

**FEEDING SUBLIMITY:
EMBODIMENT IN BLACKFOOT EXPERIENCE**

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A Thesis
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
of the University of Lethbridge
in Partial Fulfilment of the
Requirements for the Degree

MASTER'S OF ARTS

Department of Anthropology
University of Lethbridge
LETHBRIDGE, ALBERTA, CANADA

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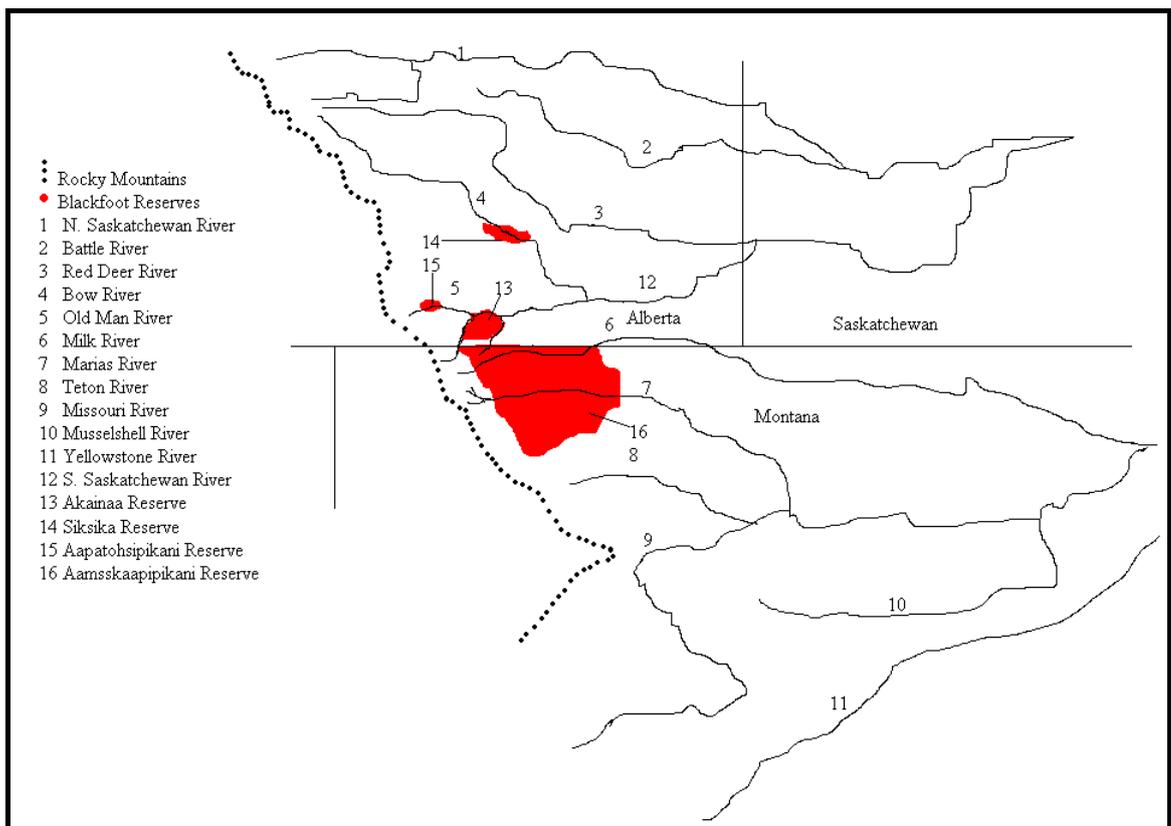
Nitsiiksiniiyi'taki

What follows is an ethnographic thesis that comprises my initial survey into an embodiment process called *áístomatoó'p* (*accustomed-body*), described as I came to understand and experience this phenomena during the period of research that was applied toward my Master of Arts degree from the anthropology department of the University of Lethbridge, Alberta. This study was conducted between the years 2002 and 2005 on the Christian calendar or, in a more localized rendering, a hundred and twenty-five winters into the era of *Áómaopao'si* (*settling-down*). It also draws from familiarities gained over a decade of prior involvement with *Niitsitapiipaitapiiwahsini* (*real-people-way-of-living*), and from my own embodied experiences as an affined member of the broad kinship network linking families across the expanse of this cultural system.

While any number of audiences – including anthropologists, cognitive linguists, philosophers, and those involved in generalized Native American or Indigenous studies – may find the thoughts detailed in this thesis to be of interest, in its writing I have tried specifically to contribute to an emerging local literature that converses between topics of mutual interest to *Niitsitapi* (*real-people*) and European scholars. The thesis, therefore, addresses the reader who ideally aims to benefit from the valuable insights being explored in both traditions, and who is engaged in contemporary discourses emanating from exchanges between these two groups.

Setting forth in this manner, my writing is most certainly one product of a particular historical moment in the relationship long-defined by the recognition of two essentialized parties, *Niitsitapi* and Europeans. Neither designation necessarily describes the existence of any coherent social group capable of fully-cooperative mobilization. Rather, these

categories index broad political relations that have arisen in the context of colonization on the high prairies of North America. I have treated these terms as referencing important socio-cultural factions for two reasons: 1) they are still aligned with observable disparities in economic, health, and educational status and practice, and 2) they delineate communicative boundaries that most members of these parties believe to really exist, although many would like to see them be made more permeable. Ironically, it is with the intent of contributing toward a realization of this desired permeability that I have reproduced the two categories here, so that – through my writing - I might construct an image of their porosities, demonstrate a degree of freedom in my own movement between the two domains, and possibly help to bring such conditions into existence more generally.



Author's interpretation of standard elements included in some European representations of Niitsitapi spatial emplacement (significant cities and roads excluded)

The category “Niitsitapi” here will refer to the constituents of four interrelated communities, often described collectively as the “Blackfoot Confederacy”. They are comprised of the Siksiká (*black-footed*), the Aapátóhsipikáni (*behind-direction-fancy-robed*), the Akáínaa (*many-leadered*), and the Aamsskáápipikani (*brought-horizontally-upward-fancy-robed*). The terms “Niitsitapiipaitapiiwahsini” (*real-people-way-of-living*) and “kipáitapiiyssinnooni” (*our-way-of-living*) signify marked patterns of cultural practice and ideology often self-ascribed by members of these communities. From their perspective, the notion of kitawahsinnooni (*our-habitat*) encompasses two massive watersheds between Omahksiítataa (the *big-river*, or North Saskatchewan) and Otahkoítahtaa (the *yellow-river*, or Yellowstone), and extending from the highest peaks of Miistákiistsi (*hard-on-edge*, or the Rocky Mountains) eastward to Omahkspatsikoyi (the *big-sandy*, or Great Sand Hills) and beyond.

In turn, the category “European” here refers to the majority population of North American immigrants, predominantly of European ancestry, some of whom have come to live and work in the politico-economic territories of southern “Alberta” and northern “Montana” - two colonies of an ever-expanding homeland defined on a global, or perhaps even solar-systemic scale. Other authors have applied the terms “Euro-American” or “Euro-Canadian” in referencing similar populations elsewhere (Furniss 1999:xi). However, because this ethnography deals with Niitsitapi experience, and since kitawahsinnooni expands deep into the territories recently claimed by the governments of both the United States and Canada, I find myself compelled to use a more indiscriminate language in reference to the Non-Niitsitapi residing here. Thus, I employ the terms

“European” and “Western” toward descriptions of this population and the marked patterns of cultural practice and ideology often self-ascribed by *its* constituents.

Where any broad categories and generalizations - like “Niitsitapi” or “European”, and the behaviours or dispositions I’ve sometimes attributed to them - are applied within this thesis, the reader should maintain an awareness that these usages are indeed essentialisms and simplifications of much more complex social and cultural dynamics. In actuality, such populations are in no sense bounded or autonomous and, even when idealized as such, they are still comprised of many interactive subgroupings with voices that are anything but harmoniously orchestrated. Likewise, the same caveat should be extended toward my descriptions of individual persons and their unique histories, which are equally impossible to textualize in any accurate manner.

I have attempted, throughout this writing, to exhibit my own biases as transparently as possible. The experiences that I describe ethnographically are my own interpretations of events and practices lived by myself and others. The hermeneutic attributes of these presentations are strongly influenced by, and often expressive of, the politics of two core social groups with which I am aligned. Foremost of these is one comprised by the persons with whom I interact on a regular basis, those individuals and families from all four Niitsitapi communities who are socially bonded through alliances created within an orthodox system of kinship and spiritual practice. This network is marked by the physical exchange of amopistaanistsí (*bound-together-by-wrapping-around*, or “medicine bundles”), and by the related intellectual exchange of particular histories, stories, songs, and ritual practices. It should be noted that not all Niitsitapi community members participate in this orthodox system, nor do they necessarily share the associated

knowledge and metaphysical assumptions that are advocated and lived by those who are involved in such practice. Within the context of this thesis, when I describe aspects of Niitsitapiipaitapiiwahsini (*real-people-way-of-living*) and kipáitapiiyssinnooni (*our-way-of-living*), it is often in reference to the experiences that I've had in interaction with members of this rather limited group, and the perspectives that I've come to embody through my associations with them. Moreover, that which I have presented is further limited by fact that I am but a novice affiliate of this social group, and cannot therefore claim much authorial privilege for representing this system in any official capacity. What I offer are, again, merely the personal ethnographic renderings of what I understood of my experiences during the period of research that was applied toward this thesis.

The second social group with whom I am aligned, and whose politics have in various ways influenced this writing, are those Western scholars known collectively as “socio-cultural anthropologists”. This is a truly imagined community, comprised of a great many members and subgroups worldwide who have never, or only rarely, met one another face-to-face, and whose alliances are based principally on familiarities and engagements with a shared literature. As such, my application of anthropological concepts, and my references-to and analyses-of their theoretical models, are limited by the books and papers I've read, and by my experiences interacting with the relatively few members of this order whom I've had the opportunity to engage in personal discussion with. What's more, I include, as part of my anthropological training, familiarities with a host of ideas derived from other Western knowledge traditions, like “Native American Studies” and cognitive linguistics, for instance. As a result of these limitations and complexities, it is unlikely that I will have succeeded in representing any of the Western

anthropological beliefs and practices with the appropriate degrees of dignity and/or critique that they deserve.

Finally, it should be noted that, in attempting to work between Niitsitapi and Western scholarships, I've made liberal use of Niitsi'powahsin (*real-manner-of-speaking*), presented in the orthographic style developed by Don Frantz (1991). For each concept introduced, I've included an italicized gloss of my own English transliteration. However, Niitsi'powahsin is a process-oriented, synthetic language that can never be adequately simulated through English form¹. Each annissin (*saying*) in Niitsi'powahsin follows a complex quadripartite pattern made up of four morphemic áóhtakoistsi (*soundings*) that describe 1) the speaker's vantage point, 2) qualities of the event being described, 3) the transformative process that defines this event, and 4) its state of manifestation². In analyzing and transliterating such constructs, it is necessary to consider all four of these aspects, as well as semantic impressions of the overall annissin. But in most cases, and for purposes of readability, I have chosen to present simple glosses that, however inaccurate, still convey a great deal about the underlying properties that I understand to be interacting within each concept. I have offered these glosses for purposes related to two different audiences: 1) those readers (be they Niitsitapi or European) who may not be Niitsi'powahsin literate and, 2) those persons involved in the contemporary local project, often mediated through English, who are attempting a kind of morphological archaeology of Niitsi'powahsin semantics. In assistance to the former readers, I have included as an appendix a glossary of all terminology used in this thesis. And in respect for the later party, I must concede that there is no local consensus

¹ For an interesting approximation of Niitsi'powahsin in a new code that applies English morphemes, see David Bohm's presentation of the "Reo-Mode" in *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1980).

² For a more thorough description of this quadripartite pattern, see Little Bear and Heavy Head's "A Conceptual Anatomy of the Blackfoot Word" (2004).

regarding standard definitions for any of the Niitsi'powahsin concepts I've incorporated into the following chapters, that the glosses presented are indeed my own constructions and that they are fairly tentative, awaiting further elaboration.

Having so prefaced my biases and limitations, I'm grateful to the following people for the assistance or inspiration they provided during the course of this research, some directly, others more indirectly, but all with kindness and patience: Betty Bastien, Kristy Beebee, Bradley Big Swallow, Darcy Big Throat, Narcisse Blood, Lee Breaker, Tim Buckley, Jasper Buckskin, Jeffrey Bullshields, Vickie Bullshields, Carola Calf Robe, Marvin Calf Robe, Star Cardinal, Jack Chief Body, Alvin Cross Child, Delia Cross Child, Adam Delany, Andy Hancock, Steve Ferzacca, Francis First Charger, Tom Eagle Speaker, the late Rufus Goodstriker, Adrienne Heavy Head, Claire Heavy Head, Hailey Heavy Head, Justine Heavy Head, Laurie Heavy Head, Maggie Heavy Head, Margaret Heavy Head, Martin Heavy Head Sr., Martin Heavy Head Jr., Pamela Heavy Head, Quenton Heavy Head, Margaret Hind Man, Taka Kinjo, Leroy Little Bear, Shane Little Bear, Sherry Little Bear, Chris McHugh, Duane Mistaken Chief, Carol Murray, John Murray, Jan Newberry, Glen North Peigan, Alan Pard, Charlene Pard, Dustin Pard, Jerry Potts, Roger Prairie Chicken, Ruth Provost, William Singer III, Louis Soop, Pete Standing Alone, David Striped Wolf Jr., David Striped Wolf Sr., Evelyn Striped Wolf, the late Mike Swims Under, Bernard Tall Man, Stella Tall Man, May Tallow, Frank Weasel Head, Gabrielle Weasel Head, Keon Weasel Head, Sylvia Weasel Head, Patty Wells, Bruce Wolf Child, and the students of Red Crow College.

This research was supported by AaKomkiyii Health Services, Blood Tribe Health, the University of Lethbridge, and Red Crow College. Start-up funding was provided by

the Aboriginal Partnership of South-western Alberta on HIV/AIDS. Principal funding was provided by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and the University of Lethbridge.

Refuge of Indistinctness



Sublimity amidst “endless miles of dormant prairie grass...” in *kitawahsinnooni, our-habitat* (2004).

It was a mild, early-winter day on the plains of southern Alberta, a giant blue sky with a clear view of the Rocky Mountains and a steady eastbound wind over endless miles of dormant prairie grass and latent alfalfa. Alan Pard, his son Dustin and I were cruising along a stretch of dirt road that runs across the Aapátohsipikáni Reserve, between the Porcupine Hills and the townsite of Brocket. We were on our way to *sstsiyyskaani, steam-making*, at a sweatlodge that had been constructed that morning, where Alan would conduct a cleansing ceremony for a family who had recently been bothered by an angry spirit. For Alan and myself this would be the second sweat in as many days - something fairly unusual for me, but pretty much the norm for Alan, an in-demand conductor of Niitsitapi orthodox ceremonies. A century ago, these kinds of services would have been held on any given afternoon, as needed. But in the current era, most activities are loosely burdened with the constraints of a work-week calendar - the seven economic days of capitalist genesis now having become encoded through Niitsi'powahsini, *real-manner-of-speaking*, in a way that reconciles the adoption of

introduced routines by committing to memory the foreignness of early colonially-imposed schedules: issikatoyiiksistsikoyi (*finishing-holy-day*), isttsinaiksistsikoyi (*collecting-rations-day*), pómmaiksistsikoyi (*trading-day*). Steam-making, one of the ritual practices that otherwise stands conspicuously in the way of contemporary production objectives in these reserve communities, where employment opportunities are relatively scarce, now gets deferred to the weekends. For ritual specialists like Alan, this means that most holiday periods become whirlwinds of strenuous, sleep-depriving activity, prompting the oft-heard lament among those exhausted by day's end, "It's hard to be [truly] Indian."

The sstsiyyskaani that afternoon was to take place adjacent to a family home in Brocket, where the incensed spirit had materialized. A few days earlier, some members of that household had been awakened in the middle of night by the irate shouts of an old man, cursing at their doorstep. Climbing out of bed to investigate the matter, nobody could find any evidence of a living person having actually been there. Among the Niitsitapi, or *real-people*, such visitations are considered to be harbingers of more serious threats. Encounters with enraged spirits fall into a larger category of divinatory forewarnings, along with certain types of dreams and narrow escapes from unpredicted dangers. When such messages are left ignored, it is not uncommon for more serious troubles to ensue, culminating on occasion in someone's disability or death.

The family that lived in this particular house had a standing precondition toward such concerns. Two years earlier, one of their members had been diagnosed with a terminal cancer, her doctors predicting that she had only a few months of life remaining. With Western medicine offering so bleak an image, her husband decided to make a vow: he would commit himself to an investment in one of the most powerful forms of

Niitsitapi medicine, in exchange for the return of his wife's good health. In their case, this meant that he and his wife would be transferred into a relationship with Ninnaimsskaahkoyinnimaani, also known as the Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle, but more accurately transliterated as *Leader-Saving-Food-Pipe* – the “saving of food” here suggesting a self-deprivation intended to enable future distributions among kin, and calling to mind the associated life-giving qualities of *feeding* as a necessary act of generosity. The Ninnaimsskaahkoyinnimaani itself is just one type in an extensive complex of Niitsitapi bundles, each embodying broad lineages of relationship between the people and the other spirits comprising their cosmos. Transferring into a relationship with such a bundle, as a married couple bringing new life to these vast lineage groups, a degree of healing does indeed occur. The woman from this household was surviving cancer far longer than any of her doctors had predicted. And along with this, the everyday experiences of her closest relatives had been profoundly transformed, so that all members of this family now recognized, appreciated, and were quick to address any signs of impending trouble. With Ninnaimsskaahkoyinnimaani in their home, the enraged spirit who came hollering at their door had not been able to enter. But its presence in such close proximity was threatening none-the-less, and so as a precautionary measure against forthcoming problems the family arranged for Alan to come and pray in a sweatlodge, *ísootspi*, *feeding* [the bundle], as it is sometimes called. Alan, in turn, had extended an offer for Dustin and I to come along and join-in.

I participated in many of these sweats over the years that I worked and lived in and around Niitsitapi reserves prior to and during the research for this thesis. There are actually several different kinds of *sstsiyyskaani*, each determined by the particular type of bundle that becomes evoked through the ritual and in a very real sense resides *over* it.

The sweat lodge, a low-to-the-ground framework of woven willow, heavily draped in canvas, forms a dome atop which the bundle rests, and within which male participants sit cloaked in complete darkness, both shrouded and cleansed by an intense earthy steam produced from water ladled over fire-heated rocks. The design of the lodge's framework, as well as the shape of the pit for the rocks, varies depending upon the bundle involved. In addition, every sweat has a bit of its own individual character, again influenced by the bundle present, but also by the participants involved, and the factors that motivate each to be hosted. Some steam makings are preparatory to major ceremonies or political endeavors. Others are put on for healing and, as during this occasion, in response to negative divinations.

Recently, some members of these communities have begun hosting a more generic "Indian sweat" that departs from orthodox Niitsitapi standards in a number of ways. Often these are utilized as a means of introducing, demonstrating, and/or validating local culture to those Europeans living in neighboring cities, and as such become quietly scorned as a form of ethno-tourism displaced: "We don't know where these new sweats came from", critics explain as one rationale for avoiding such rituals. Other sweats of this fashion are constructed by and for those who may feel marginalized in relation to Niitsitapi traditions – youths and various politically ineffective adults who have not transferred into relationships within the bundle complex, or who might be relatively unacquainted with this system because of their position in what is actually (although not ideally) a somewhat stratified society. Most certainly, the new "Indian sweats" represent the local face of a Pan-Indian movement which, like other such manifestations elsewhere, registers some degree of assimilation to non-Niitsitapi intellectual and spiritual culture,

while also acting as a vehicle for the preservation and transmission of selective qualities from a local practice (Buckley 2002:259).

I see the development of new “Indian sweats”, at least in part, as one manifestation of a larger process perhaps typical of any fixed religious or knowledge system, where there will always be factions unwilling (or disallowed) to surmount the structural obstacles necessary for investment in the lengthy training required to become positioned in officially sanctioned roles that claim the most direct access to spirits and truth. Brown (1991) has noticed similar patterns emerge in the long history of millenarian movements among the tribes of Amazonia. He too understands such departures from convention as evidence for a long continuity of “tension between hierarchical and egalitarian models of leadership, periodic questioning of traditional rituals and political systems, and openness to the ritual knowledge of other ethnic groups” (ibid:405). But perhaps even more than registering political tension, the emergence of “Indian sweats” today simply exposes the complex experience of life in contemporary Niitsitapi communities, where one may either access or be inadvertently influenced by a diverse range of cultural forms. Such diffusive and acculturative conditions are reflected, for instance, in the mimetic appeal toward hip-hop music and fashion exhibited by many of the local youth, or in the Vegas-style rodeo aesthetics of their elder relations. These circumstances are also evident in popular voices equating traditional Niitsitapi concepts and symbolisms with new-age fascinations, or the mathematical insights of quantum physics, or the ethics of Western environmentalism. Indeed, with the exception of highly institutionalized orthodox religious ceremonies, like the sstsiyysskaani that Alan, Dustin and I attended in Brocket, it is hardly possible to locate any domain of contemporary Niitsitapi life that is without some measure of obvious influence by globalizing forces.

Whether such multiplicities and syncretizations of practice have always existed here, to the degree that they do today, is an issue for conjecture or speculation. Certainly, though, the Niitsitapi have thousands of years of experience with material, biological, and intellectual exchange between their communities and the hundreds of other unique cultural groups indigenous to North America. This long history of interaction, in conjunction with their more recent experiences of colonization, partially inform and substantiate two discursive strategies employed in quiet local debates over whether or not the new “Indian sweats” are aligned with traditional *sstsiyysskaani*. The first of these discursive models proposes an interpretation of contemporary practice that is focused on aspects of persistence within change. Here a distinction is made between foreign-derived artifacts that have been *taken*, *ma'tsi'pa*, and those that are merely *borrowed*, *aahkoma'to'pa*, with moral value being assigned to the former. *Ma'tsi'pa*, in this context, refers to the semi-alteric incorporation of introduced technologies and practices within well-defined local cultural patterns, like the adaptive process evident in the Niitsitapi shift from using dogs, to horses, to wagons and automobiles as load-bearing vehicles meant for application in the procurement of sustenance, for travelling to visit distant relatives, and for the fulfillment of a variety of other everyday social obligations. *Aahkoma'to'pa*, on the other hand, represents a more apparent divergence from official convention, a key prototype here being the recreational use and abuse of alcohol by some reserve residents. In either case, it is not the artefact itself, or even the surface exercise, that signals which of these two categories become denoted. Rather, a new practice is judged as *ma'tsi'pa* or *aahkoma'to'pa* based on the degree to which long-established Niitsitapi philosophies and motives are reflected in specific applications. Thus, one's use of an automobile can easily be considered representative of *aahkoma'to'pa* when, for

instance, its inherent speed and enclosed design are treated together as a means of ignoring one's fellows who are in need of assistance at roadside, or who simply seek a nod in gesture of greeting. Similarly, alcohol use has, on occasion, qualified as a form of ma'tsi'pa, particularly when applied by áisokinakiiksi, *making-goodness-visible*, the healers who have at times prescribed it as an additive in teas consumed for the relief of cold symptoms.

Employed within the specific context of discussions around "Indian sweats", the distinction between ma'tsi'pa and aahkoma'to'pa becomes fairly polemical. Those organizing and participating in these services present the obvious contention that Niitsitapi have used sweatlodges for thousands of years, and that their activities represent the persistence of this tradition. Their rituals are avoided by most followers of the more orthodox calling, however, because of the fact that they lack certain important characteristics – for instance, they do not incorporate the bundles, and they are often prepared for generalized purposes, rather than the event-specific reasons that motivate classical-style sstsiyysskaani. In reaction to the first of these points, those hosting the new "Indian sweats" remind their critics that even some of the orthodox bundles are derived from theft or exchange with other tribes. And in response to the second point, they deny its validity altogether, claiming that a *single* underlying purpose, rather than a variety of case-specific interests, is what really matters.

The latter explanation employs what I view as a second discursive strategy popular in the Niitsitapi rhetoric surrounding tradition, this being the appeal to supposed cultural universals, those essential elements underlying seemingly diverse customs. "The most important thing about all of our spirituality," an advocate for this view will propose, "is prayer". Indeed, proponents for this understanding have often urged me personally to

“think about it”, to recognize that “prayer” is the common factor in all religious ceremonies conducted on-reserve – be they rituals belonging to the Niitsitapi, Pan-Indian, Catholic, Full Gospel, or Anglican traditions. Through a liberal application of this model, just about any practice can, in effect, be imagined as a form of ma'tsi'pa – so long as it bears some element in common with a historically recognized Niitsitapi custom.

While those organizing “Indian sweats” today may employ the same kinds of discursive strategies as their more orthodox detractors, and while a good number of them are acting in a meritorious attempt to generate better relationships between populations that are often in conflict, I find it unlikely that the “surface differences” they discount are as insignificant as some would like to believe. Their rituals are avoided by followers of the more traditional calling for justifiable reasons, a few of which I’ve already mentioned. Most disturbing of these, to those who maintain classical Niitsitapi beliefs, is the fact that many of the individuals hosting the new “Indian sweats” have been influenced by Western feminism, and are allowing women to participate inside the lodge of the sweat itself. This development is problematic not for the threat that it represents to a local social hierarchy or class system, but rather because it indexes a very significant fracture in Niitsitapiipaitapiiwahsini (*real-people-way-of-living*). The act of inviting women into the lodge of a sweat evidences a disregard-for or ignorance-of an entire cosmological order, and the emplaced identity, or *self*, that is inseparable from it. Whatever the new ritualists believe is being achieved through their displays of equality, by orthodox standards their innovations are seen as contributing to the *diminishment* of female status. Niitsitapi men sweat because they do not have a natural cycle of cleansing. Women, in orthodox sstsiyyskaani, participate as carriers of the bundles, as mothers, and it is they who prepare the ritual foods. Thus, to invite women into a sweat is seen as

detracting from their idealized status as naturally more powerful, pure, and giving than men. When these gendered roles are cast aside through the partial influence of a Western political discourse, the risk to thousands of years of Niitsitapi tradition is significant. Those who participate in such ceremonies will, in local terms, be *fed* a different kind of experience. Rather than being conditioned with an image of balance, where male and female aspects are presented as contributing two different, but equally necessary, sets of qualities in their collaboration toward the reproduction of life, those who participate in “Indian sweats” may become accustomed to an aesthetics skewed toward strong individualism. Within such transformation, they might overlook the important philosophies that are invested in specific Niitsitapi social roles.

