three Métis grandmothers, showing the ways in which their public lives reflect their Métis sensibilities and move beyond the roles of childrearing and caring for families so typical of many Métis women's stories. Each of these grandmothers had a large family but in their later years stepped into their grandmother role as leaders and activists, historians and researchers, educators and healers in their communities. Thelma's life and work as an informal community leader and activist are featured in the first 14 minutes of the film. In writing this paper, the authors returned to the transcribed materials from Judy's interviews with Thelma, which were featured in the film.

This use of film to depict Métis grandmothers' storytelling as a research approach resonates with the scholarship on Indigenous methodologies that prioritize Indigenous ways of knowing, values connections to Indigenous agency and activism, and focuses on cultural vitalization and self-determination (Iseke-Barnes 2009). Indigenous storytellers have used storytelling to share knowledge for millennia (Green; Gunn Allen; King). As [First name?] Kovach reminds us, storytelling is a way of knowing and sharing knowledge: "Indigenous methodologies flow from Indigenous ways of knowing (epistemology), incorporating an Indigenous theoretical perspective, and using aligned methods (e.g. qualitative interviews, storytelling)" (22).

[First name?] Hernandez-Avila concurs and states that women's stories are distinct and important for the specific knowledge they contribute:

How do they [Indigenous women] acknowledge and pay tribute to their own and others' expressions of indigenous ways of knowing, including principles of humanity and relationship to all that lives? One crucial way is through bearing witness and giving testimony: most importantly, they "tell a story." ... Conscious of the way language(s) mediate, conscious of how narratives are created, how and where and why they emerge, whose interests are served, which stories become official (for some), which ones are ignored (by some), which ones could help humanity and the relations of the earth, they/we tell story. (x)

Elsewhere, Iseke-Barnes has also written about inter-generational and relational importance of Métis grandmothers sharing stories, stating that: "Grandmothers ... share oral narratives as community historians and personal narratives about families and deeds that express pride and confidence. Their stories are particularly important for the young" (79).

Thelma's stories illuminate her activism as action based in historical and contemporary roles, relational responsibilities, and spiritual and communal responsibilities and relations. Thelma's own experiential knowledge informed her work to create positive change within the contexts of her family, Métis communities, all Indigenous peoples within Canada, and Canadians. As an Indigenous woman, mother, and grandmother, Thelma's purpose, her experiences, and relations within the private realm provided the contexts for her activism, informed her commitment to social justice, and guided her spiritual social and political work within various sites of the public realm.

Introducing Thelma Through her Spirit Name

In the film *Grandmothers of the Métis Nation*, Thelma is thus introduced: "Thelma Chalifoux was the first Aboriginal woman in the Canadian Senate. She is a Métis Elder who has worked in support of Métis communities her entire life. Her name is White Standing Buffalo Woman."

Reference to White Buffalo connotes spiritual power and strength and sacred work. The story goes that two warriors were out hunting buffalo, hunting for food in the sacred Black Hills of South Dakota, when they saw a big body coming toward them. And they saw that it was a white buffalo calf. As it came closer to them, it turned into a beautiful young Indian girl.

At that time one of the warriors had bad thoughts in his mind, and so the young girl told him to step forward. And when he did step forward, a black cloud came over his body, and when the black cloud disappeared, the warrior who had bad thoughts was left with no flesh or blood on his bones. The other warrior kneeled and began to pray.

And when he prayed, the white buffalo calf who was now an Indian girl told him to go back to his people and warn them that in four days she was going to bring a sacred bundle.

So the warrior did as he was told. He went back to his people and he gathered all the elders and all the leaders and all the people in a circle and told them what she had instructed him to do. And sure enough, just as she said she would, on the fourth day she came.

They say a cloud came down from the sky, and off of the cloud stepped the white buffalo calf. As it rolled onto the earth, the calf stood up and became this beautiful



Janet Stahle-Fraser, "Silent Journey," 2003, 14" x 18", pastel on paper.

young woman who was carrying the sacred bundle in her hand.

As she entered into the circle of the nation, she sang a sacred song and took the sacred bundle to the people who were there to take it from her. She spent four days among our people and taught them about the sacred bundle, the meaning of it.

