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Piikanaikiiks : a literary analysis of Blackfoot oral stories and the traditional roles of women in leadership

Department of English

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**PIKANAIKIIS:
A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF BLACKFOOT ORAL STORIES
AND THE TRADITIONAL ROLES OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a combination of life writing and literary analysis of select oral stories regarding the leadership role of the woman in Blackfoot culture. I discuss the leadership qualities of The Holy Woman, The Woman Chief/Warrior and The Blackfoot Woman Storyteller and the importance of these identities for contemporary Piikani Women. I explain traditional Blackfoot women's roles by describing the connection between traditional women's roles, oral stories, ceremonies, Blackfoot language, and the land. A literary analysis and a comparison of the oral stories found in Percy Bullchild's *The Sun Came Down: The History of The World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It*, Beverley Hungry Wolf's *The Ways of My Grandmothers*, and Clark Wissler and D C Duvall's *Mythology of The Blackfoot Indians* will demonstrate archetypal women in leadership roles, and will show the origins of these traditional roles. The argument for this thesis is to encourage Piikani women to return to traditional Blackfoot roles for the purpose of establishing traditional Blackfoot leadership to balance power between women and men; create healthy communities; and empower future generations of Piikani Women leaders.

Woman Who Stands Strong

I sit by her side
stroking her arm,

She grows colder
her light fades.

Grandfather Sun,
Grandmother Moon,

When they take back
their warmth and light,

She will be gone
A great loss it will be.

Teaching the traditional
ways to many,

As it ends, it begins again.

I stand facing Grandmother
moon shaking my rattle.

Her ancient power flows
down to me in waves.

As I sing and pray with
Grandmother moon listening,

She will share her
knowledge with me.

I continue my prayer
and song until...

I become a woman who
stands strong.

--Shelly Eli
October 2010

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Chapter 1: Who I am - Reclaiming a Piikani Woman's Identity

Oral story telling is a very important part of the Blackfoot culture. Oral stories are told to pass on ceremonial knowledge; to teach Blackfoot values and morals; for social entertainment; and to mark important events in a person's life. Oral stories take center stage whenever Blackfoot people gather together for sacred ceremonies and celebrations. Often, sacred ceremonies and celebrations are intertwined in the Blackfoot culture. At the conclusion of a sacred ceremony there is a celebration. In order to have a celebration a ceremony is conducted or, sometimes during the celebration smaller ceremonies are included in the ritual. Oral stories connect the ceremonies and celebrations; as a result oral stories become the central part of these events.

One ceremony/celebration where an oral story becomes the main focus is when a person is given a name. The naming ceremony is conducted through an oral story. Lanny Real Bird describes the way that oral tradition and protocol are linked when he says, "[i]n the practice of oral tradition there is an important emphasis on protocol and process (ritual) to the point of formal license" (187). A Blackfoot elder who has earned the right (has formal license) to name people follows specific protocols when naming an individual. The protocols include telling a story of how they were given the right to name people; what they did to find a name; the meaning behind the name that will be transferred to the individual who is receiving the name; and the purpose this name serves in regards to certain future cultural obligations that are attached to the name. Naming an individual gives that person a part of their identity. Naming also gives

an individual a purpose in the form of cultural duties that have to be performed, as well as bestows good wishes and symbolic meaning of the name through oral story.

I am fortunate to have been given two “Indian names” in my life so far, a traditional Blackfoot name and a sacred ceremonial name, in addition to my English name. In the Blackfoot culture, names give a person a purpose in their life. The purpose can include a role that the individual has to fulfill and/or sacred ceremonial duties that person has to perform. Indian names also give recognition for the accomplishments and successes that an individual has achieved. For some Blackfoot people, especially men, their Indian names could change several times over their lifetime. For men and occasionally for women, name changing marks important events in a person’s life, such as moving from childhood to adulthood; the formal induction into Blackfoot sacred societies (such as the Horn society, Crazy Dog society etc); recognition of accomplishments; or the inheritance of a Blackfoot name from a previously deceased ancestor.

My English name is Shelly Kay Eli. Though it is not a traditional Blackfoot name, there is an oral story attached to my name that was passed to me by my mother, Alva Eli. My mother chose these names because they symbolize the good qualities she wanted me to embody. The story I remember her telling me goes like this:

“When I was a young girl, I came to Piikani with your dad. We had just started living together. Your dad liked to play sports especially baseball and hockey. When we came to Piikani for games, I would always sit in the stands and watch your dad. I

noticed this little girl playing nearby at all the baseball games. She was really cute, always smiling and she was really kind. Whenever she had pop or candy, she would share it with everyone. Her name was Shelly. Then I had this friend her name was Kay. She was really good to me and I thought of her as kind and gentle. I don't know whatever happened to her but she was one of my good friends when I was younger. Anyways this is why I named you, Shelly Kay, because I wanted you to always be kind like these two people and to always be smiling like that Shelly."

Even as an adult, my mother will tell me this story to give the meaning of my name as well as to correct me when she sees me doing wrong. She would tell me this same story then tease me as a way to correct my behavior by adding to the story, "But I don't know what happened to you. You are so mean and you are always mad." By retelling this story, my mother uses oral story as a gentle discipline for the purpose of correcting my behavior.

The main significance of "Indian names" is that having a traditional Blackfoot name given to you is similar to being baptized in a church. When a person is given a traditional Blackfoot name that person is formally accepted into the community. There is a spiritual blessing performed when a name is being transferred to the individual. A Blackfoot elder will give a name first by telling a story about the name and placing his/her hand on the person receiving the name and saying the name out loud so everyone present can hear. Then the elder gives the person a gentle push forward. The push forward is symbolic because the person who received the name is stepping into the role and identity that is associated with the name she/he has been given. The person who has received the name steps forward and this allows witnesses of the name transfer the opportunity to accept that person into the community and to acknowledge the

individual by their new name. Through this public acceptance the person will be known by this traditional Blackfoot name all their life. Even when a person dies, Blackfoot people believe their relatives and ancestors who are already in the spirit world will only know a person who has recently died by her/his Blackfoot name. These traditional Blackfoot names help our loved ones and ancestors recognize us when we pass away into the spirit world.

My traditional Blackfoot name is *Itsspooapaassyiisiohtsi*¹, given to me by my paternal grandfather Thomas Yellowhorn, when I was an infant. The closest English translated meaning of this name is “Flies High Pretty”. Other people in the Blackfoot community have also been transferred this same name; however, the symbolism attached to this name is very different for each individual. My father, Joseph Yellowhorn, explained what the symbolism of this name meant to my grandfather. Here is the oral story my father shared with me about my name:

“My dad is the one who gave you your Blackfoot name. You see, when my mother was alive she did a lot of work in the Piikani community. She started a women’s group, more like a woman’s auxiliary. It was called W.A. but I don’t remember what W.A. stood for all I know is this is what my mom called the group of women. They use to do all sorts of stuff in that group, like make stuff for new mothers and help other people in the community in different ways. My mother and these other women would get together to do things to help other women in the community because back then everyone was poor. A lot of the time people could not afford things like baby clothes when a new baby was born, so these women would help out, by donating something. Anyways, later on my mother was elected to council so she started travelling all over the place. Back then, you have to remember, that it was very rare for people to fly in an airplane.

¹ This is the closest spelling of my Blackfoot Indian name based on me sounding it out. I have asked other people for a correct spelling, but all I have been told is that it is a “old Blackfoot” or “high Blackfoot” word. Those people I asked for correct spelling did not know.

My mother, because she was on council had to travel to different places in Canada. She flew to Vancouver then she would be flying off to Ottawa. My dad would just be at home with us kids. My father picked this name *Itspoopaaassyiisiohtsi* for you because it reminded him of my mother. She had all these successes with her woman's group, and sitting on Chief and Council, travelling by airplane to all these places. It is those successes that symbolize the importance of your Blackfoot name. "Flying High" in those airplanes, like an eagle flies pretty high, that idea of my mother flying in an airplane that is partly what the name means. The eagle looks pretty when it flies, so "Flying High Pretty" is the closest I can translate what the name means. My dad wanted you to have many successes in life, like my mother did. You have achieved some successes through your education and that is what your name meant and symbolized for my dad when he named you" (Yellowhorn).

My traditional Blackfoot name, *Itspoopaaassyiisiohtsi*, is part of my Piikani woman's identity. This name connects me to my family, to my community, the Piikani nation, as well as to the greater Blackfoot community as a whole. The names that people are given carry responsibilities at different cultural levels in an individual's life. For instance, each name comes with responsibilities at the family level, local community level, and at the greater society level. The responsibilities can include: at the family level – matriarchal duties such as working to keep the peace during disagreements, disciplining other members for not following traditional protocol, keeping the extended family unit closely connected through social gatherings. At the local community level responsibilities are seen through leadership in government positions or organizational leadership. The greater societal level responsibilities include: the traditional leadership roles and participation in ceremonies, sun dances and other cultural activities. Traditional Blackfoot names also help firmly plant a person in the present at different stages in his/her life. An example of this is when a

person is inducted into a society, the individual may be moving up from one society to another. The person will be required to focus on new teachings within the new society that he/she is now a member of and receiving a new name through transferring into a new society is a way of planting a person in the present. Another way of explaining the idea of 'planting a person firmly in the present' is in the Blackfoot language -"Kakoysin"-being aware of our surroundings (Weasel Fat np)². This is why, for some people, a Blackfoot name can change several times over the course of their lives to help them be aware of their surroundings so they can watch and learn.

My second "Indian name" -"Woman Who Carries the Bundle"³- was transferred when I was seven years old during a ceremonial sweat lodge. However, it is not a traditional Blackfoot name. The medicine woman who passed this name to me claimed that the duties and responsibilities associated with this name will come later in my life. This name, for me, is a sacred ceremonial name that I identify myself with when I am participating in sacred ceremonies like the sweat lodge and the sun dance. Woman Who Carries the Bundle is a name transferred to me by an elder, Rose Auger. She taught Sioux ceremonies, which are different from Blackfoot ceremonies. When I participate in these particular sacred ceremonies I use the name that is associated with these ceremonies. I understand a part of the meaning behind my name, 'Woman Who Carries the Bundle' as carrying a bundle of knowledge. A Blackfoot elder

² Hand out. Andy Black Water and Roy Weasel Fat signed a form giving permission for researchers at the University of Lethbridge to use their recorded presentation on "Niitsitapi Values", January 2013.

³ I do not have the correct Blackfoot spelling for this name for the completion of this thesis.

explained it best to me by saying “knowledge is power, and with power there is a responsibility.” My responsibility is choosing wisely how to use the knowledge I have gained through academia, my traditional sacred ceremonial role and my life experiences. Andy Black Water said in a presentation on Niitsitapi Values, “knowledge is a gift of life from one person to another person. We need to be receptive. Knowledge in school is a gift, there is a notion of ownership –feeling ownership puts value in the gift of knowledge to someone else, the value is in receiving and giving, be conscious of it” (np)⁴. I would like to share my knowledge in this thesis with Piikani women and all women in general. In sharing my knowledge perhaps they might better understand their own purpose and destiny in life.

A woman who carries a bundle is a Holy Woman in the Blackfoot community. Holy Women hold special leadership roles at the greater society level of the Blackfoot community and I will go into further detail about the importance of this role in chapter three “The Holy Woman Identity”. I am a holder of a sacred ceremonial pipe that Blackfoot people refer to as a bundle and this represents another aspect of my name. Since I am a pipe carrier, I have responsibilities and duties to perform that are an important part of my Blackfoot culture and identity. Blackfoot elders will refer to these responsibilities as fulfilling my purpose or destiny in life. These responsibilities include (but are not limited to) participating in ceremonies, teaching the traditional way of life (spirituality), and praying for the collective (all beings), especially when I have been given an offering such as

tobacco. Then it becomes my sacred duty to perform rituals taught to me to help the person who made the offering through prayer and ceremony.

I explain my ceremonial name in this way to show how responsibilities and duties come attached to Blackfoot names. I share my names because they are part of my identity. By sharing information about the oral stories, symbolism and meaning behind each of my names, I am in the act of claiming ownership for my Piikani woman identity by balancing academic with traditional knowledge, so that I weave both these forms of knowledge together in my thesis.

My Education

Blackfoot culture is an oral culture. Blackfoot people teach their children through the spoken word, repetition and by observing parents and extend family perform rituals. This way of teaching via oral tradition is more prevalent in families who practice the Blackfoot traditional way of life. By tradition, I am speaking about a spiritual life which some people may call “walking the red road of Creator”. I come from a traditional family. I was raised from an early age to walk the red road of Creator. I have been training and learning via ceremony, observing, and listening to spiritual elders teach me about the red road of Creator. Therefore, my way of thinking and worldview is heavily influenced by Blackfoot oral tradition and a traditional way of life. I have been transferred spiritual knowledge, ceremonial rites, and sacred items which gives me formal license to speak on what I know about Blackfoot culture and traditions that I refer to in my thesis.

When I started my formal Western education, my mother thought it was best to send me off reserve to school. She wholeheartedly believed because of her own experiences with residential school, that the white man's way was better than the Blackfoot way. She thought it was unnecessary to teach me to speak Blackfoot because of the physical abuse she suffered in residential school. My mother did not speak a word of English until she was sent to residential school where she was beaten for speaking the Blackfoot language. My mother would say to me when I ask her how come she did not teach me to speak Blackfoot:

"I did not know how to be an Indian. I did not like being an Indian. I thought the white man's way was better, than being an Indian. It was not until I got to be older, and met Rose Auger. She taught me what it means to be an Indian. My parents did not teach me about the ceremonies, or the traditional way of life because they too, went to residential school.

I had this dream when I was a little girl. In that dream I came out of my father's house and just outside in the yard there were four teepees, set up at the four directions. The red tipi was at the east, the yellow tipi was at the south, the black tipi was at the west and the white was at the north. All the teepees except the white one were only covered from the top and halfway down. The white teepee was fully covered. Years later, I asked Rose about the dream. She said it meant that I was not going to learn about the traditional way of life until I got older and that I was going learn in the North, which is where Rose was from. She was my elder who taught me about ceremonies, to be an Indian, and to be proud of my culture."

When I started school, I always felt like an outsider. It was hard to make friends with white children. The white children often excluded me from group settings and sometimes called me names because I was Blackfoot. I attended kindergarten at the University of Lethbridge. This is my first experience in a post-secondary institute. I was the only Blackfoot in the kindergarten class. One day

there was a mother volunteering in the class and she pulled me aside to look in my hair. After she looked through my hair, this woman told the teacher that I had lice. My father had to take off from work to bring me home. The teacher said I was not allowed back into the class until my hair was cleaned. I remember my mother taking me and my sisters to the doctor to have our hair checked and the doctor told her that there was nothing in our hair except cookie crumbs. He prescribed the lice shampoo anyways and wrote a note for the teacher saying my head was clean. Afterward my mother took me back to my kindergarten class and blasted the teacher. She told the teacher that under no circumstance was anyone ever allowed to touch me. My mother was so angry she was yelling until eventually she made the teacher cry. She found out from the teacher that the woman only checked my hair and no one else. Incidents similar to what happened to me, still occurs today with other Blackfoot children.

As I grew older, I became even more isolated from other children, even other native children, because my mother had started to raise me in a traditional way. I would wear skirts and dresses all the time and I would talk about ceremonies to the other children. I remember attending a Catholic school for my first few years in school, and not knowing anything about Christianity. The irony is both my parents distrusted “the Church” (they call any church from all denominations, “the Church”) and hated Christianity because of their experiences of abuse in residential school. Eventually, I took myself out of the Catholic school and registered at a public school. It was a new school year and I was going to start grade four. I got off the bus at the public school with my sisters. I

went into the school and told the school administration that I wanted to register for school there. My parents allowed me to switch schools and did not say anything to me about it. But my early education was a series of disruptions.

Even in the present day I still feel isolated, maybe more so now than I did as a child. I find the more educated I become the more my own people are intimidated by me. The more knowledge I gain in a traditional ceremonial setting, the more people become uncomfortable around me. For instance, I have been stepping in the role of the matriarch for my family. There are family members who will go to great lengths to avoid me because they do not want me to know what kind of mischief they are getting into. They know they are doing wrong and they are afraid of what I will say to them. My life outside of the university is mainly interacting with my own people, primarily traditional and ceremonial people. I have made attempts to be friendly with non-Indigenous people, but I find that outside the classroom or the university, many of my white acquaintances will pretend not to know me should they see me in public.

When I attended on-reserve school and residential school I was a teenager. I found that formal Western education in these institutions was lacking. There were some teachers, especially at residential school, who appeared not to care about what they were teaching. Other teachers were too busy keeping the class together so the course instruction would be slowed down and as a result not everything was taught. When I attended on-reserve school and residential school, those schools were considered inferior, and often were referred to as “dumbo high school”. The reason for the name is because the

schools often lagged behind in educational standards compared to off-reserve schools. In grade eight, I remember learning from a grade-nine science text book. My class was a mix of grade-eights and grade-nine students. The school could not afford textbooks for both grades so they purchased grade-nine science books. I missed out on grade-eight science curriculums. However, at present, the on-reserve schools have made more progress to keep education levels the same as off-reserve schools even with underfunded budgets.

For my mother, the traditional way and walking the red road of Creator is most important above everything else. Sometimes she would tell me that the more educated I became the crazier I started to sound. Then I would try to balance my knowledge by going back to my traditional ceremonial training. Training in a traditional Blackfoot way is simple. The language used is simple and straight to the point. It is the opposite of academia, where the language is expected to be more complex.

My father values education. He told his children to get an education. I thought that to be somebody I needed to acculturate in Western education. I went to universities and consistently encountered difficulties. I attended Lethbridge Community College twice and I dropped out twice, because I found it difficult to adjust to a Western post-secondary education institute. I was successful attending a tribal college, the Little Big Horn College (LBHC) in Crow Agency Montana, because I found the instructors were more accommodating. The Instructors at LBHC were Native Americans, so they had a better understanding of the challenges and difficulties I faced and would continue to

face at a Western college or university. I studied business, which is mainly numbers and how the business world works. Therefore, my experience studying the written word and writing analytically has been limited.