Aside from this considerable omission, *sstsiyysskaani* – by orthodox standards - is never supposed to be just something “Indian” to do, nor is it merely a locale for worship or prayer. Rather, it is precipitated by a sense of impending danger – a threat not necessarily distinguished as either physical, social, or spiritual. When a traditional sweat becomes unbearably hot, those inside understand that somewhere amidst the bundle, their selves, and the problem they’d been assembled to address, lurks the endangerment behind their suffering. Understanding what this impression of peril entails is key in developing an appreciation for some of the theoretical foundations of Niitsitapi ceremonial practices. The sweat that Alan, Dustin, and I attended in Brocket was, for instance, provoked by the middle-of-night antics of an angry spirit, visiting a particular household, and serving as an event-specific cue for the occupants’ need to host *sstsiyysskaani*. Similar steam-makings might also be put-up in response to bad dreams, a series of hard-luck experiences, a near accident, or any number of other cues signaling *impending* trouble. While each of these occasions carries its own unique significance in relation to Niitsitapi

beliefs, it is perhaps most important to understand who, exactly, is being threatened, and how one comes to recognize such dangers. The answers to these questions are not as simple as might be assumed, bringing to issue those long-enduring philosophical inquiries regarding what it means to *exist* in this world, what forms such *being* might take, and how this knowledge itself is produced.

Embodied Conceptual Metaphor – Framing An Epistemic Interaction



In accordance with orthodox Niitsitapi tradition, sstsiysskaani frames, rocks, and sage are used once and then returned to the land, taking male pollution along with them (2005).

In large part, both the practice of orthodox sstsiysskaani and the quiet debates contrasting it against the new “Indian sweats” comprise local exercises in the production and reproduction of Niitsitapi ontologies and epistemologies. The discursive strategies employed in these contexts, by participants involved in either type of ritual, are meant to advocate the maintenance or adoption of particular symbolic orders. To communicate their perspectives, representatives for either view construct and impart rationales that are

reliant upon two essential cognitive tools – metaphor and metonym. The first of these, metaphor, is the juxtaposition of two dissimilar domains of experience in a composite that assumes or asserts their likeness. Good examples of metaphor include the reference to classic sstsiyysskaani as íisootsspi, *feeding* [a bundle], or those treatments of the notions ma'tsi'pa and aahkoma'to'pa, *taking* and *borrowing*, as descriptive of processes that anthropology has itself metaphorically labelled “diffusion” and “acculturation”. Metonym, on the other hand, is the sense of part-to-whole and whole-to-part relatedness. Such understandings surface, for instance, when those conducting the new “Indian sweats” identify their novel rituals as aligned with thousands of years of sstsiyysskaani persistence, and base this rationale in the assertion that what is important in ceremonial contexts is the practice of “prayer”. In these constructs, their peculiar rituals are represented as metonymically related to Niitsitapi traditions on a part-to-whole basis, where specific features common to all sweatlodge practices are selected for emphasis. Whole-to-part metonymy, on the other hand, can be seen in the orthodox insistence on the important role of bundles in sstsiyysskaani – where it is, in fact, the entire Niitsitapi cosmos that becomes condensed into these single material representations.

I became interested in studying such metaphoric and metonymic constructs for a number of reasons: 1) as a way to learn more about Niitsi'powahsini, *real-manner-of-speaking*; 2) as a means of understanding my own personal experiences in a variety of socio-cultural contexts; 3) as a channel for developing an anthropology that incorporates a Niitsitapi theoretical inheritance; and 4) for the potential application of these concepts as tools in negotiating through politically tense issues – not only within Niitsitapi communities but, perhaps more importantly, between these populations and their European colonizers, whose differences in philosophy and motive are at least reflected in,

if not largely determined by, the manner in which their respective worlds are symbolically ordered. My introduction to this thinking came through a reading of Lakoff and Johnson's seminal text entitled *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), in which both of the concepts described above are treated together as types of "embodied conceptual metaphor". One of Lakoff and Johnson's initial suggestions was that we disregard our most entrenched beliefs regarding the characterization of "metaphor". For them, this term references an interactive cognitive process rather than a mere property of creative language, one that serves vital functions in our everyday understanding of various ideas and experiences. The metaphors that we find in language, like those evident in the discourse surrounding orthodox *sstsiyysskaani* and the new "Indian sweats", are just the most obvious indicators that this dynamic cognitive process is being applied toward connecting and shaping our thoughts and activities.

Take formalized Western education as an example. In the English language, there are many everyday phrases suggesting that the university student understands his or her experience in the academy partially in terms of a journey. The "road to" success in the Western world does, after all, include "going to" school, "traversing" a mental-scape, "exploring" a century or more of the ideas pertinent to a given scholarly discipline, etc. Clearly one of the notions underlying Western educational experiences is that of the "journey". In Lakoff and Johnson's model, this journey can be considered a *source domain*, aspects of which serve to map the student's experience of education, the *target domain*. This interaction might be depicted as follows:

Source Domain	→	Target Domain
Journey	→	Education

The same model could be used to illustrate the metaphorized interactions revealed in various discourses surrounding classical *sstsiyysskaani* and the new “Indian sweats”:

Source Domain	→	Target Domain
Íisootspi (<i>feeding</i>)	→	Sstsiyysskaani
Ma'tsi'pa (<i>taking</i>)	→	Diffusive Adaptation (positive)
Aahkoma'to'pa (<i>borrowing</i>)	→	Acculturative Adaptation (negative)
“Prayer”	→	Traditional Religion

It should be emphasized, however, that although there is a directionality to this model of interaction between concepts, there is not an exact equation. Lakoff and Johnson would not suggest that “education IS a journey” for the Westerner, nor that “steam-making IS feeding” for the Niitsitapi, but rather that there are specific aspects of these source domains that become applied toward mapping, framing, or understanding particular dimensions their targets. In the Western archetype, education shares with a journey the fact that it is something done away from home, that it can be exciting or arduous, that it requires a long-term commitment, rather than a quick foray, and that the student regularly consults guides in the form of instructors and books. But the source domain “journey” is not the only concept applied toward the mapping of Western educational experiences. Degree programs at universities are also understood partially in terms of the source domain “work”, for instance. Thus, there are “schedules” to keep, the students’ accomplishments are recorded both in terms of the “hours” they spend in class, and in how well they perform their “home-work”. If they succeed in these tasks, they will have

rightfully “earned” their degrees. In like manner, within Niitsitapi discourse, *íisootsspi* (*feeding*) is not the only source domain applied toward mappings of *sstsiysskaani* – such practices are also framed, for instance, by the notions of *kamotááni*, *escaping-danger* or *survival*, and by *iyo’kimaani*, *obstructing*, the act of shielding participants from any threats represented by phenomena like the angry spirit who came cursing in the middle of night at the family’s doorstep in Brocket.

In Lakoff and Johnson’s view, the reason that specific aspects of source domains like “journey” and “work” are applied toward understandings of target domains like “education”, or that notions like “*íisootsspi*” and “*iyo’kimaani*” become directed toward practices like “*sstsiysskaani*”, rather than the other way around, lies ultimately in the human body - its structure, anatomy, and sensory capacities. The activities of “journeying” and “feeding” are experienced as more viscerally *real* or *familiar* than are “education” and “*sstsiysskaani*”. In this sense, a target domain becomes grounded through metaphorical interaction with one or more source domains, so that metaphorization functions as a means of evoking physically intimate models through which to better understand and *live* more ephemeral experiences like “education” and “*sstsiysskaani*”. Hence the notion that these processes represent “embodied conceptual metaphor”, that they index cognitive interactions between viscerally familiar activities and those more complex socio-cultural encounters.

Working predominantly with European languages, Lakoff and Johnson, along with their now considerable following, have compiled listings of some key source and target domains that seem to be relatively universal across the cultures they’ve surveyed. Important sources include, as we’ve seen, experiences with movement and direction, as well as familiarities with food and exchange, but they also involve: perceptions of

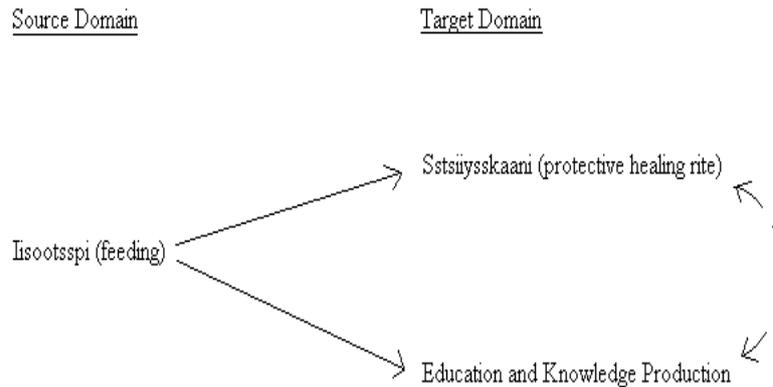
physical forces like gravity and electricity, or the contrasts that we sense between light and dark, hot and cold; common activities like cooking and sport; our interactions with public and private architectures; our observations of the behaviors and lifecycles of plants and animals; negotiations with health and illness; and – perhaps most importantly – our intimate knowledge of the human body, particularly its form and anatomy (Kövecses 2002:16-20). These relatively few domains of our diversely cultured lives seem to be exceptional sources for the knowledge we apply toward mapping target areas like emotions, desires, moralities, thought processes, social organizations, politics, economics, relationships, communications, temporal negotiations, births, deaths, religions, and a host of structured cultural events and activities (ibid:20-24). However, while Lakoff and Johnson propose that these key domains are relatively universal across cultures, they do not suggest that the same aspects of these sources are selected for grounding target concepts in all instances. Nor do they maintain that any given target always becomes mapped by the same sources cross-culturally.

Consider again the embodied conceptual metaphorizations that have aspects of the domains “journey” and “work” partially informing Western notions of “education”. In terms of the former source, a *journey*, the same cognitive interaction can be found occurring in contemporary Niitsitapi discourses surround education, but with alternative emphases. And as regards the later source, *work*, one may observe an entirely different (but yet possibly related) domain structuring local experiences. Betty Bastien, for instance, has written of her own education as a “journey of inquiry into the heart and soul of the Blackfoot world” (Bastien 2004:xi). However, for Bastien, the aspects of a journey that structure education adopt an alternate orientation. Rather than focusing on the outward movement of “going to” school, “exploring” ideas, etc., she writes of her

experience in terms of “coming home”, even incorporating the use of anatomical terminologies like “heart and soul” to emphasize the inward orientation of her intellectual trajectory. Likewise, on the Akáínaa Reserve, where I have worked as a substitute middle-school teacher, and where I’m currently employed as an instructor at Red Crow Community College, much of the rhetoric surrounding Niitsitapi education is framed in terms of helping students learn particular “trails” or “paths” that will lead them toward knowledge about “who they are” (as members of the Akáínaa community and as Niitsitapi). In this cultural context, education often selects aspects of the *return-from* a journey, rather than focusing on the traveler’s movement *away-from* the familiar.

In addition, where the notion of “work” tends to shape Western educational experiences, there are relatively few applications of this source domain to be found in the local Niitsitapi discourse. Instead, there is an important epistemological emphasis – one that should, by now, be somewhat recognizable, and that I will continue describing and employing throughout the chapters to follow – on aspects of *íisootsspi* as a key source domain. “Education”, people now say, “is our buffalo”. In fact, it is this *feeding* experience, far more than that of the journey, which maps Niitsitapi concepts pertinent to the nature and production of knowledge. He who returns from the metaphorical journey is expected to then distribute his bounty (the nutritive substance of knowledge gained) with other members of the community.

Within this second application of the source domain *íisootsspi*, one can begin to get a sense of what Lakoff and Johnson have called the “systematicity” of embodied conceptual metaphorization. This systematicity might be illustrated as follows:



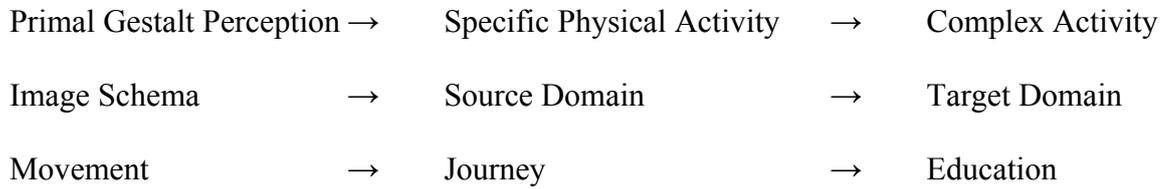
Where aspects of a single source domain map the experiences of more than one target domain, it is very possible that new metaphorical connections will be constructed, bridging various targets. Thus, one might expect to find that, in Niitsitapi communities, the discourse around “sstsiiysskaani” could converge with the politics of “knowledge”, or that the rhetoric surrounding “education” may become informed by a language of “healing” – and this is in fact the case. Various streams of metaphorized interaction moving directionally from the physically familiar to the experientially complex provide a potential structure for connections to be posited between two or more target domains. Within the context of any given culture, this structuring comprises an elaborate web of symbolic interconnectivity which should be understood – in as much as possible – as a dynamic system if, for instance, one hopes to apply embodied conceptual metaphor theory toward either the resolution of social and intellectual problems, or even just ethnographic descriptions of the same.

What is also interesting in my very brief and summarized comparison between the embodied conceptual metaphorizations enacted in Western and Niitsitapi experiences of education, is the fact that both systems draw from source domains relative to activities

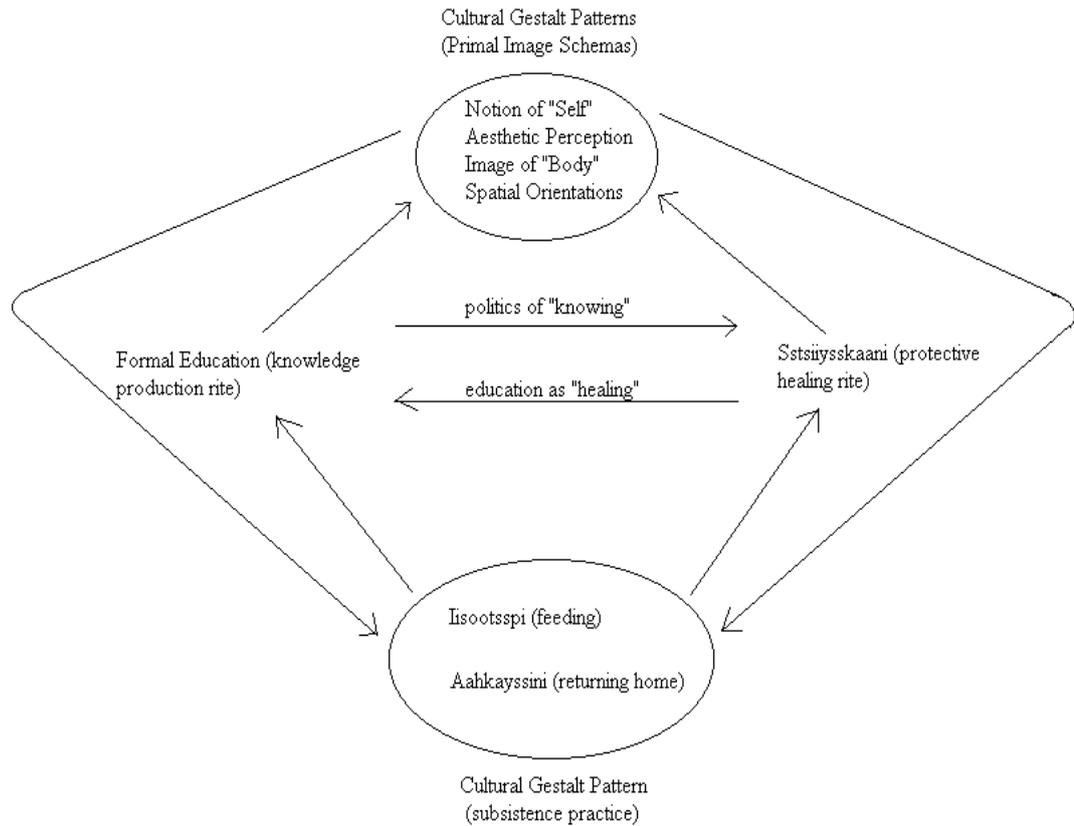
associated with their respective subsistence practices. In the European tradition of market capitalism, movement out and away from home – now often transnational – to conduct “work” for a specified period of time comprise much of the experiential or expectational essence of their normative subsistence method. In the Niitsitapi tradition, on the other hand, there is a long history of hunting and gathering, which requires knowing the right trails to food sources, and that ascribes positive value toward the generous sharing of provisions thus secured and brought home. The fact that such complex cultural constructs as Western and Niitsitapi subsistence patterns seem to be involved in the selection of which source domains become applied toward the mapping of target domains represents an elaboration upon embodied conceptual metaphor theory, and calls to question some of its original emphasis on directionality and universal grounding.

Lakoff and Johnson have proposed that even source domains are mapped by more rudimentary perceptions, which they call “image schemas”. These comprise experiential gestalts, whole patterns that are perceived as being more basic than their constituent parts and which, based on our organism’s anatomical structure and sensory capacities, are presented as being shared universally by all of humankind. In my analysis above, it would seem that broad cultural patterns of subsistence activity might form such experiential gestalts, but for Lakoff and Johnson the image schema phenomena resides in even more fundamental recognitions. Analyzed in terms its basic qualities, for instance, the “journey” is itself alleged to be mapped by an image schema of “movement”. In our human experience, according to Lakoff and Johnson, movement (whether *coming-toward* or *going-away*) is epitomized by a minimal tripartite construct that includes a point of origin, a transposition, and a point of completion. The journey, sharing these characteristics, is therefore conceptualized as a form of movement, one that is elaborated

to include a host of further specificities: travelers, vehicles, distances, obstacles, decisions, guides, orientations, purposes, etc. Thus, their model is elaborated:



The directionality represented in these interactions again reflects Lakoff and Johnson’s belief that it is the more viscerally or aesthetically *real* in our experience that informs the more ephemeral, complex, or intellectual. Image schemas are presumed to reside at what amounts to a fairly atomistic physical level, and are not themselves informed by complex cultural activities. But in my analysis above, albeit yet just one example, it would seem that, in both the Western and Niitsitapi worlds, the target domain of “knowledge production” is mapped by a number of source domains, different for each tradition, but carrying a commonality in that the sources applied in each of these instances can be correlated with what have historically been the subsistence patterns most familiar to these somewhat disparate groups. In other words, I would propose that symbolic systems are not so much comprised of this unidirectional sequence of metaphorization, moving from primal bodily gestalt experiences outward toward the framing of our more complex, ephemeral, or intellectual domains – and only there developing connections between target composites. Rather, I see these symbolic systems as operating, through metaphoric and metonymic processes, in multiple directions, so that even the most broad cultural patterns can inform basic experiences at the source and image schema levels. This interaction might be illustrated as follows:



It is, of course, impossible to adequately represent all of the metaphoric and metonymic interactions that occur in a given symbolic system, or even – as here – in an experimentally isolated subset of that system. The above illustration, for instance, largely fails to account for adaptive processes like *ma'tsi'pa* and *aahkoma'to'pa*, inferring as it does the image of culture as a closed order. Similarly, it falls short in its omission of personal semantic nuances – for, as we've seen with the new “Indian sweats”, not every member of a given society shares the same assumptions about the meanings of even the most familiar cultural symbols and practices. But what I've tried to depict, and what I believe is missing in Lakoff and Johnson's analysis of metaphORIZING processes, are the influences that cultural forms can and do have on our more primal and embodied perceptions, and certainly on the kinds of source domains that might be grouped together in the mapping of any particular target. I am confident, as they are, that many of our

complex and ephemeral experiences are understood and *lived* through metaphoric and metonymic exchanges with activities that are more viscerally known. But even this fundamental physical knowledge is informed by experiences within specific social, cultural, and ecological environments, so that rituals like *sstsiyysskaani*, for instance, carry the potential to radically shape such primal awarenesses as the sense of *self* and notions of *being*.

A “Body of Practice”, Or A Practiced Body?



Bruce Wolf Child (left) prepares to pray with Quenton Heavy Head (right) and other Niitsitapi students, who then literally *feed* offerings of raw beef liver to an ancient a’kihtákssini (*mounded-place* or stone cairn) in a critical murgence of narrative, space, and cultural form (2005).

In examining embodied conceptual metaphorizations used among English-speaking Western populations, Lakoff and Johnson have described a prevailing ontological belief, expressed linguistically and actively performed, that is symbolically grounded in a human knowledge of the physical self as “bounded and set off from the rest of the world by the surface of our skins,” providing a standard trope for projecting in-out orientations

and containment (or object-ness) onto other aspects of reality. This objectification compels people to conceptualize and treat such intangible experiences as emotions, events, and ideas, including sickness and disease, in terms of their entity-ness and substance. For example, English speakers may, in everyday conversation, refer to themselves as “being *in* love” or as “*having* the flu”. Their passions and illnesses are regarded as tangible materials, with properties of containment – the kinds of inanimate *things* a person could possess, or find themselves located either “in” or “out” of.

Lakoff and Johnson’s analysis of this particular schema, although largely drawn from research conducted within a single socio-cultural meta-complex, is presented as explanatory of the most fundamental ontological awareness experienced by humankind. What’s more, it is offered as key evidence for the linear orientation of embodied projection that they have observed in the context of wider, systematically organized metaphorical interactions. Yet, as indicated in the previous section, I would like to challenge the degree of universality and directionality assumed by Lakoff and Johnson’s model, and to advocate instead for a recognition of the important influence of cultural form upon even our most visceral knowledge. While I would readily agree that the Western perception of bounded physicality is one engendered by the resources of the human sensory apparatus, this does not in any way entail that we are somehow anatomically predisposed toward reliance upon containment metaphors and objectifications as principles of a shared ontology. In fact, had Lakoff and Johnson built their theoretical models around the everyday phrases of Niitsi’powahsini, *real-manner-of-speaking*, they would have found little trace of the ontological imperatives so patently evident in English.

Like any other source domain applied toward mappings of our supposedly more complex conceptual targets, those aspects of the gross human anatomy that become privileged and accentuated in metaphoric and metonymic extensions are always going to be informed by both our everyday and out-of-the-ordinary modes of ritualized practice. The body itself, as source, may not even be used to frame the same kinds of targets cross-culturally. In the ethnographic descriptions of Niitsitapi experiences to follow, for instance, I will propose that the internal qualities of the body allowing for cyclical processes of consumption, accumulation, and distribution are far more relevant – both ontologically and epistemologically – within a local symbolic arrangement, than the exterior shell evoked through the in/out archetype that has been selected for emphasis by European traditions. Hence, in part, the widespread application of *íisootsspi*, *feeding*, as a prominent Niitsitapi trope. Moreover, I will offer data pertinent to a metaphoric and metonymic union between this emphasis on digestive characteristics and selective features of a local ecology – so that it will be evident that there are multidirectional loops of symbolic feedback coursing between Niitsitapi knowledge of their body and the physical environment they have long inhabited. This conversation is mediated through interactions with a variety of cultural forms, and engenders a tripartite ontological order that includes, as most basic, a sense of *being* that is relatively unfamiliar to European traditions – one completely absent of form or containment features, that I will describe as a mode of “sublimation” pervading local experience. Contrary to Lakoff and Johnson’s description of the human ontological imperative, Niitsitapi do not often feel themselves to be individually “bounded and set off from the rest of the world”.

The Western symbolic order, on the other hand, bears toward objectified perceptions of existence that are hyper-accentuated, masking or rendering unexpressable

many ontological experiences that are common in other cultural traditions. Although not addressed by Lakoff and Johnson, this characteristic is starkly reflected the marked distinctions between noun and verb elements of the English language, as well as in its grammatical structure, where it is clearly the sovereign entity that tends toward and creates action, rather than ecological processes that continually lend form to recognizable patterns. In the Western experience, individuals and social groups are both spoken and thought of less often as manifestations of process, and more often as agents of engagement and change. This habituated structure for perception has significant implications for the ways that Europeans approach their environments and the many living organisms that co-inhabit these places, including other human populations. For instance, one might easily observe that the Western focus on objectification and containment is coupled with a value orientation: since it is considered normal for *beings* (prototypically autonomous individuals) to create change, this entails that those visibly motivated by processes beyond their control lack “power”, and are therefore perhaps less the models of virtuous or true humanity.

Such value orientations carry-over into even the most well-considered Western discourses regarding the cultural activities of others. Where anthropology is concerned, for instance, the projection of bounded object-ness upon so vast an array of phenomena can be seen to have implications for the ways that introduced technologies and practices are assessed as incorporated “pluralistically” into non-Western systems. Thus, a great deal has been written about the changes wrought upon Native cultures through participation in the “American and Canadian fur trades” – while almost no analysis has been undertaken regarding the transformations experienced by European immigrants through their incorporation into an established Indigenous trade network that had existed

here for thousands of years. Likewise, in medical anthropology, European medicines and therapeutics are considered to be somewhat different from Indigenous healing practices because they are directed toward *real* physiological manifestations occurring *within* individual bodies – so that a distinction is made between [true] “disease” as malfunctioning biology or psychology at the level of discreet individual and [imagined] “illness” as the psychosocial meaning of disease attributed by larger groups (Kleinman 1980:72). Yet, given this disparity, more than two hundred drugs introduced to Europeans by the tribes of North America have been included for varying periods in *The Pharmacopeia of the United States* and the *National Formulary* (Vogel 1970:6), and even such taken-for-granted “Western” technologies as the hypodermic syringe and enema are derived from this exchange. We do not often find analyses of Western systems as exemplars of pluralism, perhaps in part because anthropologists have been conditioned to overlook the influences of other cultures as having transformative effects upon their own societies’ routines. But, conversely, they are extremely aware of such influences when they emerge in foreign venues, so that even in trying to describe diverse ways of negotiating the human condition, anthropologists often betray an ontological orientation skewed toward the recognition and positive valuation of discreet object categories, thereby positioning Western selves and their possessions – and by extension Western society and its inventions – as ontologically prototypical.

Niitsitapi ontic awarenesses include, but do not overly-emphasize, the objectifying containment metaphor and, where it does occur, a constant permeability of the vessel, rather than an autonomy, is highlighted, so that it would be more accurate to speak of their objectification as one describing semi-contained and proximal manifestations that are both created and continually transformed by flows of impinging environmental

factors. That Niitsitapi readily perceive such influences upon containment suggests also that there are other fundamental senses of *being* at play here with equal, if not greater, influence over people's experiences. In Niitsi'powahsini this is perhaps most evident in the way that nominal constructions are seen to be elaborations on forms that describe process, shape, quality, and movement. For instance, a pencil is *iihtaisinaakio'pi*, *means-of-making-visible*; it is *miístsa'pssini*, *hardened-growth-type* or wooden, fashioned from *miistsísa*, *hardened-growth* or tree. None of these terms have the nominative characteristics common to English nouns. As much as the bodies indexed by such process-embedded descriptive terms may, at times, function as instruments or agents of change, they are fundamentally manifestations of more encompassing developments, and are linguistically recognized as such. *Matapiiksi*, *people*, as objectified forms, are similarly inseparable from the notion of *itapi*, *living* – a quality shared with many other figures in the Niitsitapi cosmos.