She taught them seven sacred ceremonies. One of them was the sweat lodge, or the purification ceremony. One of them was the naming ceremony, child naming. The third was the healing ceremony. The fourth one was the making of relatives or the adoption ceremony. The fifth one was the marriage ceremony. The sixth was the vision quest. And the seventh was the sundance ceremony, the people's ceremony for all of the nation.

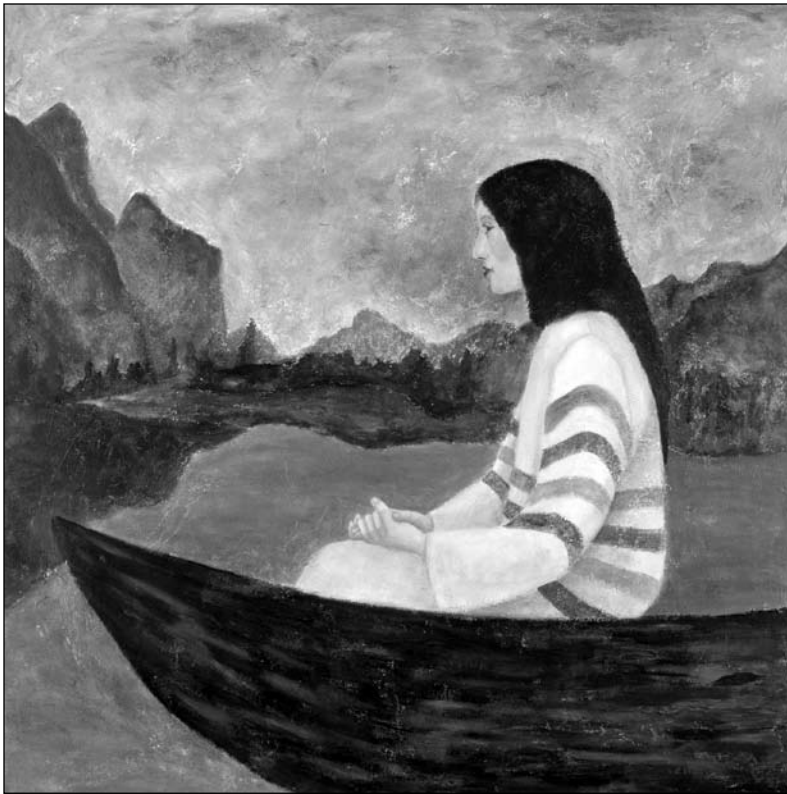
She brought us these seven sacred ceremonies and taught our people the songs and the traditional ways. And she instructed our people that as long as we performed these ceremonies we would always remain caretakers and guardians of sacred land. She told us that as long as we took care of the land and respected it that our people would never die and would always live.

When she was done teaching all our people, she left the way she came. She went out of the circle, and as she was leaving she turned and told our people that she would return one day for the sacred bundle. And she left the sacred bundle, which we still have to this very day.

The sacred bundle is known as the White Buffalo Calf Pipe because it was brought by the White Buffalo Calf Woman. It is kept in a sacred place (Green Grass) on the Cheyenne River Indian reservation in South Dakota. It's kept by a man who is known as the keeper of the White Buffalo Calf Pipe, Arvol Looking Horse.

When White Buffalo Calf Woman promised to return again, she made some prophecies. One of those prophecies was that the birth of a white buffalo calf would be a sign that it would be near the time when she would return again to purify the world. What she meant by that was that she would bring back harmony again and balance, spiritually. (White Buffalo Calf Woman)

A white buffalo calf was born on August 20, 1994 in Janesville Wisconsin and lived ten years (Miracle, the sacred white buffalo, 2001). A second white buffalo calf was born here on August 26, 2006 but it lived only a few months



Janet Stahle-Fraser, "Capote," 2003, 30" x 30", acrylic on canvas.

(Miracle's Second Chance). Whatever the lifespan of these animals, they are taken as a sign of support and strength for the Indigenous peoples that honour this story.

Having the name White Standing Buffalo Woman is thus a name that signifies spiritual strength and suggests leadership and commitment to helping one's people. These are traits that Thelma Chalifoux has in abundance.

Taking up Grandmother's Role

Indigenous women's "source of wisdom and knowledge can be found in their own experiences and in their grandmother's teachings, which have been passed on for generations through oral tradition" (Ouelette 38). A mother of eight, a grandmother and now great-grandmother, Thelma's understanding of her responsibilities within her family relations is based in Indigenous women's traditional roles. Her work teaching and supporting her family is ongoing, and will continue as long as they are living. Her relational responsibilities to her children and grandchildren ensure that her knowledge is passed down to them. "Your responsibilities do not end when your kids grow up because it carries on through the generations. This is the responsibility of a mother, a grandmother, and of a great grandmother."