I have found through writing this thesis, also writing essays for my undergraduate degree in English, to be most difficult because I lack writing skills, ways of thinking, and ways of articulating. Therefore, research and writing was not an organic process for me as it might have been with other scholars. Analyzing and arguing in writing has been a classroom exercise that I tried my best to achieve. I am a Blackfoot woman. I write in English and try to think in English, and the thesis is an expression of the intersection of these two selves (Blackfoot and English). The irony is that as I read and thought about my Blackfoot heritage, I became more and more proud of that identity that is based on oral tradition. Thus, my writing is more of a reflection of a Blackfoot traditional way of thinking. I found researching for this thesis led to a heightened awareness of my own culture and tradition. However, having studied postcolonialism and women's issues at university, the ideas – even the terms– have remained part of my consciousness even though I do not address theories directly in the thesis. Thus, my writing becomes an uneasy negotiation of Western thoughts and Blackfoot responses.

Empowering Piikani Women

My research on oral stories of the Blackfoot is for the purpose of empowering Piikani women as well as other Indigenous women who have not

been aware of their cultural traditions. The oral stories discussed in this thesis are stories about archetypal women participating in specific traditional Blackfoot roles. I want to stress in this thesis the importance of teaching oral stories to Piikani women because these oral stories embody part of the Blackfoot culture. Through oral stories, Piikani women can begin to understand a vital part of their Blackfoot identity that may help to empower them. A close reading of a selection of Blackfoot oral stories will show Blackfoot women's traditional roles are really leadership roles. Piikani women need to learn/relearn these leadership roles, and claim/reclaim these roles as part of their identity to become traditional Blackfoot leaders.

Once women begin to understand who they are as Piikanaikiiks – Peigan Women, we can perhaps begin to heal intergenerational trauma caused by colonialism. In Canada, the colonial history “resulted in the discounting of Aboriginal thought and ways of knowing and legitimized actions to assimilate Aboriginal peoples into colonial societies” (Currie et al 2) such as land loss, residential schools, forced sterilization of Indigenous women, as well as the passing of legislation like the Indian Act of 1876, which made “Status Indians” wards of the crown. By intergenerational trauma I am referring to the violence and abuse suffered by Blackfoot people that still has a negative impact on the Blackfoot culture, language and people.

One example of a colonial institution that has contributed to the intergenerational trauma of indigenous people is the residential school system. Several generations of indigenous children who were forced into these schools

suffered mental, emotional, sexual and physical abuse. Janice Acoose says “[f]our generations of my family have been exposed to that patriarchy’s cruelty, manipulative controls, segregation through the reserve system and Halfbreed⁵ community farms, dehumanization and despiritualization through the christian residential schools, and other less overt but just as genocidal assimilative programs” (12). Within my own family my siblings and I all attended residential school. Both my parents, as well as my grandparents, also went to residential school. Through my observations and lived experiences I see the cycles of abuse, including substance abuse, that continue to affect each new generation of indigenous people because the previous generation has not fully healed from the trauma experienced by that generation. This intergenerational trauma is disempowering, for indigenous people. All Indigenous people suffer, but I focus on women survivors. From my perspective disempowered Piikanaikiiks are only existing, but not fulfilling their purpose or destiny in life. It is not my intent to focus on the effects of residential school, but it is important to point out some of the reasons Piikanaikiiks have become disempowered, which include intergenerational trauma, violence, poverty, and the institutional abuses that have been used in oppressing Piikanaikiiks.

Western institutions comprise of ideas and discourse that place boys and men in positions of privilege and power within the Piikani community. While tension and inequality existed within Blackfoot culture, in some forms, Western ideas and social structures further privileged men and disadvantaged women.

⁵ Janice Acoose uses the term “Halfbreed” in this citation.

This patriarchal discourse comes from the influence of Christianity, residential schools and government legislation that gave decision making power and land ownership to men as the heads of households. Renya Ramirez claims in her essay:

the European nationalists used the ideology of bourgeois respectability to help manage and control appropriate and proper gender relationships. This ideology helped the bourgeoisie create and set aside a “private sphere” that integrated and incorporated leisure and family life. Nationalism and respectability became entangled so that the Nation state could intrude as well as impose its norms of proper gender relations. Using state-run institutions, such as prisons, schools, and census bureaus, the bourgeoisie disciplined and controlled people [...]. Thus, Eurocentric nationalisms, through policies such as boarding schools, the Indian Act of 1876 in Canada and the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 in the United States, have imposed their patriarchal gender norms on Native communities encouraging sexism and misogyny and its related potential for violence against women. (29)

Ramirez’s argument can be supported by examining the English language and gender classification. English language uses gender binaries such as masculine versus feminine where the masculine is dominant and the feminine is almost non-existent. Gender creates a divide between male and female where “[g]ender operates as a set of hierarchically arranged roles in modern society, which makes the masculine half of the equation positive and the feminine negative” (Cranny-Francis et al 1-2). For example, in the when past couples were married, they were pronounced as man and wife, now it has been changed to husband and wife. It is only recently that the use of ‘he/she’ is used to create a gender balance in the language, such as the change from man and wife to husband and wife.

Also a study on Blackfeet property relations by David Nugent suggests that Blackfoot history shows men and women had equal ownership to property, prior to circa 1730: “[a]ll, that is, were expected to perform the same kind of labor, under the same conditions, had like claims to the fruit of their own labor, and were under similar obligations to others concerning labor and its product. Each of the categories was thus internally homogenous, relations among its members being egalitarian” (Nugent 342). Because of the problems caused by male privilege, directly or indirectly, I see women having to raise their children without the help or financial support from the fathers of their children; young women (especially young mothers), who are expected to live independently without any kind of support from their parents; women who have to flee from the community because of domestic abuse; women who still have not dealt with substance abuse, sexual abuse, violence, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and lateral violence (striking out in violence against peers: this is displaced anger as a result of being oppressed). At the same time I see grown men still living at home and financially dependent on their parents; violent abusers who are allowed to remain in the community and continue abusing other women⁶; men controlling positions of power - Chief and Council; 80% of the land ownership on reserve is owned by 20% of the population, which is mostly men.

⁶ According to Statistics Canada: “Victimization of Aboriginal women close to triple that of non-Aboriginal women. In 2009, close to 67,000 or 13% of all Aboriginal women age 15 and older living in the provinces stated that they have been violently victimized. Overall, Aboriginal women reported experiencing close to 137,000 incidents of violence and were almost three times more likely than non-Aboriginal women to report having been a victim of a violent crime. This was true regardless if the violence occurred between strangers or acquaintances or within a spousal relationship.” <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2011001/article/11439-eng.htm#e>

When Piikanaikiiks assume traditional women's leadership roles, for instance, Holy Woman, Woman Chief/Warrior, and Storyteller, they are claiming/reclaiming a part of their Blackfoot identity. In regards to claiming or reclaiming, I am speaking about taking ownership of traditional roles. Ownership, as Andy Black Water mentioned earlier, places value on a gift and in this thesis the gift is knowledge; thus, Blackfoot women who hold positions of traditional leadership gain more value as well as honour and respect. Those Blackfoot women who are not aware of these roles should learn about them as well as claim their traditional Blackfoot roles. If ownership of traditional women's roles has taken place, then Piikanaikiiks may have power and might gain a louder, stronger voice to speak out and break the cycles of violence, substance abuse, poverty and other barriers that keep us oppressed. In a recent study, Cheryl L. Currie states:

Aboriginal spiritual practices may provide a direct measure of protection against drug problems given they are often based on cultural teachings that promote abstinence from psychoactive substances or moderate use. Moving beyond teachings, traditional cultural involvement may also open up opportunities for urban Aboriginal peoples to interact within an alternate social milieu in cities; a milieu that encourages Aboriginal peoples to see the strengths that exist within their cultures, to hold high esteem for themselves and their ethnic ancestry, and to socialize with others who are also highly enculturated and thus view other Aboriginal persons in a positive and esteemed light. (Currie et al 7)

Within Blackfoot culture, spiritual practices are incorporated in all areas of Blackfoot society and this will be discussed in further detail in the "Niitsitapiiks – The Real People" chapter. Having knowledge of and practicing Blackfoot spiritual activities has helped me and others maintain a balanced life. Currie's

study on Aboriginal people and the use of traditional culture as protection and resilience has recently found that those individuals who practice their Indigenous culture tend to do better adjusting off reserve. Returning to traditional Blackfoot women's leadership roles could be beneficial to both urban and rural Blackfoot women. Blackfoot women who value themselves are less likely to allow the abusive cycles to continue onto their children because they see positive strengths in the Blackfoot culture that they can then pass on to their children.

Sources and Chapters

In this thesis I refer to oral stories that are published and I also incorporated my own family stories. We, Niitsitapi, have all kinds of stories, some are traditional mythological stories (such as Napi stories), some are diaries, some are intended to be realistic descriptions of historical events or daily life; some stories were conceived as written, others are transcriptions of oral stories. The published stories I refer to are: Percy Bullchild's *The Sun Came Down: The History Of The World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It*, Beverly Hungry Wolf's *The Ways of My Grandmothers*, Clark Wissler and D.C. Duvall's *Mythology of The Blackfoot Indians*, Clark Wissler's *The Sundance of The Blackfoot Indians* and Mary Eggermont-Molenaar's *Montana 1911: A Professor And His Wife Among The Blackfeet*, Joe Little Chief's "Pita-Omarkan: A Blackfoot legend of how an orphaned girl became a great War Chief", and James Willard Schultz's *The Sun God's Children: The History, culture, and legends of the Blackfeet Indians*. I researched published oral stories that were about the traditional Blackfoot women's leadership roles, specifically on the roles of the

Holy Woman, Woman Chief/Warrior and the Woman Storyteller. The oral stories I selected for this thesis are stories that fit in the time between 1870's to 1950's because this is an era when many changes to the Blackfoot culture were occurring. For instance, transition to living on reserve from a nomadic lifestyle; dwindling participation in Blackfoot traditional ceremonies had begun towards the end of the 1950's, change in women and men's roles. I selected stories that came from all of the Blackfoot tribes, Piikani, Amsskaapipikani, Kainai, Siksika to show similarities and to demonstrate how these stories are owned by the collective of Blackfoot people.

I chose Percy Bullchild's *The Sun Came Down: The History Of The World as My Blackfeet Elders Told it* because Bullchild is from the Amsskaapipikani (South Peigan) and his informants include his grandmother and North Piikani elders. Bullchild gives most of the credit for the stories in his published collection to his grandmother. Bullchild's stories were transferred to him from Piikani elders who were alive during the transition from nomadic living to settling on reserves.

Beverly Hungry Wolf's *The Ways of My Grandmothers* includes stories from Kainai women and focuses on Blackfoot women. My reason for choosing this source is because it is about Blackfoot women. The stories are told by Blackfoot women, who were predominantly from Kainai. Their stories were recorded and transcribed by Beverly Hungry Wolf. The women who are sharing these stories were alive during the early 1900's and saw or experienced many of the changes in the Blackfoot culture, since the transition to living on reserve.

I chose Wissler and Duvall's collection because these stories are told by both men and women; the stories were gathered from all the Blackfoot tribes; and the stories were collected and translated by Duvall who was Amsskaapipikani. The collection of these stories occurred during the early 1900's. The oral stories specific to my thesis include: the origins of the Holy Woman; the portrayal of women characters as leaders, and warriors; and women as the keepers of the Blackfoot culture. Wissler tried to capture a record of the Blackfoot Sundance before too much Western influence on the Blackfoot people occurred. His record of the role of the Holy Woman is a source I felt should be included in this thesis.

I refer to Joe Little Chief's story about Running Eagle because this story is about a Blackfoot Woman Warrior demonstrating leadership. Joe Little Chief is from Siksika and he translated Blackfoot stories to English. This story was published in *Canadian Cattlemen* in 1955. This story I refer to briefly compare with a similar story found in Beverly Hungry Wolf's *The Ways of My Grandmothers*.

I selected James Willard Schultz's *The Sun God's Children: The history, culture, and legends of the Blackfeet Indians* as a source because he recorded stories at that pivotal time period when the Blackfeet were transitioning onto the reservation. Although his storytelling is somewhat romanticized, Schultz interacted with Blackfeet extensively and married an Amsskaapipikani woman.

For Mary Eggermont-Molenaar's *Montana 1911: A Professor And His Wife Among The Blackfeet*, I use Mrs Uhlenbeck's diary. The diary was written by Wilhelmina Maria Uhlenbeck-Melchior during her stay on the Blackfeet reservation in 1911 with her husband Professor C.C. Uhlenbeck. Uhlenbeck-Melchior's diary was translated and edited by Mary Eggermont-Molenaar. I briefly refer to Uhlenbeck-Melchior's diary as a source to support some of my ideas about the Woman Warrior role and the roles of Blackfeet women in ceremonial settings. Uhlenbeck-Melchior is an outsider who recorded her experiences living with the Blackfeet during the time when the Blackfeet were settled on the reservation. I include Wilhelmina Maria Uhlenbeck-Melchior's diary because it is from a European woman's firsthand account of the Blackfeet's daily activities and interaction in early reservation life. Mrs Uhlenbeck is the wife of Professor C.C. Uhlenbeck, the Dutch anthropologist/linguist who did two years of fieldwork on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana. Mrs. Uhlenbeck accompanied her husband during his second year of fieldwork.

I feel I have earned the right to use these Blackfoot oral stories in thesis because I am a spiritual and traditional elder in my own right. My knowledge has been transferred to me, since I was five years old, so that is thirty-five years of training and learning traditional knowledge. In the Blackfoot tradition I can name my teachers who have made transfers of knowledge, sacred ceremonial items and songs to me. Because they are some of my witnesses, I have to name them as proof of my earning the transfer rights and the right to speak on the oral stories in my thesis. Rose Auger from the Woodland Cree, her traditional Indian

name is “Woman Who Stands Strong”. She was my first teacher. She received her transfers and traditional knowledge from Robert Blue Hair from the Souix nation in South Dakota. My mother Alva Eli, her traditional Indian name is “Eagle Dreaming Pipe Woman”. She is from Kainaiwa nation and her transfers and traditional knowledge came from Rose Auger, John Day Rider, Gordon Good Striker. My father Joseph Yellowhorn, his Indian name is “Eagle Pipe Man”. He is from Piikani nation, and he received his transfers and knowledge from Rose Auger, his parents (Tom and Nellie Yellowhorn) and many other Piikani elders. Larry Ground, from Amsskaapiikani. He is a bundle holder and was a leader for the Crazy Dog society. Dila Houle from Piikani nation, her Indian name is “White Tail Deer Woman”. Her teachers and transfers came from Rose Auger, her father Albert Yellowhorn (Sikapi), and her grandfather Yellowhorn, as well as many other Piikani elders. Laura Auger is from the Woodland Cree. Her Indian name is “White Swan Woman” and her transfers and traditional knowledge came from her mother Rose Auger. John Day Rider from Amsskaapiikani, he is a sun dance elder. His teacher and transfers come from Buster Yellow Kidney. Bruce and Anne-Marie Wolf Child, Bruce is the grandfather to the Horns.

Identity is the main focus of my thesis; I argue for claiming/reclaiming traditional women’s roles as presented in Blackfoot oral stories. I will discuss how contemporary Piikani women can become more aware of these traditional leadership roles in the present to promote change. I include creative non-fiction in my thesis to connect the oral stories and my life experiences with my research.

Thus, the thesis incorporates discussion on the Blackfoot way of knowing, as well as historical context, literature, and my life as a Blackfoot woman.

The first chapter will be an overview of Niitsitapiiks – The Real People -- and discusses the traditional Blackfoot territory. An explanation of who the Blackfoot people are and how the smaller divisions are all connected is relevant to this thesis because the oral stories are shared by the collective Blackfoot nations. Explaining the geographical area of where the Piikani nation is located helps to narrow my argument to focus on Piikani women.

The second chapter discusses the ceremonial leadership roles of Blackfoot women by referring to the oral stories about the Holy Woman and Matoki—Buffalo Women’s society. Explaining the importance of these roles in the O’kaan—Blackfoot sundance will show how these roles are ceremonial leadership roles that need to be claimed/reclaimed. This process might help to heal the effects of abuse, violence and so on. These are roles that are dwindling in number because fewer women are fulfilling the roles. For instance, fewer women are stepping forward to take ownership of the Holy Woman’s role, but if no women assume this role then the O’kaan cannot happen. Reasons for why fewer women step forward could be: that they are not aware of these roles; they are not aware of the oral stories; are intimidated by the responsibilities of leadership roles. These are just a few reasons, there could other reasons, but for myself these are some of the reasons why I have not stepped into a leadership role in the past. This decline is happening due to different factors such as: sexual abuse or girls becoming sexually active at younger ages

because of the over sexualizing of women and portrayal of sex as presented in the media, television, movies, and music and Christian influence that discourages involvement in traditional activities. These kinds of spiritual roles are not seen as a priority by younger generations for other reasons including addiction to drugs or other substance abuse.

The third chapter focuses on the oral stories about a Woman Chief and Women as Warriors. These archetype characters found in Blackfoot oral history prove women were involved in decisions and leadership that affected the society. Through these oral stories, Piikani women can become empowered through cultural awareness and can perhaps gain the confidence to actively pursue roles of leadership in contemporary Piikani. By claiming/reclaiming political leadership roles, women can begin to challenge and change the imbalance in gender roles that has been disadvantaging Piikani women.

The fourth chapter will be a discussion of Piikani women as storytellers. Oral stories are embedded with cultural knowledge, and Piikani women can benefit from learning/relearning the oral tradition. By claiming/reclaiming the role of oral story teller, Piikani women can advance as leaders for the Piikani nation because they can play a more central role in society as the keepers of cultural knowledge.

As the financial pot grows smaller, the Piikani nation grows bigger so fewer Piikani people will have access to formal Western institutional education. This means fewer women will have access to education at the college and

university level because many will not have the means to pay tuition to obtain a post-secondary education. For example, I do not get funding for my Graduate Degree because I have been told by the Piikani Board of Education that they no longer sponsor students who go past a Bachelor's level and I am not considered a returning student. There is also a waiting list for education funding that is divided by priority categories –first priority funding goes to high school students, second priority funding goes to continuing students who already are funded, and third priority funding goes to returning students. Returning students are given last consideration for education funding and not usually funded because there is not enough funds left over to cover their tuition and living expenses. In order for Piikani women to be empowered through other means, we need to learn/relearn traditional Blackfoot women's roles. Traditional Blackfoot roles give Piikani women a purpose or destiny in life and a way to acquire self respect. Piikani women who step into traditional roles will gain honour and respect from the Piikani community as well as from the entire Blackfoot society. Thus Piikanaikiiks can become the leaders for Niitsitapiiks.