While the metaphorized notion of “*being as semi-contained-manifestation*” does enter into Niitsitapi experience, there is another sense of existence both more basic and predominant. It is this latter awareness that one must come to terms with in order to adequately appreciate who might be threatened by an angry ghost, what such hazards entail, and how practices like steam-making function to shield people from danger. Perhaps the first place we should look for answers to these questions is in the ritual itself. Elaine Scarry (1985) has explored intentionally inflicted pain as a creative process, where torture is meant to deconstruct and refashion the world of its victims. If her assertions are accurate, we might be able to examine *sstsiysskaani* as an interaction between various Niitsitapi realities, giving us some sense of that other ontological impression of *being*.

Steam making is, by all accounts, a gruelling and highly visceral experience. It is not, as some assume, a kind of primitive sauna, allied with the healthist, body-consciousness of Western fitness culture. Aside from being decidedly structured and laden with a cryptic collage of symbolism that contributes toward a multivocal and secreted “analogic codification” (Barth 1975) that is entirely local, *sstsiysskaani* seems to me most effectively applied when, through the extremity of its heat, one becomes obliged to adopt a different attitude toward his existence. In my earliest experiences of the sweatlodge, relatively unversed in the living aspects of Niitsitapi stories, the challenge of *sstsiysskaani* resided in being compelled to make a decision between life and death. The steam inside the lodge is so thick and scalding that, when compounded through four lengthy rounds of prayer and song, the novice (at least in my case, and for many with whom I’ve spoken) begins to wonder whether or not he will survive the procedure. To leave a sweat prematurely is not unheard of, but doing so would entail a certain degree of humiliation and might risk signalling one’s spiritual disengagement. Both of these dilemmas are partially rooted in that powerful embodied notion described by Lakoff and Johnson, the emergent human experience with bounded-ness and containment. But one should not overlook the fact that they are also informed by other associations, such as perceptions of distance. What is within or *nearby* is part of, what is outside or *far away* and definitely other. Fleeing the body of a traditional Niitsitapi sweat, moving out and away from it, full as the lodge is with one’s fellows who are similarly suffering, is tantamount to disassociation with an entire corpus of social identity. Faced with such an impasse, even the possibility of death seems the less threatening route.

At that initial level, clearly *sstsiyyskaani* represents the classic anthropological model for an “ordeal” – pushing through intense tribulations signifies, and invigorates a confidence in, the ability of the cohesive group to survive hardships; it instils religious faith; and it calls into play, once more resolving, the timeless conflict between society and fully autonomous individuals. Pain, at this level of experience, stands in stark opposition against what one expects to profit through social membership, but it is also made unavoidable. As Alan Morinis (1985) has written, those participating in such rituals are “forced to experience the problematic contradiction personally, and to feel deeply the real opposition between full personhood and social membership. He must then experience the reality of the only solution to the problem that society will permit: the self is submitted to sacrifice and it is painful” (ibid:165).

This analysis, itself embodied in those same metaphors emerging with perceptions of containment and distance, works exceptionally well when explaining widespread characteristics in rites of initiation and passage. And indeed, participation in *sstsiyyskaani* is, for the young and novice, one signifier of inclusion within the social category of *Niitsitapi* manhood. It also functions – in similar manner - to inspire a faith in the protective efficacy of the bundles, and to more strongly bond the members of the participant group, including the women who carry the bundles and sit outside the lodge’s entrance. In an attempt to justify the need for physical suffering and pain in such rituals, Whitehouse (1996:710) has suggested that it is the only means by which “flashbulb memories” are produced – the simultaneous impression of location, source, affect, and outcome in dramatic and long-lasting cognitive structures that generate, “a stock of very vivid, disturbing and perhaps enlightening memories which are consciously turned over in the minds of initiates for years to come...”. But faith, cohesion, sacrifice, and intensity

do not seem to entirely account for why rituals involving pain or risk of death might actually help to secure a harvest, for instance, or allow single families to escape the dangers predicated by the arrival of an angry ghost. Nor would it follow that this line of reasoning draws adequate connections between such environmental threats and the kinds of ontological beings whose worlds are deconstructed and refashioned in the process of suffering. What of those persons or groups who revisit, time and again, the supposed ordeal? What power does the ritual hold for someone like Alan Pard, who lives through *sstsiysskaani* perhaps thirty or forty times each year, and still feels provoked to host his own sweat whenever the appropriate signs of threat appear?

Not having experienced such frequent tests myself, I can hardly supply an informed answer. But even in my own repeated encounters with steam-making, perhaps half a dozen times annually, the emplotted metaphoric and metonymic aspects of the ritual have developed and shifted in my awareness. With more frequent exposure to the very complex symbolic dynamics of *sstsiysskaani*, I have begun to understand that inside the dark confines of the sweatlodge I needn't be a person at all, whether autonomous or social. Robed in my blanket, I now crawl along *makóyoohsokoyi*, the *wolf-trail* that takes me through the women into *sstsiysskaani*, marked by a path of white sand that symbolizes the seminal flow of the Milky Way galaxy, road of the souls who pass between this life and the next. When the canvas is pulled down, enveloping us in darkness, I lose the visual-spatial confirmation of my body's existence altogether, and before long gain another sense of *being* - blending into a more cosmic order, where I become disembodied as spirit, dwelling in a world dense with waves of heat, condensation, the tangy flavour of sage, earthy scent of stone, and sounds of singing voices amidst the prolonged primal hissings of rapid evaporation. Neither vision, pain,

time, nor fear of death – facets of embodied identity one and all - have any use in this place, and so they are relinquished and cleansed away, leaving me with a sense of existence that is anything but bound or contained.

Ma Ninna Ihpawakksskiwa – That Man of Scarred Face



A distant view of Nínaiistáko (*man's-hardness*) or Chief Mountain, shot taken from along Mookoansítahtaa (belly-river) on the Akáínaa Reserve (2004).

In the novel *Ceremony*, Leslie Silko wrote: “I will tell you something about stories. They aren’t just entertainment / Don’t be fooled / They are all we have, you see / All we have to fight off / Illness and death. You don’t have anything / If you don’t have stories.” (1977:2)

If ritually inflicted pain is a creative process, functioning to deconstruct one’s world in order that it may be refashioned, then stories seem, to me, the stuff that is both stripped away like clothing or physical form in *sstsiyyskaani*, and that from which a transformed identity is moulded anew and reborn. For not only through the ceremony, but afterwards, as the body is reclaimed in crawling out the opposite side of the sweatlodge, draped in blanket and confronting again the world of color, cool light winds, and the tastes of meals

prepared by women, one draws from learned repertoires of narrative those strands which seem best suiting to explore and assess the experience.

Following each of the sweats I've attended, participants have lingered in recovery for a short period around the lodge, laying in the grass or sitting up against the canvas to have a drink of water. During this time, personal evaluations of the encounter are shared – the relative intensity of the heat is judged in comparison with past *sstsiysskaani*, rationales for variation are exchanged, and tales told of one's own sensual experience during the event and any coping techniques or transformations derived there-from. This conversation is often carried away from the sweatlodge, into the host's home where a feast is waiting. After the *sstsiysskaani* Alan, Dustin and I attended in Brocket, some of this discussion around the dining table was aimed at assessing the way one of the younger participants had managed his frantic emotions during the most intense round of heat. This individual admitted that it was a struggle for him to remain in the lodge for the duration. Offering a hint of advice, I suggested, "When it gets like that, you just have to forget about your body, and go outside of your mind." The knowing nods from more experienced participants confirmed, for this young man, that my advice rang at least moderately true. In this way, through recurring intimations and multiple partial tellings, stories embedded within and projected upon the felt immediacies of the sweat grow anew in each generation of participants, and become ever more complex for those who have lived the ritual repetitively.

Recent anthropologies of the body have proposed that we might shed this emphasis on literatures, structure, symbols, and text that have pervaded ethnography for nearly four decades. Desjarlais (1992:248) writes, "When art is reduced to signs and symbols, when *Hamlet* is diluted to a singular 'meaning,' a great deal is left out." He suggests instead a

movement toward an anthropology of lived aesthetics, focused on tacit forms of knowledge that are absorbed by and patterned within the body itself. Similarly, Blacking (1977) describes “waves of fellow-feeling” that occur between bodies in a space that is without language or symbols. I agree that there are dimensions to steam-making that go far beyond our capacities of description and analysis by semiotic models, aspects that are viscerally complex, the domain of sensual immediacies, familiarities, and physicalities. Certainly textual explanations and mythologized rationalizations – whether espoused by the Niitsitapi themselves or proposed ethnographically - are always fraught with compromise. It is for this very reason that local knowledge production demands balance between instruction and first-hand participation. Little benefit comes from only knowing *of* stories. Rather, they should also be *done to* a person, as the lived-ness is that which makes the narrative understood, an embodied explanation of the narrative.

The trouble with Desjarlais’ admonition, however, is similar in nature to that of Lakoff and Johnson’s directionality. Both views inadvertently threaten to further reinforce the unnecessary distinctions between body and mind, sense and sentiment, feeling and signification. Turning away from text and symbol, in Desjarlais’ case, only serves to reverse the bias of ethnographic description. We do indeed need an anthropology that takes more notice of lived aesthetics, but this should not entail, in my opinion, a dismissal of narrative elements within such patterns of experience. Just as it is not, in the Niitsitapi world, enough to only know *of* stories, nor is it at all adequate to go without them. In fact, either scenario is quite impossible. What then becomes an issue of socialization and enculturation is the activity of matching or harmonizing of story to practice – such as with the multiple partial tellings that, through repetitive performance in specific contexts, come to blend imperceptibly into the sensual and emotional experience

of sstsiyysskaani. The two proposed domains of thought and viscosity are not truly disconnected in human phenomena, and so it would be a mistake to approach them ethnographically one outside the other. I understand the two as rather indivisible, and arguably indistinguishable, complements in creation. That which the body “absorbs” in cultured places is neither entirely incidental and tacit, nor wholly disciplined and conscious, nor even some kind of staccato admixture of the two. I suspect, instead, that experience involves broad clusters of simultaneous metonymic and metaphoric associations working in multiple directions.

Given such a complex, amalgamating process, it can be seen that only on its surface is the orthodox Niitsitapi sstsiyysskaani merely a performed re-enactment, one of many ceremonies in their religious order that might minimally be dealt with as a social or cultural text. While the roles of participants in steam-making do parallel those set out in what is perhaps the most written and orated tale of plains legend² - describing how the sweat was directly transferred to the people by Naato’si, *sacredness* itself, embodied in the Sun - like all good stories, the origin myth of steam-making is as much a conduit for other tellings and experiences as it is an explanation or enacted presentation. Since, during sstsiyysskaani, there are neither audiences nor readers to partake of these performances or texts, as there are only thoroughly invested spirits engaging in real exchanges that can affect such weighty issues as life and death, it is undeniable that the felt experience of steam-making and its healing results, in all its indescribable sensorial minutia, is what becomes judged in later determining the ritual’s efficacy. The framework for that mediation, however, still resides largely within stories, plural to the extreme, and no less embodied. The events which predicate the ritual, the cooperation of

² See Black Plume 1978; Bullchild 1985; Crowshoe and Mannes Schmidt 2002; Laurie 1952; San Souci 1978; Schultz 1910; and Wissler 1908 – among others.

those involved, the ordeal undergone, and the transformations that either do or do not occur as a result are all enmeshed in thick currents of collective narrative. They incorporate and channel through the account of steam making's origin, but also include rationalizations and attendant sensations of currently impending dangers, histories of past traumas, biographic essences of the participants and their ancestors, local theories of cause and effect, plays on contemporary morality, and tales of tragedy, miracle, wisdom, destiny, luck, etc. As Steedly (1993) quotes from Italo Calvino's (1981) *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*: "What I want is for you to feel around the story, a saturation of other stories that I could tell and maybe will tell or who knows may already have told on some other occasion, a space full of stories that perhaps is simply my lifetime, where you can find more in all directions, as in space, always finding stories that cannot be told until other stories are told first, and so, setting out from any moment or place, you encounter always the same density of material to be told...".

In trying to understand what destruction and reformation of realities the pain of sstsiysskaani accomplishes, so that we may work toward a Niitsitapi ontological self that experiences the kinds of phenomena to be explored throughout the chapters to follow, it is my feeling that we must minimally take into consideration that tale which historicizes the ritual's origin. The story begins with Pawakksski, *Scar-Face*, an impoverished, deformed, and timid young man, orphaned by the death of his parents and grandparents to lead a life of destitution and abuse. Having no clothes or family, he followed barefoot behind the movements of the buffalo-hunting bands, living like a dog off their scraps, his only ally an old widow who – with no companion to take care of her - lived similarly poor, and so felt pity for him. Among one of the bands there was a most beautiful young lady, the only child of their leader. Because her father loved her so dearly, he had

decided to allow her to choose her own husband. When the spring season came, and all of the bands moved together into a single large encampment, many suitors both young and old approached the young lady in courtship, but all were refused. Rumors began circulating through the camp that this girl had something wrong with her, that she was a hermaphrodite. When her parents caught wind of the gossip, her father approached her to ask why she had refused so many good men. She told him that she was already promised to Naato'si, the Sun, and therefore forbidden from the company of others unless first released from this bond.

While the girl and her parents kept discreet about her odd circumstances, confident that nobody would ever believe them, the rumors about the young lady continued to flourish. Eventually, the bachelors of their camp began teasing Pawakksski too, saying that since both he and the girl were similarly disfigured – she a hermaphrodite, he looking mangled from a scar that ran from earlobe to mouth - they'd be a proper couple. The boys found the idea of this odd match particularly entertaining, and so kept tormenting Pawakksski whenever an opportunity arose. Finally, early one morning, Pawakksski determined that he would go talk to the girl. Secretly, he had loved her all along. But he never thought that someone so beautiful would ever agree to be with him. Even that morning, he was certain that she would refuse him. But he went to call on her anyway, with the hope of at least putting an end to the teasing jokes. Shortly after dawn, he walked directly to the lodge where the girl stayed, and passed through her door without any formality. Inside, he saw that the girl's parents were not present. She, on the other hand, had been expecting him. Before Pawakksski could say a word, the young lady told him that, although she had refused every other man in the tribe, her answer on this day would be different. She was willing to marry him, but it would be difficult.

Pawakksski would have to travel to the lodge of Naato'si, to ask his permission. And if it should be granted, he would return to her with proof of authorization by having had his disfigurement removed.

Pawakksski was deeply aggrieved by this reply. He didn't know if the girl was making fun of him, or if she was serious. If what she told him were true, his chances of being with her were none-the-less impossible, for no human being could ever reach the lodge of Naato'si. Saddened by what was likely another act of cruelty dealt upon him, Pawakksski decided to consult his only friend, the old widow. She listened quietly while he told the girl's story and how she had promised to marry him if he could get the permission of Naato'si. When he was through talking, the old lady told him that it sounded crazy, but that if he felt like pursuing the challenge he would need to find a wise man in the camp, someone who knew how to seek spiritual assistance. If Pawakksski were willing to go that far, she would make all of the other preparations. Hearing this, although still feeling somewhat paranoid, Pawakksski went looking for a wise man. He asked around here and there, until finally deciding who would most likely help him. Approaching this man, Pawakksski offered what few possessions he had in return for the elder's advice. The old man listened to the story, then prayed with Pawakksski and gave him full instructions. He was to take his robe, extra moccasins, a flint knife, pipe and tobacco, sweetgrass and a pouch, climb the east peak of the Sweet Pine Hills and pray. Pawakksski should stay there for four nights, no more and no less. If successful, the spirits would advise him further. If not, he could return home and try again another day.

The next morning, after a hearty breakfast, Pawakksski started on his way. The widow had packed all of the things he needed, plus some dry meat and berry patties to keep his energy up before he got to the mountaintop. It was a few days walk, and then a

long climb, before Pawakksski reached the place that his elder advisor had told him about. There he found a seat of flat stones, surrounded by a short wall of boulders. Pawakksski sat, praying and singing some holy songs that his advisor had taught him. Nothing happened for two full days. On the third night, a spirit approached, but stayed at a distance and merely surveyed the area. Then, on the fourth night, Pawakksski prayed particularly hard and fell asleep singing. Some time later, he was rudely awakened when someone seized his feet and began throwing him around. Pawakksski grabbed hold of a boulder, trying to keep himself from being tossed down the hillside. But the spirit ripped him free of this hold, and sent him sprawling a-ways below. Pawakksski didn't get frightened or discouraged. He caught his breath and returned to the peak, grabbed his pipe and quickly lit it with a coal that he'd kept hot inside a buffalo horn. The spirit accepted the pipe, and as he smoked Pawakksski was put into a sleepy trance. Dazed by the spirit in this way, Pawakksski asked about how he might find Naato'si. The spirit told him that he would have to go to the mountains in the west, climb the highest peak, Nínaiistáko, and sit again for four nights. There, he would find his answer.



Itáitsiyyiiso'p, *there-becoming-fragrant* site atop Nínaiistáko, where Pawakksski sat during his second fast, looking east over kitawahsinnooni (2004)

Pawakksski wasted no time when he awoke from the spirit's trance. He set immediately for the western mountains. Along the way he began to cry, overtaken by the impossibility of the task that had been set before him by that beautiful young lady now so far away. It took him a number of days to reach the Rockies, before he finally arrived at the top of Nínaiistáko, *man's-hardness*, the most prominent peak in this vicinity. There he sat again, praying and singing for four nights. On the last two evenings, a spirit came to him more gently than with his previous encounter. When this soft spirit took the pipe, it told Pawakksski that he would have to travel a very long distance further west, where he would find another giant mountain near a body of water that had no end, and atop which the summer moons were never seen. He should prepare himself for intense cold, and then climb to that mountain peak and again wait for a spirit.

The following morning Pawakksski set off, eating roots and duck eggs as he went along. The journey to the giant mountain was the farthest yet. It would be almost a full lunar cycle before he arrived, skinny from hunger and tired to the point that he thought death would be met before Naato'si. Wrapped in his buffalo robe, he ascended the mountainside, making switchbacks along the snow and ice until he reached its peak. There – atop what is now called Mount Rainier - he sat again, in prayer and song. On the second night, he saw a spirit watching him. On the third evening, this same spirit came close, only to disappear and show-up again in a different position. It remained nearby throughout the night, dissolving and reappearing endlessly. On the fourth night, Pawakksski was suddenly seized by a penetrating cold that embraced his entire body. It was the spirit of the giant mountain. But like the previous advisors, this being had no knowledge of how to reach Naato'si. It told Pawakksski that he would have to travel to

the shore of the water with no end, the Pacific Ocean, and there he might find someone to show him the way.

When Pawakksski awoke from this encounter, he was down at the base of the mountain again. He felt entirely defeated, and just sat there crying for some time, recalling all he'd gone through, and still being told to move further. He had no food left. His clothes were tattered. All of his extra moccasins had been used up, and his feet were raw and bloody. Eventually, he decided that there was nothing else to do but go that one last distance. He collected moss and leaves from the forest around him and tied them to the bottom of his feet as shoes. Then he walked on. Weakened and hungry, his gait was staggered and clumsy. Many times he stumbled into thorned brush that tore away at his skin. Some days later, he finally came to the water's edge. There, looking out over the vast sea, Pawakksski gave up all hope. This was his end. It would be impossible to travel further, no matter what the spirits told him. He hadn't energy enough remaining to even attempt a swim, and neither could he turn around and go home. All was through.

Pawakksski walked out into the ocean to wash the blood and dirt off his body, then went to shore and lay there with his feet in the water, crying, praying, and singing. He called to the spirits and asked that they take pity on him – either show him to Naato'si or take away his life. The last thing he saw before falling asleep were some swans drifting far offshore. When he awoke, it was in a trance. A large white swan had floated up near him. It asked why he was crying. Pawakksski told the swan all that had transpired, from the teasing, to the girl, to the mountain spirits and his travels. He told the swan that all hope was lost, and that now he only wished his life would end. The swan felt sorry for Pawakksski, and told him that the journey was almost over, that he had only one more thing to do. He would fall asleep again, and when he woke up there would be a swan-

head rattle beneath his robe to prove that what he was being told had actually happened. When he had retrieved the rattle, the swans would come to him, to take him to Naato'si. He would have to close his eyes, and not open them again until he was told to do so. If he slipped up and looked around, it would be over, and he would never achieve what he had come so far to do.

The next morning when he awoke, the same group of swans were floating in the distance, and Pawakksski began to cry again, certain that he had only imagined his encounter. Reaching around to find his tobacco pouch, his hand came upon the swan-head rattle. In an instant, he realized that all he had experienced was real, and he quickly built a fire, so that he could make a smudge and pray in thanks to the large swan. Just before Naato'si could be seen in the east, the swans floated to shore and told Pawakksski to lay down on top of his robe and close his eyes. No sooner had he shut them than he felt himself being pulled rapidly away. Following their instructions, Pawakksski fought curiosity and kept his eyes closed until he fell asleep. When he woke again, the large swan had returned and was poking him in the ribs, telling him to open his eyes, that he was in the land of Naato'si. When Pawakksski looked up, the swans startled and took flight, eventually disappearing far out over the horizon of the waters.

He sat there on this new shore, watching out over the waves and thinking about what he should do. Then he heard a piercing scream, and he looked down the beach to see a young boy running frantically toward him, seven giant white cranes giving chase from behind³. Without a thought, Pawakksski jumped to his feet, ran at the enormous birds, and one by one thrust his flint knife into their throats. Each crane toppled and died

³ These birds were like oversized whooping cranes (*Grus Americana*). Their white plumage symbolizes winter, and the threat of death, as does their numbering seven, corresponding to the winter moons of Niitsitapi calendar systems.

instantly. Surprising even himself, Pawakksski glanced down at his feet and found that he wore a new pair of moccasins. The swans must have dressed him. While he stood over the defeated cranes, the boy came up to thank him, telling him that all the people of that land lived in fear of the giant birds. Exchanging greetings, Pawakksski learned that the boy's name was Iipisówaahsi, *Distant-Food*, a term used to refer to raw chunks of buffalo meat that were hung up to dry as jerky. He also learned that this boy was the son of Naato'si, and that his mother was Ko'komíki'somm, the *Night-sun*, or Moon. Iipisówaahsi told Pawakksski that they would remove the skins from the dead cranes and take them back to his family's lodge, and that Naato'si would be so elated by the victory



that he would probably grant any wish Pawakksski had.

had occurred on the beach, how Pawakksski had come out of nowhere to slay the deadly birds. The old lady agreed that this was indeed an incredible accomplishment, and so the two young men sat in waiting for Naato'si while

she prepared a meal. Just before Naato'si arrived, Ko'komíki'somm told Pawakksski to hide behind the linings of their lodge, so that he would not be harmed by the intense heat of the old man. As soon as Naato'si stepped through the door, he put his nose to the air and sniffed around, claiming that he sensed the presence of a human being among them. He went and sat down to listen while Iipisówaahsi explained the day's events. Naato'si was pleased to receive the scalps of the cranes, and told his son that the visitor should

stay as their guest. Then Pawakksski was brought out from behind the linings, his eyes closed to the blinding light, and made to sit in front of Naato'si. The old man painted him from head to toe with in black, and after that Pawakksski was not bothered by either the light or the heat in the old man's presence.

For almost a full lunar cycle, Pawakksski lived at this lodge, in the company of these sacred beings. He started to become used to their routines – the way Naato'si would go away during the daylight hours, to return in the evenings when Ko'komiki'somm would take her turn outdoors, until just before dawn when Ipisówaahsi, the Morning Star, would go out for a short while, and so on. After living with them for some time, keeping company with Ipisówaahsi during the days, Pawakksski began to feel an urge to return home. He knew that the widow back in his camp had probably been suffering without his assistance, and his thoughts still remained with the young woman who had promised him her love. Naato'si had known of his guest's intentions all along, but thought it best to wait until the boy approached him with a request. Now the old man was beginning to sense the youth's urgency to return home, and so finally decided to give him an option. Assuring Pawakksski that they had thoroughly enjoyed his visit, and were very grateful for the way he had saved their son's life, Naato'si suggested that it might be good for him to return to his own people, while the warmth of summer was still with them. In exchange for his altruistic act in slaying the seven cranes, he could ask for anything he wanted to take back home with him.

Pawakksski recognized that his moment of opportunity had at last arrived. In full detail, he explained why he had come to their land, and all that he had suffered to get there. His only wish was to have the young woman by his side. But because she was already promised to Naato'si himself, her restrictions would have to be lifted and, as

proof of this, the scar removed from his face. For a long while Naato'si just sat there silent, with Pawakksski growing increasingly nervous. When the old man did respond, it was with kindness, but also in a serious tone. What Pawakksski had requested was very unusual – it was not considered proper for a man and woman, once committed to one another, to be broken apart by a third party. Because of his debt to Pawakksski, and his empathy for the suffering the boy had endured, Naato'si would grant the wish. But since the nature of this change was so significant, something would have to be done to remind people that the break-up of a marriage is always incredibly damaging. Since Naato'si would feel sorrowed by the loss of this young woman, so she too, and Pawakksski as well, must suffer. He would teach the boy a new ceremony, to be brought to the people and used during the largest summer encampment each year, commemorating this important lesson about marriage. But before Pawakksski could be taught such sacred things, he needed to be cleansed.

When Naato'si went out the next day, he left Pawakksski and Ipisówaahsi with instructions to gather four hundred willows and rocks with which they would construct four sweat lodges. That evening, when Naato'si returned, they held four sstsiysskaani. Ko'komíki'somm sat outside these lodges, taking care of the doors and bringing in the stones for them. After they had finished the first steam-making, and the skins of the lodge were pulled up, Naato'si asked Ko'komíki'somm to look inside and identify their own son. She could clearly see the scar on Pawakksski, and so knew right away which boy was her own. After the second and third sweats, this test was repeated, and both times the old lady knew her boy right away. Then they sat through one final sstsiysskaani, and when Ko'komíki'somm looked inside, neither boy had any blemishes.

She couldn't tell one from the other. Taking a guess at it, she selected Pawakksski as her son. This mistake was proof that the steam-making process had been successful.

Over the next four nights, Naato'si instructed Pawakksski about the ceremony he would bring home to the people. He had already experienced sstsiyyskaani, and could always use that to heal, as well as to cleanse himself and his wife before they began the new ceremony – the construction of the okan lodge, for which they would fast and thirst for four days in recognition of the importance of marriage, and the pain that comes when such bonds are broken. In addition, Naato'si set out seven items in front of Pawakksski and told him to choose whichever it was he would like to take home with him. “There's one for gambling, for stealing, for cutting with, there's a weapon, one for killing, and one for taking out,” Naato'si said, pointing to each item. The object he didn't name was a white staff, so Pawakksski said that he would take it. “You don't want that,” Naato'si told him, “it's nothing.” Again he named each of the six other items, and once more Pawakksski indicated that he would take the staff. Only when he'd made the same choice four times did Naato'si agree to relinquish it, admitting that the white staff was the best choice of all, as it represented life itself. And for final departing gifts, Pawakksski was dressed in a new buckskin suit, the shirt of which held the emblem of Naato'si and had scalp-locks hanging from the sleeves that represented the seven cranes he had defeated. Two raven feathers, bound together, were tied to his hair, and Naato'si showed him how to get home quickly, following makóyoohsokoyi, the *wolf-trail*.