Thelma explains that her own realities and experiences position her understanding of her responsibilities

as a woman—to teach and support her children and grandchildren from her own experiential knowledge. Historically, these responsibilities were grounded in her role within the realm of kinship relations in family. [First name?] McDougal [in references this name is spelled Macdougall/ pls verify spelling] explains the traditional kinship responsibilities to family using the Cree concept of "*wahkootowin*" as:

... the Cree cultural concept that best represents how family, place, and economic realities were historically interconnected, the expression of a world view that laid out a system of social obligation and mutual responsibility between related individuals—between members of a family—as the foundational relationship within communities. In the Cree language, *wahkootowin* was the term used to express the sense that family was the foundational relationship for pursuing any economic, political, social, or cultural activities and alliances. (432–433 [?? What are these page nos from?], cited in [??] Iseke-Barnes 74)

Paula Gunn Allen, an Indigenous grandmother and renowned scholar, also emphasizes that Indigenous women continue to take up our work in our various locations for the benefit of the people:

We are doing all we can: as mothers and grandmothers; as family members and tribal members; as professionals, workers, artists, shamans, leaders, chiefs, speakers, writers, and organizers, we daily demonstrate that we have no intention of disappearing, of being silent, or of quietly acquiescing in our extinction. (193)

A part of taking up roles and responsibilities for Indigenous women can be engaging an activist spirit. Indigenous women's activism is typically based in community. Silvia/Sylvia? Maracle writes from the perspective of Indigenous women's community development work in urban centres. She contends that Indigenous women have led community development work to improve conditions for Indigenous peoples, particularly women and children. She views this community development work (in areas such as education, addictions work, housing, welfare, and employment) as a form of healing.

Thelma learned from a young age from her immediate and extended family about the meaning and responsibilities and extent of family life in relation to herself as a Métis woman. "The Métis, always strong political people. Always. Always very much involved with the whole extended fam-

ily. And whether you were an auntie or an uncle or even a second cousin, you were family. And we had to look after each other and that's how it was."

As Osenntonion and Skonaganleh:ra state:

We have to begin, as Aboriginal women, to think about all of our relations, not just ourselves and getting ahead, but all of our relations! ... Through our thoughts, our actions, our words, *today*, we're supposed to be thinking about their well-being,

that directly impacted Métis peoples' lives. She was an active part of Indigenous movements organizing across North America. Like Thelma, many of these grassroots activists working for change were women.

Thelma told stories about activism in her life and work in numerous community organizations in Alberta as well as her work in the Canadian Senate. She explains the unlikely beginning of her activist work. "I walked into the Métis Association office to change my address for the newsletter and they hired me right away as one of the first women

"The Métis, always strong political people. Always. Always very much involved with the whole extended family. And whether you were an auntie or an uncle or even a second cousin, you were family. And we had to look after each other and that's how it was."

... this time that we have, these resources that we have, we are only borrowing from our children, our grandchildren, and our great-grandchildren; that they're not ours. (461)

Kim Anderson sees women as uniquely located to take on grassroots activism. This stems from women's personal experiences and their roles and responsibilities within families and communities. Linking women's activism to the Indigenous approach of contextualizing knowledge Kim Anderson, [First name?] Mihesuah, [First name?] Oulette, and [First name?] Voyageur emphasize the importance of Indigenous women's relational place in families and communities and the types of activist work in which they engage. Their location gives them an insider's perspective facilitating a grassroots approach and connectedness to issues within the community to which their activism responds.

From Thelma's earliest understandings of her roles and responsibilities as a woman, a family member, and a Métis, she extended her experience, wisdom, knowledge and her social obligations from her personal, relational location into roles and responsibilities within public realms and larger communities. Her activism around getting welfare for Métis families and improving housing conditions exemplifies socio-economic and political activism work in and for community.

Thelma's Community Activism

Thelma advocated for adequate welfare and safe living conditions for community members. She challenged the work of the governmental bureaucracy and its inequities

fieldworkers for the Métis Association. This was in 1969. And that was really the beginning of my activism."