Chapter Two: Niitsitapiiks -“The Real People”

What makes me an Indian

Sitting on the ground in a circle with other teenagers, I was only half listening to what the Elder was saying. My mother had sent me to a ‘Knowledge Camp’ hoping I would learn something cultural. She was not concerned about what I would learn, just as long as I gained some kind of knowledge from this camp, be it spiritual or wilderness survival skills. The camp was located out on the Piikani timber limits, far from any modern facilities such as toilets that flush, television and so on. We had to learn to cook our meals on an open fire and sleep in a tipi. I was like most of the other teenagers in the camp, bored silly and also wishing I could be back at home where I could use a toilet that flushed. While I sat there in that circle, I suddenly stopped daydreaming and became aware that the elder speaking to the group had asked a very important question. The elder sat in silence for a moment waiting for someone to answer her question. Since I was not paying attention, I had to wait for her to ask it again. She singled out one of the boys, in the group, by pointing at him and asking: “Do you know who you are?” Naturally the boy blushed and shrugged his shoulders before shyly saying “I’m Colin.” The elder shook her head and pointed to another person, asking the same question. She asked a few others who answered by stating their names as well. Then one person said, “I’m an Indian.” The old lady smiled and asked “What makes you an Indian?” At that time, I did not have an answer to this question. Over time I would think of this question, trying to find a sufficient answer but I have not been able to answer it completely. I will answer in part during this section.

Connecting oral stories with language, ceremony and land

In this chapter I introduce Niitsitapiiks and discuss the Blackfoot worldview to establish the connection between oral stories, language, ceremony, and land to better explain the concept of co-existing as one. Before I begin my overview of the Blackfoot I would like to refer to a quote by Abraham Deleon. He says:

I, imbue the narrative with “personal notes” that allow me to have a pseudo-conversation with, you my reader, or better yet, allows me to give you a window into my thinking at key points during the article. By situating my personal experiences as a context for this essay, I can begin the difficult process of theorizing from my location, which may include moments of intense pain, shame, or triumph that life sometimes brings us. (Deleon 401)

I opened this section of my thesis with a personal narrative to connect my idea of what it means to be a Blackfoot from the Piikani nation and what makes a Piikani Woman different from other women around the world in order to begin identifying Piikani Women’s traditional roles. By identifying Piikani Women’s traditional roles I hope to challenge contemporary stereotypes, myths, and the exotic portrayal of Blackfoot women. Throughout this section I will be sharing some documented Blackfoot history and some oral history passed down to me.

Archana Pathak says:

In many ways, the argument that embodied knowledge is not intellectual knowledge is a deeply colonialist position, derailing native, embodied knowledge as mere “lore” [...]. This knowledge is relegated to the realm of the exotic fantastic world of the indigenous and their myths. And, implicit in the derailment is the reinforcement of the Western white male knowledge as scientific, universal and true. (4)

Embodied knowledge is information our bodies know and use without conscious thought or a gut reaction (Knoblauch 52). Intellectual knowledge is using reason,

rationale and logic. How I interpret what Pathak is saying is that for Indigenous people, embodied knowledge is the acceptance of the supernatural without conscious thought. One example is to accept that there are talking animals in Blackfoot oral stories without over rationalizing and trying to find scientific proof of how an animal can communicate with a human. Earlier I mentioned the idea of co-existing as one. A scientific explanation of this idea is humans need plants to have oxygen to breathe. Plants need carbon dioxide and humans exhale carbon dioxide. In a single way, this is what I mean by co-existing as one. The Blackfoot oral stories about talking animals show humans and animals co-existing because every living being is equal and dependent on another living being for survival. Indigenous oral stories are used as evidence for land claims and helped to win some cases. A landmark case is the *Delgamuukw v. British Columbia* in 1997⁷. Oral stories are important and can hold weight in some court cases. Therefore, I disrupt my academic voice with a voice informed by “native embodied knowledge”; this includes the oral history and oral stories in my discussion about Piikani Women’s traditional roles, because Blackfoot cultural knowledge is considered common knowledge for Piikani people. Yet from an outsider perspective, Blackfoot common knowledge is not easily identified. Thus, using native embodied knowledge, I can better explain to a non-Blackfoot audience the common knowledge acquired through Blackfoot culture and explain the importance of Blackfoot pedagogy in recognizing the value of Piikani Women’s traditional roles. According to Pathak, “[t]o know is not merely an abstract, omnipotent intellectualized process. To know is to engage an

⁷ <http://www.parl.gc.ca/content/lop/researchpublications/bp459-e.htm>

experience fully with one's mind, body, and heart. Knowledge then is a vaster, more multi-dimensional realm than we often recognize" (4). Native embodied knowledge is found within Blackfoot oral stories that I understand without conscious thought (ie. Blackfoot common knowledge) and in order to highlight the embodied knowledge within the oral stories, I rely on the Blackfoot way of knowing from cultural and spiritual experience. Betty Bastien defines the Blackfoot way of knowing as:

[t]hese ways of knowing are premised on seeking understanding of the complex levels of kinship relations that constitute a cosmic world of balance and harmony. Indigenous ways of knowing are the tribal processes that align *Niitsitapi* [lit. "real people," ie., Indigenous people] with their alliances from which knowing and knowledge is obtained. This way of knowing is of a different nature than the knowledge generated using cross-cultural or alien perspectives developed by Eurocentric sciences. (1)

The other sections of my thesis will focus specifically on giving Blackfoot women in history a voice through oral stories. History was taught mostly from a white male perspective and omitted (until recent years) women, especially indigenous women. The residential school system, where the assimilation of Indigenous people into Canadian society was the goal, also promoted male privileges. "Government and church officials often said the role of the residential school was to civilize and Christianize Aboriginal children. When put into practice, these noble sounding ambitions translated into an assault on Aboriginal culture, language, spiritual beliefs, and practices" (Truth and Reconciliation of Canada 10). Duncan Campbell Scott is often quoted saying "kill the Indian save the child" when he was minister of Indian Affairs and this was the purpose residential school served. It was prohibited to teach Indigenous history, language and

culture in residential schools. The majority of the government and church officials were white men who had control over the residential schools' education system; as such, the educational curriculum taught in the residential schools would come from a white male perspective. Nuns working in the residential schools were just as abusive as their male colleagues.

I share my traditional knowledge, which is part of my lived experience and part of my cultural beliefs and values, as a way to explain native embodied knowledge found in Blackfoot oral stories. It is a difficult task to argue from a post-colonial perspective when many indigenous people will argue that “colonialism didn't die away in post-colonial societies, it merely metamorphosed – same horse, different rider” (Tovias ix). However, by incorporating the Blackfoot oral tradition and my personal narrative, while my reading of postcolonial and feminist texts as a student still inform my intellectual thinking, my argument will focus on Piikani Women's identity and traditional roles rather than on reflections of the colonial impact.

I am a member of the Piikani Nation. There are approximately 3580 band members with about 2398 living on the Piikani reserve and 1182 living off reserve according to the Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development Canada webpage⁸. The Piikani township of Brocket is located in SouthWestern Alberta, sixty kilometers west of Lethbridge on Highway 3.

⁸ <http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1351794569236/1351794633025>

The Piikani nation is part of the Blackfoot Confederacy (a European construct). Blanca Tovias explains how this alliance between the Blackfoot bands, Sarcee and Gros Ventre tribes came to be named a confederacy. She says “Europeans coined the term Blackfoot Confederacy to refer collectively to the Blackfoot First Nations that have now developed a formal political alliance” (Tovias 1). The Blackfoot Confederacy includes the North Piikani, South Piikani, Siksika, and Kainai. Included in this alliance were two other nations –the Tsuutina (Sarcee) and the Atsina (Gros Ventre). The Blackfoot shared their territory with these two tribes yet the Gros Ventre later became enemies of the Blackfoot. Although they were enemies, both tribes had close familial ties with one another and continued to maintain those ties (Tovias 1).

It is important to mention all the names for the four Blackfoot bands or “gens” (Tovias 1) since there are multiple names applied to them. Giving an account of all the names that apply to the Blackfoot bands will help identify which band is being referred to with regards to secondary sources where the name spellings can differ. Tovias created this list for the different names:

- Kainai:** (translates as “Many Leaders”), also called Blood, Bloods, Aapaitsitapi Kainah, Kainawa and Akainawa.
- Siksika:** (translates as “black-footed people”) also called Northern Blackfoot or Blackfoot Proper.
- Piikani:** (translates as “a people that possessed poorly dressed or torn robes”). Also called Pikani, Piikani, Pikunii, Piegan, Peigan. The Pikani are now divided in two autonomous First Nations. In Montana they are called Blackfeet, Piegan, South Pikani, or

Amsskaapipikani; and in Canada they are called Peigan; North Pikani: Aputosi Pikani, Apatohsipikani, or Skinnii Piikani. (8)

The North Piikani is where I am registered as a member under the Indian Act. I have opted for using Piikani in the rest of this thesis. Although the Blackfoot are separated into smaller bands as part of a colonization process that resulted from the signing of Treaty Seven in 1877 (here in Canada), and the removal of the Blackfoot from nomadic lifestyle to reservation, the Blackfoot still refer to themselves as collective. The name Blackfoot people call themselves is Niitsitapiiks – Real People. Percy Bullchild says:

We are all of the former Tribe of the Piegans. Others of this former tribe are in Canada—the Kainais of the Bloods, the North Piegans, and the North Blackfeet tribe or band, all in Alberta Canada. Our four tribes were once one big Tribe of the Piegans. We were split by the coming of the whiteman and their international boundary that presently divides the United States and Canada. (1)⁹

The Blackfoot have in common the same customs, knowledge, language, and ceremonial practices and controlled a vast territory on the prairies before European contact. There are oral stories about how names came to be for the four Blackfoot bands. I will go back to these oral stories later in this section. In the meantime, the Blackfoot in the past and even in the present day have a notion of the collective, in the Blackfoot language the word is “Aakomhkoyiisini.” Andy Blackwater explains it in this way: “being aware of the other, building relationships, no one value or belief is independent of the others. [We] go a long ways as a collective, make sure we all move forward together, be considerate”

⁹ Percy Bull Child’s *The Sun Came Down: The History of the World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It* is written following an oral story, format.

(np). In Blackfoot history this collectiveness was important to the survival of the whole community. When it comes to the oral tradition and oral history, the stories are owned by the collective of Niitsitapiiks. Another example of the notion of the collective is the hierarchy of societies within the Blackfoot bands. Tovias says: “[t]he Blackfoot participated in sodalities¹⁰ collectively named *I-kun-uh'-kah-tsi* (all comrades societies). Membership was age graded and cut across the different bands of each division” (2). The different societies (all-comrades societies) were made up of members from the four bands. Tovias points out that the reference to Blackfoot society is different from the term used to define a community and should be referred as the *I-kun-uh'-kah-tsi* (2) when discussing Blackfoot societies. The Piikani intermarried with the other Blackfoot bands and their allies and this is another aspect of how the Blackfoot acknowledge one another as part of the collective. An example of intermarrying among the Blackfoot is within my own family. My father Joseph Yellowhorn is from Piikani, and my mother Alva Eli is from Kainai. I can claim membership from either band for “Indian Status” (a colonial construct). However, I am a full Blackfoot.

In a broader perspective the Blackfoot language is included in the Algonquian linguistic family. The Blackfoot language is in the same linguistic family as the Cree, Algonquins, and Gros Ventres¹¹. As a collective the Blackfoot share a common language, yet there is a regional dialect in the pronunciation of words among the four tribes. It is important to discuss the Blackfoot language

¹⁰ Means an organized society or fellowship.

¹¹ Donald G. Frantz “Notes On The Linguistic History of Blackfoot” found in University of Lethbridge website: <http://people.uleth.ca/~frantz/blhist.html>

because some of my secondary sources include Blackfoot words in the text. Claiming/reclaiming Piikani Women's identity includes reviving the Blackfoot language. Also it is important to mention that the Blackfoot believe that the language originates from the land and embodies Blackfoot culture. Jody Pepion explains:

[w]hen the peoples lived in a good relationship with Mother Earth, they needed to know all they could about her and learn to live with her. They knew their entire existence was due to the gifts of food, water and air. They learned to communicate and live with Mother Earth; they needed to communicate with her to understand her language as opposed to controlling her and consuming her. (50)

In this quote Pepion is explaining, in a different way, the idea of co-existing with the earth as one because the earth is a living being. One Western European perspective about the earth is to go out and conquer the land because it holds valuable riches in the natural resources. As such the earth is not a living being. Blackfoot ways of knowing include the language, ritual, spirituality¹², and the oral tradition. Niitsitapiiks are earth people: everything related to spirituality, language and oral tradition includes Mother Earth in the ceremonial rituals. Women are believed to have a stronger connection to the earth and in the following sections on the Holy Woman, Woman Chief, and women as storytellers I will show that the connection between language, ritual, spirituality, and oral tradition is what makes these roles unique. Some of the oral stories to be discussed later in other

¹² I will use the definition spirituality as described by Donald Duane Pepion. He says "the common dictionary term that is preferable to some Blackfoot people that best describes Blackfoot spiritual beliefs as a way of life rather than a religion" (18).

sections are translations from the Blackfoot language to English. Jody Pepion also says:

[t]his cultural system of storytelling is a way of the Amskapi Pikuni to educate our people because it's our core, and is based upon values of respect and equality, built with knowledge of earth, women, children, men and within the sacred ancient and on-going tradition and knowledge of ancestors as the foundation. (16)

I chose to give an overview of the Niitsitapiiks. Hence, this includes discussing the different aspects of the culture, language, and history. I take ownership of the knowledge I received with my research and I am building a foundation of how all these elements interconnect at the same time. Utilizing the Blackfoot language in my thesis is my way of renaming my "Indian"¹³ identity from a colonial concept into Niitsitapi. Renaming me as Niitsitapi is similar to what Gerhard J. Ens says about renaming places in Blackfoot territory back to traditional Blackfoot names. He says:

[i]n the context of both 1871 and 2011 this action of naming, or more accurately recording of Blackfoot names, involves the social construction of space and the symbolic construction of meaning about place. [...] Just as replacing aboriginal names with Euro-Canadian place names was part of the colonial practice of claiming territory and subordinating indigenous history and memory, so the recovery of these Blackfoot place names is part of the process of reclaiming their history and memory. (qtd in Ronaghan xiii)

In my introduction I renamed myself with my traditional Blackfoot names. Then I symbolically constructed the meanings about my names *Itsspooopaassyiisiihtsi* and *Woman Who Carries the Bundle*, at the same time I shared a part of my

¹³ "Indian" is referring to my short story at the beginning of this section. This is a portion of my answer of what makes me an "Indian."

history. The stories I shared about my names are memories I have of my parents. When my parents were telling me the stories of the symbolic meaning about my names, they were transferring knowledge to me. As I was receiving this gift of knowledge, I learned about a part of my identity, history, and oral tradition. Donald Duane Pepion found in his research that:

Teaching through story telling [sic] and mentoring uses metaphor and facilitation as a way of learning, which requires the learner to use, thought processes in order to attain understanding and meaning. Learning process includes utilization of critical thinking skills to examine phenomenon to find meaning. Those raised in the traditional Blackfoot way, learn critical thinking from the Napi and origin narratives, which helps to guide the individual through the process of discerning appropriateness of information. Story telling as a methodology instigates critical thinking in that the student must reason the consequences of action. I conclude that the Blackfoot ceremonial learning process includes elder teaching methodology that follows the metaphorical way of learning through story telling. (180)

My mother, Alva Eli, uses storytelling to teach me so I am aware of the consequences of my actions. My father, Joseph Yellowhorn, uses storytelling in order to make a connection between the symbolic meaning of my Blackfoot name and the academic achievements I have accomplished so far. I started this section on the Niitsitapiiks with a short story about what makes me an Indian, so I can answer this question in part. The oral history of my tribe, the Blackfoot language, and spirituality are all connected to oral tradition and I will explain how these all relate together by discussing the relationship between land and language. It is important to put emphasis on spirituality, language and oral tradition because:

[i]t is difficult for Native Americans to clear the haze of ignorance embellished by the attitudes of the mainstream, just as it is a challenge to provide insight to non-Natives into Native American's formal institutions of knowledge, education, economy, and spirituality. Emphasizing these facets of oral tradition are important because there is a need to understand that Native Americans have formal structural processes in the educational system of learning and teaching delivered via oral tradition. (Real Bird 188)

The oral stories about the role of the Holy Woman and the role of the Ma'toki (Buffalo Women's Society) are spiritual roles. So it is important to point out that Blackfoot spirituality is a way of life. These roles empower women because these roles are positions of power in Blackfoot spiritual ceremonies. Women fulfilling these roles have to live a spiritual life. Alice B. Kehoe says "[w]omen's roles in ritual and myth reflect their economic power. Women are seen as the intermediary or means through which power has been granted to humans" (quoted in Klein, Ackerman 116). The oral stories about Blackfoot women are part of a Blackfoot educational system that has been around since time immemorial.

Looking at Blackfoot history, "[d]uring the so-called golden age of the Plains Indians (1750-1875), the Blackfoot alliance dominated a territory extending from the Elk (Saskatchewan) River to the Yellowstone River" (Tovias 3). These are the markers for the far northern boundary and far southern boundary. The far Western boundary and far eastern boundary begins at "the Rocky Mountains, between these two rivers, eastward upon the plains for an average distance of nearly four hundred miles" (Schultz 11). I mentioned earlier that land and language are related to oral tradition; therefore, knowing where

Blackfoot territory is located relates back to creation stories. Nimachia

Hernandez explains:

[t]he significance of the Blackfoot Creation taking place on areas around the home of the Blackfoot from time immemorial is not lost on those who know the stories. They indicate the homesites of uncounted ancestors and the longstanding relationship with the universe established and nurtured by the ancestral Blackfoot. In the traditional Blackfoot relationship with the land, all land is alive and filled with the ancestors of the entire people [...]. (8)

Many landmarks in Blackfoot territory have an oral history and continue to be taught today to younger generations, so memory of these Blackfoot names and places continue on. Vine Deloria Jr. says “[t]he test of the extent to which a religion has a claim to historical validity therefore, should at least partially involve its identification of the specific location and lands where the religious event that created the community took place” (122). An example of a famous place that is continuing on in memory is the world heritage site “Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump.” It is protected as a World Heritage Site and the significance of this site for the Blackfoot is taught all year to elementary school students who are educated about the ritual and ceremony that took place when Blackfoot people hunted buffalo. At the same time “Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump” is a site where a traditional religious event takes place regularly – that is the visions quest.