Pawakksski returned to the camp of his people with a new name: Pahtsiipisówaahs, *Mistaken-for-Morningstar*. He won his bride and shared his knowledge of all the gifts that Naato'si had bestowed – the first sstsiyyskaani, okan lodge, scalp-lock suit, raven topknot, and white staff. Some time later, Pawakksski and his bride followed the wolf-

trail once more, she to reclaim her position beside Naato'si, he as the bright star in the dawn sky often mistaken as Iipisówaahsi.

Forsaking Oppositions – The Disembodied Self

There are many facets of the Pawakksski story that might again confirm the nature of sstsiysskaani rituals to be one of reproducing the experience of ordeal for its participants. Like the four rounds of a sweat, Pawakksski must suffer four trials by mountaintop and seashore - a practice, generically known as “vision questing” that is, in Niitsi'powahsini, described by the embodied conceptual metonym itsiyissini, or *becoming-fragrant*, a reference to the Niitsitapi impression that human beings can accumulate odors repelling to the beneficial spirits of their cosmos. Activities like fasting, thirsting, sweating, menstruating, smudging, etc. help to either expunge or mask such odors. In addition, the symbolic characterizations of participants involved in sstsiysskaani parallel those from the story, such that the man conducting the rite represents Naato'si, those he himself invites are Iipisówaahsi, the individual who has requested the ceremony be performed is Pawakksski, and the women (wives of those in attendance) who carry the bundle and sit outside the east door are like Ko'komíki'somm. Elders who I consulted during the research for this thesis often spoke of the dynamics of sstsiysskaani as a prime example of traditional Niitsitapi medicine, not only because of the relationship it draws between people and the cosmos, nor solely for its cleansing function, but also because the preparations for the ritual require its hosts, men, to exert themselves outdoors collecting rocks and willows, to cut wood for the fire, and dig a pit in the hard prairie earth. The physical demands of the ceremony begin in advance of the steam-making itself, and form part of a sensual and tactile association between laborious exercises of the human body

and one's vitality or well-being. This sense of natural health may be extended through conceptual metaphorizations in elaborated tellings of the Pawakksski story, where elders – speaking through the voice of Naato'si – will sometimes define what it is Pawakksski should have learned during his journey: that when a person truly desires a good life, he has to walk an honest road, long, arduous, and beset with difficulties.

Suffering and enduring, sacrificing and surviving – these are some of the experiences meant to be engendered through the rigors and pain of the sweat. They are visceral associations to qualities of human existence, what will be encountered physically, socially, and emotionally during a lifetime conceptualized at least partially in terms of arduous passage through cycles of hardship. Harkening again upon Elaine Scarry's ideas about ritualized torture, one might argue that prior to the trials of sstsiyyskaani as ordeal, the initiates, distressed by their afflictions (sickness, depression, social tension, etc.), are inappropriately troubled, that they are under the false impression that life should be otherwise or that someone in particular is at fault. The sweat then sears these rationalizations away by forcing the individual in passage to withstand pain and suffocation that tax the body, inside and out, and compel one toward absolving dilemmas between life and death, autonomy and the value of membership. Surviving this test, the spirit is strengthened, and a new, more healthful story replaces the blame and self-pity, just as Pawakksski himself was transformed from a lonely, impoverished, teased, and scarred boy into an icon of Niitsitapi manhood.

Certainly we have now located two significant local models for existence – the individual and the group – both of whom are considered to gain strength and vitality through “regular” (as well as ritualistically regulated) ordeals of the body. Both are also senses of *being* that, I would argue, are partially informed by those notions of semi-

contained manifestation and distance mentioned earlier. These perceptions are similar to, but in no way synonymous with, the autonomous containment and in-out orientation that Lakoff and Johnson direct us toward in Western cultures. In the Niitsitapi sense, ontologies of individual and group phenomena converse with a somatic awareness that has, as its principal focus, the channelling and conversion of aqueous environmental flows. If we consider the steam-making lodge itself as representative of a metaphorical body or organ, it will be seen that all who enter – stone, water, and human spirit - are directed along a seminal path that passes first by way of the women seated outside the lodge's door, and then circulates around a central hollow. It is within this hollow that the dense stones collect, rocks that are so hot from their prolonged exposure to flame that they threaten to burst and scatter fiery shards over all those huddled at their periphery. Within this perilous context, pooled water is streamed down, over, and through the hollow, becoming transformed into a vapor that both cleanses and conceals, diffusing the dangerously concentrated heat amongst a wider collective. Those who then exit the lodge at the completion of this process are met again by women, who wrap them in blankets, allow them to become briefly reacquainted with the visual world, and call them to feed. In this sense, while *sstsiyyskaani* may indeed tax the resolve of an individual in relation to the social, it is foremost a processing of various critical densities – of heat, liquid, odor, emotion, etc. – into a dispersal and reformation that constitutes healing, expunging, birthing, and renewed life.

In the Western ontological schema, as presented by Lakoff and Johnson, it is not this sense of bodily permeability and internal transformation that is most noted and extended metaphorically, but rather a boundedness and objectification, the skin that marks a separation between individual and environment, self and other, in and out, this

and that. Through such constructions, sharp delineations and polarizations are often imagined. And in much of anthropological literature, as a cultural artifact of the West, this embodied conceptual metaphor of containment leads to descriptions that project such polarized awareness onto diverse symbolic form – it is, for instance, at the very heart of structuralist theory, not to mention the center of much debate historically between American “cultural” (read “psychological”) and British “social” schools. Through the lense of containment, one might find particularly interesting the fact that Pawakksski returns to his people bearing instruction for coordinating two different types of ceremony: sstsiyyskaani and okan. Whereas sstsiyyskaani is usually performed to alleviate dangers threatening the individual or limited group, the okan addresses such problems within society at large. It is the man who hosts sstsiyyskaani, and the virtuous woman (like she who becomes wife to Pawakksski) who puts up the okan – another rite of ordeal, involving the four consecutive sweats from the story, plus a lengthy period of isolated fasting and public performance. In both cases, a spouse is involved in the ceremony, but on most occasions only men need enter the sweatlodge, and it is the morally faithful woman alone who is competent to become allied with Naato’si in her vow to host okan. So, true to classic structuralism, one *can* find, in the Pawakksski story, a series of symbolic dialectics – outside:inside::man:woman::individual:society::sstsiyyskaani:okan::etc. These dialectics might then lend themselves to charting upon linear scales of symbolic interaction, demonstrating hierarchies of relationship that evidence grades of differentiation and conflict between two extreme bodies of knowledge and experience – autonomy and group membership, for instance – which are negotiated through cultural performances like sstsiyyskaani. For those intrigued with the symmetry revealed in such models, the role of myth and ritual become that of mediating human

contradictions – just as Lakoff and Johnson’s conceptual metaphors talk between the tangible physical organism and our more ephemeral and intellectual experiences.

But this type of analysis misses a very important element of these ceremonies and stories. Depending on one’s vantage point, *sstsiyyskaani* isn’t so much a mediation, or reconciliation, as it is a legitimate cure for threat of death. I was present in one sweat, for instance, where the elderly man running the ceremony was himself struggling with cancer. During the months leading up to that *sstsiyyskaani*, he had undergone a series of chemotherapy treatments that had failed to reverse his condition. He then began to experience odd, immobile fugue states. On one such occasion, his wife found him standing outside near a fencepost he had been repairing, with no clue as to why he was standing there or how long he had been in that position. Around this time, he was approached to conduct a sweat that would cleanse the host of an upcoming *Ninnaimsskaa* ceremony. Even given the delicate condition of his health, he agreed to sit the ordeal. There were only four of us in there that day: the elder, the host, another elder guest, and myself. As the ritual began, it was immediately apparent that it would be particularly intense. Whatever the conditions that made it so, the steam was incredibly hot and thick. The old man prayed at length and then began to sing. With the *Ninnaimsskaa* sweats, there are four songs sung during the first round. He sang the first of these, and then the second. Then he sang the second song again, then again, then again. At that point, it was evident that something was very wrong – he hadn’t just become confused, he wasn’t trying to recall the third song, he was in trouble. The canvas was quickly lifted for the two doors, bringing the ceremony to a premature end, and the old man was rushed to a hospital. There, some hours later, infused with saline drips to rehydrate him, the elder swore he’d never go into a sweat with that bundle again. His first impression, therefore,

was that the bundle itself (representative of one cosmic pattern) had placed him in mortal danger. But some weeks later, back at the hospital for a different reason, he changed his mind. The cancer that had been slowly overtaking his body was gone without a trace. As far as he was concerned, it could only have been that the *sstsiyyskaani* cured him. The bundle, briefly feared, became again touted as powerful medicine.

Lévi-Strauss attempts to deal with this kind of phenomena, the physiological transformations and actual healings that occur through “magico-religious practice” of indigenous societies, in his chapter from *Structural Anthropology* entitled “The Effectiveness of Symbols”. Here, he walks the reader through an analysis of a Cuna song text used by their healers to facilitate difficult childbirths, one which might arguably share many points in common with orthodox Niitsitapi *sstsiyyskaani*. During the ritual enactment of the Cuna song, the healer must quest for the mother’s lost spirit, which has been captured by Muu, the power that forms the fetus. Lévi-Strauss shows that Muu-Igala (*Muu’s way*) and Muu’s abode within the performed text represent the mother’s vagina and uterus, and it is to these places where the healer must trek, to overcome “many vicissitudes” in the form of monsters and obstacles, waging “victorious combat” over Muu’s “abuses of power”, repatriating the spirit, and in so doing offering the patient “a resolution, that is, a situation wherein all the protagonists have resumed their places and returned to an order which is no longer threatened” (1963:192). According to this analysis, what occurs through such ritual is something like the abreaction in psychoanalysis, that catharsis which comes to Western patients when, through talk therapy, they reveal the unconscious psychological underpinnings of their ailments. What is different among tribal peoples, Lévi-Strauss asserts, is that the patient in treatment receives a *social* myth, through the shaman’s telling, “a language”, rather than

the construction of an *individual* myth, drawn from elements of their personal past. In either case, be it that of the psychoanalyst or the shaman, the healer becomes “a flesh-and-blood protagonist” through a double transference mechanism, against whom the patient can “restore and clarify an initial situation which has remained unexpressed or unformulated” (ibid:194). Having done so, the patient does not merely resign him- or herself to now-explicable pains, but actually “gets well”. Rendering the experience intelligible serves to release physiological processes or, as Lévi-Strauss writes, “regulatory mechanisms beyond the subject’s control are spontaneously set in motion and lead to an orderly functioning”.

What I find useful in this analysis is that it advocates for the power of signification and narrative *experienced* or *done to* a person as intrinsically able to stimulate physiological cures. What is less fortunate is that Lévi-Strauss relies upon notions of “conflicts and resistances” as those causative agents that have been “repressed” and need to be brought to consciousness through a ritualized battle, resolved victoriously. This is one place where my own understanding of Niitsitapi therapeutics departs from the typical structuralist explanation, prompting me also to question those other conflict-oriented anthropological analyses of healing, such as the ethnography that regards spirit possession as functional in creating neutral mediums through which to resolve social and political tensions. Certainly, in sstsiyyskaani, as in the account of Pawakksski, there are *ordeals* and *hardships* to be surmounted, but this does not seem, to me, as necessarily requiring a revelation of conflicts and resistances.

The celestial beings in the Pawakksski story - Naato’si, Ko’komiki’somm, and Iipisówaahsi - are in no sense oppositional in relation to Pawakksski. Nor are the spirits he meets during his travels, those that one might encounter during sstsiyyskani as well,

the four guides who are said to assist Pawakksski in learning about his fear, humanity, frustration, and *shadow* (or soul). Rather, they are all, in their own ways, helpful. The boys of his camp and the seven white cranes, on the other hand, might seem adversarial. In relation to the former, Pawakksski does not illustrate “resistance”, but attempts instead to change himself, and therefore their perceptions of him. In terms of the latter, the cranes represent personifications of winter, the prototypical Niitsitapi *experience* of hardship, which are not attacking Pawakksski, but threatening a complete stranger, Ipisówaahsi, the next generation of life. Feeling for the endangered boy, Pawakksski instinctively launches toward and defeats the cranes without bothering to consider any consequences to his own person, and this spontaneous act of compassion for a child is judged as one of true generosity, facilitating the development of valuable relationships. It is through the bond so formed between Pawakksski and Iipisówaahsi, the exchanges that emerge with Naato’si, and the transfer of sstsiyyskaani in particular, that the blemish on Pawakksski’s face is eliminated.

This is the *language*, the story, given through the steam-making ritual, and it tells that Niitsitapi healing, understood partially as transition and survival through periods of hardship, the metaphorized seasons of life, assumes also the adoption of an ontological status that is sublimated within a vast sphere of *social-like* relations incorporating not only one’s fellow tribesmen, but also other beings, spirits, and processes in a culturally defined and humanly perceived cycle of regeneration that is addressed at the conclusion of Niitsitapi prayers as misamiipaitapiyssini, *long-time-living*. The sstsiyyskaani is not so much a mediation of ego to group as it is a rebirthing of both these identities through the womb of a more expansive cosmic body, cuing an ontic sense of unbounded relativity that is less a middle grounds between conflicts of individuality and socialization than it is

the overarching context through which these two orders find existence. The healing that results from their affiliation, through their kinship in this context, is manifest in such phenomena as the removal of scars, the dissipation of cancerous tumors, or the elimination of lingering odors - residues perhaps, but not necessarily, of prior discord... marks of distinctness and stagnation.

If we follow the tenets of classical structuralism, or many of the typical analyses of ritualized ordeal and spiritual healing, the story lived through steam-making seems largely meant to instil in its participant actors a recognition that compromises between naturally conflicting polarities are a fact of life, that endeavouring for a solution may lead one eventually to recognize an endless and inescapable body of opposition, within which the most rewarding course is the adoption of a particular role in a limited social order, creating an equanimity of individual and group. But this analysis strikes me as one of foreign emphasis, particularly when contrasted against the non-conflictful experience of one man's escape from cancer, another's expunging of scar-tissue, and the vast wealth of similar accounts I could detail if so inclined. In my opinion, such explanations do not actually reveal a tacit battle between life's oppositions, requiring mediation by spirits less socially accountable for their interpretations. Rather, these analyses create or discover such tensions. Again, I find Lakoff and Johnson's work partially useful here. They have demonstrated that in Western cultures there is a conceptual metaphor, embodied in the physical source experience of violent confrontation, that is extended to partially frame target understandings of other, largely non-violent, experiences. As their principle example, they explore the various ways that communication itself is understood in terms of warfare, particularly where there are differences of opinion. The standard academic argument is one such domain where intellectual battles play out. *We shoot down*

theories, *advance* ideas of our own, maintaining or retracting our *positions*, even this thesis must be *defended*. Difference, to the Western mind, may entail opposition and conflict. Thus, Lévi-Strauss, Leach, and their troops readily find, in the stories about men and women, individuals and social groups, the makings of an ageless military campaign, periodically calmed through the treaty-makings of myth and ritual.

In my opinion, this is not what Pawakksski and sstsiyyskaani are about, although some of their gestalt connections to embodied experience, as we shall later find, do seem to correlate at least partially with familiarities of “war” as practiced and conceptualized on the northern plains, as a perpetual gamble or gaming between society and sickness, rather than a conflict and effort to vanquish. It is my impression, however, that steam-making functions to alleviate threats in the very way that is recounted in the Pawakksski story: it removes distinctions, or dangerous concentrations. It does so not in the sense of transforming ego-centric concerns into those more socio-centric, nor in mediating a compromise between the two. Rather, the individual maintains both of these overlapping notions of self, while at the same time being refashioned to resemble the likes of an other, more sacred, being. In this condition of similitude, he blends-in with, or becomes part-of, various patternings in a cosmological order, and can no longer be targeted by those illnesses that could previously distinguish him as out-of-sync with powerful ecologic cycles. Whereas before he had both an ontological sense of autonomy and belonging, the singular individual and the group membership, now he has also no particular number at all. It is a sense of the *somewhat disembodied*, a more cosmic identity, which I understand partially in terms of my most recent encounters with steam-making, and the feelings of being released from the pain and potential death of my physicality, adopting instead the role of spirit in the realm of Naato’si.

What I am proposing, therefore, is that there are at least three separate, but simultaneously operative, Niitsitapi identities, corresponding to a like number of base ontological categories:

- 1) The **singular individual**, who is manifest within the semi-contained or permeable boundaries of human physiology, subject to various environmental currents;
- 2) The **finite group**, which is metaphorically semi-contained like the singular individual, with membership determined by degrees of spatial proximity; and
- 3) The cosmological, or **sublime**, a somewhat disembodied being, that is without number and relatively uncontained and dispersed.

Although I've described the third identity, the sublime, as "somewhat disembodied", I am certainly not suggesting that the ontological notion itself is produced outside of interaction with human-specific visceral or perceptual knowledge. In fact, I have borrowed the term "sublime" from Victorian period art theory regarding humankind's impression of self amidst the grandiose in Nature, as it seems to me very close to the cosmological sense of being I'm trying to plot here as a fundamental, and oft revisited, Niitsitapi experience of the body, fed largely by cultural form. Alexander Gerard described this sense as follows:

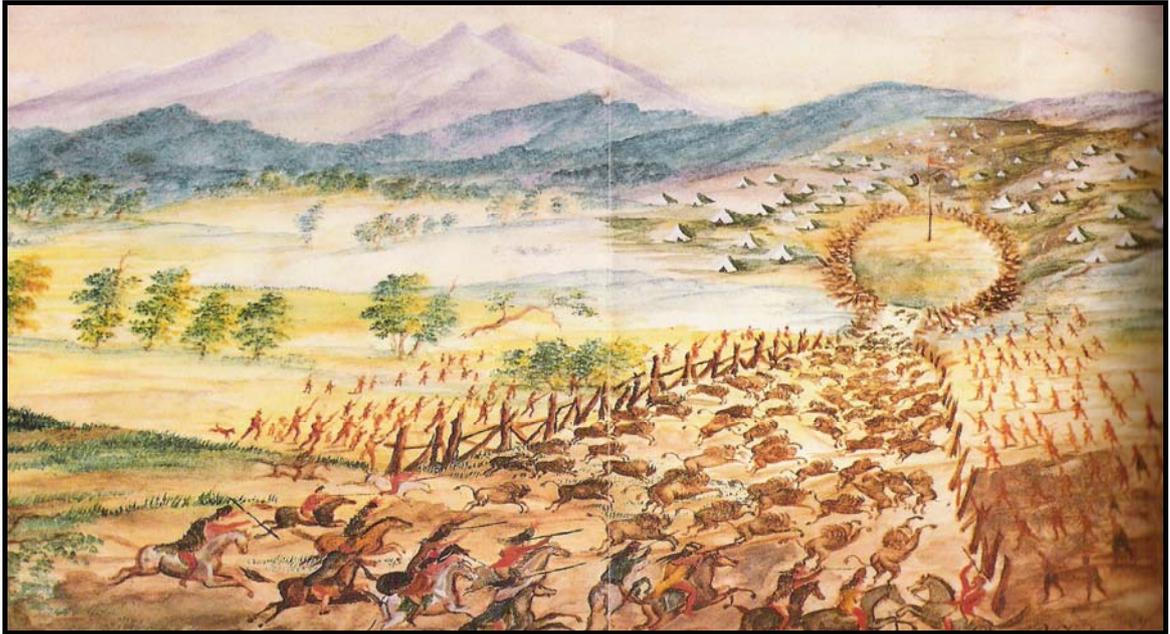
"Objects are sublime, which possess quantity, or amplitude, and simplicity, in conjunction.... When a large object is presented, the mind expands itself to the extent of that object, and is filled with one grand sensation, which totally possessing it, composes it into a solemn sedateness and strikes it with deep silent wonder and admiration: it finds such a difficulty in spreading itself to the dimensions of its

object, as enlivens and invigorates its frame: and having overcome the opposition which this occasions, it sometimes imagines itself present in every part of the scene which it contemplates; and from the sense of this immensity, feels a noble pride, and entertains a lofty conception of its own capacity.” (1963[1780]:11)

To Gerard’s portrayal of this awareness, I would add only a bit more an air of humility, an observation of one’s own insignificance, which harmonizes (however strangely) with the simultaneous pride and lofty conceptions he writes of. I would also extract from his account the term “object”, as it is precisely because there is a recognition of *no objectness* – not even metaphoric – that a sensation of the sublime takes hold. As part of a process, similar to that which I’ve experienced in *sstsiyyskaani*, the re-telling of Pawakksski, the cosmological body shifts through much the same cycle outlined in the definition of “sublime” put forth in Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition: “to cause to pass directly from the solid to the vapor state and condense back to solid form”. This ontological position, which I will later show to be effectively represented in the very grammar of *Niitsi’powahsini*, is decidedly different from the individual and finite group in that it is not oriented around the *bounded* or *containing* features of a corporeal structure. Rather, it seems to me that it is more concerned with revealing or suggesting the illusory and dangerous nature of such objectifications, highlighting instead various movements and fluidities, fluctuations and temperatures, passages through cycles of condensation and dispersal that, in effect, sublimate one’s individuality, society, *and* humanity within a more expansive and process-oriented environmental current. It is this sense of being or existence that I find to be most basic to *Niitsitapi* awareness, that which so many of their ceremonial practices seem oriented toward illuminating and nurturing. In this fashion, while visceral knowledge may indeed be seen to inform the more

ephemeral and intellectual dimensions of experience, so too is it apparent that ritualized cultural routines feed into fundamental perceptions of the body and being.

Iinú Áyiisakiyi: How Buffalo Feed Experience



Painting of a pisskan (*enclosure*) by an unknown mid-19th century artist, in the collection of Archief Noordbelgische Jezüietenprovincie, Heverlee, Belgium (copied from Peterson 1993:66)

In the previous chapter, I briefly surveyed Lakoff and Johnson's model for the process of embodied conceptual metaphorization, and began developing an elaboration upon it. Where they had originally proposed a symbolic transference that moves unidirectionally from our most common and visceral human knowledge toward understandings of our more intellectual and emotional domains of experience, I have contended that even such fundamental awarenesses as that of the body, self, and categories of *being* are, in turn, strongly influenced by cultural practices. As an example of this exchange, I drew upon my own familiarities with orthodox Niitsitapi sstsiyyskaani rituals. When revisited a number of times annually, and conjoined with oral tradition in the form of both an origin story and numerous contemporary discourses regarding purpose, technique, and affect, sstsiyyskaani compels participants to realize and experience a sublime sense of self and existence that is without the kind of bounded-ness and containment that Lakoff and

Johnson portray as ontologically imperative to the human condition. While they may be correct in their observation that there are a limited number of primary embodied sources that become applied toward the vast host of ephemeral target experiences⁴, it seems to me that their model neglects to ask some very crucial questions: Why do those aspects of the sources that become selected for metaphoric and metonymic projection, as well as the particular targets they inform, differ across human populations? And, given that this is the case, what kinds of social and cultural features are involved in the selection process? How does this operation work? To what extent are embodied sources understood metaphorically and metonymically in terms of our more complex and learned structures? And what possibilities are there that we might use such knowledge to our advantage in actively determining or transforming the metaphors that we will live by?

In the Western anthropological tradition, “sympathetic” operations have long been considered “magical” forms of logic (Frazer 1935), comprised of experiential similitude or the perception of resemblance (metaphor) and of experiential co-occurrence or the perception of part-whole relatedness (metonym). This view on the processes of signification reinforces a principle of “cultural relativism” – the notion that no single group has a fix on the really-real, that all cultural routines are equally valid and intricate developments emerging from unique histories of socio-ecological experience. With this principle in mind, Western anthropologists are urged to interpret various beliefs and practices from within associated matrixes of cultural context, and not to project their own values and ideologies ethnocentrically onto other people’s customs. What Lakoff and Johnson’s embodied conceptual metaphor theory attempts to contribute to the principle of

⁴ For a review of the universal sources of embodied conceptual metaphorizations, see bottom of page 14 to top of page 15 in this thesis.

cultural relativism is the observation that the “laws of sympathetic magic” operate via an identifiable mechanism. As Basso has written:

“George Lakoff and Mark Johnson have stated that the essence of metaphor is ‘understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.’ Although this definition departs relatively little from the classical one given by Aristotle (‘metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the similarity in dissimilars’), it points to a problem in the study of language and culture that is deeply ethnographic. For where metaphor is concerned, the question always arises, On what grounds is one kind of thing understood in terms of another? In other words, what must individuals believe about themselves and their surroundings for their metaphors to ‘work’?” (1996:68)

As I have detailed and called to question above, Lakoff and Johnson propose that the mechanism producing embodied conceptual metaphors operates in a linear direction, moving from the most familiar visceral and physical experiences of the human body toward a structuring of the more emotional and intellectual domains of our lives. In their model, universal image schemas inform source domains that, in combination with other source domains, serve to structure our understanding of more ephemeral experiences. Unfortunately, though, they extend very little rationale for why aspects from two or more sources might function together in this manner, or why other cultural traditions might select entirely different sources for understanding a particular target.

Lakoff and Johnson have, through their analysis, offered us a very appealing experientialist paradigm for cultural meaning. But in my opinion their ideas do not yet encompass anywhere near a complete model for understanding the processes of signification. This may be a result of their over-reliance upon data and analytical aesthetics derived largely from Eurocentric patterns of language and thought. For instance, their emphasis on metaphor over metonym, indeed their propensity to distinguish these as two separate (however similar) phenomena, belies an intellectual

tradition skewed toward the kinds of inquiries that focus on the taxonomy, anatomy, and behaviors of agentive elemental particles, neglecting the equal significance of holism and systematization. Similarly, the directionality of their model, moving from the most visceral and physical to the more emotional and intellectual, threatens to overlook the degree of influence that complex cultural forms, like subsistence patterns or religious rituals, for instance, appear to have on our perceptions of some very immediate and intimate of physicalities.

In an effort to contribute toward an improved explanatory framework for these processes, the present thesis offers Niitsitapi comparisons to Lakoff and Johnson's Western examples, assumes and demonstrates multi-directionality in the development of signification, and describes an additional mechanism in the production and partnered interaction of metaphor and metonym, a process that Niitsi'powahsini speakers call **áístomatoo'p** – the *accustomed-body*. Among the Niitsitapi, this notion is employed as a scientific theory to explain such phenomena as muscle memory, addiction, the habitual practice of dwelling upon or paying attention to either virtuous or negative thoughts and comments, an individual's talents in remembering songs and stories, a group's tendency to both claim and demonstrate a shared ethos, etc. In short, **áístomatoo'p** can be said to describe a process by which any activity that has been made repeatedly familiar then becomes reproduced in everyday performances as if by first-nature. It is, in one sense, a way of learning or knowing. But I have also heard the notion of **áístomatoo'p** extended to describe a phenomena approaching genetic inheritance. This use of the utterance enters into conversations where, for example, older people criticize the younger generations' foolishness in risking their health by eating processed and packaged Western foods, or where they suggest that modern, gas-heated homes are “slowly roasting [their

people] like [so many] potatoes”. On such occasions the elders often say “maatomáístomatoop”, or *bodies-not-yet-accustomed*, inferring that their ancestors’ particular experiential histories, as long-time buffalo hunters and tipi-dwellers, had not prepared their contemporary physical bodies for the kinds of Western environments that have been recently introduced.