The Métis Association is the precursor of the Métis Nation of Alberta (MNA), a political organization that represents the political interests of Métis people across Alberta. The Métis Association was established in the 1930s to help mobilize Métis people and act as a unified voice of Métis people. Currently, the Métis Nation of Alberta is involved in political organizing and creating Métis cards for its membership as there is [ongoing/renewed??] interest by government in controlling the number of Métis people who might assert political rights to land and resources.

[First name?] Adams writes of Indigenous socio-economic and political activism of the 1960s and 1970s when agencies such as the Métis Association worked to effect governmental policy changes to improve living conditions for Métis people in communities. He contrasts this grassroots activism with the later period of 1980s and 1990s when federal and provincial governments increased support to Indigenous political organizations to build leadership and infrastructure while controlling the types of programs and activities funded. These activities did not include opposing governmental policies for programs and services. The increased funding, Adams argues, came with conditions that limited the organizations' advocacy work on behalf of their members.

Thelma joined the Métis Association in the late 1960s, at a time when Indigenous groups' growing political struggles and activism for community and family resources that would enable a reasonable livelihood took place as the many sources of income on which the Métis had relied were dwindling, and as resources and supports in the form of land or housing were becoming available to Métis.

Activism then focused on local-level issues and included demands for adequate social welfare programs to cover necessities such as food and shelter for Métis people living without basic needs (Adams; Fiske).

Thelma explained the focus of her work within the Métis Association: “I’m always a strong advocate for a good home and a good job and then a lot of the social problems stop.” Her advocacy within the Métis Association involved the formation of the Welfare Unit that looked into concerns about the Alberta government Welfare Department’s activities in regard to Métis people. The first job of the Welfare Unit was to investigate living situations that were described in letters coming from the outlying areas about the terrible conditions that people were forced to live in.

So we [a Welfare Unit colleague] and I went to Fort Chip[pewa]. It was the middle of winter. It was about 50 below. And we went up there and the conditions that I found up there just made me so angry. We had a little trapper up there who had his feet wrapped in gunnysacks. They had been frozen. And the Welfare [Department] wouldn’t help him. We had another lady up there—a widow with five children and they gave her 60 dollars a month to live on, with five children. And it cost her over 60 dollars a month just for the propane for her house.

Thelma was invited to speak to the government Minister about the use of buffalo meat as food for the people. She took this opportunity to raise public awareness of the terrible living conditions in Northern communities.

When we were in Cadot Lake, they had put houses in there and the contractors ended up putting the furnaces in bedrooms! It was very, very dangerous. They had propane tanks right beside the septic tank. It was just absolutely horrendous. So we as an organization, as the Métis organization, we had to go in there and we had to really explain to the government exactly what was happening. Because they were putting money in there and our people were still suffering, more than they ever did before they ever had any of these appliances. So it just made me really, really sad when I went in there to see that little children were smelling sewer gas because the contractors didn’t do it properly.

Thelma and her Welfare Unit colleagues met with **the government of Alberta**? Welfare minister to raise awareness of the issues. They presented a position paper that challenged the way decisions were made in the Welfare

Department. As a result of Thelma’s activism changes were made. The social worker **responsible for the Fort Chippewa area or Cadot Lake [IS THIS CORRECT?]** was fired, the supervisor of the social worker was transferred, and people began to get some help from the Welfare Department. Thelma’s activism was consistent with Indigenous activism that opposed governmental structures and their functions at that time (Adams). As Adams notes, Métis leaders and activists challenged the government publicly and advocated on behalf of their people for basic human rights and economic equality. Indigenous activists attacked “central government institutions like Indian Affairs and welfare offices.... Unorthodox approaches and aggressive actions intimidated bureaucrats and politicians: as Native activists, we learned to play on the colonizer’s deep-seated fears and internalized racial stereotypes” (88).

Thelma’s advocacy work included documenting conditions, meeting with and challenging the bureaucrats and their policies, and using the media to create greater public awareness. It was activist work in the interests of community that she continued also within the Senate of Canada.

Thelma’s Appointment in the Senate of Canada

In November 1997, Thelma was appointed to the Senate of Canada as the first Aboriginal woman and the first self-identified Métis:

When the Prime Minister called me... I asked him... “why me” because I was not a member of the liberal party. I was just working for the people. And he said, “when I read your story I knew you were needed in the Senate.” And what a wonderful, wonderful compliment that was. I couldn’t believe it.