A discussion about the warrior aspect of Blackfoot society is an opening for introducing the Woman Chief and Woman Warrior identity in chapter three. According to Tobias and Schultz (and others), the Blackfoot were considered the terror of the plains by their enemies --other tribes such as the Crow and Cree, as

well as explorers and trappers. The Blackfoot were considered very warlike.

Quoted in *The Sun God's Children* Edward Unfreville of the Hudson Bay

Company says:

[t]hese Indians though divided into the above three tribes are all one nation, speak the same language, and abide by the same laws and customs.[...] They are the most numerous and powerful nation we are acquainted with; and, by living on the borders of the enemies' country, are the principal barrier to prevent their incursions. War is more familiar to them than the other nations, and they are by far the most formidable to the common enemy of the whole. (Schultz 20)

The reason Blackfoot people were protective of their territory is because they believe that “[...] *Ihtsipaitapiyo’pa*, their creator (literally, “The Source of our Life”) gave the care of this land to them” (Lokensgard 16). Thus Blackfoot spiritual rituals and ceremonies also were included in the preparations for war with enemy tribes. The transferring of sacred items such as war shirts and stand-up head dresses used to protect the wearer of such objects from harm during battle were transferred to women. A few reasons for participating in a war party were to steal horses from enemy tribes as well as captured women and children from other tribes to rejuvenate the bloodline. War was one of three major survival goals of the Blackfoot, the other two included food and religion¹⁴ (Schultz 35). Women had roles in the preparations for war and raids. For example, they participated in the transfer ceremonies of the head dress. Some women also did go on raids. Mrs. Uhlenbeck describes her experiences living among the Blackfeet in Montana in a diary and recorded an account of one woman who accompanied her husband on raids. Uhlenbeck says “[s]o at 10:00 we went again and visited

¹⁴ Religion is a term used by Schultz. I will opt to use spirituality in this thesis as defined by Duane Pepion.

Bear Chief and his wife Elk Yells In The Water, who used to go raiding horses with him” (Eggermont-Molenaar 38). Blackfoot women participating in raids and war parties, plus the evidence of a personal account by Uhlenbeck, shows how oral stories of Women Chiefs and Women Warriors are also identities that Blackfoot women performed.

Counting coup is used by the Blackfoot to mark achievements and to impress upon the youth the need to emulate heroic deeds (Tovias); this may account for the “war-like” image of the Blackfoot, as described by explorers, trappers and traders (i.e. Anthony Henday, Matthew Cocking, and Alexander Henry, who are referred to by Schultz). “During the Buffalo days these recitations of self-achievement recounted feats such as touching an enemy before striking him the deathblow, capturing enemy weapons, shields, bonnets or other objects deemed to possess sacred power” (Tovias 21). This is the act of counting coup which is part of the Blackfoot oral tradition. Recounting of heroic deeds preceded sacred rituals like the O’kaan and during sacred bundle opening and is still in practice today.

Napi is a major character in Blackfoot stories; he is portrayed as a trickster in many oral stories. However, Napi is a representation of human nature because human beings make mistakes. The word Napi translates to Old Man. In regard to rejuvenating the bloodline, there is a Napi origin story that was told to me when I was a teenager by one of my aunts. She told me the story to prevent me from marrying any of my relatives. I shared this story with my older children so they will be aware of their relatives and therefore, avoid dating or marrying a

close relative. The story as I remember it begins when Napi was still a young man. He was at an age when he could live on his own, in his own tipi. Napi was considered really handsome and all the young women in the camp liked him. Napi had a sister. She and her friends would giggle every time Napi walked by them. The young women were always flirting with Napi whenever he was around. This happened for awhile, until eventually late one night, one of the girls sneaked into Napi's tipi and they had sex. Since it was dark, Napi could not see which one of the young women it was who came into his tipi, and the next morning before everyone else got up in camp, the young woman sneaked out of Napi's tipi. These nightly visits happen a few more times until one morning both Napi and the unknown woman overslept. Everyone in the camp was already awake and they knew these two people were up to mischief. Meanwhile, Napi woke up and took a look at who had been coming into his tipi at night. It turned out to be Napi's sister. Napi woke up his sister but he already knew it was too late for her to sneak out, because he could hear the people in the camp were already angry and coming towards his tipi to search for them. Napi and his sister became very scared as the angry mob came closer to the tipi, then finally, they both were so scared they started to pee. They peed so much that it turned into a big flooding of water that washed all the people of the camp away. This body of water became known as the Old Man River and it flows through Blackfoot territory to remind the Piikani people not to marry their relatives. I am reminded of this story while I research the Blackfoot history.

I understand this reason for capturing people from other tribes as a way to prevent Blackfoot people from marrying within their families. Other tribes, like the Crow, have oral stories of capturing Piikani women. The Crow have a dress called a Peigan¹⁵ dress that the Crow women wear and this dress originated from the Piikani¹⁶. The Old Man river is a landmark in Blackfoot territory, and this Napi story I shared gives an explanation of the origins of the Old Man river. For Niitsitapiiks, Blackfoot oral stories are based on truth from a Blackfoot worldview and everything discussed so far is relevant to reclaiming my oral history as Blackfoot elders have told it.

I return my discussion back to the names for the Blackfoot bands. This origin story for the names of the Blackfeet tribes is an account given by Schultz. He married within the Blackfeet tribe. This gave him access to inside information about the South Piikani because some Blackfeet perceived his marriage as an alliance and embraced him into the collective. The story goes:

In the very long ago, an old man and his three married sons, and their women and children, were near starvation, because of the scarcity of deer and elk, so they set out to try find a better game country. They crossed some mountains, and for the first time came to a treeless country: great plains, upon which were countless numbers of huge dark-haired animals new to them, the buffalo. The three sons attempted to approach and kill some of them, and failed, as the animals always outran them. Then, in accordance with a vision that the old father had, he made a black-colored medicine, rubbed some of it upon his eldest son's

¹⁵ I use Peigan dress because this is the name the Crows use.

¹⁶ The oral story is connected to the Capture of a Peigan woman by the Crow. I will not discuss this story because it removes the focus of this section elsewhere. I use the Crow capturing Piikani women to demonstrate that this was a common practice. I am aware that "capturing women" indicates that in native tradition, women did not always maintain a position of power. I would certainly further investigate this conflicted area in future research.

feet, and it enabled him to run swiftly that he easily overtook and killed some of the strange animals. Whereupon the old father said that Blackfeet should thereafter be his name. At that, the two other sons became jealous of their elder brother, and demanded that they also be given some of the black medicine. The old man refused to give it, for, he said, his vision had plainly shown him that it was to be used only by his eldest son. However, they should also have new names, and they must earn them: they should go far away upon discovery of the new country and its life, and upon their return he would name them in accordance with what they had done. The two sons departed, and were gone a long time. The younger of the two, who went south, returned with several beautiful tanned and painted buffalo robes which he had obtained from a friendly tribe that he had met, so his father named him Piku'ni (Far-Off Robes). The other son, who went east, brought back scalps of a number of enemies that he had killed, and he was therefore, named, Ah-ka-i'na (Many Chiefs). Such was the origin of the three tribes. (30-31)

In this story the names given to the three Blackfoot gens originate from deeds that were accomplished that began from a vision of the father. In particular the origin of counting coup can be seen originating from this story. The second eldest son went off and brought back scalps, when he came back he would have had to give an account of his achievements as well as origin of the name Ah-ka-i'na (Many Chiefs). In her book Tovias mentions that newcomers (explorers and fur traders) often adopted the derogatory exonyms given to them by their "Indian" guides to refer to their enemies (11). Earlier in this section Tovias uses a translation of Piikani –"as a people that possessed poorly dressed or torn robes" – this translation I question as a derogatory translation but it now is an accepted translation. However, in the origin story above Piikani is translated as "Far-Off Robes". Similar to the Piikani, the other name used for Kainai is "the Bloods." According to Schultz this name came from the Ojibway and Cree who called the Kainai –"the Bloody People" because they so profusely painted their faces and

robe with native paint of the country, red ochre (32). The mentioning of red painted faces among the Kainai that will be discussed further in the next chapter on the Holy Woman role is a ritual performed during the O'kaan and at other forms of Blackfoot ceremonies. It is important to point out that face painting is a common practice for all Niitsitapiiks. Mrs. Uhlenbeck describes the face painting ritual briefly in her diary. She says "[n]ow the consecration to the sun, the face painting, starts. The men are painted on the forehead & chin by the leader; the women are painted by the female leader of the Beaver dance" (Eggermont-Molenaar 39). From Mrs. Uhlenbeck's experience during the Beaver Dance -- this event is also referred to as a bundle opening-- Blackfoot women have an important role in Blackfoot ceremony and their role is not diminished or subordinate to the roles of men. I reference Schultz's origin story to demonstrate how all the Blackfoot tribes are connected by the name Piikani and how the separation of the bands is a colonial construct. I want to establish how Blackfoot oral stories are owned by the collective and not by one Blackfoot tribe.

Knowing about my Blackfoot history, language, ritual, spirituality is what makes me an Indian. Archana Pathak says:

[t]o know is not merely an abstract, omnipotent intellectualized process. To know is to engage an experience fully with one's mind, body, and heart. Knowledge then is a vaster, more multi-dimensional realm than we often recognize. And this then allows us to consider how it is possible for a person to have intellectual and experiential knowledge. (4-5)

I explored different aspects of the Niitsitapiiks to clearly show how land, language, oral tradition and spirituality are related in a Blackfoot world view. For

instance, the connection between land and spirituality is best described by Deloria. He says “[i]n a sense then, religion must relate to land, and it must dominate and structure culture. It must not be separated from a particular piece of land and a particular community, and must not be determined by culture” (202). Ceremony is where the Blackfoot language is spoken, and the oral stories are told during Ceremony in the language. Oral stories tell how the ceremonies originated and why the rituals are performed in specific ways. Blackfoot ceremony and sacred rituals are performed on the land using materials from the land in sacred bundles and in the building of sacred sites, for instance, the O’kaan. Ceremony, land, oral stories, and the Blackfoot language coexist as one. In the next sections I discuss these ideas and oral stories along with personal narrative. I will show how returning to a traditional Blackfoot pedagogy through oral storytelling proves that essence of Piikani Women’s traditional roles are vital to Niitsitapi. Blackfoot traditional roles are leadership roles that can be adapted into contemporary Blackfoot society.

Chapter Three: The Holy Woman Identity

The Face Painting Ceremony

My mother lived with me when I grew into adulthood. Quite often we would sit in the living room, drinking tea and she would tell me stories. I remember one summer she told me a story about face painting. There was an old woman from Kainai who was on her deathbed. Her whole family were around her waiting for her to die. Eventually, she took her last breath and one of her relatives checked for a pulse. When that relative could not find a pulse, and told the rest of the family, everyone started to grieve for the old woman. She only died for a few minutes then all of a sudden she came back alive. The old woman woke up and she told all her relatives present that she was sent back to relay a message. She said “every one of you has to get your face painted at least once in your life. This is so your relatives on the other side, in the spirit world, will recognize you.” The old woman had someone fetch her bundle and she sat up to begin painting the faces of everyone who was present. When she had finished painting everyone, she lay back down and died. It was after my mother told me this story that she asked me if I could take her to the sundance, that was happening on the Kainai reserve, so we could get our faces painted. Up until that time seven years ago, I only had my face painted a few times.

The first time I got my face painted I was about five years old. My grandfather’s brother John Yellowhorn, who was the last hereditary Chief of the Piikani, painted my face. I went to his house with my dad and sisters. When we walked into his house, all the furniture had been taken out of the living room and

everyone sat on the floor. I stayed back while my dad went up to get his face painted. When he was done, my dad came back to where I stood and he sent me over to John so he could paint my face. I had been observing my father and I decided to mimic everything he did. When I sat in front of John, he talked to me in Blackfoot, I understood a little of what he tried to tell me. Translated into English, I heard him tell me to sit here, on a cushion placed on the floor in front of him. He patted it so I sat down cross legged like my dad. He shook his head and in Blackfoot he said no, then he patted the floor in front of him. I tried to comprehend what he was telling me, so I tried kneeling on my knees. He patted the floor again, so I lied down on the floor with my head on the cushion. Everyone in the room started laughing at me. Then John called one of his daughters over in Blackfoot and told her to show me how to sit. He wanted me to sit closer on my knees in front of him so he could reach my face to paint me.

When my mother asked me to bring her to get her face painted I drove her to Kainai and had my face painted as well. From that time I started bringing my mom to the sundance when the Horns Society were painting people's faces. Then we began to get our faces painted when the Ma'tokis were painting faces. The Ma'tokis are the first to set up their sundance and the last to set up are the Horns Society. These sundances happen one after the other in the summer. We would try to get our faces painted everyday of the sundance. Recently, I have become a bit more cautious of attending too regularly. I mean attending everyday of the sundance, especially the Ma'tokis, because I have relatives who are members. Sometimes society members are looking for new members transfer

into a society or transfer holy items like bundles. I only became aware of the possibility of getting “captured” by a Ma’toki member when my cousin, Sandra, went to get her face painted. She came out of the Ma’toki sundance tent looking stunned. She told me she just walked into her own capture. A member, who is also our relation, had told her she wanted to transfer her bundle to Sandra. My fears about becoming captured came from the kinds of responsibilities and duties I would be required to perform, and what I would be sacrificing in return for stepping into a role of a Ma’toki. However, my thinking has changed somewhat from that time. Now, I have a little more understanding of the importance of these traditional Blackfoot women’s roles.

The Ma’toki

For an individual to be captured into a Blackfoot society, is considered a great honour. The act of capturing is a ritual performed to induct someone into a particular Blackfoot society. Often capturing a person includes the transferring of a medicine bundle or holy pipe from the owner to the newly captured inductee. Caring for a Blackfoot medicine bundle is seen as a great blessing, which is believed to come from the power of the medicine bundle. There are people who actively pursue getting captured in order to gain the blessing and prestige of caring for a medicine bundle. However, there are people who wish to avoid being captured mainly because of the material and financial expense that must be gifted to the owner of a bundle to honour the power of a medicine bundle. Also, a person will avoid getting captured because she or he may not want to give up certain privileges in exchange for a different lifestyle. For instance, a

woman is required to give up wearing pants and must only wear dresses. Pants restrict her connection to the earth, whereas a dress helps her to keep that connection. Traditional Blackfoot ceremonies and rituals are performed outside on the land to include “mother earth”. This means including plant life, wildlife, water, stones and other sacred objects found on the land into the ceremonial rituals. Therefore, it is important in the ceremonies and rituals for a woman to have a strong connection to the earth. Many women in the present day do not want to give up wearing pants and only wear dresses every day so this is a privilege that is exchanged for the honour of caring for a bundle. There are other privileges that are sacrificed, for example, consumption of certain foods such as pork and alcohol; or sacrificing favourite pastimes, so participating in powwow celebrations will be less important because attending bundle openings, transfers or sun dance take precedence.

In Percy Bullchild’s version of the Blackfoot story about the creation of earth, he tells of the Creator Sun marrying the Moon. She went astray, having an affair with the Snakeman so the Creator Sun killed him. The moon retaliates by threatening to kill the Creator Sun and their seven sons. While she is chasing them around Mother Earth and overcoming obstacles that the Creator Sun and their seven sons put in her path that keeps the Moon from catching up to them, the Creator Sun marries Mother Earth and with her creates more children. Mother Earth is left to suckle all the children she created with the Creator Sun, while he is busy running away from his first wife, the Moon. The Creator Sun would visit his new wife during the times when the Moon was preoccupied with

chasing him. Mother Earth would get lonely when he was away so the Creator Sun created Mudman out of mud from Mother Earth to keep her company. After a time, Mudman also became lonely so the Creator Sun made Ribwoman out of the image of himself, Mudman and Mother Earth. Bullchild says “[a]s he blew on the face of this figure, formed after the three of them, Creator Sun spoke to it. ‘Now you have a life as we have and you are made after our son, the Mudman, to be his playmate. But you are made after your mother, Mother Earth, to bear others that will come from you and our Mudman son. You have breath like we have’” (40-41). Since women are created in the image of Mother Earth, women have a closer connection to the earth. Women bring new life into the world like Mother Earth and this is where the connection to the earth comes from. As mentioned previously, when women wear pants it is believed that they sever that connection to the earth. From a Niitsitapi epistemology and spiritual belief women have a stronger connection to the earth when they wear dresses and this is why women are required to wear dresses when attending traditional ceremonies. However, for many women only wearing dresses and sacrificing pants is too hard to do.

In the previous section on the Niitsitapiiks, I briefly touch on the Blackfoot societies. *I-kun-uh'-kah-tsi* (all comrades societies), the age graded societies included a woman's society that is the Ma'toki –Buffalo Woman's society. There are societies for the different age groups, for instance, children up to the age of six can be inducted in to the Chickadee society, as they grow older they transfer out of the Chickadee society. Then they join other societies for older children,

such as the Pigeon society, the Bear Cub society, the Crazy Dog society. Then as adults, people transfer into the adult societies like the Crazy Dog, Ma'toki and Horns. The Ma'toki is the society that I have mentioned in my story at the beginning of this section. Alice B. Kehoe explains Blackfoot societies in this way:

Blackfoot sodalities for the most part include both men and women, usually as couples. [...] Adult men in societies were expected to be accompanied by their wives, who took part in the rituals and feasts and sang as men, or men and women, danced. The Bloods, one of the three divisions of the Blackfoot confederacy, had a woman's society called the Ma'toki in which men served only in auxiliary roles. The Ma'toki danced as bison, and apparently were believed to be instrumental in bringing bison, and thus prosperity, to the people. (qtd in Klein, Ackerman 119)

These societies, such as the Horns¹⁷ and Ma'toki are still in existence today. The sundance I referred to in my story is what the Blackfoot call the O'kaan. I have opted to use O'kaan instead of sundance for the rest of this section. In the Niisitapiiks chapter, I discussed briefly how the Kainai tribe were given the name "Bloods" because of painting their faces with red ochre, this is the same face paint that I refer to in my story. The face painting ritual and ceremony is still practiced in the present day, as in the past, where "[b]oth men and women painted their faces with a mixture of ochre and grease, usually as part of a religious ceremony" (Yellowhorn 151). The O'kaan consists of spiritual practices in the way of prayer and songs; however, there are strict protocols that are adhered to over the duration of the O'kaan. Certain members of the Ma'toki and Horns have "formal license" (Real Bird 187) to perform face painting, but anyone

¹⁷ I mention the Horns society because the origin story for the Ma'toki is also the origin story for the Horns society. Kehoe says "[t]he most feared of the societies is the Horns, said to have life and death power" (119).

wishing to receive special prayers, blessings, or ward off bad omens or bad luck can have their face painted. Usually tobacco is offered and a gift of money and/or some other gift (i.e. money and/or blankets, food, etc)¹⁸.