My rendering of áístomatoop as the *accustomed-body* ultimately fails to register the sophistication of this concept. In many ways, áístomatoop is like the tale of Pawaksski, a massive nexus for the telling of other stories both classic and contemporary. Even in first approaching this concept transliterally, for instance, I feel obliged to note that Niitsi’powahsini is a process-oriented synthetic language that can never be adequately simulated through English. In order for Niitsitapi concepts to be sufficiently addressed, each transliteration must be elaborated upon, both in terms of its áóhtakoistsi, or constituent morphemic *soundings*, and in terms of its semantic applications. Like all other Niitsi’powahsini forms, the lexical construct “áístomatoop” is comprised of at least four key áóhtakoistsi, each of which may – in analysis - be either further dissected or united. The four major aspects of any particular annissin, or *saying*, describe a view, quality, transformative process, and its state of manifestation. In this manner, “áístomatoop” can be deconstructed into the four áóhtakoistsi: á-iistom-atoop.

The first of these, “á-”, conveys that whatever follows is being perceived as ongoing or continuous. The second áóhtakoyi, “iistom-” describes the quality of having spirit within a tangible, but permeable, structure. It is derived from “isto-”, which forms the basis for many other áóhtakoistsi referencing the body, the self, and resemblance. For instance, “isto-” can be found in the áóhtakoistsi and aanissiistsi “istot-” (*similarity*), “moistómi” (*body*), and “iistotóóhsiwa” (*clothed* or *bearing-similarity*). At the same

time, “isto-” underlies independent pronouns like niistó (*my-self*), kiistó (*your-self*), and kiistówaawa (*your-selves*). Through this common application in abstract references to personhood, and unlike the phonetically disparate notions of “I” and “you” in English, “isto-” engenders metonymic and metaphoric impressions of similitude and part-whole relatedness between all individuals in Niitsitapi communities, ultimately contributing to a much wider discourse on “mottáka”, *shadow* or *spirit*, among Niitsi’powahsini speakers – hence my transliteration of “iistom-” as *having-spirit-within-tangible-structure*. The third áóhtakoyi of “áístomato’p” is “-atoo”, which describes the transitive act of having something *done-to* the body/self (or spirit) in “iistom-”. And finally, there is the áóhtakoyi “-’p”, indicating that the phenomena “áístomato’p” is being referenced in its general, rather than specific, manifestation – as a process that affects all of humankind.

Of course, semantically speaking, nobody utters the term “áístomato’p” with such a detailed morphological analysis in mind. Rather, it is applied in conversation for its gestalt qualities, the whole construct in its synthetic form being more fundamental in thought than the sum of its constituent parts. What is evident to the Niitsitapi in their contextualized application of “áístomato’p” is the essential intent to reference something being *done-to* the body/self, and the idea that this process defines the manner in which knowledge is acquired, behavior habituated, and the organism adapted to a local ecology. In other words, as in my transliteration, the body/self (or manifestation of spirit) is being made *accustomed*. This transitive procedure, in Niitsitapi communities, is often metaphorized and metonymized as an act of íisootsspi, or *being-fed*. In fact, when using Niitsitapi sign language, the gesture for áístomato’p involves directing the fingers- and thumb-tips of one’s right hand, together as if holding a morsel of food, in a single circular motion toward the mouth, down to the stomach, and back out to eye-level. It is similar to

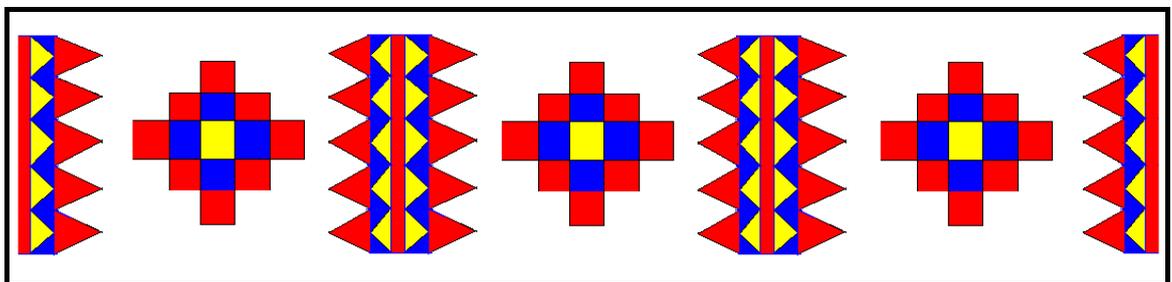
the sign used for eating, where the hand usually makes just a couple of passes toward the mouth. But in *áístomatóo’p*, the gesture is elaborated - something has been taken in, digested, and reproduced. Experience done-to, internalized, and embodied.

In my opinion, *áístomatóo’p* offers an improvement upon Lakoff and Johnson’s attempt to express sympathetic associations as “embodied conceptual metaphor”. Their construct, comprised of three separate lexical elements – the body, the mind, and the mergence – not only fails to adequately unite physical and intellectual experience into a single indivisible whole, it also threatens to draw the listener’s attention toward metaphor alone, without acknowledgment of its partner and co-creator, metonym. Furthermore, as a scientific theory applied toward understanding adaptation and habituation, *áístomatóo’p* references a far more complex and interactive system than the linear model outlined by Lakoff and Johnson, and yet maintains their important experiential emphasis. As I have already suggested, the greatest shortcoming of embodied conceptual metaphor theory may be that it does not speak to the influence of cultural form upon the practices and perceptions from which image schemas and source domains emerge. *Áístomatóo’p*, on the other hand, brings custom and physicality together as inseparable factors in localized environments that interact with even our most primal experiences.

To the Niitsitapi, the human body, our homes, our families, the larger social groups of which we are members, and the physical spaces and places that we inhabit, are all synonymous in nature – bound by both co-occurrences and similitudes that are made routine through the process of *áístomatóo’p*. We have glimpsed one example of this symbolic production already in the manner by which orthodox *sstsiyysskaani* rituals compel participants toward a sublimated sense of being. But there are other less-obvious kinds of ritualized activity that may play an even greater role in selecting those aspects of

our basic embodied experiences that become applied toward the shaping of target concepts. Here I refer to our systems of everyday custom and practice, those cultural meta-constructs which we are regularly exposed to as players in a given social milieu, as speakers of particular languages, and as inhabitants of specific ecological environments. Even in a globalizing world, like that of the contemporary Niitsitapi, deeply entrenched regional social and cultural patterns still pervade our every moment and have a large hand in determining how we will receive, interpret, and organize our experiences. As a means of further elucidating the notion of *áístomatoó’p*, I would like to turn now toward one such pattern, a local history that is reproduced and lived in everyday practice, defining an interactive system of signification that regularly nurtures both the trope of *íísootsspi* and the awareness of sublime existence.

Buffalo Subsistence And The Wager For Life And Death



Author's rendition of traditional quill- or beadwork patterns alternating, in cyclical fashion, between *íípisówaahsi* and *aako’kaatssini* (2005)

A most sure-fire means of locating sources of union between everyday knowledge and official discourses is through the examination of institutions in which the new members of any given society receive their public indoctrination. For instance, in strolling through Saipoyi Elementary School, on the Akáínaa Reserve in Southern Alberta, and especially if doing so every day over the course of four or five formative years of life, one might

begin to appreciate what it means to say that “education is our buffalo”. Indeed, one of the first images encountered upon entering this building is that of iiníí, the bison (or *death*), with an attached label describing the animal as “aoówahsini” (*eaten*). Following a pathway that runs circularly through this facility, laid-out in tiled designs representing aako’kaatssini (*coming-into-a-circle*, the traditional Niitsitapi camp structure) and Iipisówaahsi (*distant-food*, the Morning Star whom we met with Pawaksski), one is



drawn to survey the student artwork and inspirational posters lining the walls – crayon drawings of painted tipis, cut-out silhouettes of iiníí (both face-on and profiled), photographs of eagles, wolves, bears, and ermine, and sketches of elders offering guidance to groups of young people. This pathway routes around a central library, and at four intervals along its course, one encounters pods of classrooms, each sky-lit and

designed to represent pisskan, the type of *enclosure* through which Niitsitapi, in centuries past, would herd and trap iiníí during their hunts.

Far from being token expressions of popular, or even *past* “Indian” identity, this style of architecture and imagery, found in institutions and households throughout the Akáínaa and other Niitsitapi reserves, evokes both a history of experience that is locally

specific, and an official contemporaneity. Elders, tribal administrators, educators, health care provisioners, social workers, and parents often interact closely in designing these presentations, with their expressed purpose being that of nurturance, or *feeding*, helping the young people to find their “paths” toward understanding “who they are”. For adult members of Niitsitapi communities, thoroughly accustomed to kippáitapiiyssinnooni, *our-way-of-living*, these images call to mind a host of stories, associations, and kinship alliances that, through both classroom and at-home instruction, will eventually become familiar to their children. Each crayoned tipi design is, for instance, coupled with an account of its origin, detailing the extraordinary circumstances through which it became gifted to the people, often by the very animals whose likenesses decorate the school walls. At the same time, these lodge designs carry histories of transfer among households, the manner in which they have created networks of relatedness between families and clans that might otherwise have been considered less connected. Similarly, in the serial configuration of the symbol for Iipisówaahsi, each tiled image mirroring the next, one may register the sacred nature of koko’sinnooniksi, *our-offspring*, as related in the Pawakksski story. And these designs are, themselves, set in alternating fashion between representations of a particular circle structure, depicted in the linear form derived from quill- and beadwork traditions, permeable on two sides, and evoking such cyclical transformations from condensation to diffusion as occur among participants of both sstsiyysskaani and aako’kaatssini.

Most prevalent in the imagery at Saipoyi Elementary School, and around these communities generally, is iiníí, the buffalo. While this animal, long the most populous herd mammal in the world, may have been all but exterminated by colonial forces more than a century ago, in terms of the everyday consciousness and culture of contemporary

Niitsitapi, its influence is far from extinguished. In fact, this is not the first time that kippáitapiyssinnooni has persisted despite the physical absence of iiníí. Thousands of years ago, there was another period when the herds had mysteriously disappeared and, just as today, it was considered to be a time of hardship for the people. Back then, without the presence of buffalo for food, there were many untimely deaths, and the continuance of the Niitsitapi way of life was endangered. It was toward the end of a summer season, during this era, that iiníí were finally called to return. A woman, who had been walking near the river collecting berries, heard a voice singing and calling out to her. When she looked down toward where the voice had come from, she found an odd shaped rock set upon a tuft of buffalo fur – it looked like a miniature version of iiníí. The stone told her to pick it up and, when she had, it taught her a song and ritual that could be used to entice the bison to return. The woman brought this iinisskimm, or *buffalo-stone*, home with her and performed the rite that she had been advised of. Then she had a camp crier go around cautioning the people – a storm would soon be rolling through, heralding the coming of a lone buffalo bull. This bull should be allowed to pass unharmed, as the rest of the buffalo would follow behind him. Not long after her announcement had been made, a storm did fall upon their camp, and soon the lone bull was observed walking through. Nobody dared approach it, and the following morning the people awoke to find a large herd grazing beside their camp.

Since that occasion, representations of the buffalo's likeness have been a mainstay of Niitsitapi cultural, social, religious, and philosophical expression. The posters and drawings I've described as decorating the walls at Saipoyi Elementary School are only the most recent manifestations of this tradition. Outside of such novel institutional contexts, iinisskimm are still widely popular in these communities, enjoying inclusion in

just about every ceremonial bundle, whether public or private. In the household alters of Niitsitapi families, there are often iinisskimm found – like their predecessor from the story – set upon beds of fur, dung, and sage. These stones are *fed* scraps of fat and prayed over whenever someone wants to acquire something. A stick, representing that which is desired, can be painted red with ochre, and the iinisskimm set upon it to *weigh it down*, enabling a person to successfully seek out and capture whatever it is that they desire. The predominance of this buffalo imagery in Niitsitapi communities, and of the iinisskimm themselves, might typically be addressed in Frazerian terms as a form of “sympathetic magic” – where metaphoric similitude (registered in the stone’s shape) and metonymic part-whole relatedness (drawn from the inclusion of actual fur and dung) are thought to “empower” their users over that which is represented. While there is much truth to this analysis, and while I think that it is crucial to recognize how the Niitsitapi employ both of these symbolic processes (metaphor and metonym) simultaneously, such simplistic explanations are at risk of failing to account for the very real experiential histories that lay behind these practices and significations, and that serve to accustom Niitsitapi bodies and selves to their meanings.

We should not forget that these communities have occupied the northwest plains since the very beginning, when Náápi, *white-[haired-old-man]*, the “trickster-creator”, won this land of clear-flowing waters east of the Rocky Mountains in a now-famous gamble. At that most early of times, the buffalo here were not quite the same as those familiar to recent North American history. This was an era when megafauna roamed the plains – mammoth, camel, horse, musk-ox, and short-faced bears, some of whose footprints and bones can still be found along the river bottoms today. Among these massive creatures was an immense bison that, according to local tradition, was

carnivorous, and particularly fond of eating people. These giant bison, along with the other megafauna, used to gather together in the evenings and play a gambling game amongst themselves, alternately hiding and guessing at the location of a square bone that they had taken from a human wrist. Their gaming continued until, late one night, a man came crawling on hands and knees into the lodge where the animals played. Many froze in shock at the man's suicidal behavior, but others immediately leapt up and prepared to kill him. Then one of their members called out for his companions to wait, and approached the prostrate human, asking how it was that he came to be there. The man told him that, because the enormous carnivores were so many, and people so few, it would not be long before all human beings were gone from the earth. Hearing this, the animals became concerned for their own survival, and vowed that – from that time on – things would be the other way around, people would become the hunters and animals the food. To mark this occasion, they transferred their game to the man, and showed him how to mimic their movements as he played. He was told to take that game back to his community, with instruction that, so long as the people used it, they would never again have to worry about the extinction of their kind. And indeed, the Niitsitapi continue to play this traditional hand-game today.

Following that encounter, the buffalo became smaller in size and, until their near-extinction in 1883, served continuously as a dietary mainstay of the people. It is entirely significant, of course, that a gambling game and the right to kill animals came to Niitsitapi society simultaneously. Moreover, it is important to note that this event, like that recounted in the origin of *iinisskimm*, occurred during a period when the survival of the people, as a species, was in jeopardy. In an even earlier story, the existence of death itself was determined by another wager. First man and first woman joined Náápi, *white-*

[haired-old-man], beside the river, where the latter was preparing to throw an object into the currents. Some say that Náápi attempted to throw a stick. In other versions, however, it was a piece of buffalo dung. Either way, Náápi proclaimed that if the object sank, then people would have to die, but that if it floated they'd live forever. Upon hearing this proposal, first woman advanced toward the river's edge in protest, picked up a rock, and insisted that they throw that instead.

Each of these stories – that of the *iinisskimm*, the right to hunt, and the origin of death – reiterate the same gendered roles described in the previous chapter, with Pawakksski and the politics of *sstsiyyskaani*. In the earliest of these, the wager over life and death, we find Náápi the trickster, in his typical “anti-social” manner, failing to recognize the necessary gamble inherent in the living human condition. He doesn't understand, as even the animals did in the megafauna story, that life requires death. Nor does he appreciate the fact that events in his world are connected, interdependent, and that his activities at one moment are bound to carry consequences beyond the immediate. Thus, his version of the stakes amounts to no gamble at all; it is self-serving. First woman, on the other hand, recognizes Náápi's mistake immediately, and insists that they throw a rock instead, settling with finality this most crucial of issues. In the story's more elaborated telling, not long after this resolution is made, first woman experiences grief over the passing of one of her own children; her decision to throw the rock was, unlike Náápi's scheme, self-sacrificing.

Then there is first man. While present for the riverside gamble, he has no business at all interfering with the outcome of such weighty matters as the determination between life and death, and thus his character is presented as almost non-existent here. Given the very few narrative streams I've outlined thus far, we don't get a sense of man's role until

his encounter with the giant bison and their megafauna allies. Like with first woman, the man who intrudes upon these animals' game is self-sacrificing, but his risk is of a most immediate nature, having just his own life to wager. Similarly, in the Pawakksski story, the deformed and impoverished protagonist is compelled, almost as if by instinct, to single-handedly slay the giant cranes who are endangering Ipiisówaahsi, even though he himself might have easily been killed. In both of these accounts, man is really the only character who truly gambles at all. First woman knows well the forthcoming result of her decision to throw a rock into the river. And in both the iinisskimm and Pawakksski stories, the female character is depicted as having a pre-established connection with the forces of creation. In the former tale, the buffalo-stone seeks *her* attention, rather than the other way around. And in the legacy of Pawakksski, the young lady that all of the men desire is already committed to Naato'si, *sacredness* itself.

Through these classic Niitsitapi narratives, a number of important metaphorizations emerge. Both male and female genders, in these stories, are sources for understanding the continuance of life that is enabled through self-sacrificing behaviours and an acceptance of the inevitable risk of death. The male experience, in particular, is one informed by the source domain of gambling, or danger. And female experience, by its inherent proximities to the sacred, often symbolized through a woman's location at river's edge.⁵ Together, these symbolic characterizations might be understood as comprising what Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987) have called the "social body", where gender categories are affixed with responsibilities that are important for the community as a whole. Náápi's role, on the other hand, is the antithesis of all this generative order, the "individual body" who – through ambivalence to any but himself –

⁵ A detailed analysis of this Niitsitapi association between water and sacrility will be presented in the chapters to follow.

inadvertently forces the creation of more righteous truths, which trickle down to contemporary Niitsitapi society in the form of a cleansing “body politic”, played-out in such domains as humour, reference to oral tradition, conservative orthodoxy, and locally encultured lived experience in general.

Perhaps a better way to frame these significations, though, is through the ontological structure outlined in the previous chapter – the local distinction made between senses of *being* that I have referred to as the singular individual, finite group, and sublime. Just as in the context of the stories, men and women in Niitsitapi society experience each of these three ontic states simultaneously. They are themselves as individuals, but at the same time metaphorically and metonymically representative of particular groupings (be they of gender, family, society, or species). Similarly, even though people may embody the qualities associated with one or more finite groups, the men and women described in each narrative account are also seen to enter into relationships at a more cosmic level – becoming married to Naato’si, or being made to resemble Iipisówaahsi; able to influence the forces of life and death, or change the natural order of predator to prey; even such divergent classes as buffalo and rocks are seen to be connected through the powers of signification. In fact, one could argue, very convincingly I think, that a key implication of these stories is the understanding that there are no defined boundaries to isolate human beings as either individuals or groups, that the interconnections of an entire socio-ecosystem must be taken into account, and that the organic body, as well as the social identity, are merely the reproduction of this larger, and very much open, structure.

But stories and traditional gender distinctions are not the only place where such categories and valuations can be located and assessed. Another source that is critical for

the everyday maintenance and reproduction of these significations is Niitsi'powahsini, *real-manner-of-speaking*, the local language itself. Examining basic forms of classification in Niitsi'powahsini, its grammar is seen to delineate the three ontological categories described above. These appear in all lexical forms, with the exception of a couple dozen uninflected utterances (i.e. *yes, no, and, etc.*) Two of these categories of *being* correspond roughly to what an English speaker might think of as the singular and plural, but the third is more of a generic pattern without any sense of number. Of course, none of these classifications can be *directly* correlated with their approximate English equivalents, and it is the sense of generalized, unnumbered patterning that seems most primary in Niitsitapi language and thought. Let's consider, as an arbitrary example, various ways of talking about "dogs". The simplest means of referring to a dog, or dogs, is to say "imitáí", which does not, in fact, refer to either the singular or plural sense of its English counterparts, but rather to something more generic, like *dog-ness*. Only when indicating a very particular example of dog-ness, an individual specimen familiar to at least the speaker or addressee, will Niitsi'powahsini allow for an extension of this category with a suffix to create the singular imitááwa. Similarly, when specifying a precise grouping of *dog-ness* - a pack, for instance, that either the speaker or addressee knows of - they will elaborate further and say imitáíksi (which is not so much a pluralizing as it is a *grouping-of*). This ontological organization pervades the entire Niitsitapi language and, taking into consideration the disparities in phonological simplicity between the categories (marked above by suffixes i – wa – iksi⁶), as well as testimony I've heard from native speakers, I'm led to believe that neither the singular nor the sub-group influence local symbolic systems as strongly as various forms and patterns

⁶ The distinctions between these categories may appear elsewhere in the language as marked by other prefixes and suffixes. In all such instances, the un-numbered category is the most simple.

of being that are free from tainting by integers and any sense of bounded-ness. In fact, the vast majority of the Niitsitapi speakers I've questioned with about this matter testified either that they view the happenings and forms around them entirely in terms of position, quality, process, and transitional shape, or that such thinking was stolen from them through a history of forced exposure to English.

For the Western mind, the Niitsitapi way of registering existence in the world might be difficult to comprehend. When someone says the word “dog”, singularity is assumed – the individual is the basic category of being, plurality is indicated by addition of a suffix, and the generalized numberless form rarely appears. Where the third, unbound sense of being does occur in English, as with various substances (*milk*, for instance), in the regular context of speech these are almost always modified by some indication of containment and objectification (i.e. a *stick* of butter, a *glass* of water, a *loaf* of bread). As mentioned in the preceding chapter, Lakoff and Johnson rightly demonstrate that, in the Western conceptual system, the individual human body, in its perceived *contained-ness* and singularity, converses with the emergent metaphors used to understand in-out orientations, entities, substances, time, events, actions, activities, states, physical objects, even words and forms of communication. That the ontological imperative as contained, autonomous individual seems to correlate very well with the way that English speakers experience their bodies marks this notion of existence as *embodied* in just such a way. It does not, however, follow that “the body” as singular object, ripe for metaphorical extension, may in any respect be *more* natural than other senses of being. Nor does it suppose that this notion goes uninfluenced by experiences with other cultural forms.

Given a different history and environment, English speakers too may have developed ontological categories similar to those of the Niitsitapi senses of being. I find

it very curious, for instance, that early European explorers to kitawahsinnooni invariably described the wildlife as Alexander Henry did in January of 1801, so abundant that the “ground was covered at every point of the compass, as far as the eye could reach, and every animal was in motion” (Henry and Thompson 1897:167). Even into the late 1870s, just a few years before the sixty million head of buffalo here were brought to near extinction under pressure from the U.S. Army, James Willard Schultz wrote that “the plains [were] dark with them to the horizon” (Schultz 1974:9). Interestingly, the English names for the most visually prominent plains species – buffalo (or bison), elk, antelope, deer, moose – all express an ambiguity for number. Each of these terms approach the central Niitsitapi category of generalized patterning, in that they convey neither singularity nor plurality. This begs the question of whether it is arbitrary coincidence that brought a people who have thrived in this world of boundless fauna, endless sky, and expansive land for so many thousands of years to develop a language less concerned with containment and objectification as prerequisites for existence.

Following the theory of *áístomatoo’p*, the *accustomed-body*, I would be hesitant to dismiss entirely the possibility that visual familiarities associated with conspicuous life forms on these plains, or the grandiose dimensions of the landscape itself, rooted firmly in the sensory and cognitive capabilities of the physiological human body, partially compelled this ontological organization, and provided the environment for an emergent metonymy – where generic level patterns form the most basic and socially important senses of being, and individuals and groupings become mere delimitations of these more incalculable factions. Also of interest here may be the fact that there appears to be no taxonomical hierarchy, in the Linnaean sense, applied by Niitsitapi thinkers. All formally recognized patterns of existence (i.e. categories committed to language) follow the same

ontological model already described. Where a grouping can be readily delimited from one of the unbound forms – for instance, where chickadees are distinguished as a kind of bird – one may choose either to emphasize their belonging to the wider category (sisttsíiksi as a specific grouping from sisttsíi, *bird-ness*), or one might opt to focus on their composition as another general pattern altogether (níipomakii, *chickadee-ness*). Thus, any grouping-of entity can be re-conceptualized as a generic pattern in itself. This would be something like the English equivalent of saying, “Within species there are species, and within those there are yet other species,” and so forth, until such delimitations had been made as to bring the size of the qualification down to the level of distinct individual.

The term “species” itself is interesting because it is another of the relatively few English lexemes that approximates the Niitsitapi ambiguity for number and personal containment. It is also, in the tenets of Western biology, the only level of living patterning that is capable of reproducing itself. For Niitsitapi thinkers, this process of reproducing living patterns may not be understood so prominently through the source domain of individual bio-sexual behaviors, a Western emphasis clearly supported by Lakoff and Johnson’s principle metaphoric source domain: the singular contained body. Rather, the reproduction and *persistence* of a Niitsitapi ontological category seems to me, as evident in the stories introduced above, more informed by experiences with exchange practices, embodied in a history of cooperative subsistence and an aesthetics perhaps endemic to the magnificent plains landscape. It is this variation in meaning that makes possible the ability to locate reproduction not so entirely at the species-level of a hierarchical taxonomy, as in Western biological theory, but at any range of generic phenomenological patterning. What matters for reproduction, or survival, is not so much

the transfer of a genetic code as it is the persistence of a role within a particular exchange relationship. Thus, Betty Bastien (2004), a Niitsitapi sociologist, finds something very familiar in the definition of “genocide” proposed by Raphael Lemkin, “...genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation.... It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the group themselves” (ibid:26-27). Bastien incorporates this definition into her discussion of the relationship between Niitsitapi and Europeans, “...[governmental policies] were an attempt to destroy a holistic way of relating to the world by disrupting the process of maintaining alliances central to *Niitsitapi* way of life and identity through ceremony, language, and traditional instruction” (ibid:27).

Niitsitapi history incorporates thousands of years of localized experience. And perhaps resulting from this, they’ve come to view their existence as sublimated-to and inseparable-from a very specific ecosystem. From the time that the people were transferred the rights to hunt animals until 1883, the Niitsitapi mainstay was buffalo, and their social organization reflected this. For much of the year, people lived in lineage groups of between one and two hundred individuals in thirty to forty lodges. Each household within this organization was comprised of a husband, wife, and children, this basic unit occasionally being supplemented by addition of an older relative who could not live alone, or with a younger male relative who was being raised as a helper by the father of the household. At marriage, which was exogamous to the lineage group, the wife’s family would usually provide the new couple with a lodge, which was erected next to the husband’s father’s residence in his lineage camp. If the young husband had many brothers, his new household unit might instead locate beside the wife’s father’s residence,

in her lineage camp. The children from these marriages belonged to whichever group their parents resided with, but maintained relationships with members of the other camps as well and might, in the course of their lifetimes, freely shift their residencies and primary group affiliations.