The Senate of Canada forms Parliament, along with the House of Commons and the Governor General. The Canadian Senate is comprised of 105 members who are appointed by the Governor General on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. They are recommended to represent the provinces and territories of Canada. The majority of senatorial appointments come from four major regions of the country, Ontario, Quebec, Maritimes, and western provinces. One member represents each of the smaller regions of Canada (Yukon Territory, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut). Senators sit as members of the Upper House, the Senate. They may remain as Senators until the mandatory retirement date at age 75 (Parliament of Canada).

Until 1927 Canada had no women in the Senate, although the Constitution did not explicitly prevent women’s appointments to the Upper House. In 1927, five

women (known colloquially as the Famous 5) challenged women's lack of representation in the Senate by asking the Supreme Court of Canada to determine women's eligibility to become Senators. The case was known as the Person's Case because the Famous 5 asked the court to rule if women were considered persons under the British North American Act (BNA) of 1867. The Supreme Court decided that women were not persons within the context of the BNA and thus could not be appointed to the Senate of Canada. The Famous 5 appealed the Supreme Court

Northern Alberta. "Did you know that they do not have, we do not have communication there ... the radio waves don't allow it." Based on her work in Western Canada, Thelma also raised concerns about everyone being able to afford a registered retirement savings plan (RRSP). "Have you ever thought about the seasonal workers? Most of our people in the mid-Canada corridor are seasonal workers and they rely on that Canada pension. They don't have anything".

Thelma explains that in response to her speak out she "got

They had that First Nations Elders *may* be consulted in traditional land use. And I said, "no, no. There are Métis in the traditional land in the mid-Canada corridor." So I said, "we have to put in the First Nations *and* Métis." Then *may* meant nothing. I made sure that the word was changed from *may* to *shall*.... It made a big difference."

decision to the highest court of the time, the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, where the original decision was overturned. Shortly after the final legal decision, the Prime Minister appointed Cairine McKay to the Senate. She became Canada's first female senator (Parliament of Canada).

It would take another 60 years for the first Aboriginal women to be appointed to the Canadian Senate. In 1997, Thelma Chalifoux became the first Métis woman appointed to the Senate (Tremblay). Between 1997 and 1998, two other Indigenous women, Ethel Blondin-Andrews and Nancy Karetak-Lindell, a First Nations and Inuit woman respectively, won seats in the House of Commons (Tremblay). These women worked for Canadians, while also representing the needs and interests of the Indigenous communities from which they came.

Usually, when Senators enter the upper chamber, a ceremony is planned before which they are not allowed to voice their opinions in the house prior. But this was not the case for Thelma Chalifoux. She recounts:

The first day I was sitting there and they were debating the Canada Pension Plan. And this one fellow, this one senator from across the way, conservative senator, stood up, and he said, "Everybody in Canada can afford an RRSP. Everybody in Canada has communications." And he's going on and on and I'm getting angrier and angrier. So I said to the senator sitting beside me, I said, "I have to respond to this man. I said, how can I do it?" He said, "Just stand up and the speaker will recognize you...."

Thelma addressed the Senate based on her recent trip to

a standing ovation" for raising awareness and broadening perspectives. This first speech in the Senate signifies how Thelma would spend her career in the Senate, continuing to advocate for Indigenous peoples.

Thelma describes the challenges of inherent in people's perception of the Canadian Senate and how it works. "People don't understand, and the don't realize how important that upper chamber is. We don't just take and review the bills that have gone through the House of Commons." She used the example of an environment bill that was to be passed by the House of Commons.

They had that First Nations Elders *may* be consulted in traditional land use. And I said, "no, no. There are Métis in the traditional land in the mid-Canada corridor." So I said, "we really have to look at the difference, so we have to put in the First Nations *and* Métis." Then *may* meant nothing. So I made sure that the word was changed from *may* to *shall*. So it was an order in the bill. And it was things like that that really made a big difference in how that bill could be used by our people.

As a senator, Thelma worked from within the parliamentary structures. Working from the inside, she had the ear of the Prime Minister on a weekly basis, and actively participated in political processes to change conditions for Indigenous peoples, particularly women and their children. She retired from the Senate of Canada in February 2004, at the age of 75.