When I was younger I often heard elders saying “we need to return to our traditional Blackfoot gender roles”. I thought they were crazy, and I never thought much about what it was they meant about returning to traditional gender roles. These roles, to me, meant returning back to a time when we all lived in teepees, living off the land, and when women had no voice or just existed to serve the needs of men. History books in elementary and secondary school never mentioned indigenous women, only men –Chiefs like Fools Crow, Sitting Bull, Crazy Horse, Red Crow, Crowfoot, and Charcoal to name a few. In my youth it was hard for me to imagine that Blackfoot women existed before mine or my mother’s time because they were written out of history. Then I began my post-secondary education. This is where I learned to question why Blackfoot women were written out of history; what were these women like; what kinds of lives did these women live; what are traditional Blackfoot women’s roles; and finally, how can these roles be adapted to the present and empower the younger generations of Blackfoot women. I had to learn about these roles from academic research and oral stories. My mother never told me about these roles because her mother did not teach her. My grandmother’s mother is where the teachings were stopped. However, I did learn through different traditional indigenous

¹⁸ Offerings such as money, blankets, horses, food, and so on, symbolize sacrifice. The more difficult for a person to give away a prized item, the more the person is deemed as having humility.

teachings and academia that these traditional Blackfoot gender roles are important.

There are a few reasons why the teachings about traditional gender roles were stopped in my maternal line. Beginning with my grandmother Sooakii (Pretty Face), who owned a medicine bundle, when she passed away the bundle was not transferred to anyone. One of her sons-in-law sold the bundle to a museum. The knowledge, the ceremonies and the rituals that Sooakii knew about the bundle died with her. My grandmother did not encourage her children to participate in traditional ceremonies so the teaching of traditional roles ended with her. My mother went to residential school and became indoctrinated in the Anglican religion from the age of five. When I was born my mother decided not to teach me the Blackfoot language because of the abuse she endured while in residential school. She decided to send me to “white schools”, thinking that it would make it easier for me to transition into “white society.” My mother had very little knowledge about traditional roles. She began learning traditional ceremonies when I was about six years old. However, the traditional ceremonies we participated in were not Blackfoot but Sioux and Sioux ceremonies. For instance, in the “yu-wi-pii” ceremony, the fasting ritual is different and women participate in the sweatlodge. Among Blackfoot people, women are not required to participate in a sweat lodge because their monthly menses is considered a form of purification similar to the sweat lodge. Some Blackfoot women participate in specific sweat lodges where women are allowed to take part. It usually depends on the sweat lodge keeper and their traditional teachings and transfers were.

Blackfoot traditional gender roles are a part of the culture, and still are performed today. By reviving traditional Blackfoot women's roles and renewing a claim for these roles, I am more aware of and proud of my own culture and I have gained more knowledge to share with other Blackfoot women. Paulo Freire says: "[i]n order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (31). I am transforming my thinking outside of what I will refer to as a box of my own perceived oppression. Inside this box I mimic non-native culture (ie Western Canadian culture). I live off the Piikani reserve, I dress in Western-European attire, and I attend university. Yet I am still an indigenous woman, a Blackfoot woman from the Piikani nation, and I have not been fully embraced by white-Euro-Canadian society. I have received formal education from federally recognized college and universities: an Associate of Arts in Business Administration from Little Big Horn College; a Bachelor of Arts and Science in Business Administration from Montana State University – Billings; a Bachelor of Arts in English from the University of Lethbridge; and am presently working towards my Masters of Arts in English at the University of Lethbridge. Even though I have all of this formal education, at times I still feel as though I am disempowered. In Jody Pepion's dissertation, she describes experiences with "white privilege"¹⁹. She says:

¹⁹ This term is from a quotation by Peggy McIntosh which Pepion used. The quotation is found in the article "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," <http://www.nymbp.org/reference/WhitePrivilege.pdf>.

[a]s an Indigenous woman growing up on the reservation, and having to attend a school 15 miles off of the reservation, I knew of this privilege very well. I saw it every day I attended school. I internalized it as a personal wound. Thinking of self as less, never did I associate these internal self destructing wounds as white privilege. I realize for the first time, *it's not me!* I am not stupid; my skin color and race are not dirty. I am not lazy. My people are not vanishing. My womaness does not belong to man." (23-24)

From Pepion's words, I realize the limiting situation I feel is disempowerment by "white privilege". Freire says that a limiting situation can be transformed (31).

Therefore, changing my thinking and my reaction when I am confronted with white privilege is the "motivating force to liberating action" (Freire 31).

Assimilating into white-Euro-Canadian society is not a solution, nor should we forgo our own heritage, for empowering Piikani women because white privilege still places us at a disadvantage. Indigenous women and Indigenous men as well, are still marginalized. If this were not true, there would be no need to raise awareness for all the missing indigenous girls and women in Canada through the Sister's In Spirit campaign (NWAC)²⁰ or to pass laws with provisions to protect Native American women, such as the Reauthorizing the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)²¹ in the United States Congress. According to the Indian Law Resource Center:

native women experience rates of violence 2 ½ times that of any other population and many live on reservations where rate is 10 times the national average. One in three will be raped, two in five

²⁰ NWAC is the Native Women's Association of Canada, <http://www.nwac.ca/programs/sisters-spirit>.

²¹ S. 47 the Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act which "includes key provisions that would restore limited criminal jurisdiction to tribes to persecute non-Indians who choose to commit crimes of domestic violence and sexual assault against tribal citizens on tribal lands" (Indian Law Resource Center np). <http://www.indianlaw.org/swsn/vawa-reauthorization-high-priority-113th-congress>

will be victims of domestic violence, and three in five will be physically assaulted in their lifetime. (np)²²

When I come across these kinds of statistics and campaigns to stop the violence against Indigenous women, I ask the question: What will help empower Indigenous women, more specifically Piikani women by making them more aware of history, of possibilities, and perhaps prevent the cycles of violence? Then I find I am back to the old argument made by Blackfoot elders: a return to traditional Blackfoot gender roles. Vine Deloria, Jr. says:

[t]he largest difference I can see between Indian religion and Christian religions is in the inter-personal relationships. Indian society had a religion that taught respect for all members of the society. Remember, Indians had a religion that produced a society in which there were no locks on doors, no orphanages, no need for oaths, and no hungry people. Indian religion taught that sharing one's goods with another human being was the highest form of behavior. The Indian people have tenaciously held to this tradition of sharing their goods with other people in spite of all attempts by churches, government agencies, and schools to break them of the custom. (121)

Returning to traditional Blackfoot gender roles means returning to "Indian religion,"²³ which is a way of living. In the previous chapter on the Niitsitapiiks, I explained that spirituality is an intricate part of a traditional Blackfoot way of life and in oral story telling. The traditional women's roles I am discussing in this chapter are important spiritual roles: the Ma'toki and Holy Woman. These traditional women's roles command respect and are valued because they hold a place of great importance and honour in the O'kaan.

²² The statistics for Indigenous women in Canada are also comparatively high. See Woman Abuse Working Group webpage for comparisons, <http://www.wawg.ca/pages/violence-against-aboriginal-women>.

²³ Indian religion and native spirituality are the same. Author uses Indian religion instead of native spirituality.

The origin story of the Ma'toki is also the origin story of the Horns. Both of these *I-kun-uh'-kah-tsi* have a part in the O'kaan, one begins their ceremonial rituals first, and the other is last in performing their ceremonial rituals that signals the end of the O'kaan. According to Clark Wissler's and D.C. Duvall's translation of origin of the Ma'toki and the Horns, the story is a Blood version. By Blood version, I am referring to the story having been told by a Kainai informant to Wissler and Duvall. The story summarized is about a young man who takes advantage of a buffalo-cow and she eventually gives birth to a son. As the son grew older he would go into the camp to play with other children during the day, at night he returned back to his mother. After some time the son followed his playmate back to his camp and the son approached the head man of the camp. He told the head man, that he was looking for his father one of the men who lived somewhere in the camp. The head man took pity on the boy and called all the men by age group to his camp for the son find his father. When all the unmarried young men were called the son found his father in the group. The son takes his father out to the prairie where his mother is staying. She is a buffalo and runs at the father and son four times before she changes to a woman. The father and boy's mother become husband and wife. The wife makes one demand that her husband must not ever strike at her with fire. All three live together for awhile until one day the father invites guests over and the wife expresses a dislike at having to cook for the guests so the father strikes at her with fire. The wife and the son run back to the buffalo. The father mourns for his wife and son, so he goes searching for them. The Chief of the buffalo tells the father that he has to

pick his son out of the rest of the buffalo-calves. Earlier the father and son had made plans to make it easier for the father to pick out his son. Four times the father had to choose correctly, which buffalo-calf was his son. The first time the son held his tail up. The second time the son closed one eye. The third time the son let one of his ears hang down. On the fourth time the son would be dancing on one leg and the father made the wrong choice because the son's friend was also dancing like the son. Since the father chose wrong, he was trampled to death by the buffalo herd. The mother, her son, and an old bull mourned for the man. The old bull told the mother and son to find a piece of bone from the man. They found one small piece of bone that did not get trampled. The old bull made a sweat-house and restored the man to life. After the man was restored, the old bull gave the family some power, head-dresses, some songs, and crooked sticks that were similar to the sticks carried by the buffalo in the dance when he tried to pick his son out. "The calf-boy and his mother then became human beings, and returned with the man. It was this man who started the Bull and the Horn Societies, and it was his wife who started the Matoki (Wissler 119).

This Ma'toki and Horns origin story not only explains how these two societies came about, but shows an act of violence against a woman, the Buffalo wife. The Husband is warned not to strike his wife with fire, but he does not listen and strikes his wife with a burning piece of wood. She runs away back to her family. The Buffalo wife is supported by her family and her community, the buffalo herd. The Chief of the buffalo confronts the Husband and creates four challenges for the Husband to overcome before he can take his son and wife

home. The husband is punished for not recognizing his son in the buffalo form, as well as for his hitting his wife with fire by the herd of buffalo trampling him into dust. In this story the Buffalo wife is supported and protected by her community from her violent husband. In my introduction chapter, I talk about violence against women and how most often it is women who have to flee their communities instead of their abusers. I also mention how men are coddled and supported by their families. Women have to be more independent and often are not supported in the same way as their male relatives. Yet in this story it is the woman who is supported and protected by her community. This story shows another situation regarding gender roles. This situation in which a woman is supported can be shared with women who are being disadvantaged by their community in society in general. Another aspect of how oral stories of the Blackfoot can be used to teach young people about traditional roles and maybe to prevent family violence.

The O'kaan is a major religious ceremony for the Blackfoot. Toviass says, "[t]he centrality of the O'kaan, the Blackfoot Sun Dance, resides in the fact that the ceremony maintains the links between Natosi (the Sun) and the Blackfoot" (17). Offerings are made to renew the relationship between the Blackfoot and the sky beings (Natosi, the moon and the morning star). The Ma'toki gather at the time of the O'kaan and dance to honor the Bison. In the origin story the woman and son can change from buffalo to human form. The family at the end of the story are transferred power from the old bull that symbolizes the beginnings of both the Ma'toki and Horns. Kehoe says:

Algonkian languages do not distinguish male and female through lexical gender. Instead, they distinguished animate from inanimate. Everything that exhibits volition through movement – humans, animals, and manifestations of power such as thunder and rocks in odd places – is marked by the animate gender. Within that gender, various species have differing degrees of power. Bison, beavers, and otters are more powerful than humans. Some humans are more powerful than other humans. In humans, degree of power (i.e. spiritual power) is evidenced by health, strength, longevity, and success in undertakings, including skill in hunting, in crafts, or in judgement. [...] Women are believed to have more power than men, because they are born with power to reproduce both the human and the material components of the social world. (qtd in Klein, Ackerman 120)

Power in the story is spiritual power and degree of power in a human varies from person to person. Hence, in the story the buffalo have the power to shape shift into human form and restore life to the man. The woman in the story has more power than the man because she can change her form from a buffalo-cow to woman and she is the one who started the Ma'toki. The Horns require couples to be inducted into this *I-kun-uh'-kah-tsi*. In another version of origin story, translated by Wissler-Duvall from the North Piegan about the Horns, the story ends with: "This is the way in which the Horn society came to be. All dancers must have wives, for the buffalo had wives. In every medicine-dance there are three people, -- the man, his wife, the young man. The young man is the cow [messenger]" (120). In the Blood version of the Ma'toki and the Horns origin story, the son is the messenger between his father and his mother when he takes his father out to the prairie to find the mother, and again when the son coaches his father on how to recognize him from the other buffalo-calves. The mother and the man become a family along with their son. Medicine bundle keepers and

inductees into the Horns have a woman role that must be filled. Kehoe says in her essay found in *Women and Power in Native North America*:

[t]his crucial role appears in medicine bundle openings: only a woman should unwrap and rewrap a holy bundle. She hands the powerful objects inside to the male celebrant. It is important to note that the woman sits quietly behind the man and to European eyes seems to be a servant. The Blackfoot see the woman as more powerful than the man, who dares not handle the bundle entire and alone. The modesty of the woman's dress and her manner is a sign of her *intrinsic* power: she is so secure in it that she need not flaunt her role. (qtd in Klein, Ackerman 116)

Medicine bundles²⁴ are sources of spiritual power and are transferred to couples or require three people – a wife and husband and a young man (the messenger). Paul Weasel Head explains, “[e]ach of those bundles has a man and a wife for an owner, and a child goes with them to wear the special topknot wrapping and fur headband that is kept with the bundle” (qtd in Hungry Wolf 76). In the Ma'toki and the Horns origin story, the old bull transferred power, head dresses, crooked sticks and songs to the couple. Similar items like those in the story are often included in Medicine bundles. As Kehoe points out, the role of the woman is an important role because she has the power to give birth to new life. The role of the Ma'toki is also important because they honour the Buffalo that was the major food source for the Blackfoot. Without women to handle the holy items in a Medicine bundle or participate in the role of a Ma'toki to honor the Buffalo

²⁴ Kenneth Hayes Lokensgard says, “The Blackfoot Peoples consider their medicine bundles to be powerful living persons. They believe therefore, that humans should not hoard or display bundles as mere commodities. Instead, they expect human keepers, who care for the medicine bundles, to circulate the bundles between keepers and to help assure that relations between the Blackfoot Peoples and the powerful beings embodied in the bundles remain positive and beneficial for all” (21).

through ritual and dance, the spirituality of the Blackfoot cannot continue on to future generations.

The Holy Woman

Another role for women is the Holy Woman role that is vital to the O'kaan. The O'kaan can only occur when a woman makes a vow to undertake the role of Holy Woman and sponsor the O'kaan. "Among the Blackfoot, to build a Medicine Lodge to Natosi required that a married woman, whose virtue must be beyond reproach, make a public vow to become the Holy Woman in the Sun Dance and thereby also the 'Mother' of her community" (Tovias17). The vow made by a woman is the qualifier for becoming the Holy Woman. In times when a loved one is sick or the woman (herself) has poor health she will appeal to Natosi to help heal the ailing person and in exchange for this help, the woman will sacrifice an offering, and promises to undertake the role of Holy Woman. These vows are not taken lightly, once an offering and vow are seen to be accepted a public announcement is given. The acceptance of an offering and vow is evidenced by the healed health of the sick individual that the woman has appealed to Natosi for, however this is not the sole purpose a woman can vow to qualify as a Holy Woman. There can be other reasons (as Kehoe says: health, longevity, strength and success in undertakings). As an example of the kinds of vows that are made, one Holy Woman named Catches-Two-Horses tells her story in *The Ways Of My Grandmothers*:

[d]uring my life I have given three Sun Dance ceremonies. I gave my first Sun Dance because of a battle with the

Assiniboines. I made a vow in order that Sun might keep some of my relatives from being injured in the fight. I gave my second to fulfill a vow by my son Cross Guns. He made it in battle when surrounded by enemies. Cross Guns escaped and came home. (Hungry Wolf 40)

A man can make a vow to Natosi and get the help from one of his female relatives to come forward to fulfill the vow (Wissler 11). The vow is binding unless the woman's prayers are not granted. "In such cases, the promises are not only not binding, but to proceed with the sun dance, or to take a secondary part in it, would be to the detriment of all concerned. The fault is said to lie in the woman's life and that only the wrath of the sun would be invoked by her participation in the ceremonies" (Wissler 11). Along with the formal public announcement, the woman will need to acquire the Natosi Bundle for the O'kaan ceremony. Kehoe says, "[t]he Blackfoot Sun Dance is a more obvious manifestation of the superior spiritual power of women: the Sun Dance ceremony is led by a woman and cannot be held if no woman is willing to undertake the arduous fasting and heavy responsibility of the Holy Woman role" (qtd in Klein, Ackerman 116). It is also important to note that to undertake the role of Holy Woman and sponsoring the O'kaan is also to incur great material expense for the woman and her husband.