In effect, the strongest social bonds, then and now, tended to be those between an older couple, their children's young families, and the older couple's closest age-mate friends (who they were usually related to either consanguineally or through the bundle complex). A lineage group would be comprised of a number of such bonded units, with blood relationships connecting most of the adult males. The composition of lineage-based organizations, often called "clans" or "bands" today, varied throughout the year, depending upon the availability of resources in a given area, and on household-level inclinations to visit more distant relatives. If food became scarce, or if tensions emerged within the group, a household or part of an extended family might leave their lineage camp, to go settle-in with another group where they had relatives. Or they might establish their own camp, with the potential of forming a new lineage group altogether.

To some extent, these social dynamics of the past persist today. Certainly the clan affiliations still exist, each generally being associated with a particular area of the reserve. For those moving off-reserve, residency patterns tend toward positioning households within neighborhoods where there are minimally other Native people, and preferably relatives. Newly married couples today are often found to patrilocate and, as throughout Niitsitapi history, these patterns of residency may fluctuate depending upon the emergence of social tensions and/or the availability of economic resources. During the year leading into the writing of this thesis, for instance, the size of my own household (which happens to be matrilineal, principally because my parents do not live in this

region) was at various times comprised of anywhere between three to nine members, as my wife and I took in – for periods ranging between one night to three months – various siblings or cousins (considered as siblings) and/or their children, who had been prompted to join us for economic reasons, or to calm hostilities that had been building at their primary residences, or just for our company. Similarly, my wife’s parents, at various times, hosted brief visits for *their* siblings, or extended stays for the young families of either their own children, or those of their nephews and nieces. Indeed, simply being around relatives is an important factor in the daily lives of Niitsitapi people – if more than one member of a household goes away to visit someone, or to find employment, etc., the remaining members are apt to leave their residence for this period as well, and stay with other relatives. The rationale behind this, as locally explained, is because they do not want to be *alone*.

Given these social dynamics, one of the Niitsitapi ideals is to attain such stable household sufficiency as to create a haven for comfortable visitations and relocations of this sort. Correlating with this, there is a contemporary discourse regarding traditional practices that constantly reminds members of these communities of their moral obligations to take visitors into their homes without question, feed them without asking whether they are hungry, and prepare beds for them without inquiring as to whether they plan to stay over. When such company is ready to leave – whether it be a day or some months later - they will simply announce their departure and be on their way. In a functional but ironic sense, it is often people’s failure to fully live-up to these high ethical standards that creates the subtle auras of tension causing young families in particular to be on-the-move between the households of their relatives, until such time as they are either given a home, or manage to fund one on their own. But this latter observation is

likely somewhat of a more recent development, stemming from obstacles presented in the modern colonial context: where employment on-reserve is scarce, and off-reserve is limited by informal racial segregation; where those who wish to reside on-reserve can't get a mortgage from a bank, because no companies will insure them; and where those who seek rental housing off-reserve again face quiet but sure limitations due to local racial friction. Be that as it may, the underlying flux of household and lineage group membership, associated with apprehensions about being either distinguished as troublesome, or being left alone, have long been a part of Niitsitapi experiences.

One important result of these residency patterns is that Niitsitapi polities have not been stable through history, but instead exhibit transformative and shifting characteristics that people see as natural and adaptive through changing circumstances. For this reason, group organizations, in themselves, have no abstract reference in the lexicon of Niitsi'powahsini – there are no words for “clan”, “band”, “tribe”, “nation”, or even “family” as objective *types* of social institutions. Instead, how one chooses to speak about such groups depends largely on what aspects of their relationships with other patterns of being need to be emphasized. A lineage group could be called *matapiiksi*, as a particular *collection of people* (delimited from *matapii*, or *human-ness*). Or they might be called *niitsitapiiksi*, as an *assemblage of real-people* (delimited from *niitsitapii*, or *real-people-ness*). The same unit could also be called *akáinaikoaiksi*, a *grouping of many-leaders* (delimited from *akáinai*, *many-leadered-ness*, a locally recognized pattern of existence at what would be the tribal level in an English hierarchical model). Finally, the very same group might be referred to as *mamiyiksi*, or *fish-eaters* (delimited from *mamiyii*, *fish-eater-ness*), the parodic characterization of a particular lineage organization on the Akáinaa Reserve today. Names at the level of lineage group, like the

physical composition of the unit itself, have historically shifted and transformed through time and circumstance. And, up until the introduction of ecclesiastic baptismal practices, there were no family or household titles. The names of individuals, like lineage groups, also changed during the course of a lifetime, particularly for men. Today, members of Niitsitapi communities have both static English identities (complete with patrilineal surnames) and “Indian” or “Blackfoot” names that often change within one’s lifetime, following the more persistent tradition.

Although these structural dynamics of Niitsitapi social organization carry both a contemporary and historic face, it is my opinion that the development of these practices, as well as the related ontological sense of sublimity and the epistemic trope of *feeding*, have a great deal to do with the peoples’ long experience as buffalo hunters on the prairie landscape. In terms of the explanatory model of *áístomatóo’p*, the *accustomed-body*, these practices amount to more than just learned cultural tradition or memory. Rather, they are the often reflexive and habitualized result of a lengthy exchange relationship between the Niitsitapi and their prairie environment, one that has affected their lives at every dimension – organically, linguistically, socially, economically, religiously, what have you. In the old days, the average size of a lineage group, the first formal category of membership beyond the individual, reflected necessities of the buffalo hunting lifestyle. Before the introduction of horses, buffalo were driven into *pisskan* that would sometimes direct them over the edges of cliffs along the river coulees and in hilly areas. These drives required a cooperative assembly of at least twenty to forty active men and a similar number of active women (Kehoe 1993). The men would run the buffalo through the corrals and (hopefully) over the cliffsides, while the women would work below to

process the animals. Each successful drive could support the lineage group for several weeks into the future.

While pisskan technology worked very well, affording the people a relatively stable and rich lifestyle, it obviously had its inherent dangers. In order to guide the buffalo in this manner, the corral structure of brush and stone needed to be physically manned at intervals, creating a living funnel that would frighten the animals toward the direction of their fall. Also required were fast buffalo runners, young men who would disguise themselves in coyote and wolf skins, approach the herd, and then keep pace behind them as they fled. Finally, there were buffalo imitators positioned near the edge of the cliff itself, who would use bison robes in such a way as to deceive the animals into following them to their death. Each of these positions had its inherent risks – placing individual, usually male lives, on foot and in close proximity to the stampeding bovines.

If a group were lucky, however, the pisskan they used would include a strategically placed boulder that resembled iiníí, and functioned to lure buffalo into position with a minimal risk to male lives. These boulders could attract the animals for miles around, who – in the absence of people – would use them as rubs, leaving behind patches of shed fur and piles of dung. In Niitsi'powahsini, the name for these types of boulders is, none too surprisingly, the same as that used for their smaller, household representations: iinisskimm. Thus, as I suggested earlier, the tradition of buffalo imagery in Niitsitapi culture is constructed of much more than mere “sympathetic magic”. It is based, rather, in a very real experiential history, where buffalo were indeed attracted to the sight of large rocks and waving robes that resembled their species, or where they could be caught off guard when the animals that appeared to be the usual coyotes or wolves following their herd suddenly jumped up on two legs and began a deadly chase. In these instances,

buffalo knowledge too had been made *accustomed* by long-association with certain socio-ecological factors.



Bruce Wolf Child stands behind an iinisskimm, a boulder resembling a buffalo calf, used to lure herds into a pisskaan enclosure (2005)

Before the Niitsitapi had access to horses, pisskan drives were really the best, most energy efficient response to subsistence on the plains. Deer, elk, antelope, and moose could be hunted with projectile technology alone, but buffalo – the most available resource – generally could not.⁷ I once attended an elders' gathering with the Aamsskáápiikani in northern Montana, commemorating (a bit after-the-fact) the centennial anniversary of the Lame Bull Treaty. While there, it was proposed that a buffalo from the free-range, tribe-owned herd be slaughtered to feed the people. Someone brought a rifle, selected an animal, and knocked it down. Immediately, a

⁷ There are a very few buffalo kill sites in the archaeological record of Niitsitapi territory, including the Fincastle site excavated jointly by Red Crow College and the University of Lethbridge in 2004, that evidence otherwise. Such places are typically small hollows where a limited number of buffalo might congregate in shelter from harsh weather, thereby positioning themselves perfectly for a surround-attack by a band of hunters.

number of other buffalo from the herd moved in to gore and trample their suffering comrade, seemingly desiring to hasten its death. By the time any people were able to reach the carcass, much of the meat had been ruined, provoking one woman to tears with the thought of having mishandled sacred food. An informant I spoke with during the course of this thesis research related a similar story, where someone he knew had gone to a buffalo farm to purchase an animal. The owner of the farm told this man which cow he could take, and assumed that he knew how to go about separating her. As my informant's friend began attempting to drive his cow into the proper corral for pick-up, one of the bulls sensed his intentions and immediately set about goring the selected animal. Thus, while one could certainly hunt an individual buffalo, procuring the meat would have required scaring all other nearby animals into flight. Elders today speak of sharpshooters who could overcome this dilemma by sending an arrow silently through the ribs from behind, in such a way that the fallen animal appeared as if just laying down for a rest. But even when successful, these sharp-shooting techniques would not have been as energy efficient as the pisskan drive, and so the individual kill was usually reserved for travelling and raiding parties, and probably could not have supported the Niitsitapi population generally.

The lineage group was, therefore, a necessary organization – both for its size and for the close relationship between the men who would need to put their lives at stake in cooperation for the kill. Another indicator of how much influence the buffalo has had on social organization and the movement of people comes from an examination of the Niitsitapi seasonal round. Prior to the establishment of reserves, during the seven winter moons of each annual cycle the bands would reside toward the western edges of the territory in forested, wind-sheltered river bottoms, moving eastward up onto the grassy

plains near springs and other water sources in summer, often traveling in something of a clockwise (or “sunwise”) circle to complete an entire round. When the saskatoon berries ripened, about a month after the summer solstice, a number of bands would join together to form a larger encampment of tribal-level organization called aako’kaatssini, *coming-into-a-circle*. Known in English as the Sundance, these gatherings are still very well attended today, with people taking in excess of two weeks off from their employment so that they can camp there. The aako’kaatssini have always been located near the most spiritually significant landmarks in Niitsitapi territory, and within walking distance of the rivers and berry thickets. The encampment might last a full lunar cycle that, in the old days, coincided with the mating season of the buffalo – a time when hunts were particularly dangerous, not only because of the unpredictable behavior of the animals, but also because disturbing them might hinder their reproductive success. For these reasons, formal sanctions were in place to make people refrain from hunting during the aako’kaatssini, and to encourage instead their participation in religious, political, and recreational activities at the gathering. It was, and is, a massive rite of intensification among the Niitsitapi, a time for becoming reacquainted with distant relatives, for developing love affairs among the young, for making large-scale political decisions, and for gaming and feasting.

Within the aako’kaatssini, another dimension of social organization becomes revealed in the existence of age-grade and gender-distinct religious societies, comprised of members from all lineage groups. These societies, unlike the fluctuating consanguineal institutions, maintain stabilities of social role and membership over centuries and millennia – only the individual faces representing various positions within them are seen to change. For this reason, in addition to their own individual titles, the

societies in general also have an abstract name in the lexicon: kanákkááatsiiksi, or *all-comrades*. Membership in these societies entails a metaphorization on relationship structures within the lineage group. Thus, those entering into a society do so as married couples, whether symbolic or actualized, and sometimes requiring the inclusion of a young male helper. Together, the couple undergoes a ritualized transfer exchange with past members, wherein they are painted with ochre, given medicine bundles to take care of, and gain new identities (symbolized by being dressed in outfits provided by passing members of the society). Those who transfer to them will, from then on, be addressed in kinship terms as “mother” and “father”, and will in turn think of the new initiates as their “children”. All who enter the society together at one time are considered a single generation, “brothers” and “sisters” to one another. And those who are two or more generations above them are the “grandparents”, who will teach them all that they need to learn. The relationships implied by this kinship structure carry with them corresponding obligations that extend beyond the encampment and are life-long.

During the aako'kaatssini, each society participates in both public and secreted performances collectively intended to ensure, for both the people as a group, and for the living beings of their socio-ecological environment, misamiipaitapiyssini (*long-time-living*) and kamotááni (*survival*). At these times, their bundles are opened to reveal the sacred gifts imparted by various spirits of the Niitsitapi cosmos, who are danced by the society members, as well as by those within the encampment at-large in an effort to escape sickness and misfortune. Beyond this, the societies are also in charge of assuring a degree of cooperative order within the camp and, in the old days, would have enforced the sanctions against buffalo hunting. Thus, those of most ultimate authority at the aako'kaatssini are the Iitskinaiksi, or *Horns*, representing the buffalo themselves. The

leader of the Iitskinaiksi takes care of the staff of life that Pawakksski brought home from his sojourn to the land of Naato'si. Individuals in violation of decisions endorsed by the Iitskinaiksi are liable to have their material possessions destroyed, thereby returning them to a practice of cooperative dependence upon others.

Niitsitapi religious societies represent an alternate dimension of social organization, modelled on, and conceptualized through, relationships embodied in experiences within the lineage group. These kanákkááatsiiksi associations, as well as the affined networks derived through the transfer of other bundles (like the Ninnaimsskaahkoyinnimaani introduced in the previous chapter), have functional value at many levels – from ensuring the sustainability of exchange relationships with the buffalo and other plains species, to instilling a sense of close affiliation between Niitsitapi families who might not spend much time together during other seasons of the year. At one level, they act paradoxically to expand the kinship circle, enhancing one's sense of affiliation and interdependence with distant relatives, animals, plants, and celestial bodies, while at the same time bringing these vast relationships into manageable form. The bundles can, in this sense, be understood as feeding sublimity through their simultaneous metonymic contraction and metaphoric expansion of relatedness and being.

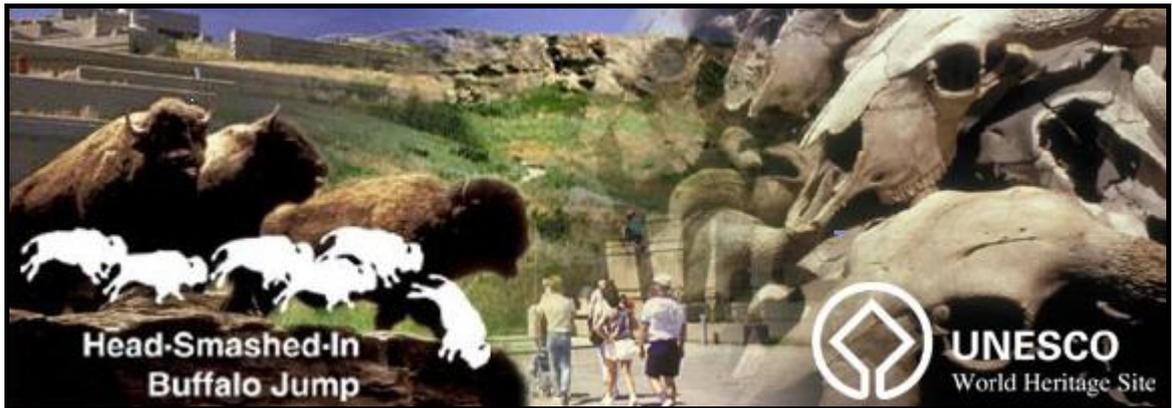
Given a landscape so vast and open as the northern prairies, the cumulative experience of subsisting for thousands of years on a buffalo economy, and the trials of periodic adaptation to environmental changes (including those brought on through colonization), Niitsitapi society has developed senses of being that have enabled them to persist through the dangers inherent to a lifestyle that has necessitated conspicuous cooperation at a large scale. Their three basic ontological categories – the individual, finite group, and sublime identities - can be seen to emerge directly from this host of

embodied familiarities: the visual perception of endless skies, lands, and fauna; the visceral knowledge of their human bodies as semi-bounded manifestations with near-far orientations, susceptible to pain, injury and death; experiences with reproduction, perhaps less sexual than economic; the observation that group dynamics vary through time and circumstance, while the patterns that enable such groups to exist remain fairly constant; the traumatic sufferings of the occasional loss of species (temporary or lasting); and the gendered need for men and women to brave physical and emotional risks for the benefit of the next generation. Each of these dimensions of the Niitsitapi experiential history serve to structure those aspects of the source domains that become extended through metaphoric and metonymic processes to configure local ontological and epistemic perspectives today, and lend additional meaning to presently felt immediacies. They are critiqued, negotiated, adapted, and reproduced through many institutionalized performances – from orthodox ritual to traditional narrative, and from a primary and modern education to the curing of cancer. They contribute semiotic frameworks for language, kinship systems, socio-political organizations, economic activities, and knowledge production. They are, in essence, the crux of kippáitapiiyssinnooni, registered in all spaces, both sacred and everyday.

Áístomatoo’p, Categorization, And The Role Of Metonym

If Lakoff and Johnson are correct in asserting that conceptual metaphorization is grounded in our most fundamental and visceral experiences, it seems to me equally apparent that our perceptions of such immediate physicalities are, in turn, heavily shaped by the influence of cultural forms, the habitualized patterns of behaviour and awareness

that have developed in the context of particular histories of socio-ecological exchange. Certainly, for the Niitsitapi, even those relatively few primary source domains applied symbolically - like the body, movement, animal behaviors, and contrasts between hot and cold, male and female, life and death, etc. – evoke very different routines of knowledge and practice than they do among Europeans.



Province of Alberta advertisement for Head Smashed-In Buffalo Jump (2005)

Consider for example, Head Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, an ancient pisskan located just above the Old Man River in the Porcupine Hills. Here, the Province of Alberta operates an interpretive centre in conjunction with UNESCO⁸, servicing visitors from around the globe who are drawn to this pisskan under the auspices that it comprises a “world heritage site”. Their impression, as mapped-out in a seven-story museum of artefacts, built into the cliff-side, is that Head Smashed-In remains significant as a monument to the past. Excavations at the site show that it was used periodically for at least ten thousand years. Stripped from the Aapátohsipikáni Reserve when the centre was built, the pisskan now serves as a useful commodity for the Province, where tourists can pay a few bucks to get an “authentic” glimpse at a piece of Niitsitapi history, take a guided trail walk, listen to censored recordings of Náápi stories at the push of a button, and maybe come away

⁸ United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

with some locally-grown beadwork as a souvenir. Little do these visitors suspect, I would assume, that the buffalo and the pisskan are not as ghosts in Niitsitapi memories of what once was, but are instead very much at the fibre of contemporary culture – essential to the concept of *íísootspi*, *feeding*, and the sublime sense of *being*.

The difference between these cultural awarenesses, from a Niitsitapi theoretical perspective, is one of *áístomatoop*, that which has been *done-to* the body/self, and habitualized. Europeans have an entirely different experiential history informing their systems of signification, such that they might never come to understand places like Head Smashed-In in the same way that Niitsitapi do. The story that is told in their “interpretive center” today is part of the Western narrative tradition, informed by a conceptual framework that is grounded in Lakoff and Johnson’s ontological imperative: the autonomous, contained body. What’s more, when this metaphorization itself converses with a linear notion of time, and with related cultural narratives telling Europeans that Head Smashed-In is a “monument to the past”, and that it is “world heritage”, they are compelled to treat this place as they would a *deceased* member of their own society. Thus, they perceive this pisskan as in danger of decay at the hands of either the natural elements or grave robbers, and therefore in need of preservation, and of autopsy, dissection, an internal examination, so that the “world” might come to understand something of its history from the condition of its organs and the contents of its belly. Here it is not only evident that Head Smashed-In has become framed metaphorically by certain aspects of the human body, and by a popular history regarding the victorious outcome of Western conquest, but also that these approaches to the qualities and treatments of the body, and to colonial relations, are structured by deeply engrained European cultural forms.

Among the Niitsitapi, on the other hand, Omahksipisskan (*big-buffalo-pound*)⁹ is approached through the sublime category of being, as a place that has mottáka (*shadow*, or “spirit”), but no particular features of containment. Rather than being treated as something historical and dead, Omahksipisskan is known to be *old*, worthy of the people’s respect and gratitude. For these reasons, when Niitsitapi visit this “site”, they often feel compelled to *feed* this elder spirit, as it has fed them - leaving it offerings of tobacco, raw kidney, or blankets. In both the Niitsitapi and European approaches, the pisskan is conceptualized in terms of an ontic category that is obviously modelled on experiences with other organisms (not “bodies” per say). But what aspects of their respective experiences with the source organisms become selected for symbolic extension depend largely on the interventions of cultural form. That Head Smashed-In is a *site*, that it is primarily of *historical* value, in need of *preservation* and archaeological study, or that it comprises a *heritage* belonging to all of humankind, are characteristics not necessarily inherent to the pisskan itself, but rather imposed upon it by symbolically-laden assumptions that are culturally specific.

Some of Lakoff and Johnson’s predecessors, the cognitive linguists whose ideas they drew upon in formulating their conceptual metaphor theory, had come to recognize this important role of culture in the art of signification. For instance, Eleanor Rosch’s work with categorization (1977), also known as “prototype theory”, was pivotal in the formation of Lakoff and Johnson’s thinking, and drew in-turn heavily off Roger Brown’s (1958 and 1965) “basic-level categories”. Brown had observed that there are certain lexical constructs in any given language that seem to represent our realities more strongly than other related terms. A “shoe”, for instance, is more basic and meaningful in an

⁹ This is the Niitsi’powahsin name for this particular pisskan. The real “Head Smashed-In” is located some distance further upriver from the “world heritage site”.

English speaker's experience than an "athletic shoe" (subordinate), or than an "article of clothing" (superordinate). He believed that the reason a "shoe" could be considered a basic-level category – and therefore one of the earliest, most phonetically simple words an English speaker learns – is because we have a distinct complex of interaction with "shoes" that we do not have with either "athletic shoes" in particular, or with "articles of clothing" in general. In other words, a "shoe" is an important, culturally meaningful, basic-level category, because it enters our experience in a very distinctive way – it is the level of experiential event associated with putting something on our feet, wearing it around, warming and protecting those extremities, expressing what kind of walking our individual or social lives either require or imagine, etc. An entire network of associated action comes together in a marked way when we experience "shoe-ing", i.e. as a gestalt – a collection of co-occurring experiences that, combined, seem to comprise a whole event that is more basic than its individual aspects.

Rosch, on the other hand, was interested in whether such gestalts were, of necessity, either linked-with or, more importantly, determined-by language. Having, like so many others, misread Benjamin Whorf's ideas as Newtonian and mono-directional, rather than systems-think, Rosch was setting-out to disprove linguistic determinism. What she found, through various experiments, was that people could learn new words for categories that would likely correspond to Brown's "basic-level" more easily than they could learn specific (subordinate) or generalizing (superordinate) lexicals – and that they would do so whether or not their native languages originally had terms for such categories. In other words, certain bundles of experience were shown to be psychologically real for human beings, even if they had no linguistic representation for those gestalts. From these experiments, Rosch also developed her "prototype theory",

which held that for any given basic-level category, people would understand a “best example” of that gestalt, against which other members of the category would be judged in terms of “family resemblance”. Thus, “runners” might be considered better members of the “shoe” category than “cleats”, or “ballet slippers”, or “horse shoes”, because runners represent more aspects of the full gestalt than these oddball types of footwear. What is important then about basic-level structures is that they index prototypical *clusters* of interaction. As Lakoff later writes:

“What determines basic-level structure is a matter of correlations: the overall perceived part-whole structure of an object correlates with our motor interaction with that object and with the functions of the parts (and our knowledge of those functions). It is important to realize that these are not purely objective and ‘in the world’; rather they have to do with the world as we interact with it: as we perceive it, imagine it, affect it with our bodies, and gain knowledge about it.” (1987:50)

Indeed, the argument for gestalt experience and prototype effect as the foundation of our systems of categorization, signification, or metaphorization is strong when, as above, the focus is upon dense clusters of interacting and co-occurring events, of which we too are aspects. It then seems rather odd that Lakoff and Johnson would propose that the predominant embodied nature of our collective ontological knowledge – including the existence of substances - derives from metaphoric perceptions of and with the in-out orientation and “containment” modelled by our own bodies, as if the experience of objectification (itself necessary if we are to “interact” with the supposed “part-whole” structure of our anatomy) could arise outside of a context of pre-existing ontological-sensation. Would not their own treatment of the term “containment”, hardly heard in the everyday language of anatomy, suggest more of a directionality from cultural artefacts to the body than visa-versa? I believe Lakoff and Johnson stray from the premises of their own theory, and effectively silence the role of metonymic (gestalt) forces, by suggesting

a directionality of the experience informing signification as moving only from the body outward. In contrast, what Brown and Rosch have offered is that our most basic identifiable experiences, those from which our primary lexical categories develop and symbolic thinking stems, are gestalt events, *metonymic* clusters of interaction that occur within a cultured context, and that we come to register as fundamental co-occurrences against which to judge degrees of similarity. Certainly our knowledge of “existence” itself is based in a much wider network of interactions than that which, peculiar to Western cultures, assumes the division of mind and body necessary for Lakoff and Johnson’s ontological imperative to work.

Áístomatoó’p, as an alternative model for this experientialist paradigm, seems to me much more aligned with the ideas put forth by Brown and Rosch. It describes the holistic convergence of all experiences – physical, ecological, social, cultural, intellectual, spiritual, etc. – that serves to habituate the body/self to particular modes of behaviour and interpretation. Niitsitapi thinkers often criticize Western scholars for their attempts to disarticulate such wholeness in the context of analysis, and for their propensity to narrowly pinpoint but a limited number of causal *agents* involved in the production of any given phenomena. In fact, this differentiation in the two systems of analytics – Niitsitapi and European – often serves as a stabilizing factor for the boundaries to communication evident between these populations. A Western scholar will approach a given phenomena from a particular disciplinary angle, as either a biological, cultural, philosophical, artistic, psychological, recreative, or physical event, etc. Áístomatoó’p combines all of these facets as need be to describe the analyst’s observations, and even allows for an expansion of the discourse to consider, for instance, the influences of Náápi (the trickster/creator), or the contributions of dreams.

Western anthropology, which prides itself as fostering a similar holistic perspective, has approximated the concept of *áístomatóo’p* in Bourdieu’s (1977[1972]) theory of practice or, more specifically, in his notion of habitus. In this model, there is an integration of all past experiences into a system of dispositions that functions “at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions,” applied – in much the same way as a language - toward the accomplishment of infinitely differentiated tasks (ibid:261). Habitus speaks to both a principle of sociation and of individuation, in that we are each understood to acquire, through practice, a history of experience with the application of certain categories for judgement and action. While all members of our social world share familiarities with these conventional categories, just as they do a common language, each individual still remains uniquely stationed in that social world and internalizes his or her own combinations of usage, or schemata. Like with *áístomatóo’p*, anthropologists interested in Bourdieu’s theory of practice see that it is as much our social environment that becomes symbolically imprinted on our bodies as vice-versa. But unlike these anthropologists, Niitsitapi analysts applying their theory of *áístomatóo’p* do not limit their notions of sociality and signification to human beings alone. In fact, they attribute all of the knowledge of a given society, the everyday categories absorbed by individuals through practice, to histories of social interaction with the wider membership of an ecological system. Thus, it is a rock that first teaches the Niitsitapi woman how to communicate with buffalo, and the animals themselves who transfer humankind the right to hunt.