Through my years in the Senate ... I fought for the rights of not only the Métis, but of the Crees and the

Ojibwa, and all the Aboriginal people in this country here. They needed a voice. . . . I was there every week, every Wednesday morning at National caucus, bringing our issues forth to the Prime Minister.

A Hard Bed to Lie In

During her time in the Canadian Senate, Thelma facilitated various research studies. One of these was in regard to property rights on First Nations reserves and inequities in this area for women and children. The issue at the center of the conflict was that when a Native man marries a non-Native woman she becomes a member of the band and a full voting member of the community. But when a Native woman marries a non-Native man she is stripped of her Indian status and loses her membership in the band. The children of a Native man and his non-Native wife become full members of the band and have Indian status but the children of the Native women and her non-Native husband are stripped of status and voting privileges in the band. This discrimination, until 1985, was written into the *Indian Act* with significant consequences for women and their children.

The man has total control, and if a woman is leaving a violent domestic issue, and she has no rights on the reserve. Her husband can kick her out of the house and she has to leave because it all belongs to the man. And not only that, when they leave the reserve, Indian affairs has no jurisdiction over them, so they're left in limbo. Then I have another case, where a mother's daughter was hurt in an accident with her horse. Totally paralyzed. There was no services on the reserve where she was living. She had to take her girl, who was totally paralyzed, into Calgary, put her into a special home there, and Indian affairs had no jurisdiction and did not support her. Even though she was from the reserve. The minute you leave the reserve, Indian Affairs has no jurisdiction over you, and they don't support you what so ever. That's terrible. Just absolutely terrible, that's horrendous. So this is what this report was all about. The issues regarding women and children that have absolutely no rights under the Indian act. And that has to change.

Indigenous women's legal activism to fight this discrimination within Canada formally began in the early 1970s when two Aboriginal rights groups, Indian Rights for Indian Women (IRIW) and the Tobique women's group, united around on-reserve rights for status women. Much of the scholarly writing on Indigenous women's activism has focused upon the legal area of Indian women's

rights, particularly within the *Indian Act* (Bear; Jamieson; Silman). Three women, Jeanette Corbiere-Lavell, Mary Two-Axe Early, and Sandra Lovelace were instrumental in legal activism to repeal the section of the *Indian Act* about women losing Indian status upon marriage to a non-Indian man.

Mary Two-Axe Early summarized 40 years of Indigenous women's legal activism work when she wrote:

We Indian women stand before you as "the least members of your society." You may ask yourself why. First, we are excluded from the protections of the Canadian Bill of Rights or the intercession of human rights commission because the *Indian Act* supersedes the laws governing the majority. Second we are subject to a law wherein the only equality is the inequality of treatment of both status and non-status women. Third, we are subject to the punitive actions of dictatorial chiefs half-crazed with newly acquired power bestowed by a government concerned with their self-determination. Fourth, we are stripped naked of any legal protection and raped by those who would take advantage of the inequalities afforded by the *Indian Act*.

Raped because we cannot be buried beside the mothers who bore us and the fathers who begot us:

Because we are subject to eviction from the domiciles of our families and expulsion from the tribal roles.

Because we must forfeit any inheritance or ownership of property.

Because we are ruled by chiefs steeped in chauvinistic patriarchy who are supported by the Indian Act, drafted by the rules of this country over one hundred years ago.

Because we are unable to pass our Indianness and the Indian culture that is engendered by a mother to her children.

Because we live in a country acclaimed to be one of the greatest cradles for democracy on earth offering asylum to Vietnamese refugees and other suppressed peoples while within its borders its Native sisters are experiencing the same suppression that has caused these people to seek refuge by the great mother known as "Canada." (The Mohawk Women of Caughnawaga 356)

In 2003, the Senate published its report, *A Hard Bed to Lie In: Matrimonial Real Property on Reserve*, which built upon legal activism undertaken by Indigenous women for Indigenous women from reserve communities. This Senate-led research sought political change to address the

inequality of Indian women who were not accorded the same protection and access to reserve capital and services as their male counterparts under the *Indian Act* (Fiske; see also Jamieson; Voyageur). The report recommended changes to the *Indian Act* to redress the division of personal and real matrimonial property as a first step. The committee also recommended funding for Aboriginal women's associations to consult with First Nations women to find permanent solutions that do not violate existing Canadian human rights for Indigenous women and their children who are living under the *Indian Act* if their marriages break down on reserve. The Senate committee's recommendations met with resistance from others. Thelma explained:

We tried to make amendments to the *Indian Act*, when Robert Nault was Minister of Indian Affairs. He tried to make changes to the *Indian Act*, and, he was stopped. And I regret to say, that some of our [First Nations] leaders at that time, did not support it, because of the power struggles. So this is the issue with women and children. Especially women under treaty.