These traditional spiritual roles require much sacrifice and responsibility. I realize how empowering the Holy Woman role and the Ma'toki role have always been. Blackfoot women who step forward to claim these roles are powerful role models. It is true that "[b]oth popular and academic writing portray an overwhelmingly masculine image of Plains society. [...] Yet women played pivotal

roles in the sacred and daily life of Plains cultures” (McMillan 150). It is this portrait of the masculine image that gave me the impression that Blackfoot women were not important before my mother or my time. They were written out of history because of the people who were writing the histories, influencing the narratives, and their gender. Joan Sangster says this in her essay:

[h]istorical sources, to be sure, make the search for women difficult. In many arctic Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) post journals, for example, women existed on the margins of the main story. The journals were written by white traders, anxious to justify *their* output of daily work for their employers, and they recorded information according to a masculinist mindset: marriage records listed only men’s names and occupations, while account books recorded trading by women “under their husband’s names”. (249)

From what I was taught in school about Canadian history, I did not learn about famous Indigenous women. The history I learned tended to degrade and dehumanize Indigenous people in Canada. They were portrayed as savages, and women were not mentioned at all. It is only from my pursuit of a post-secondary degree that I have become aware of the role Indigenous women have had in history. By discussing these Blackfoot Women’s roles I am attempting to create a “counterhegemonic discourse” (Duran 27) to encourage more Piikani women to begin stepping into these iconic roles. Beverly Hungry Wolf says:

[a]ll of my traditional grandmothers prayed a lot and believed in their religion. To me they were all holy women living a sacred way of life. But there were special ones among them who were revered by the rest of the tribe as holy women. These were the sponsors of the Sun Dance, or medicine lodge ceremonies. That is the highest religious event among my people, and it is always sponsored by a noble woman who has been true to her husband and otherwise upstanding in life. This fact, by itself, has long helped women to have a special standing in our tribe. (31)

No longer do I think that returning to traditional gender roles is not important, because roles of the Ma'toki and the Holy Woman are positions of power for women. Without women to step into these spiritual roles, the ceremonial rituals that renew the Blackfoot connection to the land cannot occur. The Blackfoot women's roles are not just roles to be filled for the purpose of ceremonies and rituals; these roles become a part of a way of living life, as for instance, when I discussed sacrificing wearing pants or giving up other privileges. I agree that this argument follows "Native Feminist Spirituality" (Jaimes-Guerro 67), "which advocates for Native women's cultural rights in contemporary times, in terms of one's subjective agency within the existing patriarchal and postcolonialist globalizing U.S. [and Canadian] society" (Jaimes-Guerro 67). My intention is to promote the empowerment of Piikani women through Blackfoot ways of knowing. I discuss the origin of traditional Blackfoot roles; how these roles demonstrate leadership; and why these roles should be carried on to future generations of Piikani women.

Chapter Four: The Woman Chief Identity

Headdress Transfer

A woman sits on a chair at the edge of the dancing circle, in front of the announcer's stand. The dancing festivities have come to a halt, allowing time for the transfer ceremony to occur. Spectators, dancers and drummers remain seated as witnesses for the headdress transfer. The dancing circle is kept clear of persons running across and of children playing in the center. A woman enters the dancing circle. A nod from the woman signals to a drum group to begin singing a capture song. The woman dance while searching the crowd for the one she is capturing for the headdress transfer. She dances completely around the dancing circle until she comes upon a lone woman sitting in front of the announcer's stand. The lead woman holds out her hand to take the sitting woman's hand and pulls her up to stand. The capture ceremony is complete. The transferring ritual is performed with a face painting ceremony and only completed when the stand-up headdress is placed upon the captured woman's head. With a nod from the lead woman to the same drum group, an honour song is sung. The lead woman parades the newly adorned stand-up headdress woman around the dancing circle. The spectators watch and are witnesses to the captured woman's initiation into a form of leadership. The stand-up headdress symbolizes authority, respect, honour, and the right to be a leader among the Blackfoot people.

The Contemporary Woman Chief

Piikani nation elects thirteen members to Chief and council. There are

twelve council members and one Chief. John Yellowhorn was the last hereditary Chief and the first elected Chief when Piikani switched to an electoral system for Chief and council. From the year 1964 (Piikani Traditional Knowledge Society np) women had been elected to council. My grandmother, Nellie Yellowhorn and Madeline Good Rider, Agnes Smith (Mrs. Joseph Smith) were the first few women elected to council. Some of the other women who have sat on council over the years include: Rose Potts, Daintry Crow Shoe, Rose Crow Shoe, Julianna North Peigan, Patsy English, Louise English, Elma Provost, Harriet North Peigan, Angie Grier, Eloise Provost, Serene Weasel Traveller, Celeste Strikes With A Gun, Roberta Yellowhorn. However, no women had been elected as Chief of Piikani, until Gayle Strikes With A Gun was elected as Chief in 2010. Also, in this same year there were three other women elected to council that provided an opportunity for change in long-held stereotypes that only men can hold office in Piikani Chief and council. If Piikani nation were to elect a balanced Chief and council of half women and men to represent the collective, it could create an opportunity for change where the interests of Piikani women can be addressed: for instance, encouraging more women to take on leadership roles in the community, taking a stronger stance on violence against women, or even finding solutions to breaking other cycles of dysfunction within the community. It is important to point out, that although Gayle Strikes With A Gun has been recognized as the first woman elected Chief since Piikani switched to the electoral system, woman Chiefs and woman warriors are evident in Blackfoot oral stories like "*Napi and Women selecting husbands*" version by Percy Bullchild

and the translated version by Wissler and Duvall and the stories about Running Eagle from Hungry Wolves collection and Little Chief's version. These stories I will be discuss later in this chapter. The four women who were elected into Piikani Chief and council in 2010 are examples of Piikani women stepping into leadership roles. Having more women elected to Chief and Council has disrupted a history of Piikani leadership that had been predominately controlled by men. It should be seen as an inherent right for women to have a voice in governing the Piikani people, instead of creating division and heated debate within the community over whether or not women belong in leadership roles. Blackfoot oral stories prove that the Piikani nation had women leaders long before the colonial system of governing, as well as changes within the Blackfoot culture, took away Piikani women's matriarchal roles, leadership, voice and autonomy.

The inherent right of Piikani women to speak on behalf of the Blackfoot collective has been and continues to be undermined by the colonial legislation and discourse that places all of Piikani people as wards of the government under the Indian Act of 1876. Since the signing of Treaty Seven in 1877, Piikani women have lose decision making power, resulting in fewer women with influence over the governing body and administrative leadership for Piikani nation. There are supporting arguments and evidence that show "[w]omen's traditional activities were greatly altered by colonial forces that decreased their autonomy, imposed foreign laws and new forms of work relations, and brought into being a distinction between private and public spheres of activity" (Weist

596), and this is true for Piikani women. For instance, policies under the Indian Act of 1876 that unbalanced the equality between men and women in First Nation communities that include: First Nations women lost their Indian Status and band membership when they married non-native men; First Nations men who married non-native women, on the other hand, kept their Indian status and their wives also gained Indian Status and band membership; First Nations men had authority to enfranchise, meaning sell their Indian status as well as that of their wives and children for ownership of land off reserve without the consent of their wives; up until the 1950s First Nations people were not allowed to leave the reserve without the consent of the Indian Agent. Since Piikani is a recognized treaty band under the Indian Act of 1876, and all policies, legislation and laws under the Indian Act applied to Piikani nation and these are just a few policies that decreased Piikani women's autonomy and altered their traditional activities, such as the role of the Holy Woman (ceremonies such as the sun dance, were outlawed in the early 1900s and many ceremonies had to be performed in secret). As a result, Piikani women stepping into positions of leadership in the public sphere are not encouraged by many Piikani people and the proof is in the fact that the first woman Chief elected for Piikani only occurred in 2010.

Although there have been a few women over the years since the adoption of the electoral system, who broke through the glass ceiling to hold positions in Piikani council and other leadership roles in the different administrative departments, there were not enough women filling these leadership positions to create the necessary changes that would grant Piikani women more influence in the political

sphere. Women today who hold leadership roles in supervisory positions or in elected office still face some form of lateral violence such as bullying, harassment, and intimidation from other members within the Piikani community. For example, Gayle Strikes With A Gun as Chief has had to deal with criticism, conflict and controversy during her term in office more so than past male Chiefs. The election forum for this current Chief and council office was to push for more accountability and transparency. This put Chief Strikes With A Gun under more pressure to be accountable for her actions because she held council members accountable for their actions by suspending them short term. Another factor I believe is that she is a woman, so the council members and Piikani membership were less intimidated by her than previous male Piikani Chiefs and were louder in voicing their opposition of her actions. Piikani membership opposed the actions and decisions of previous male Chiefs but their voices were not loud to enough to remove past Chiefs from office. I base my judgement on past Chief and Councils and their actions while in office. Many of the previous Chief and Councils have not been re-elected to office. Elected Chiefs of Piikani from the last decade have done far more damaging actions that have put Piikani nation into co-party management with the federal government, but those Chiefs were allowed to finish their terms in office. During her second year in office, Piikani council suspended Chief Gayle Strikes With A Gun indefinitely²⁵. Since the completion of writing of this thesis, Chief Gayle Strikes With A Gun had not been allowed back into office and she may not be allowed to finish her term in office.

²⁵ See newspaper article from *Pincher Creek Voice* <http://www.pinchercreekvoice.com/2012/09/chief-gayle-strikes-with-gun-suspended.html>.

Removing the Chief from office has created feuding and division within the community, as well as resulting in legal costs for court proceedings, court injunctions, law suits against the band and freezing of band, actions that affected the financial livelihoods for many Piikani members. Thus, more women are needed to step forward to claim leadership roles in order to create a critical mass to push for changes that would benefit everyone in Piikani equally.

The story at the beginning of this chapter describes a stand-up headdress transfer for Blackfoot women. Headdresses have often been associated with warrior chiefs from past to present contemporary First Nation leaders who are usually men. During official government political functions at the local, provincial or federal levels, First Nations chiefs are seen wearing the flow back headdress, which is styled with the feathers flowing toward the back of the head. This style of headdress originated with the Sioux nation and was adopted by other prairie tribes. The flow back feather headdress is seen in many films and pictures adorning the heads of Native American warriors throughout the prairies. But only few pictures are of women wearing any kind of feather headdress. Feather headdresses are often referred to as the War Bonnet because they were worn during battles with enemy tribes, mainly by men.

The Blackfoot have their own unique headdress style that is the stand-up headdress where the feathers stand straight up on the head. Both men and women wear the stand-up headdress. At one time men were transferred the headdress because of their military accomplishments, and women were transferred headdresses to wear when their husbands left with a war party. The

headdress gives the illusion of a taller person and was used to intimidate enemies into thinking Blackfoot people were giants. Presently, stand-up headdresses are transferred to both women and men who become inducted into a Headdress society; or for recognition of leadership (for example, Chief Strikes With A Gun was transferred a stand-up headdress because of her successful election); and for service in the military or other significant accomplishments. The headdress is a symbol of authority and leadership; therefore, only certain people have been given full transfer rights. This means having the right to make the headdress, paint faces during a transfer and to transfer headdresses to other people. The headdress is cared for in the same way a Blackfoot holy bundle is cared for because the headdress is considered a sacred object.

It is significant that Blackfoot women are given full transfer rights to wear a stand-up headdress because the symbolism of the headdress is chieftainship, warrior status, and leadership. The Blackfoot stand-up headdress also has ceremonial significance for women because the Holy Women wore the stand-up headdresses during the medicine lodge ceremony and the origin story of the headdresses came to a woman – Elk Woman – first. In the Peigan version by Wissler and Duvall in *Mythology Of The Blackfoot Indians*, the headdress is called a medicine bonnet. The story goes like this:

There was once an Elk who was deserted by his wife. When he found that she was gone, he went out to look for her, and finally saw her in the thick woods. He was very angry and wished to kill her: so he walked toward her singing a song. Now this was a medicine-song, and he intended that its power should kill his wife. He had great power. The ground was very hard; but at every step his feet sank deeper into it. Now his wife was

frightened; but she had some power also. She began to sing a song, and as she did so she turned into a woman. In her new form she wore a medicine-bonnet, a robe of elk-hide over her shoulders, and elk-teeth on her wrists. The song she sang when she became a woman was: --

“My wristlets are elk-teeth;
they are powerful.”

Then the woman moved toward a tree, moved her head as if hooking at the tree, and it almost fell. Now when the Elk saw what she was doing, he stopped in great surprise at her power. He did not kill her as had intended.

This was Elk-woman. In the sun-dance a tree or post is put up in the centre of the sun-lodge and the woman who wears the bonnet makes hooking actions at the pole, as did the Elk-Woman in the first part of the story. (Wissler and Duvall 84-85)

In other versions of this story the elk bull gifts Elk-Woman with the medicine-bonnet that was put together by various animals, for instance, the raven, the owl, and the weasel. The stand-up headdress for women is made up of seventeen eagle tail feathers that go around the head with a weasel tail hanging down both sides of the headdress. Induction into the Blackfoot headdress society is a public event and women who are transferred a headdress are considered Holy Women. Qualities of the Holy Woman role are also incorporated in the roles of the Woman Chief and the Woman Warrior because the stand-up headdress originates with the Holy Woman. Also the stand-up headdress is adapted for military strategy, yet is still considered a sacred bundle and cared for like a bundle because of the ceremonial ritual that is performed during the transfer of the headdress.

In the Elk Woman story the elk bull and his wife are in a power struggle against one another. Elk Woman essentially becomes a warrior woman who

defeats her enemy, who happens to be her husband, by singing one of her medicine songs. Often when warriors went to war, they had sacred objects: war bonnets, shirts, and songs that they sang to protect them from harm while in battle. The elk husband had intended to kill his wife by singing his medicine song to manifest power. Elk Woman countered his attack with a medicine song of her own that transformed her into a human woman, proving that her power is stronger than her husband's power. According to this story, a woman's power is stronger than a man's power and she is awarded the headdress for her capabilities as a warrior. Her husband stops trying to kill her and Elk Woman's action of hooking the tree is then imitated in a sun dance lodge by the Holy Woman. This story and the discussion about the stand-up headdress shows how ceremony and ritual are an intrinsic part of traditional Blackfoot gender roles. Along with ceremony and ritual, Blackfoot origin stories are told to explain the reasons specific ceremonies and songs are used and explain how certain traditions came into practice. Analyzing oral stories such as the Elk Woman story shows why traditional Blackfoot women's roles should be recognized and respected for leadership instead of creating conflict, controversy and criticism that is seen occurring with Chief Strikes With A Gun. There are still people in Piikani who believe that women should not be leaders, should not have a voice and should not be heard. There are also people who want change and want more women in leadership. In regards to Chief Strikes With A Gun, some people who are on opposing sides have reacted by being verbally abusive and in some

cases physically violent with one another over whether or not Gayle Strikes With A Gun should remain as Chief.

The Woman Chief and Woman Warrior roles that are found in some Blackfoot oral stories can be used as primary sources to encourage more Piikani women to assert their positions in the leadership of the Piikani nation. Within Percy Bullchild's version of "Napi and Women Selecting Husbands", the single women had their own head Chief who is a single woman. The beginning of the narrative demonstrates that leadership is not necessarily only a male role but that women had a voice in leadership of the camp. Bullchild's version of the story begins in this way:

Towards the last days of Napi, all of the single women left from camp where everyone else lived. The single women had their own head woman besides the Chief of the camp, and the single men had their own Chief too.

It was one of those things where the Chiefs couldn't get along too well, arguments, and arguments between them, the head woman of the single women's group and the Chief of the single men's group and the head Chief of this camp. One day the arguments got so bad that the head woman of the ladies' group decided to move away from here where she could better take care of her followers. She moved far away from this main camp. It took the women several days to get to wherever they moved. The place was along a river, and the women camped on the north shore. The women went out to find their own food, and built their own *pis-kun* where they killed buffalo by the herds. They didn't have any problems. It could've been the very first women's lib. (Bullchild 222)

This oral story supports the idea that Blackfoot women were influential in the decision making that impacted the community. In the story, the Chief of the single women has a disagreement with the other two head Chiefs and decides to

leave the camp along with all the single women because the interests of the single women will be better met by separating from the rest of the camp and creating their own camp. The women moved away from the camp to live separately in another area. The larger camp is where the single men and married couples still resided. The single women are successful living in their own camp by building their *pis-kun* to hunt buffalo for food, shelter and clothing. Further into the story the women are portrayed as having no problem living on their own. They have warrior women who scout the area for intruders and other dangers. It is the single men who miss the companionship of the women and they go in search of the women.

In the excerpt above, Bullchild interrupts his narration of the story to say “[i]t could’ve been the very first women’s lib” (222). First “women’s lib” aside, the introduction of this story shows a Blackfoot woman asserting her leadership role for the single women. The Woman Chief chooses to leave the camp because of the disagreements between her and the two male Chiefs. She has the authority to make a major decision to separate with all the single women from the rest of the camp. The other two Chiefs do nothing to prevent her and the single women from leaving the camp either. The single women have autonomy to go wherever they choose and make their own decisions. One point in Bullchild’s story to take note of is when he says “the Chiefs couldn’t get along too well” but for the rest of the story he refers to the leader of the single women as the Head Woman. Throughout Bullchild’s narration of Blackfoot oral stories in *The Sun Came Down: The History of the World as My Blackfeet Elders Told It*, there are Western

Christian undertones, for example, the stories in the “Earth’s Beginning” section offer similarities to the Adam and Eve story from the Christian bible. In this story of “Napi and Women Selecting Husbands” the Western Christian and patriarchal influence is evident in how Bullchild stops calling the head of the single women a Chief after he introduced the story with “the Chiefs couldn’t get along too well” but continues to call the male leaders in the story Chiefs. For example, he calls the male leaders the Chief of the single men and the head Chief of the camp, while he refers to the Chief of the single women as “Head Woman.”

In the Wissler and Duvall version of this same story the head woman of the single women is called a Chief, as seen here in this excerpt of “The First Marriage”:

Now in those days, the men and the women did not live together[.]. The men lived in lodges made of skin with the hair on; the women, in good lodges. [The dressed-skin lodges.] One day Old Man came to the camp of the men, and, when he was there, a woman came over from the camp of the women. She said she had been sent by the Chief of the women to invite all the men because the women were going to pick out husbands.