Another set of Western ideas that approximates this holism in *áístomatóo’p* comes from the investigations of cognitive science, particularly those approaches to embodiment fashioned by Maturana and Varela (1987) and Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991), and

applied toward the whole of linguistic anthropological theory by Foley (1997). In these authors' works, it is proposed that we think of the interaction between organism and environment in terms of "structural coupling". Chemical changes in the environment trigger sensory reception in the organism, which proceeds to adjust and adapt accordingly. However, since the nature of an organism's neural system is "closed" (i.e. because the brain makes changes to itself), the state of that system at any given moment, which is partly a function of its history of previous organization, determines the possibilities for adaptation into following states. In other words, although our environment (cultural or what have you) may change rapidly and significantly, our adaptability to that shift is limited by our history of neural organization leading up to that moment. One's conceptual system adjusts only by the degrees that are feasible, given their present organization. In this sense, our environment (along with its meaning) may not be something "out there", but that which we in a very literal sense *embody*.

While the theory of *áistomatóo'p* is aligned with this first premise of the cognitive science model, that which has the organism embodying its environment through transformative histories of experience, it differs in the outline of interaction leading to that point. Operating from a cultural perspective, so familiar to bioscience, that favors the kind of atomistic metaphorizations described by Lakoff and Johnson - the body as a contained unit - cognitive theorists assume a degree of separation between organism and environment that is not entirely necessary, one that is a function of their own conceptual inheritance. In fact, were one to press their logic further, it would have to be argued that each and every neuron or organ of the body is itself a "closed" unit, as none apparently move through the others. Where the objectification of this being-ness ends and its environment begins is a boundary every bit as fuzzy as that which separates mountain

from foothill. It seems to me, from my understanding of áístomatóo'p, that “the organism” as an active neural and muscular *sub-system*, is not at all “closed” to its environmental Other – but rather permeable and inseparable, even indistinguishable from it, for that environment is the very physical and conceptual stuff that comprises the organism itself, the energy that courses through, transforming and shaping it. In this view, the individual being is likened to, or metonymized as, an event phenomena of the wider socio-ecosystem. The mechanism of its cognitive transformation, however, is none-the-less slow, and based in an experiential history of the body.

Perhaps significantly, it was a beaver who – during the course of this thesis study – most impressed upon me the importance of these seemingly minor differences between the holistic Niitsitapi theory of áístomatóo'p, Bourdieu's human-centric habitus, and the separation of body from environment assumed by cognitive science. Throughout the term of this research, as during most of my lifetime, I'd found myself drawn to taking long walks in areas less peopled, as a means of gaining a greater familiarity with the local ecology. If I had gone for a week or more without taking one of these walks, I'd begin to sense that I was missing some important happening transpiring in the coulees, or out on the prairie, or by the river. So, not wanting to be a hermit, I'd go visiting. One of the neighboring groups I sometimes came across were the beavers. On most occasions, they were not so thrilled to see me. When I stepped foot on the gravelled river banks, they'd swim out into the water. If I approached up to the water's edge, they'd slap their tails (alerting others of my presence), and either dive or swim further away. Some would analyze their behavior as involving signs – since, as they say, animals don't think symbolically. But on one occasion during this thesis study, while walking in a somewhat more frequently peopled area, an adult beaver allowed me to come right up and sit in the

grass beside it, even talking and singing, as it casually stripped the bark off a willow sprig. Still reflecting upon this experience some months later, the possibility occurred to me that neither the assured beaver, nor his precautious relatives, necessarily understood what I myself was about. The beavers that kept their distance had misjudged my intentions by a long shot. The beaver that allowed me to sit beside it may have been more accustomed to the presence of people and, had I actually intended to kill it, wouldn't have stood a chance. In other words, both of these patterns of beaver behavior could be understood as responses to environmental stimuli that betrayed certain histories of cognitive organization. Neither animal was able to adjust in accord to the potential, but not necessarily inevitable, danger of my presence. They were embodying environments that were experiential, rather than necessarily instinctual or, in the really real sense, "out there". But of the two, it was the beaver that ventured to let me near who most accurately gauged the threat that day, and this because it had become accustomed to certain social experiences. On the other hand, I had never known a beaver to let me come that close – and in this sense, it is clearly I who could be understood as embodying an assumed reality, as misreading the beaver's intent, and failing to more fully appreciate our social relationship.

The cognitive theorists mentioned above posit that biological activity becomes "social" when arising in a context of *recurrent* structural coupling between two or more organisms in a shared environment – like the behavior of the beaver that had grown comfortable around people at a particular location. When this kind of "social structural coupling" occurs between organisms for some time, their behaviors can be seen to become coordinated, communicative. And if the social relationships recur through multiple generations, transferring such harmonized activities from one to the next, and

fixing the communicative patterns into a relatively stable code, or language, the resultant modes of behavior can be considered “cultural”. It is in this manner, more fully conversant with the theory of *áístomatoó’p*, that contemporary Niitsitapi continue to reproduce a sublime identity in relation to their localized socio-ecosystem, and to understand that identity as *fed* its knowledge by the totality of experiences within this environment – a mergence of history in presence that renders entirely logical the metaphorical notion “education is our buffalo”. *Áístomatoó’p*, then, comprises an experientialist model that, unlike Lakoff and Johnson’s, gives equal (if not greater) priority to the metonymizing forces that play into any development of signification. It defines a categorical inseparability of self from society, home, and cosmos that, as we shall explore further in the next chapter, carries important implications for how the Niitsitapi envision their physical bodies, and for the specific aspects of those bodies that they apply toward metaphorical construction.

Niitoyiusti: Real Enclaves



Ksisskstaki fearlessly allowing me to approach at the Old Man River (2004)

There are four large bodies of water on the western edge of kitawahsinnooni, clustered where the continental divide meets the forty-ninth parallel to separate the state of Montana from the province of Alberta, that Niitsi'powahsini speakers call Paahtomahksíkimiiksi, or *Inner-Lakes*. English speakers have come to know these places as Waterton, Sherburne, Saint Mary's, and Two Medicine, a series of breathtakingly scenic glacial pools nestled into the east side of the Rocky Mountains. It was along the shore, toward the southern end of the centremost inner-lake, Saint Mary's, that one of the most ancient and all-encompassing Niitsitapi stories unfolds. This is the place where White Grass lived away from the people, with his wife and baby boy. Above their camp towered Divide Mountain, marking the headwaters of streams that coalesce to feed into

the Milk, Marias, and St. Mary's Rivers – which bring sustenance and cleansing east across kitawahsinnooni, eventually spilling into the South Saskatchewan and the Missouri, and continuing to the Great Lakes in the north, and the Mississippi and Gulf of Mexico in the south.

White Grass was a trapper. And there, at the base of the mountains, the origin of so many great waters, he could find just about any kind of animal he wanted. It was unusual and lonely for a small family like his to live so isolated from other people, but White Grass enjoyed his success there in accumulating the most exquisite furs and pelts to be had. Every day he'd go out, from dawn till dark, checking his traps along the animal trails. Sometimes he'd be gone overnight, leaving his wife and son alone in their lodge. One evening, after an especially long sojourn into the bush, White Grass came home to find his infant boy unaccompanied and crying – the mother was nowhere to be seen. Being an excellent tracker, White Grass wandered around their camp searching for some sign of where she might have gone, but he couldn't even find so much as a footprint. After some time of searching like this, he resigned himself to the likelihood that she was lost, probably eaten by a bear.

That night, White Grass sat awake in his lodge, holding the baby boy, who cried in desperation over the loss of his mother. Hearing that infant's wails, a spirit came to visit them, an apparition formed into the shape of a man. He told White Grass and the infant not to feel depressed or lonely, that the woman they mourned was still alive and safe. She hadn't been eaten. Instead, she was charmed into the chief lodge of the Soyitapiiksi, the *Underwater-Life*, to stay with an old beaver who was the leader of all the lake's inhabitants. The spirit said that there was still a way to get her back, if White Grass was willing to suffer.

The next night, this same spirit man returned to the lodge. He told White Grass that the old beaver had many children, but that among these was a small albino pup that was the favorite son. If White Grass could capture that young beaver, he would be able to get his wife back.

On the third night, the spirit man came to White Grass's lodge yet again. This time, he gave instructions on how to capture the albino beaver. The spirit told White Grass to gather excrement from the elk, deer, and buffalo, and to rub this all over his body, masking his human scent. Then he must dig a hole near the water, and wait there, covered by brush, watching for the white beaver to come ashore. When the pup came, White Grass was to capture it with his bare hands, being careful not to harm it in any way, and to take it into his lodge to await further instruction.

Come morning, White Grass did as the spirit man had instructed, but the young beaver never appeared. Day by day thereafter, he smeared his body with excrement and waited in the hole. He saw lots of beavers, but none that were pure white. It was difficult waiting in that hole each day, hungry, nearly naked, and smeared with dung, seeing all the waterfowl that he might otherwise be able to capture and take for food. There were many times when White Grass felt like giving up. Then one afternoon, watching out over the lake, he noticed a flock of geese startle and take flight. There, where they had been on the water, was the wake of a small albino beaver swimming toward shore. White Grass sat perfectly still until the pup had come out of the water, and then leaped from his hole and seized it.

That night, as he sat in his lodge, holding both his own son and the young white beaver on his lap, the spirit man came to visit a fourth time. He told White Grass to hang onto the beaver's favorite son at all costs. There would be an emissary sent by the

Soyiitapiiksi to negotiate an exchange. This person would tell White Grass to release the young beaver, and that they would send his wife back in turn. But he must refuse, remain in his lodge, and wait for the old one, the leader of the Soyitapiiksi, to come bearing gifts. The spirit man told him what gifts he should demand before agreeing to the exchange for his wife's return.

Later that same night, after the spirit man departed, White Grass heard someone coming out of the lake. A different spirit entered his lodge, an otter transformed into human shape. This otter man told White Grass that the old beaver had sent him with a message, that if his favorite son was released, so too would the woman be returned. White Grass sat in place, the two boys on his lap, gently stroking the albino beaver's fur. "No," he said, "We like this young beaver here. He makes a good playmate for my lonely son. I think we'll keep him until my boy's mother has returned."

Hearing this, the otter man left, and all was quiet again. Some time later, White Grass heard more noise coming from the lake, voices of many people singing as they approached the shore. These were the Soyitapiiksi – the old beaver, the loon, the otter, and all the other animals and birds who lived in the lake. As they emerged from the water and walked toward the lodge, they were joined by some of the land animals – the buffalo, coyote, fox, badger, and others. It was a very large group, all walking single file in the night, singing as they went along. The procession made its way around the lodge four times before entering. They were led by the old beaver and White Grass's wife, who carried a bundle on her back.

When they came inside, White Grass was sitting on his bed, against the west wall of the lodge, holding his boy and the young albino beaver on his lap. With hand signals, he motioned for his wife to sit next to him on his south side, and for the old beaver to sit on

his north. All the others took their places around the lodge following this pattern, with the females on the south and males to the north. When all had found their seats, the old beaver turned toward White Grass and reasoned, “Your wife has been returned safe, now you should release my son.” But White Grass, following the instructions of the spirit man who had helped him all those nights, sat still, gently stroking the young white pup. “No,” he said, “We’ve grown fond of your boy here. He’s made my son happy. It’s good that you’ve returned my wife, but if you want to take someone away from our child again, you will have to give me something more as well.”

“Perhaps we should just eat this man,” Otter suggested, baring his teeth and eyeing White Grass dangerously. “This human is nothing to us. Look how many we are. He has no means of defense, and yet sits here making demands. Certainly I am ready to taste his flesh.”

White Grass didn’t respond, he just sat there petting that young beaver. Then the old one, the beaver man decided, “No. We shouldn’t eat him. If we do that, then the humans will always hunt for us. Nothing will stop them from killing us underwater beings. They’d keep after us until we were all gone. We’ll give this man what he asks.”

The old beaver began to sing. As he sang, he brought items out of the bundle that the woman had carried in, and set them in front of White Grass. The beaver man sang seven songs in total, placing in turn the eagle’s tailfeathers, the pelt of a black coyote, red kit-fox, and fisher, the hide of a white buffalo calf, the pelt of a marten, and the hide of a cow elk. “This is the sacred Beaver Bundle,” the old one said, “I’m transferring it to you in exchange for my son.”

White Grass sat, petting the young albino beaver still. All waited for his reply, but he just kept stroking that beaver until, finally, he looked up at the old one and said, “This is not enough.”

Hearing those words, the old beaver made an announcement. He called on all the other animals and birds who had come, from the land and underwater, to step forth and offer something to the bundle. Heeding this plea from their leader, each of these beings began, one after another, to come forward. Each sang seven songs, and gave something of themselves. The first to approach was Matsí’sai’pi, or *Fine-Charger*, the loon, chief of all the water birds. He gave his skin to the bundle and, following him, most others gave their skins as well. The last to come forward were the turtle and frog. Turtle, having no songs of his own, borrowed some from the lizard, and put them in the ceremony. Frog didn’t have any songs either, and began looking for someone to borrow from. When he did this, turtle became upset and knocked him onto his back. Laying like that, frog held up seven fingers, representing the number of winter moons during which pelts would be in their prime. This is what he gave to the bundle. Then the three of them – turtle, frog, and lizard – painted representations of themselves upon a piece of rawhide, and put this with the bundle. Finally, all sat back and waited for White Grass to respond. The trapper remained unimpressed, betraying little emotion as he sat petting the young white beaver on his lap. “What else?” he asked.

The old beaver then offered a whistle, explaining that it was to be blown when the bundle is opened. Elk and otter contributed their whistles as well. Then buffalo calf came forward and offered his hide as the inner wrapping for the bundle, and buffalo cow came to give her skin for the outer wrapping. Last of them was the buffalo bull, who

offered his hooves, explaining that they could be danced whenever White Grass wanted to bring his ceremonies to a close.

“What else?” White Grass asked.

All had given him their most valuable belongings. Only the old beaver had anything left. Taking these items out, he held them up in turn. The first was a gambling wheel that should be played only before going to war, in order to bring good luck. The next was a small willow stick, with the bark chewed off. Each time the bundle was opened, the first person to grab the stick would have good fortune. Finally, the old beaver held up a small bladder bag. “In this bag are the seeds of your tobacco. If you plant them with your spring opening, you can return from your travels in the fall season and find tobacco to smoke and distribute to the people during all your ceremonies.”

At last, White Grass consented to the exchange and returned the young albino beaver to the Soyitapiiksi. Just as this was done, the door-covering of his lodge was flung aside, and a man walked in. It was the same spirit man who had come to give White Grass instructions on those four previous nights. As he walked into this circle of beings, he led two dogs. One of these was female. The other, which dragged a travois behind it, was male. The spirit man explained that he was Naato’si, *Sacredness* or the Sun, and that he had come to help White Grass in those earlier nights, after his daily work was finished, because he’d felt sorry for the poor infant boy who’d lost his mother. He advised White Grass to move their family back amongst the people, bringing the two dogs along with them. The male dog with the travois would haul the Beaver Bundle. The female was offered so that, in the years to come, there would be many dogs amongst the camps, warning the people of approaching danger and relieving their burdens when they moved around.

This is how White Grass and his wife became the first Beaver People among the Niitsitapi. In commemoration of the event, White Grass took a new name, Naato'si Innipi, *Brings-Down-The-Sun*. Some other Beaver Men since have carried-on that name. And today, twice a year, Beaver Bundles are opened in kitawahsinnoni for performances that renew this earliest of transfers. It is to these openings – enactments of that waterside exchange - that many people go, in the first days of spring and just before winter, to dance as those animal spirits, restore harmonious social relations, resolve sickness, and escape danger.

Scouting Toward The Niitsitapi Body

When I sat down to write this thesis on áístomatoo'p (the *accustomed-body*) in Niitsitapi experience, Ksisskstaki Amopistaan, the *Beaver-Bundle*, is where I originally thought it would have to begin. The White Grass story is, after all, an account of the very first bundle ever transferred to the Niitsitapi, the principal living representation of their metonym between body, family, home, society, and cosmos. For myself, Ksisskstaki Amopistaan *felt* like the most appropriate place to open, not only for this ancient quality, the bundle's historicized role in the development of the Niitsitapi religious complex as a most efficient artistic interpretation of the interdependent nature of diverse life, but also because my own introduction to Niitsitapiipaitapiiwahsini, *real-people-way-of-living*, started with the repatriation of a Beaver Bundle from Harvard's Peabody Museum. It was through involvement in this affair that I first met some of the individuals who would become my advisors, relatives, colleagues, and allies in kitawahsinnooni, who invited me into their homes and ritual spaces, and who validated my contributions to the local lifestyle project, a continual process of reproduction, syncretism, and revitalization. This

experiential history has certainly left its impression on my analytical perspective, becoming that cognitive nexus or gestalt against which everything else I've since been introduced to has found bearing, so that almost a decade later Ksisskstaki Amopistaan still *feels*, to me, like the most fundamental representation of kipáítapiiyssinnooni, or our-way-of-living.

For other people in these communities, however, blending the experiences of their own personal and shared histories, the essence of this world, and of their *being* as part of it, might be better expressed as relative to aako'kaatssini (*coming-into-a-circle*, the Sundance), or through their transfers into the Iitskinaiksi (*Horns*) or the Ninnaimsskaiksi (*leaders-saving-food*, the Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundles). Still others, not particularly involved with the bundles, might regard kipáítapiiyssinnooni in terms of their memories of childhood amidst loving and thoughtful grandparents, the stories told of ancestors who were here generations earlier, or their present familiarities with the numerous members of these communities to whom they can trace a genetic relationship. There are even those today who reference such widespread phenomena as powwow, and their participation in its continuity, as representative of a local way of being. Thus, despite my own convictions and aesthetic sensibilities, in writing about Niitsitapi embodiment it is necessary to concede a lack of unified representation, or any point of origin out of which to best, or most genuinely, frame the ethnographic construct. Which is not to say that there is any shortage of substance to be called "Niitsitapi". But when it comes to the interactive experiences between bodies and knowledge, autonomous form dissipates, social unions become relative, and lineality feeds back into itself, everything is internal and in-process. This phenomena itself becomes the story that most needs to be told – first, last, and throughout - one whose principle character I have called "the sublime".

Despite the admission of subjectivity in one's commitment to particular bodies of representation, it is no coincidence that Ksisskstaki Amopistaan created the lasting impression it has on my life, as also upon the lives of those others whose experiences it has shaped even more intimately. This transformative quality is, in fact, the greatest testament to the power of these bundles – they bring spirits together in unforgettable and lasting networks of affined kinship. Hence, in part, the metaphorical term “amopistaan”, *bound-together-by-wrapping-around* or, more simply, bundled. In a way, it is this process of binding or bundling together diverse environmental constituents in the human experience that defines the metonymic aspect of áístomatoó'p, and which has prompted me to pursue research toward a better appreciation for the kinds of interrelationships that constitute Niitsitapi-specific ways of being. Having opened a door, in previous chapters, to an investigation of the sublime ontic category as a predominant factor in local experiences, it might now be fitting to illustrate how simultaneously expansive and condensed this awareness can become, how much of the Niitsitapi world is bound-together within it, and what this perspective entails in terms of perceptions of anatomical bodies. Through my understanding, both uniquely personal and shaped by local convention, the classic model for this sublime body is to be found among the beavers and the story of White Grass.

Just as with Pawakksski, steam-making, the buffalo-stones, and pisskan, the origin of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan is foremost a story to be lived through ritual enactment – in this case, during the liminal days of early spring and late fall, those transitional periods between the intense cycles of deep freeze and blossoming life that characterize an annual succession on these northern plains. The beaver ceremonies combine the scents of sweetgrass and tobacco, the sounds of rawhide rattles, song, and melodious prayer, the

tastes of boiled meat, oil-fried bannock, berry soup, and mint tea, and the tangible kinetics of dancing as animal spirits, to create a fully experiential, tactile, participatory day-long telling of White Grass's encounter that is a most certain route to valid knowledge production in Niitsitapi pedagogical traditions. As previously mentioned, it is not deemed adequate here to only know *of* a story. Rather, one must *become* it by having it *done to* him. Only then can its deepest meanings be made familiar, as the story is transformed and regenerated through the process of áístomatoop. Yet, knowing *of* the Ksisskstaki Amopistaan origin, as a kind of grand narrative, may be an important aspect of this process, as it offers an indispensable guide for how the ritual, and life, is to be experienced. Like the tale of Pawakksski, it functions as an anchoring point against which a great many personal and social anecdotes may find linkage based on felt degrees of co-occurrence and similarity. Mattingly has called such procedures "emplotment", the service of narrative to wrest control over otherwise overwhelmingly complex happenings (1998:2). In the case of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan, the White Grass story is directed toward and through its associated rituals, becoming in-turn transformed into intimate experiences of that foundational exchange which has forever defined the relationship between humanity and the living being that is both the bundle and the world.

The maintenance of the relationships invigorated and committed to sensual memory through Ksisskstaki Amopistaan ceremonies is carried home by participants in the form of a Niitsitapi ethos – the aesthetic qualities and consequential moral characteristics of ever-negotiated values and beliefs that feed into, and register through, postures and sentiments of the everyday. This is especially so for the beaver man and woman, who must care for the bundle, their waking hours regimented by protocols and taboos that urge them toward kímmapiiyipitssini, *habitual-kindness*; their dreams a harbor to visitation by

the animal spirits. But it is also true for ceremonial participants of a more general order, who come away from bundle openings with ideals and attitudes drawn from the White Grass story. They may, for instance, become more attuned to recognizing, in both themselves and others, subtle degrees of anti-social or individualistic behavior that could breed trouble, not only for the persons committing such acts, but also for their dependents, their relations. The lived-story exposes or substantiates, for many, the notion that problem resolution is something best achieved through cooperative efforts, and reconciliatory offerings. Children, left relatively naïve to these adult fascinations, are understood to be cherished beyond the most favored possessions, even one's own body. And all patterns, cycles, and forms co-inhabiting an area are felt to be interdependent, like a vast kinship network defined in spatial relations. These are but a few of the many ideologies instilled through beaver ceremonies, *fed* to its Niitsitapi relations. And, like any chronicle, the White Grass tale is also revealing in its absences. There are no characters marked as particularly good or evil, no polarities evident outside of the gender distinctions that I shall soon discuss as extremes of a continuum that charts the sequence of life. Social leaders, even gods, do not exercise force – they are not able to *make* things happen, but only to suggest directions. And they are the first to commit themselves toward necessary sacrifices.

Perhaps the most important message woven into the Ksisskstaki Amopistaan origin, that which I've heard stressed by those who are transferring this story through ceremony today, pertains to the limitations inherent in the human form. According to their teachings, a key implication of what happened at that lodge beside Paahtomahksíkimiiksi is that human beings are, by nature, deficient. In their words, people are the “most pitiful” beings on earth. We are the only creatures who come into this life without any

inherent power, without instinctual knowledge. We are delicate, weak, and slow. Everything we have, and all that we learn, must be gifted to us by the other spirits with whom we co-exist: the animals, plants, mountains, waters, winds, the earth, the sun, moon, and morning star. All of these beings, associated with three dimensions of the cosmos – the *soyiitapiiksi* or *underwater-life*, *ksaahkomitapiiksi* or *land-life*, and *sspommitapiiksi* or *above-life* - contributed to the formation of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan as Niitsitapi body and world. Even those lessons which our parents and grandparents teach us have been inherited, like the White Grass story itself, through lineages of transfer that always originate in gifts from these other beings.

While this view may be epitomized in the origin of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan, I should hope not to give the impression that only a few old beaver people subscribe to it. In practice, this is a premise echoed in all of the local bundle traditions, and widely held in Niitsitapi communities, even by those individuals who may never have learned or participated in the orthodox stories. It has a hand in shaping, at all levels, and particularly when dealing with issues of health, Niitsitapi social and cultural behaviors. It even serves as a kind of ecological anthropology, a model used to interpret the activities of peoples both within these populations and without. For instance, early-on in the research for this thesis, I consulted Frank Weasel Head, a respected Akáínaa elder who refers to this tradition as the “theory of co-existence” and “the one thing nobody understands about our ways”. When asked to explain his views on Niitsitapi concepts of health and illness, Frank directed me to observe changing strategies in the logging industry of British Columbia. For many decades, people there had been clear-cutting the forests without any consideration of their dependent relationship to the trees and other allied species. More recently, logging companies had been planting seedlings in the areas

where they cut. “They’re just beginning to learn,” Frank told me. “They don’t know it yet, but what they are doing is leaving an offering. That’s the same as our way.”

Thus, one imperative of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan, as well as the other bundles in this intricate complex, is the inducement of allegiance between human beings of various social orders and the wider Niitsitapi cosmos. Drawing off Lakoff and Johnson’s experientialist paradigm, Nurit Bird-David (1993) has proposed that there may be a universal metaphorization, particularly among foraging societies, that represents human-nature relatedness in terms of social interactions. Using four case studies from around the world, he demonstrates how this underlying association adopts varying forms. Among the Cree of Mistassini, he suggests that hunting is understood as a kind of sexual intercourse: the man, attired in fine clothing courts his prey or, if the animal fails to appear, seduces it with charms – the act of killing is itself talked about in terms of intercourse, and the carcass then becomes offspring from the relationship, turned over to the meticulous care of women. Moving on to Western Desert Aborigines, Bird-David sees in their practice of “the Dreaming” a procreative metaphor. A woman remembers the *location* where she first senses her pregnancy, and the child learns of this place as the abode of the ancestral spirit who fathered him, leaving birthmarks that correspond to geographic features of the landscape, and committing him to a kinship network expanding there-from. The !Kung Bushmen of Kalahari relate to animals in terms of name-sakes: each person bearing the same title as a significant food species in the environment and, by this, being considered equal and connected to it, enabling the hunter to sense the movements and dispositions of his prey, and visa-versa, the two working strategically through a game that may, for the animal, be lost at the expense of its life. Finally, he surveys the Nayaka of South India, the Batek of Malaysia, and the Mbuti of

Zaire, all of whom illustrate metaphorical systematicity around nature-human relatedness conceptualized as adult-child care. They address the forest as a parent, thanking it for affection, food, and other provisions. Their ceremonies involve gathering and feasting with the forest spirits, these parents then having occasion to voice their expectations and complaints, and the children – in turn – to request whatever may be desired.