Thelma contextualizes her knowledge of women and their children's plight on reserve through experiences from her own life. She explains how the issues surrounding Indigenous women's equity impacts her personally, telling,

I have a granddaughter that was born on a reserve, and because she doesn't live on the reserve, she has no benefits. The band membership, the band has control of all the membership, so you can be put on the Indian list, the general list, but if the band does not accept you, chief and council, then you don't have a reserve either, you don't have a community, if they don't want to accept you. And that happens, especially in the rich reserves. And this is the issue with Bill C-31. A lot of our women, got status back through Indian affairs, but because they were Bill C-31s, they were not accepted back on the band council, because the band council didn't want them. A lot of the poor bands didn't mind at all—they welcomed them back—but the bands that have lots of money, big difference, big difference. They don't want to share the wealth.

Thelma refers above to Indian women who regained their Indian Status in 1985 through Bill C-31, which amended the *Indian Act* to comply with Canada's 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Women who had previously lost status upon marriage became eligible for reinstatement of their Indian status and band membership under the

Indian Act. This legislative change came about through Indigenous women's activism, beginning with Indigenous women's briefs on loss of status to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women and culminating with Sandra Lovelace, whose challenge to the removal of her Indian status upon her marriage to a non-Indian man reached the Supreme Court of Canada. When she lost the case in Canada's highest court, Lovelace and her supporters appealed Canada's decisions to the United Nations, claiming that Canada discriminates against Indian women on the basis of gender, in contravention of the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights. In July 1981, the Human Rights Committee found that Canada, as a signatory nation to the Covenant, had denied Lovelace's rights. In 1985, Canada amended the *Indian Act*, when Parliament passed Bill C-31 (Boyer). In 2010 Parliament continues this work with Bill C-8, the *Family Homes on Reserves and Matrimonial Interests or Rights Act*, for the distribution of personal and real property to divorcing couples on reserves.

Despite years of activism by Indigenous women and further research described by Elizabeth Bastien, the actions of the Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, (Government of Canada 2003), the Standing Committee on the Status of Women (Government of Canada 2006), and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples to counteract remaining inequities for women within the *Indian Act* and Canadian society have been very limited. As such, the *Indian Act* legislation continues to disadvantage women and their children on reserves as well as women who relocate to cities and towns.

As Sharon McIvor states:

Because marital property rights for Canadian is governed by provincial law and not federal law, in cases of Indian divorces involving land on Indian reserves, the wife is legally disadvantaged compared to other Canadian women. There is no federal law granting rights to women in cases of marital dispute or separation, and the Supreme Court of Canada has held in *Derrickson V. Derrickson* and *Paul v. Paul* that where there is a conflict between federal and provincial law, federal law prevails in the case of Indians. Also, wives of Indians living on reserve cannot enjoy any benefits related to possession of land in the event of divorce from an Indian male unless they own the land in their own name, with the blessing of the Band Council and the Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs. (374-375)

Unfortunately, the extent of the federal government's activity on this issue is limited to the publication of re-

search. Nevertheless, the Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) filed a lawsuit [WHEN?] against Canada alleging that the legislative gap on Matrimonial Real Property violates the human rights of Aboriginal women that are guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. [AND DID THIS RESULT IN ANYTHING THAT HELPED?] As well, some First Nations including Band Administrations Housing Policies or Band Council By-Laws, Land Codes and/or Matrimonial Real Property Codes under the *First Nations Land Management Act* (INAC 2004) or under Self-Government Agreements. The number of communities that enacted such policies, codes, or by-laws has been limited, and the federal government has not recognized the authority of actions that do not fall within the purview of the *Indian Act* or other legislation (INAC 2006) (see, also Bastien 175). [THIS IS UNCLEAR. WHAT DO YOU MEAN HERE? WHAT HAS HAPPENED AS A RESULT? IS ACTIVISM ONGOING ON THIS ISSUE? DOES THELMA HAVE ANYTHING TO ADD HERE?]