Now the men began to get ready, and Old Man dressed himself up in his finest clothes: he was always fine looking. Then they started out, and, when they came to the women’s camp, they all stood up in a row. Now the Chief of the women came out to make the first choice. She had on very dirty clothes, and none of the men knew who she was. She went along the line, looked them over, and finally picked out Old Man, because of his fine appearance. Now Old Man saw many nicely dressed women waiting their turn, and, when the Chief of the women took him by the hand, he pulled back and broke away. He did this because he thought her a very common woman. When he pulled away, the Chief of the women went back to her lodge and instructed the other women not to choose Old Man. While the other women were picking out their husbands, the Chief of the women put on her best costume. When she came out, she looked very fine,

and, as soon as Old Man saw her, he thought, “Oh! there is the Chief of the women. I wish to be her husband.” He did not know that it was the same woman. (Wissler and Duvall 21- 22)

In both stories, “Napi and Women Selecting Husbands” and “The First Marriage”, the women are independent, and have power to make their own decisions or give their consent on anything that will have an impact on their lives. The women have a leader who is referred to as a Chief or Head Woman who speaks on the other women’s behalf and makes important decisions by discussing everything with the rest of the women. She gathers the women and speaks to them about significant changes that will affect their lives, which include moving away from the larger camp and choosing a husband. Both stories portray Blackfoot women as having autonomy, thus having freedom to make choices, move their camp freely and live independently. The single women make their own camp away from the others, implying they are a self-governing community. In Bullchild’s version of the story he tells of how within the larger community the single women had a representative—the Head Woman—who would speak on their behalf. This shows there is no distinction between the public and private sphere because women are working in both spheres. The position of head Chief is a public position and women are working outside the home to gather food for their survival.

The single men in Bullchild’s story are portrayed as the ones who need companionship of women. Shortly, thereafter, they eventually go in search of the single women’s camp. In both versions of this story, it is the women who are making the choice of who they will marry. The men are just lined up along the

river bank waiting for the women to choose who they want. Incidentally, the Chief of the single men is Napi (or Old Man in the Wissler/Duvall version), who is known as a trickster and a representation of human nature because of all the mistakes he has made while teaching the Blackfoot how to live. Kehoe says of Napi that “[h]e personifies the foolishness in human nature, and it is significant that this quality is shown as especially dominant in a man. There is no comparable corpus of stories about a foolish woman” (121). This foolishness is evident in the beginning of Bullchild’s story because the two other Chiefs are men, they argue constantly with the Chief of the single women and they cannot foresee the negative impact it will have on the single men when the Chief of the single women decides to break away from the camp with her followers. Napi is portrayed as foolish when he backs away from the Chief of the women because he does not want to be her husband. It seems as though he is the one choosing a wife when it is the women who are deciding who they will marry.

The single women, especially the Chief of the single women, are not portrayed as foolish. Instead the women are hard working, doing manual labour that, in a patriarchal society, would traditionally be seen as man’s work. For instance, the women build a *pis-kun* for the purpose of hunting buffalo and they carry the meat back to their camp and in the Wissler/Duvall version, the women’s teepees are made nicer than the men’s teepees. Similar to the Elk Woman story, the Chief of the women (in both versions of the story) manifests supernatural power and turns Napi into a lone pine tree for his foolishness and vanity.

In another aspect, women owned their own homes and accumulated wealth within the story. The accumulation of wealth can be seen in the story when it is said that the women have to travel several times to the *pis-kun* to retrieve their meat. Blackfoot used all parts of the animal when they killed buffalo for survival. There are buffalo hides, and bones along with the meat that would have been brought back to the women's camp. Also, the women owned their teepees and everything that went into making a home. As seen in the story, the women had their own camp. They were not destitute or homeless and the women were doing the necessary work to create a successful community. Kehoe says "[b]ecause the tipi was a product of women's labor, the very roof over a man's head was not his but a woman's property" (qtd in Klein, Ackerman 114-115). As the story suggests, the single women owned their teepees. Even in the Wissler/Duvall version of this story, which is called "The First Marriage," women are said to live in good lodges and "the men lived in lodges made of skin with the hair on" (21). This confirms what Kehoe says about woman owning the tipi because it was a product of her labour. The women, in Wissler/Duvall's version, dressed the skins and the men did not, so the women lived in better quality lodges. From these two stories, it shows that Blackfoot women had authority in both the public and private spheres. In the present day electing the first woman Chief in Piikani shows that once again women are claiming/reclaiming positions of power and leadership in the public sphere.

The stories of the woman warriors also defy boundaries of public and private spheres where women are concerned. Chief Gayle Strikes With A Gun

can be identified as a woman warrior in contemporary times. In the present day, Piikani people moved the battle of protecting Blackfoot territory from invaders off the battlefield to the court rooms. This is a contemporary way of gaining prestige through counting coup for gaining a Chieftainship. The battles in the court rooms are to negotiate with governments for the right to self-government and sovereignty, as well as to protect Piikani land ownership along with other current issues that affect Piikani nation. Counting coup helped promote warriors up the social ladder towards Chieftainships, to accumulate wealth and prestige; however, “there was no law to prevent Blackfoot women from going on the warpath and many are known to have gone on raids, while others achieved prestige through defensive action under enemy siege” (Tovias 79). This aspiration to accumulate wealth by some Blackfoot women, who also demonstrated aggressiveness, independence, and assertiveness in both the private and public spheres, earned these kinds of women the name of *ninauposkitzipxpe* – manly-hearted women, because they demonstrated ideal traits for Blackfoot men (Kehoe 115). In present times, many Piikani women can be aptly named manly-hearted women, for the way accumulation of wealth and social power has evolved and Piikani women have become more independent with the changing of the social norms and expectation of women. The identity of the Warrior Woman can be claimed/reclaimed through different traditions rather than from the accomplishments of counting coup during battle.

From the identity of the Warrior Woman found in the Blackfoot oral stories it is evident that women had a means of accumulating wealth and social power

other than through a husband or another male relative. A well-known warrior woman among the Blackfoot is Running Eagle, said to have been a Holy Woman whose spiritual power (similar to that of Elk Woman) came from a vision of power. Running Eagle made vows to the sun for help on her war parties so she never married or took a lover (Hungry Wolf 63). The story tells of a young woman whose name was Brown Weasel Woman. Her father taught her hunting skills and she became good at it, and eventually her name was changed to Running Eagle for her accomplishments on her first raid. There are two versions of the story to compare one from Beverly Hungry Wolf's *The Ways Of My Grandmothers* and a magazine article written by Joe Little Chief. An excerpt of Hungry Wolf's story about Running Eagle starts after her father dies and a war party is on the trail of Crow warriors who had stolen horse from the Blackfoot:

Her first war adventure came not long after she and her family had gotten over their initial mourning. A war party of men left the Blackfoot camps on the trail of Crow warriors who had come and stolen horses. When this party was well under way, one of its members noticed someone following behind, in the distance. It turned out to be the young woman, armed and dressed for battle. The leader of the party told her to go back, threatened her, and finally told her that he would take the whole party back home if she didn't leave them. She is said to have laughed and told him: "You can return if you want to; I will go on by myself."

One of the members of this party was a young man who was a cousin of the young woman —brother, in Blackfoot relationships—and he offered to take her back himself. When she still refused to go, the leader of the party put this cousin of hers in charge of her well-being, so that they could all continue on their way. She grew up with this cousin, and learned to hunt by his side, so the two got along well, in general.

The war party with the young woman spent several days on the trail before they reached the enemy camps of the Crows. They made a successful raid, going in and out of the camp many

times, by cover of night, to bring out the choice horses that their owners kept in front of the lodges. It is said that the woman and her cousin went in together and that she by herself, captured eleven of the valuable runners. Before daylight they were mounted on their stolen horses and headed back toward their own homeland, driving ahead of them the rest of the captured herd. The Crows discovered their loss in the morning, and chased the party for some way. But the raiders became worn out, and in that way they soon left the enemy followers way behind.

However, the most exciting part of this first war adventure for the young Blackfoot woman was yet to come, according to the legend that has survived her. While the rest of the party rested and cooked in a hidden location, she kept watch on the prairie country from the top of a nearby butte. From there she saw the approach of two enemy riders, and before she could alert the rest of the party to the danger, the enemies were already to round up the captured herd. It is said that she ran down the butte with her rifle and managed to grab the rope of the herd's lead horse, to keep the rest from running away. Then, as the enemies closed in on her, expecting no trouble from a woman, she shot the one who carried a rifle and forced the other one to turn and try an escape. Instead of reloading her own rifle, she ran and grabbed the one from the fallen enemy, and shot after the one getting away. She missed him, but others of the party went after him and shortly brought him down as well. Her companions were quite surprised and pleased at what she had done. Not only had she saved their whole herd from being captured, but she also killed an enemy and captured his gun. She even captured his horse and one of the others took his scalp and presented her with it. It is said that she didn't want it, but she felt better when reminded that she had avenged her father's death.

Although the young woman's first war experience was quite successful, there were still many people who thought that the Chiefs should make her stop following the ways of the men. However, the critical talking came to an end altogether after she followed the advice of wise elders and went out to fast and seek a vision. She spent four days and nights alone and the Spirits rewarded her with a vision that gave her the power that men consider necessary for leading a successful warrior's life. Such visions were not always received by those seeking them, and very seldom have women received them at all. By tribal custom, no one questioned her about the directions which she was thus given. From then on the people considered her as someone

unusual, with special powers, whom only the Spirits could judge and guide. (65-66)

The whole story as told by Hungry Wolf portrays a warrior woman who demonstrated great leadership for her feats during raids and on the warpath. In the Joe Little Chief version of Running Eagles story, her success as a warrior was encouraged. He says “[a]fter successful raids against the Crows, the Sioux, and the Flatheads, she became a Chief. Warriors begged to join her party for they believed that where she led, nothing but good luck would come to them” (54). Running Eagle earned her chieftainship for her deeds and accomplishments on raids. She also accumulated wealth by stealing horses from other tribes. This helped to promote her to the role of Chief for her own war party. The story above makes mention that there was some criticism about Running Eagle going on a war party; however, once she became initiated into the warrior society by doing a vision quest and thereby receiving a vision, no one questioned her right to become a warrior.

The story of Running Eagle demonstrates what the Blackfoot would deem ideal traits for a man, since she is aggressive, independent, and assertive. The fact that she leads men on successful raids and in war parties is demonstration of her good leadership skills. Running Eagle is also portrayed as being able to control social situations. In the story she refuses to marry anyone and dresses as a man, that could have also earned her the status of a manly-hearted woman. Running Eagle’s story shows that warriors and Chiefs are leadership roles that Piikani women can step into based on their own achievements and accomplishments in contemporary times. Although aggression and

assertiveness can be seen as masculine traits, I argue that for Piikani women to become leaders, those are traits that they have to adopt for pragmatic reasons.

Running Eagle is not the only woman in the Blackfoot oral stories to step into the roles of a warrior. Mrs. Uhlenbeck makes reference in her diary about other women who went on raids. She says:

Once, Bear Chief goes on narrating, a strong woman went along on the warpath. All the young Indians were tired. But the strong woman went high on the hill and raised their spirits by singing. One of the younger companions could not take it. So he also stood high on the hill singing encouragement to his brothers, "Soon we will go home; then we will eat cherries and ride the horses we stole from our enemies," etc. He could not allow that courage should come from a woman. However, women did not go often on the *raids*. (Eggermont-Molenaar 47)

Whether or not Blackfoot men approved of women going on raids or war parties, women did participate in these kinds of activities that normally were seen as traditional male roles. Earlier in the Niitsitapiiks chapter I introduced the warrior aspect of Blackfoot society, where I quoted Mrs. Uhlenbeck saying that Bear Chief's wife Elk Yells In The Water went on raids with her husband. This excerpt of Bear Chief's story just further proves Blackfoot women had autonomy, they made their own choices like the single women in the Napi stories when they were selecting husbands. The warrior who "could not allow that courage should come from a woman" should be aware that Blackfoot women would have had to display courage because the survival of the whole collective depended on each individual in the community to help out in some way or another.

Future Piikani woman leaders can look to the oral stories of the Blackfoot to find role models and attain the essence of what it is to have good leadership skills like Running Eagle, Elk Woman and the Chief of the single women. Piikani women should begin to realize that it is their inherent right to have influence and a say in the governing of Piikani people. Also, Piikani women have the right to voice their consent on any major decisions that will have an effect on Piikani people, lands and traditions. By studying Blackfoot oral stories Piikani women can realize that their female ancestors had autonomy and were not oppressed by the traditional roles of Blackfoot women. Instead, these roles existed to create balance between men and women.

Chapter Five: The Blackfoot Woman Storyteller

Trail Mix

With hands gripping the
steering wheel

First year in college

He stares at the Rabbit
staring back

Think, Think, Think

Where can he get some money,
Gas gage is on Elvis

Ask the Rabbit for help

Take pity on me Rabbit Spirit,
I have no tobacco to offer

Please send me some money,

I need to put gas in the car,
to get to class all week

Dad says you like trail mix

I will put some out for you
as soon as I can

He starts his car

Rabbit watches as he drives away,
his music so loud

Can't hear what Rabbit says

Okay Grandson, I will help you
don't forget the trail mix

No salt, lots of cranberries.

--Shelly Eli
Arts Bridge
Fall/Winter 2010.11

This poem, "Trail Mix", tells the story of a time when I was studying for my first Bachelor's Degree. I had to travel fifty miles every day to school from the Crow Indian Reservation to Montana State University in Billings for classes. In my last year I had a hard time financially. It was a real struggle staying in school to complete my degree. At the beginning of the week I was getting ready to leave for home and I realized I did not have enough gas to get to school for the rest of the week. There was only enough gas for me to drive back home. I sat there in my vehicle trying to think of ways to make some quick cash so I could attend classes for the rest of the week. I noticed this rabbit hopping around by my vehicle. I rolled down my window and said to the rabbit, "Oki Rabbit, can you send me some money, so I can come back to school the rest of the week? I will put out some trail mix for you when I can." Well, the rabbit just continued to chew on grass and hop around looking for more food. I started my vehicle and drove home. The next morning I found an eighty dollar cheque in the mail. I felt such relief and gratitude for the rabbit sending me a cheque in the mail. I went to gas up and bought some trail mix. When I got to the university I put the trail mix out in the area where I last saw the rabbit.

Stories like this one captivated me whenever I took the time to sit and listen to the women who were my role models. Women, for instance, my mother, my spiritual teacher - Rose Auger, aunties, and friends of my mother would get together and tell all kinds of stories from their life experiences or stories they heard as children. Often they would chase me outside when I was a child, but I would always stay nearby just to listen to their stories. When I grew into

adulthood I was included in these storytelling sessions and I always found the stories so fascinating. Even if a few of the stories were ones I had heard often enough that I could retell the story in the exact same way. Now I am a mother and I find my children are the ones who hang around nearby when I gather with my sisters, other female relatives and friends to share stories.

The Storyteller

Telling stories is prevalent in Blackfoot society. At ceremonies, for example, when sacred bundles are opened, stories are shared. A person is selected to stand-up and share four counting coup stories during a bundle opening as part of the rituals performed during the ceremony. The telling of four stories, such as counting coup stories, is part of the formal process in many Blackfoot rituals, so keeping with the Blackfoot tradition I maintained that practice with this thesis. I open up each of the previous chapters with a story. In the second chapter, “Niitsitapiiks,” I discussed the connection between oral stories, ceremonial rituals, land, the Blackfoot language and in the previous two chapters, “The Holy Woman Identity” and “The Woman Chief Identity,” I discussed traditional Blackfoot women’s roles. Women have a place in Blackfoot ceremonies to balance out male and female energies. The roles that are specifically for women in the ceremonies are leadership roles. There is a feminine mate for everything masculine in the world. For instance, the sacred pipe I carry has a male part, the stem and female part, the bowl. Put them together, the female and male pieces balance one another and it becomes a sacred pipe for ceremonial purposes. In the Holy Woman chapter, I discussed

how women are needed to fill sacred roles and how specific ceremonies that renew Niitsitapiiks connection to the land can be preformed. Medicines, bundles and even the Blackfoot language used in Blackfoot ceremonies come from the land. Oral stories told during the ceremonies are told in the Blackfoot language and tell of the origins of how certain rituals and protocols were created and are practiced; why certain medicines are used; why certain animals are represented within the rituals. Oral stories bring all of these things together for the purpose of transferring of knowledge, education and keeping the culture intact. Lanny Real Bird says:

Although there are some assumptions that Native Americans have not formally documented their ideals and knowledge, this does not necessarily indicate that the formal education process must be confined to a physical building. The educational structure of the Native American world is intertwined throughout the universe. Even though presumably informal, a story told around the fireplace is as valid and important as a lecture in a major university. The knowledge exchanged by the caretakers of the medicine of healing and daily meals is a formal curriculum, just as a press conference presents news impacting the nation. (187-188)

Oral stories told within a social or ceremonial setting are examples of what Real Bird is using to compare to lectures in a major university. Thus, story telling is part of the educational structure in the many diverse tribes in North America, including the Blackfoot. The sweat lodge, sun dance and medicine lodge are a few places that formal Blackfoot knowledge is exchanged. The knowledge shared by an elder or storyteller is not confined to a building. Instead, knowledge can be transferred to the student out on the land around a campfire or in the home. Blackfoot teachers and elders will always try to teach a life lesson when

opportunities arise, even when they are not in a formalized learning environment. The lessons are usually in forms of oral stories. The public initiation of a woman into the Blackfoot stand-up headdress society is equivalent to holding a press conference. The news of the stand-up head dress transfer impacts the nation, especially, in regards to how the nation will have to interaction with and behave towards a newly initiated Holy Woman. Just as the Storyteller role plays an important part in the different aspects of Blackfoot culture, the Storyteller is the keeper of knowledge. The Storyteller has the transfer rights to pass on knowledge and is responsible for making certain that the proper protocol and ritual practices are strictly followed when telling oral stories.

More Blackfoot women should fulfill the role of Storyteller because as mothers and grandmothers, they can have influence on the early development of a child. This is not to say that Blackfoot men are not good storytellers. Overall, more Niitsitapi should take time to learn Blackfoot stories to pass on to future generations. Historically for most tribes across North America, “[t]he education of Native American Indian children about traditional ceremony and practices fell to the women in most Native societies. Because family units were often tied by matrilineal threads, teaching of the family history was the responsibility of the grandmothers and elder women of the tribes” (Portman, Herring 187). Bullchild gives credit for the majority of his knowledge of Blackfoot stories to his grandmother. He says “[m]y best informer of the past, both of history and the Indian legends, was my own paternal grandmother, Catches Last. She told me many things, many nights, when I was a very small boy” (Bullchild 2). In the

Blackfoot tradition, everyone in the community will have a hand in teaching a child, and it is normal for extended family such as grandparents, aunts and uncles to have an influence on a child via oral stories. Blackfoot people accept extended family kinship as though they are part of the immediate family. All female relatives such as aunts and grandmothers are referred to as grandmothers. Beverly Hungry Wolf refers to female kinship in this way “[a]ll the women of my tribe who lived long ago are spoken of as grandmothers. In addition, it was common for any old woman in the tribe, when speaking kindly, to call any young woman or girl ‘my granddaughter’” (20). There are different ways that grandmothers are recognized in the Blackfoot tradition. The first is through biological ties, or through the tradition of adopting a close friend into the family unit or through initiation into the various Blackfoot societies.

Bullchild acknowledges his grandmother as his best informer and so this illustrates how much of an impact a Blackfoot Woman Storyteller has on a child. Telling stories for the purpose of educating and transferring cultural knowledge will influence a child’s worldview. Oral stories are part of the educational structure in the traditional Blackfoot practices and have as much validity to Niitsitapiiks as the Western educational system. The report, *They Came for the Children*, from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada states:

[C]eremonial feasts could bring people together for a variety of spiritual, cultural, and economic purposes. At such feasts, people could fulfill spiritual commitments, exchange goods and information, and impart traditional teachings. Elders were the keepers and transmitters of this knowledge, and in some cases medicine people had specific roles in dealing with the spirit world and in curing the sick. Just as spiritual life was part of daily activity rather than confined to a church, education was woven

into everyday activities. In this way, living and learning were integrated. Children learned through storytelling, through example, and by participation in rituals, festivals and individual coming-of-age ceremonies. (8)

In the previous chapters, “Niitsitapiiks”, “The Holy Woman Identity” and “Woman Chief Identity,” I discussed the connection between oral stories, spiritual rituals, land and language. The quotation mentioned above proves that Indigenous people in North America, including the Blackfoot, have an interconnected educational system for teaching each new generation via oral story telling. Oral stories are where information and communication is transferred and exchanged. Elders, especially women, who are the keepers of cultural information, are leaders because they are the ones sharing the knowledge. The leadership roles for Niitsitapiiks include the Holy Woman, Woman Chief and Storyteller and all of these roles are interconnected. A Holy Woman is an elder and the keeper of oral stories for the O’kaan and she becomes the Storyteller when she tells the story about the role, rituals and origins of her position. She is also fulfilling the role of teacher when she is transferring the rights and obligations to newly initiated Holy Women.

The role of the Storyteller has been greatly affected by the residential school system because Native children were taken out of their homes at an early age. For example, “[t]he Archbishop of St. Boniface wrote in 1912 of the need to place Aboriginal children in residential schools at the age of six, since they had to be ‘caught young to be saved from what is on the whole the degenerating influence of their home environment’” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 10-11). Taking children out of the home disrupted the tradition of transferring

knowledge through stories to future generations of Blackfoot people. Residential schools were only part of a larger system that the Canadian government had in the past used to push for the elimination of the whole Aboriginal identity. The Indian Act of 1876 “brought together all of Canada’s legislation governing Indian people. The act both defined who Indians were under Canadian law and set out the process by, which people would cease to be Indians. Under the act, the Canadian government assumed control of Indian peoples’ governments, economy, religion, land, education, and even their personal lives” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission 11). By taking control over things like religion, land, education and personal lives it created changes, including an imbalance between women and men. The leadership roles of women that are interconnected with governing, educating, and religion either had to be practiced in secret because such practices were prohibited, or practice was no longer performed publicly. For example, the sun dance would have had to be conducted in secret from the Indian Agent; otherwise, Blackfoot people who were caught participating in the ceremony would face jail time. The children were excluded from participating in the sun dance out of fear that they would tell the church officials in the residential schools. As a result, the Holy Woman role over time soon became a defunct role model for young Blackfoot women. As such, the significance and importance of this leadership role has been forgotten by the younger generations of Piikani women.

In Beverly Hungry Wolf’s *The Ways Of My Grandmothers*, she tries to capture some significant stories and roles through the oral tradition from women

Storytellers. According to what she says in the introduction, she wanted to write Blackfoot women into history by recording stories and writing from the perspective of Blackfoot women. She says;

In the years since I began following the ways of my grandmothers I have come to value the teachings, stories, and daily examples of living which they have shared with me. I pity the younger girls of the future who will miss out on meeting some of these fine women. I think how much some of this knowledge might have helped me when I was younger. Because of that I have put together this book to serve as a permanent record about my grandmothers. (Hungry Wolf 16)

The stories Hungry Wolf recorded were from Kainai women who shared their experiences and knowledge about origin stories, ceremony, and traditional roles for Blackfoot women in the home as well as the public sphere. Blackfoot women have to be aware of their own womanly power and use that power carefully and wisely. Womanly power is why women can bring forth life through childbirth and monthly menses. This is akin to a form of spiritual purification like that found in the sweat lodge. The oral stories discussed in my Woman Chief chapter had women characters in possession of supernatural powers that were more powerful than a man's power and these women are seen defeating the male characters within the stories. A traditional Blackfoot woman, from a Western European perspective, may seem subordinate to her husband in a public setting when she defers her opinion about a current event that has an impact on the nation for her husband to voice. What is not seen is that the couple will have already discussed the matter in the home and the husband will not voice his opinion unless he has consulted and received consent from his wife before speaking publicly. Returning to the oral stories discussed in the previous chapters, there is

evidence of this phenomenon also occurring within the stories. For example, in the Wissler/Duvall version of “The Horns and The Matoki”, the husband invites guests over and the wife dislikes having to prepare food for the guests. The husband takes a strike at her with a stick from the fire (117). If the husband had consulted with his wife and got her consent first before inviting guests he could have avoided getting trampled and killed by a herd of buffalo.

In the presentation of this thesis I found it challenging to give a scholarly analysis of the oral stories that pertain to Blackfoot women’s identity in a traditional Western theoretical approach; instead, I chose to employ the roles of informant, scholar and storyteller to establish a better appreciation for the oral stories that I reference. Sarah E. Turner says “[b]eing positioned on the margins of the hegemonic culture enables Native American women the critical distance necessary to critique and disrupt dominant practices. The freedom of renegotiating discursive acts thus enables texts that explore rituals, ceremonies, and traditional teachings symbolically not chronologically or linearly” (111). As an informant I explain nuances of the Blackfoot culture that are not easily readable from the perspective of an outsider looking in perspective. This thesis is a scholarly endeavor so I attempt to support my argument with evidence in academia. Thus, I use a scholarly approach in my analysis of the stories. The best way I found to express my words and focus my ideas into my argument is to become a storyteller. In this fashion I created a position whereby I can coexist as one between these roles –scholar, informant and storyteller. Furthermore, the Blackfoot Woman Storyteller is a dual role that requires coexisting as one,

whereby the storyteller must also be a listener. Helen Hoy says “[i]n reproducing stories that she neither originates nor necessarily augments, Hungry Wolf enacts and validates a self given little standing in the cultures most familiar to me – the self who listens rather than the self who speaks” (113). As I wrote this thesis I would to listen to the story that I am writing because I am the audience for my own writing. Essentially, for Piikani women to save these traditional Blackfoot leadership roles they would have to first listen to understand how these roles coexist. By stepping into these roles, Piikani women can then begin the process of helping to rebuild our communities into healthier communities based on this idea of coexisting as one. Piikani women can be empowered by understanding what traditional leadership roles are and become less intimidated to voice their concerns when it comes to breaking unhealthy cycles as well as to create change. These unhealthy or dysfunctional cycles include: lateral violence; family violence; suicide; substance abuse and the list goes on.

The Blackfoot Woman Storyteller role incorporates the telling of a story to help in the development of self identity. This can include teaching family recipes for medicinal purposes and daily meals by story. Also, teaching ancestry of the family tree by storytelling reinforces the importance of recognizing the familial ties. Helen Hoy in her essay on Hungry Wolf’s *Ways Of My Grandmothers*, seeks answers on how oral stories found in Hungry Wolf’s narrative should be read. Hoy says:

There is more than just a genealogical and tribal positioning here, though, however self-defining this cumulative layering of relational mappings maybe. Because the text documents the practices of *her* grandmothers, Hungry Wolf’s selection and

arrangement provide self-representation (through perhaps not in the highly individualized manner valued in Euro-American culture) in ways that a parallel document prepared by a visiting ethnologist (though highly revelatory of the compiler in its own fashion) would not. Aspects of a textual self are conveyed through Hungry Wolf's decisions (random examples, these) to include the story of a Kootney woman (whose adoption of the male gender roles parallels that of several Blood women), to detail children's games to provide the German-derived recipe for head cheese, to discuss methods of contraception, to revert time and again to the subject of child brides, to incorporate photographs of a Beaver Bundle Dance or Sun Dance initiation. More substantively, Hungry Wolf is implicated in the narrative as a whole because it lays out some of the materials from which her selves are cut. (Hoy 112)

In this quotation, Hoy refers to the randomness of the stories conveyed within Hungry Wolf's narrative as a reflection of Blackfoot cultural influences on self identity. The stories told do not follow a strict linear fashion (as is found in Western European narrative), but resemble a routine of daily living, where the opportunity to tell a story is relevant to the circumstances surrounding a lesson about Blackfoot culture. I mentioned this earlier in this section on formal education conducted outside on the land. This is why formal education system of Niitsitapiiks can take place anywhere and is not confined only to a building. Real Bird says "[o]ral tradition is the primary medium for interactive teaching among Native Americans" (188). The role of a Blackfoot Woman Storyteller is that of an educator who reinforces Blackfoot ideology, proper cultural practices and behavior through oral storytelling while still teaching a basic survival system to younger generations. Oral storytelling involves the layering and mapping of Blackfoot history, traditional spirituality, and information that impacts the nation for the collective consciousness of the Niistapiiks. In interviews conducted with Peigan informants, Janet Katherine Markley found that "[a]ll informants believed

that their participation in spiritual and cultural practices was essential to their identity as a Peigan or Blackfoot person. Some believe strongly that their participation in their culture was in essence who they were as individuals” (88).

In my overall thesis I am attempting to point out the connection between the Piikani Women’s identities in oral stories and the participation in spiritual and cultural practices. My thesis takes on similarities of an oral story as I interact with the oral stories I am able to validate the importance of traditional Piikani Women’s identities for contemporary Piikani women. I share personal narrative as a way to show my insider knowledge about my experiences and perspective on the topics of spirituality, ceremonies and traditional Blackfoot roles. As a Piikani woman, I found it difficult to see beyond issues that I thought oppressed me and gave me a sense of helplessness to create change. It is telling my own oral stories that helped me to overcome these challenges and see oral stories from an empowered perspective. When I learn from Blackfoot elders the knowledge shared is not told in a linear fashion. A Blackfoot elder will tell stories that seem off topic but at the end of their storytelling I see the bigger picture of how everything told to me is connected. Nimachia Hernandez says:

The oral tradition is strong enough to have taught Native peoples for thousands of years, and to have effectively taught what traditional Indigenous communities find useful. The spiritual directives handed down from generation to generation have come in the form of stories for Native cultures. Each Native culture had developed a use and structure of language that helps make the connections necessary to understand the phenomenon of life. People believe in them not from careful analysis to try to ferret out the truth or because they can pin down the precise date for every occurrence. What is important is that a way of life was offered as a model of rightness, or as an alternative to other

more maladaptive strategies for survival, has continued, and that its worth is reaffirmed through the practice of the stories. (39-40)

Therefore, by telling the stories and practicing what is mapped out in Blackfoot oral stories, I reaffirm the importance of traditional Piikani Women's roles.

Contemporary Piikani women who continue to practice the roles of Holy Woman, Woman Chief/Warrior, and Blackfoot Woman Storyteller are a testament to the survival of Niitsitapiiks collective consciousness. Blackfoot culture, ritual practices and ideology are still alive despite assimilation policies and government legislations geared towards the elimination of the Blackfoot identity.

The Blackfoot Woman Storyteller identity is a complex and important role that interconnects with the other traditional Blackfoot women's roles and includes the role of educator. The role of Blackfoot Woman Storyteller facilitates the reinforcement of the Piikani identity through the telling of oral stories that pertain to Blackfoot history, spiritual and cultural practices, family history regarding family ties and kinship and the transmission information that affects the nation.

Chapter Six: Conclusion - Coexisting As One

In my thesis I am speaking with an indigenous narrative voice and discussing traditional Blackfoot Women's roles, "the Holy Woman", "the Woman Chief/Warrior" and "the Blackfoot Woman Storyteller," more specifically from a Blackfoot woman's perspective. In my introduction, I opened the section with a discussion on the naming ceremony of the Blackfoot people and I explained how the ritual of giving traditional Blackfoot names is a formal process of layering an identity onto an individual. All the names I am given in my life so far have become layers to my identity. In my thesis I tried mapping Blackfoot ideology and Western academic thought to separate the layers of Piikani Women's identities found in Blackfoot oral stories. With each new chapter, I took each of these identities "the Holy Woman", "the Woman Chief/Warrior" and "the Blackfoot Woman Storyteller," began layering them all together in one identity. This is coexisting as one to show the adaptability those roles can have in a contemporary Blackfoot society. Also, to prove the relevancy these roles have for Niitsitapiiks and the importance of saving these roles for future generations of Piikani woman. Then perhaps they can step into and create healthier Blackfoot communities.

Approaching the Blackfoot oral stories that are exclusively about traditional Blackfoot Women's roles without taking away from the spiritual integrity of the roles is a challenge. I have to position my thesis away from Western theoretical discourse to achieve the process of keeping the spiritual integrity of these roles intact because these roles still hold ceremonial value and

importance for Blackfoot traditional people. In order to discuss “the Niitsitapiiks,” it is important to better explain the collective identity and consciousness of Blackfoot people so an outsider looking in can better understand how oral stories, land, language and spirituality combine into the collective identity of Niitsitapiiks and see the complex layers in a Piikani Woman’s self identity.

Nimachia Hernandez says:

Around the world, Indigenous epistemologies are obviously longstanding, viable traditions. However, research literature on Native American education does not generally consider the oral tradition of Native peoples relevant to the process or purpose of investigations, or ultimately to findings of science, and thereby excludes Native knowledge and its foundational structures or expressions from serious consideration as a representative of a philosophy. [...] All cultures do not fit within the one narrow definition of philosophy as defined in academia. In fact, those cultures most similar in philosophy and value orientation to the West are considered cultures with philosophy. (14-15)

This thesis is a negotiation between two ways of thinking: the academic way and the oral tradition of my culture. The bridging of the two is not easy and there is more work to be done. I use Blackfoot “philosophy” to signify the importance of these roles and how these roles are leadership roles in Blackfoot society.

Exploring Blackfoot oral stories and using Blackfoot “philosophy” as my way of studying these traditional Blackfoot identities. These traditional Blackfoot women’s roles are adaptable and significant to contemporary Piikani Women. I did this by mapping out the origins of these roles to illustrate how these roles fit in Blackfoot culture, and how these roles still fit in the present day Blackfoot culture. Hernandez suggests that indigenous epistemologies and “philosophies” that are right for one culture may not necessarily be right for all cultures and, rather than

place indigenous knowledge in the realm of folklore, superstition, myth, the supernatural and so on, we should look at native traditional knowledge as another form of philosophy that is vastly different from Western philosophy(15). The impact of colonization on Niitsitapiiks cannot be undone, and contrary to what Hernandez is saying, it would be difficult for me to approach Blackfoot oral stories strictly from Blackfoot philosophy. The reason is because I am not a fluent speaker of the Blackfoot language and I could miss important information. I also need to write this thesis for a North American institution. Yet, I considered Hernandez's argument about Blackfoot philosophies in my approach to Blackfoot oral stories. Therefore, I am arguing from in between these two philosophies because my worldview is influenced by both Blackfoot and Western ideas.

I began work on this thesis with the hope of empowering Piikanakiiks – Peigan Women and to provide solutions for the current dysfunctions of intergenerational trauma, violence, oppression and colonization that negatively affect contemporary Blackfoot society. As I finished each chapter I realize how these three roles, Holy Woman, Woman Chief/Warrior and Storyteller, were layers that I found in my own self identity and then I began to understand the idea of coexisting as one and Niitsitapi collective consciousness. Traditional Blackfoot Women's identities are not lost, Piikani woman are still here despite everything that has been done to threaten our existence, and Piikani women are still performing these roles whether or not they are aware of it. Blackfoot people may or may not be telling the oral stories in a traditional Blackfoot way, but these

stories are documented in various forms of media, and all a person has to do is decode the information to begin mapping out layers of the Blackfoot identity.

In my introduction I refer to one of my Indian names, 'Woman Who Carries The Bundle'. In "The Holy Woman" chapter I briefly discuss the significance and importance of sacred Blackfoot bundles that are, according to a Blackfoot world view, living beings. My thesis contains some of my knowledge about Blackfoot oral stories, traditional Blackfoot women's identities and from the beginning to the end of this thesis. I have come to view this thesis as a bundle of information that can take on a life of its own. I am now aware of a bundle of oral stories about strong archetypal role models such as Elk Woman, The Motakis, Running Eagle, and the Chief of the Single Women that I can share as a storyteller to younger generations of Piikani Women. This showing of cultural knowledge, I hope, might lead to the younger generations of Piikani women recognizing the idea of coexisting as one and be included in the collective Blackfoot consciousness. Now that I understand a new meaning for my Indian name, "Woman Who Carries the Bundle", I call this thesis a bundle and carry the information I learned in the process of putting it together for other Piikani women.

As for men dominating the leadership of the Blackfoot collective, I suggest understanding Blackfoot oral stories to show how Piikani women have an inherent and equal right to step into leadership roles. Ideally, in Blackfoot culture everyone is equal. We only have to look to the traditional ceremonial practices of Piikani people to see evidence of equality. Women sit in positions of power in ceremonies like the O'kaan because without a woman to make a vow to the sun,

the O'kaan cannot happen. In bundle openings, women have an equally important position as the men. The women sit on one side and the men on the other side in a tipi. The leadership consists of a Head Man and Head Woman. A man cannot carry a bundle by himself, he needs the consent of a woman partner to carry it alongside him. According to Blackfoot ceremonial practices women are not subordinate to men. In fact, women should be included in the leadership of the collective or their consent and approval over anything that impacts the nation should be sought first before major decisions are made. All this is mapped out in the oral stories.

In conclusion, I would like for my thesis to open a space for further discussion about oral stories, identity, other traditional women's roles and leadership, but most importantly, the thesis suggests that we see oral stories from an indigenous "philosophical" lens. There are a lot of discussions and information on the oral tradition of Indigenous people. The discourse is vast and beyond the scope of a Master's Thesis.

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