The Michif Institute

Upon retiring from the Senate, Thelma established the Michif Institute in St. Albert, Alberta. The mandate of the institute is to facilitate genealogical and historical research on Métis peoples and to provide a museum and cultural support center offering workshops and education. One important aspect of this work was the development of a Youth Justice Committee that works with Indigenous youth in trouble with the law. Some of them had hours of community service work that they completed through the Michif Institute by doing work to support Elders in the community (i.e., doing chores like clearing snow, raking leaves, painting fences, or delivering groceries). Thelma's model for Youth Justice Committee follows other programs for Indigenous youth that combine service learning or alternative justice models with cultural teachings. Thelma explained that, "we have them going around the communities and we have them looking after the Elders which teaches them respect and how to help others." When they were finished their hours, the Institute marked the occasion with a smudge ceremony and a prayer for the youth. Thelma stated, "a young offender came here as a youth and left as a man."

Conclusion

Thelma entered the workforce at a time of Indigenous peoples' burgeoning political actions for Indigenous peoples within communities. Many Indigenous women undertook activism work to enact changes and promote healing

within their communities. Thelma's activism in housing and welfare sectors highlights issues and inequalities and ultimately affect positive changes in living conditions for Métis people within communities, bringing support and balance in the lives of people struggling without appropriate housing. Thelma's rationale—that a good house and a good job and social problems stop—speaks to her focus on health and healing in communities.

Thelma had the unique distinction of being the first Aboriginal woman to be appointed as a Senator. She responded to this honour by using her role in the Upper Chamber to bring issues forward and to advocate for all Indigenous peoples—across Nations and across Canada. Through her research participation, Thelma continued Indigenous women's previous legal activism work against the ongoing impact of colonial legislation on women and their children's lives. While the struggle for change continues, her work helped bring the issues to the attention of the government at the highest level.

When Thelma retired from the Senate and returned to her community, she again took up activism work focused on the health and well-being of her community. Again, she contextualized her work within community needs, and working for all her relations. She created the Michif Institute to publicly celebrate the histories and genealogies of the Métis people within the community of St. Albert. Her work with youth through the Institute is rooted community activism that engages youth through Indigenous ways of being to facilitate their own agency and healing.

Thelma's activism draws strength from the spiritual underpinnings reflected in her spirit name. Thelma's family background, Métis upbringing, and personal experiences, as well as her spiritual purpose, provided her with contextualized knowledge and guided her activism. Thelma exemplifies spirituality as a process of action rooted in experiences and focused on relationships (Faver; Iseke, under review). Her community leadership and activism effected change in the lives of people in communities. She not only advocated for adequate housing, good jobs, health and healing opportunities, but she tirelessly worked to raise Indigenous women and men's awareness and knowledge about their own situations in order to encourage them to embrace political opportunities for change. Today, she continues to create and support networks of people committed to change for the betterment of all communities.

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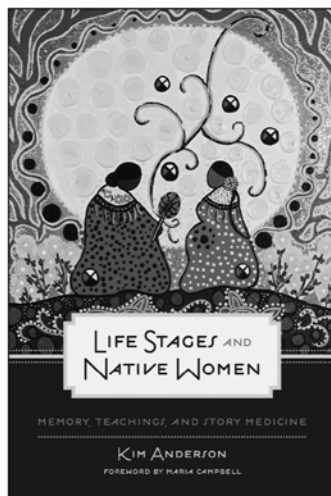
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Life Stages and Native Women Memory, Teachings, and Story Medicine

By Kim Anderson, Foreword by Maria Campbell

A rare and inspiring guide to the health and well-being of Aboriginal women and their communities.



The process of "digging up medicines"—of rediscovering the stories of the past—serves as a powerful healing force in the decolonization and recovery of Aboriginal communities. Kim Anderson shares the teachings of fourteen elders from the Canadian prairies and Ontario to illustrate how different life stages were experienced by Métis, Cree, and Anishinaabe girls and women during the mid-twentieth century. These elders relate stories and customs related to pregnancy, birth, infant and child care, puberty rites, gender and age-specific work roles, the distinct roles of post-menopausal women, and women's roles in managing death. Through these teachings, we learn how evolving responsibilities from infancy to adulthood were integral to community health and well-being. By understanding how healthy communities were created in the past, Anderson explains how this traditional knowledge can be applied toward rebuilding healthy Indigenous communities today.

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