Where Bird-David has proposed that these human-nature metaphorizations are modelled on our own social relations, I would again suggest that we respect the complex interactions between body, cultural form, and environment before asserting too strongly this unidirectionality of the metaphoric construct. The Niitsitapi, for instance, blend spatial perceptions with household familiarities and interdependencies, generating an aesthetics of co-occurrence and similarity such that they are motivated to seek *kinship-like* relations with more distant members of their society, with some of the other cultural groups now residing in kitawahsinnooni, and with the many diverse life forms of their cosmic order. Those who share a defined space are understood as being interdependent like family. On the other hand though, it can also be seen that the social organization of Niitsitapi kinship units reflects a degree of shaping by the environment itself – human responses to seasonal weather changes and buffalo behavioural cycles that, to some degree, persist in Niitsitapi experiences today. If we add to this the powerful influence of the bundle rituals on people's social lives and identities, where – like with Ksisskstaki Amopistaan – there is evidence of metaphorized interactions between the Niitsitapi and a large number of local animal species, one could easily find basis for strong arguments along the lines of those pursued by the elders of these communities, proposing that humankind has, at one time or another, gained all of its knowledge via exchanges with nature that become embodied through the process of áístomatoó'p.

The advocates of orthodox Niitsitapi traditions also depart from Bird-David's analysis in their belief that, whether living in "foraging" communities or not, people must ultimately learn their proper relationships to these environmental others, and both confirm and respect such family-relationships through ritualized reproductive exchange. Naapiikoiksi, *Náápi's-kind-of-people* (i.e. Europeans), are viewed as only recently having begun to understand that they need to *give* in order to persist in this "New World". Thus, as Frank says, logging companies in British Columbia are starting to "leave offerings" to the forests they have, for so long now, harvested without empathy. Whether or not one finds such Niitsitapi analyses compelling, it must still be conceded that Western peoples are not exempt from the conceptual processes involved in applying perceptions of nature toward metaphorizations that inform their social relationships. These blends of experience can be witnessed in many popular phrases of the English language: children are busy with *horse* play, *monkeying* around, and *puppy* love, when they're not gathering social lessons from *Animal Planet*; women are accused of *bitchiness*, men of *bullying*; young married couples evidence the *nesting* instinct; and political leaders guide their *flocks*. Perhaps the most productive metaphors of nature-to-human socialization in the Western world come through an awareness of predator-prey relationships, and differentiations between the "really wild" and the "domesticated". Consider, for instance, the following excerpt from my field journal:

Coinciding with the full moon, in early December of 2003, the Lethbridge Herald ran an urgent story, warning the inhabitants of this southern Alberta city about a vagrant "wolf-dog" that the local police force suspected in the disappearance of numerous house-cats and small lap-dogs. The article urged city residents to keep vigilance over their children's movements outside of their homes, suggesting that it might only be a matter of days before the vicious "wolf-dog" turned its appetites toward scrumptious little people. In the mean time, the police would continue scouring the city parks and back alleys in search of this illusive beast, who had

allegedly walked away after consuming enough tranquilizers to knock-down a three-hundred pound rottweiler – proof positive of it's wild ancestry.

Throughout the following week, the morning paper reported daily updates on “wolf-dog” sightings and the police pursuits that ensued there-from, heightening the fears of those who would be concerned about such things. That Wednesday, eighty kilometers outside of Lethbridge, at the southwest end of the Akáínaa Reserve, I delivered my final lecture for the fall semester in an *Introduction to Anthropology* course at Red Crow Community College. On the reserve, nobody ever seems too worried about the potential threat of “dangerous” animals. Most households could claim association to at least three or four half-wild dogs, living in partial dependence upon people's breakfast and dinner scraps that are thrown outside each day. Even the occasional grizzly bear attacks, occurring in the mountains another hundred kilometers west, only ever befall White people. That particular afternoon, during a midpoint break in my lecture, I noticed a young student named Anthony standing in the college parking lot, waiting for one of his cousins to pick him up for the drive home. When the evening hours approached, and Anthony's ride still hadn't appeared, I offered to take him to his place. He lived in a little trailer just below the Belly Buttes, in the middle of the reserve, within walking distance of the annual Sundance encampment. On our way north, Anthony told me about a cougar that had been coming down from the buttes and crossing his property. “I've got the footprints by my house to prove it,” he told me. Indeed, when we arrived at his trailer, there in the snow just a couple paces from Anthony's doorstep were the unmistakable impressions of a large cougar that had passed by just a few days earlier. “It doesn't scare me,” Anthony said, “I still take my mountain bike up along that same trail into the buttes every morning. He doesn't bother me, and I don't bother him.”

The following daybreak, back in Lethbridge, the Herald finally produced a photograph of the “wolf-dog”, still at-large, and looking suspiciously like an average German shepherd. That night, the city became targeted by yet another troubled canine species, the smooth-pimping Los Angeles rapper Snoop Doggy Dog. Although I'd have liked to observe the inversion ritual that defined Snoop Dog's show, which was well-attended by youths from all over southern Alberta, at forty dollars a ticket I opted to settle for second-hand accounts. Adrienne's cousin Kristy, who was in the hockey arena turned gangsta theater that night, described the venue as thickly clouded with ganga smoke. “Snoop sure didn't mind it any,” she said, “he was lighting-up big-old blunts on stage, and passing them around with his crew. Security tried to keep everyone from smoking at first, but after a while they just gave up.” Thus the boundaries on tolerable levels of danger were defined in Lethbridge: a massive, mind-altering drug party in celebration of music that lauded gin-drinking binges and the prostitution of women was acceptable. A stray dog that might be reverting away from domestication was not.

By Saturday, it had been a full week since the first “wolf-dog” report had appeared, and the paper that morning finally put the issue to rest. The police had found the German-shepherd's owners after they had noticed its picture in the news. They had reported their dog, named Peter, as missing some months previous, but had eventually given-up any hope of finding him. Working with the police, the dog owners fed Peter a pile of drugged meatballs, and then brought him to an animal

shelter. He wasn't a "wolf-dog", the police said. And if Peter did have any wolf blood in him, it would be such an insignificant amount that it shouldn't affect his behavior. The police retracted their suspicion that Peter had been responsible for other missing pets, but they would keep him detained until his owners renewed his dog license, where-after he could be released back into their custody as a legitimate animal citizen.

I was certainly relieved by this news of Peter's rescue, and was particularly happy to see his reputation absolved of all the slanderous accusations that described him as being of "wild" blood. Finally, I could rest easy, unthreatened, and set forward in the latter half of my thesis research.

Certainly I found the wolf-dog Peter episode very interesting, not only for what it reveals about Western approaches to nature, but also for the implications that this type of narrative carries into the social relationships between European and Niitsitapi people. The latter, viewing themselves as intimately connected with the indigenous flora and fauna of this territory are, in turn, associated with "wildness" by the West. But rather than conceptualizing their own relationship to local nature as one typified by interdependence and family-arity, Europeans are obviously under the impression that these species are more outside than inside – not one of them. Their approaches to "wild things" are informed by the ontological metaphorization of containment, so that non-domestics are, by definition (and apparently blood quantum), external to the kinship network of the social body. As a result, their interactions with indigenous human beings, the Niitsitapi who either reside or shop in Lethbridge and contribute millions of dollars each year to its economy, is shaped by this impression of non-relatedness to the "wild", the conceptual blend becoming disturbingly evident in apartheid or segregationist practices. Where Anthony had welcomed a cougar's co-existence in his everyday, even the ecologically-minded European likes to keep the wildlife controlled and, preferably, outside the boundaries of his resident space. Thus, in the summer following the wolf-dog episode, a joint effort between the Niitsitapi and Western ecologists developed to re-

introduce an endangered kit-fox species to the local area, selecting – by no matter of happenstance - the Akáínaa Reserve as a most likely place for their efforts to succeed. The Niitsitapi, for their part, wholeheartedly concurred.

From this data, we can see that while kinship models become source domains for the metaphorization of human-nature relatedness, so too do perspectives on nature affect social dynamics and ontic categorizations among people. Like Lakoff and Johnson, Bird-David fails to consider the metonymic aspects of the interactions between cultural forms, those gestalt-quality classifications that define kinship models among these respective populations in the first place. Thus, we learn very little from this paper about how the Mistassini view intercourse, or what the normative relationship is between adults and children among the Nayaka; there is no contextualization to help us determine if Western Desert Aborigines are indeed metaphorizing procreation, or if their sense of procreation is itself modelled on observations of their local ecology. Bird-David, like Lakoff and Johnson, seems to assume the existence of pre-cultural human bodies, with universal sensory experiences, that become relied upon to ground knowledge that can then be developed through unidirectional metaphorical elaboration to explain or symbolize more ephemeral ideas. A brief survey of embodied conceptual metaphors inherent in Lakoff and Johnson's descriptions of thought processes, or the workings of the brain itself – focusing as they do around technological models of cognition, systematicity, organization, and structure – reveals just how dependent we are upon other cultural forms as a means of understanding our own bodies. Thus, there is an emergent *exchange* between anatomies, senses, and environments, rather than a single directionality of experience from the pre-cultural self outward. How we understand, feel, and make use of our bodies depends largely upon intellectual inheritance derived from a collective

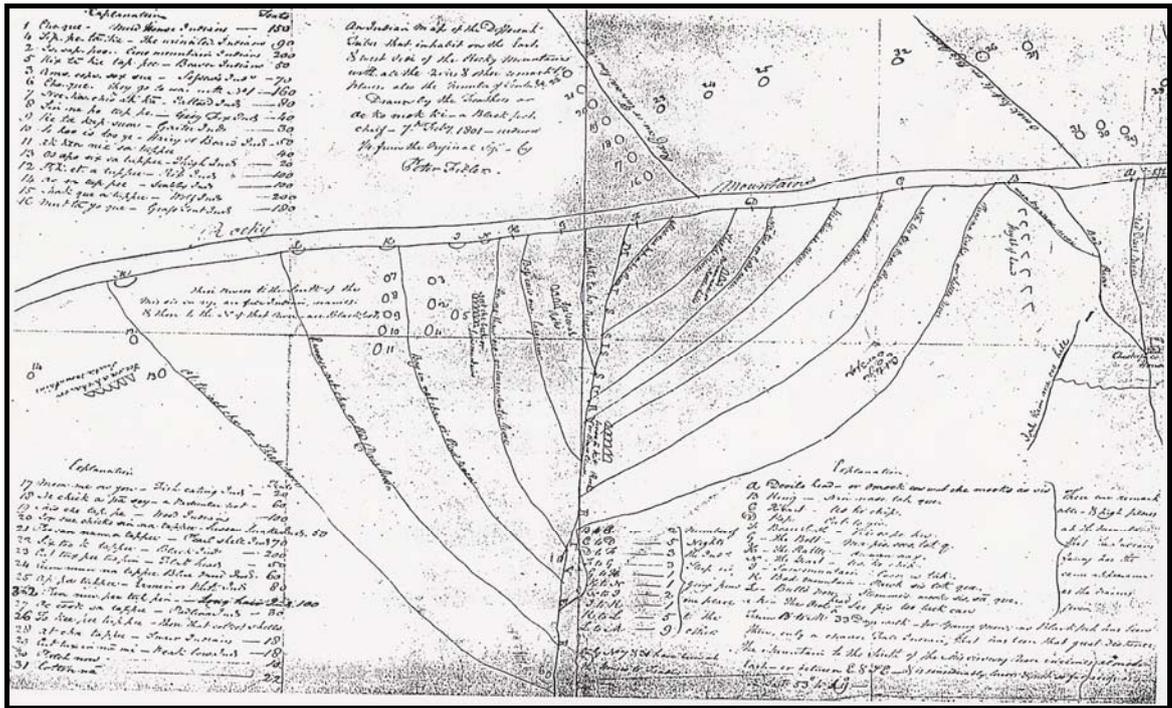
interaction with localized ecological and social influences. Recognizing this, anthropologists – particularly since the eighties – have developed new streams of theoretical discussion around embodiment, sensory experience, representation of the self, and have begun collecting ethnographies of various body types: topographical-hydraulic bodies (Bastien 1985), social bodies and body politics (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), consuming bodies (Falk 1994), colonized bodies (Kelm 1998), and aqueous and pneumatic bodies (Ferzacca 2001), just to name a few that I had the opportunity to explore in my preparatory review of this increasingly dense and fascinating literature.

In my opinion, one of the more intriguing patterns that emerges in these anthropological discussions is the symbolic correlations between body, place, and object. Ksisskstaki Amopistaan, as representative of all three phenomena simultaneously, is a perfect example of the localized partnership between metonymy and metaphor, informing knowledge of both selfhood and gross-anatomy through experiential co-occurrences and similarities to a Niitsitapi geo-physicality. But this bundle is characterized by a very high order of philosophical and scientific thought that simply can't be breached through such an essentialized account as this thesis. Ksisskstaki Amopistaan entails thousands upon thousands of Niitsitapi insights regarding their relationships to one another and the process-laden world they “co-exist” with. My intent here is not to diminish this wealth of inheritance, but only to reveal that tiny little bit of understanding necessary to illuminate local significations of body, place, and object – so that I might scout further toward a Niitsitapi anatomy and its role in everyday experiences.

One of the messages oft repeated in beaver ceremonies in this regard pertains to the sacrality of the body and home. Indeed, anthropological writings on embodiment, symbolic form, and materiality have demonstrated that there is something to be profited

through the comparative cross-cultural study of architecture in the construction of family domiciles. As Desjarlais (1992:186) noted among the Yolmo of Nepal, “The homologies between body, house, and cosmos create a hall of mirrors through which the participants of... healings pass: body resembles house resembles cosmos.” Indeed, it seems that *resemblances* are imperative in creating these analogous representations and impressions. But equally, if not more important, are the gestalt-like blends of co-occurrence that feed the cultural *perspectives* from which houses, bodies, and places become experienced.

In southern Alberta, for instance, Niitsitapi and Europeans share common landscapes, human physiologies, and architectural styles that are often perceived in vastly different ways. What they most certainly do not share though is a unified cosmological schematic, an emplaced space. This patent divergence between the worldviews, which carries into their differences of interpretation and understanding in relation to the body, home, and landscape, tempts me toward a position of asserting metaphysical-determinism as a most crucial factor in the shaping of other cultural forms. Of course, I wouldn't be so bold as to adopt this stance firmly, aware as I am that metaphysical schemas are themselves moulded and reproduced from the experiential histories of distinct cultural groups interacting with particular socio-ecological environments. But it is certainly curious that so much apparent *resemblance* between the objective worlds of Niitsitapi and Europeans can be overlooked during their respective significations, which correlate fairly directly with distinct cosmological orders. The two perspectives come together most brilliantly in an artifact of early colonial contact, when Peter Fidler of the Hudson's Bay Company met Saahkoma'pii (*state-of-youth*) of the Aamsskaapiikáni to produce the “first map” of kitawahsinnooni, *our-habitat*.



Saahkoma'pii and Fidler Map of kitawahsinnooni 1801 (Hudson's Bay Company). The double line on top represents the Rocky Mountain Range, with numerous rivers flowing down to meet with the centralized Missouri River.

For Fidler, Britain's Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), the embryonic Canadian nation, and Western civilization, this map represented another piece of the puzzle in what had already become a global model of home turf. At the time, Fidler's interests were in plotting major landscape features of northwestern portions of the Americas, *Rupert's Land*, and locating indigenous groups within this region. His benefactors would then apply these surveys toward strategically planning and planting their business outposts in the west. Unfortunately, for the HBC, the principal waterway featured in the center of this map, the Missouri River - to which all other streams in this southern portion of kitawahsinnooni connected - was to become controlled by the American Fur Company and the Montana whisky traders of Fort Benton, who would utilize steamboats based in ports along the Mississippi to transport their illicit goods to and from the frontier settlements they established. The HBC, reliant as they were on canoes travelling the

more shallow rivers to the north, eventually saw their business failing in competition against the Americans, so that by 1869 Great Britain was ready to sell this “property” to the Canadian government.

Less than ten years later, aghast witness to the slaughtering of both the buffalo herds and Heavy Runner’s lineage group of Aamsskáápipikani by the American Army, but unaware of Canada’s increasing sovereignty, the Niitsitapi moved to ally themselves with the soon-to-be-departing British in what the former would appreciate as *innaihtsookakihtsimaani*, a *peaceful-deciding* between the two groups that would entail a lasting relationship of reciprocity, decreasing their disparities and celebrating their alliance in co-existence (Treaty 7 Elders and Tribal Council 1997). The Brits, for their part, maintained a sense of warfare as their leading trope for understanding these negotiations of difference, and so valued and documented their meeting with the Niitsitapi as *Treaty Seven*, a major land cede on behalf of a defeated people. This agreement, objectified and commodified, could then, without any involvement of Niitsitapi voice, be readily transferred to the Canadians and subsumed under the policies of their pre-established Indian Act (1876)¹⁰, which ironically sought to eliminate distinctions between Aboriginals and Canadians by stipulating what an “Indian” was and how, through a process of “gradual civilization”, that could be corrected.

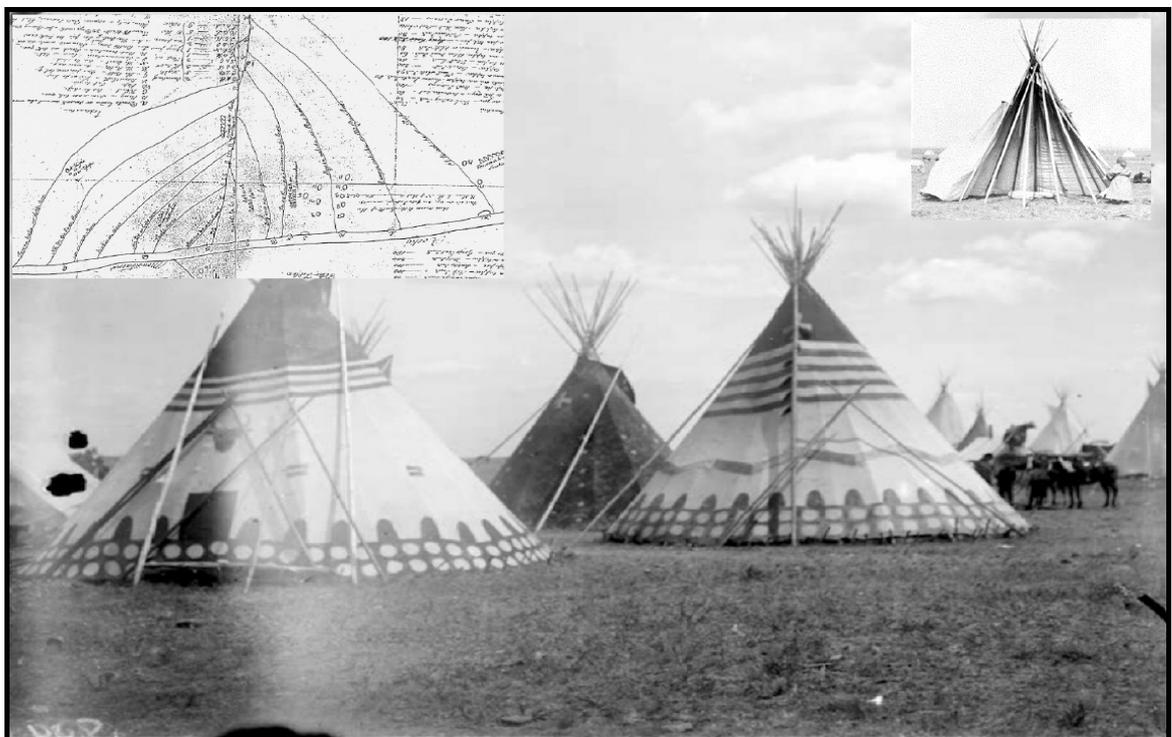
Today, just two centuries after Fidler’s encounter with Saahkoma’pii, the Niitsitapi have, for the most part, been written off most re-mappings of this territory. They can be found yet on some state and provincial maps of Montana and Alberta, like the representation that I reluctantly provided in “Nitsiiksiniiyi’taki”, the preface to this thesis,

¹⁰ The Indian Act is modeled on an even earlier piece of legislation entitled “An Act to Encourage the Gradual Civilization of the Indians of this Province and to Amend Laws Respecting Indians”, also known as the Enfranchisement Act (1857).

where they are depicted as small dark patches on the landscape, places Ronald Reagan once called “preservations”, through which one or two trepidant public roads pass. On global maps, however, those more encompassing depictions of the Western abode, the Niitsitapi are featured not at all. Tim Ingold (1993) has written of the global view as one that is “centripetal”, where the observer is forced outside, de-centered, compelled to know the world as an object of appropriation rather than an “environment” (i.e. that which surrounds and is part-of). On this perspective, he writes, “meaning does not lie in the relational context of the perceiver’s involvement in the world, but is rather inscribed upon the outer surface of the world by the mind of the perceiver. To know the world, then, is a matter not of sensory attunement but of cognitive reconstruction. And such knowledge is acquired not by engaging directly, in a practical way, with the objects of one’s surroundings, but rather by learning to represent them, in the mind, in the form of a map...” (1993:37-38).

At first glance, the “map” drawn by Saahkoma’pii, oriented and labelled by Fidler, appears to present a standard eagle-eye view of the local terrain – a perspective entirely familiar to the Western mind. In fact, upon my first look at this sinaakssini, this *made-visible*, I saw nothing too revealing of a Niitsitapi-specific worldview, and became rather interested only in the native titles of the rivers and the positioning of particular bands. It was a combination of influences that eventually led me to see this drawing in an entirely different way: living for some years amidst Niitsitapi symbolic systems, my wife Adrienne’s experience with river waters in a medical therapy for her arthritis, camping at the annual aako’kaatssini, participating in Ksisskstaki Amopistaan ceremonies, and – believe it or not – reading ethnographies. In terms of the latter, it was two particular works that helped me to receive the possibilities of what Saahkoma’pii meant to depict.

The first of these was Ohnuki-Tierney's *Illness and Culture in Contemporary Japan* (1984), where she opens with an exploration of Japanese notions of germs and hygiene through an analysis of their architecture. This ethnography brought me to consider the "home" in relation to Niitsitapi bodies and health concepts. Then I connected these elements to geography through J. Stephen Lansing's brief but insightful *The Balinese*, where he deals similarly with symbolic architecture, but eventually links this to an ecological complex involving a system of water temples which enabled the Balinese a long-successful history as rice farmers. It was the holism presented in these two works, the interrelationships between body, house, religion, subsistence, and ecology, juxtaposed against my own experiences in Niitsitapi places, that finally led me to ignore Fidler's writing and turn his "map" upside-down, revealing what Saahkoma'pii meant to relate, that this territory is niitoyis, a home, the Niitsitapi *real-enclave*.



Niitoyiistsi with Saahkoma'pii map insert (photos from Walter McClintock collection in Yale's Beinike Digital Image Archives)

What had, for me, once seemed a fairly crude map of the local “landscape” was transformed into something like the Gestalt-switching illusions shown to students in nearly every introduction to psychology, the silhouette image of a goblet that can shift in the mind’s eye to reveal human profiles face-to-face, or the haggardly old woman who changes upon deeper inspection into a Victorian lady. As Theresa O’nell (1996:12) has pointed out, such image-switching is critical for achieving the “metaperspective” sought in anthropological interpretation. And, indeed, with just a simple adjustment in the angle of my viewing, this *sinaakssini*, *made-visible*, became another anchoring point to which I could tie together a good many observations, experiences, and narrative streams that had, here-to-fore, remained somewhat disassociated in my thoughts. No longer did I see the centripetal eagle-eye view of a “landscape”, but instead the centrifugal internal perspective of a “lifeworld” with multiple dimensions, characterized by cycles, slopes, and liquid flows – simultaneously home, body, society, environment, and cosmos – authored by a man thoroughly aware of his context in and of these spaces and processes. It was an insight, I believe, that brought me a great deal closer to understanding what it means when Niitsitapi refer to their painted lodge designs as also being considered *amopístaanistsi*, “bundles” or, more accurately, *bound-together-by-wrapping-around*. There is more to this notion than a metaphorical tying together of objects, it is a metonymic binding of thoughts, identities, domains, currents, stories, experiences, and living spirits that emphatically relate Niitsitapi bodies and environment as inseparable forms of being. Through this symbolic association, we can start to understand how Niitsitapi regard the anatomy, shape, and processes of the body. Thinking just a bit

further about the sinaakssini drawn by Saahkoma'pii, it will become apparent how very complex this representation is.

Moyís - Transformative Spaces Of Body, Home, And Environment

The traditional Niitsitapi lodge, the tipi, is today called niitoyis, which is often loosely translated as *original-house* or *one-space*. The disparity between these renderings lies in a phonic similarity between the sounds niit- and ni't (*original* or *real* and *one* respectively). Either translation makes perfect sense, of course, but I prefer an interpretive form that combines both of these common versions, to describe niitoyis as a *real-enclave*. In any case, the entire construction is a product of post-colonial language adaptation. Just as such everyday terms as atsikin (*footwear*) eventually became qualified for niitsítsikin (*real-footwear* or moccasin), as compared to naapisstsiitsikin (*cloth-footwear* or sneaker) for instance, so too did the notion of moyis (*enclave* or home) see a distinction emerge between niitoyis and naapioyis (*white-man's-house*). For some elders I've spoken with, this language transition represents a threat to Niitsitapiipaitapiiwahsini, *real-people-way-of-living*, because – through the process of áístomatoo'p – the new terms are beginning to obscure important meanings embedded in a more fundamental lexicon, and they see this shift as becoming registered in corresponding behaviors, such as the neglect of domestic maintenance, an irreverence for the sacrality of the family abode. The gloss “home” or “house”, in any rendering, is a blatant misnomer that most fluent Niitsi'powahsini speakers recognize immediately, but utilize none-the-less to overcome the complications that arise with cumbersome transliterations. The patterned argument is such that, if you tried to transliterate directly from Niitsi'powahsini to English, it wouldn't make any sense [to the naïve listener]. Yet,

at the same time, it is clear from the apprehensions expressed by elders over the development of new lexical forms, that even some fluent speakers now understand Niitsi'powahsini at least partially in terms of English. I am presenting moyis as a concept more approximated by the term *enclave*, but even this requires a bit of supplemental discussion.

Moyis is an elaboration on the sound oyi, which is most simply a kind of space, prototypically that modeled on the human mouth. Thus, to have an *open-mouth* is i'pakoyaakio'p, a *twisted-mouth* aamoyio'p, and to *eat* is oyiiwa. On careful inspection though, oyi is more than a mere *mouth-like-space*. It is defined more accurately as a space that is protective yet permeable, enabling generative processes to unfold within, through partially controlling which liquids or semi-liquids (i.e. foods) pass through in a recurrent cycle of nourishing consumption. A bird's nest, for instance, is oyíyis, the relatively exposed enclave where the eggs of winged beings are deposited, chicks hatched, fed, and grown until they move off into the skies – an ample analogy for the transformative cycle of the Niitsitapi spirit that passes, in the human body, through the moyis illustrated on the “map” by Saahkoma'pii. Similarly, during smudging rituals, one creates a symbolic oyíyis, into which is placed a coal that is then fed plant materials, in turn becoming transformed into a vaporous incense that disperses with prayers into the cosmos. And another metaphoric elaboration on oyíyis in Niitsitapi communities is used to describe the responsible behaviors of older generations in shielding their youth from harm. Children, as both the Pawakksski and White Grass stories attest, are to be valued beyond one's own preservation of self.

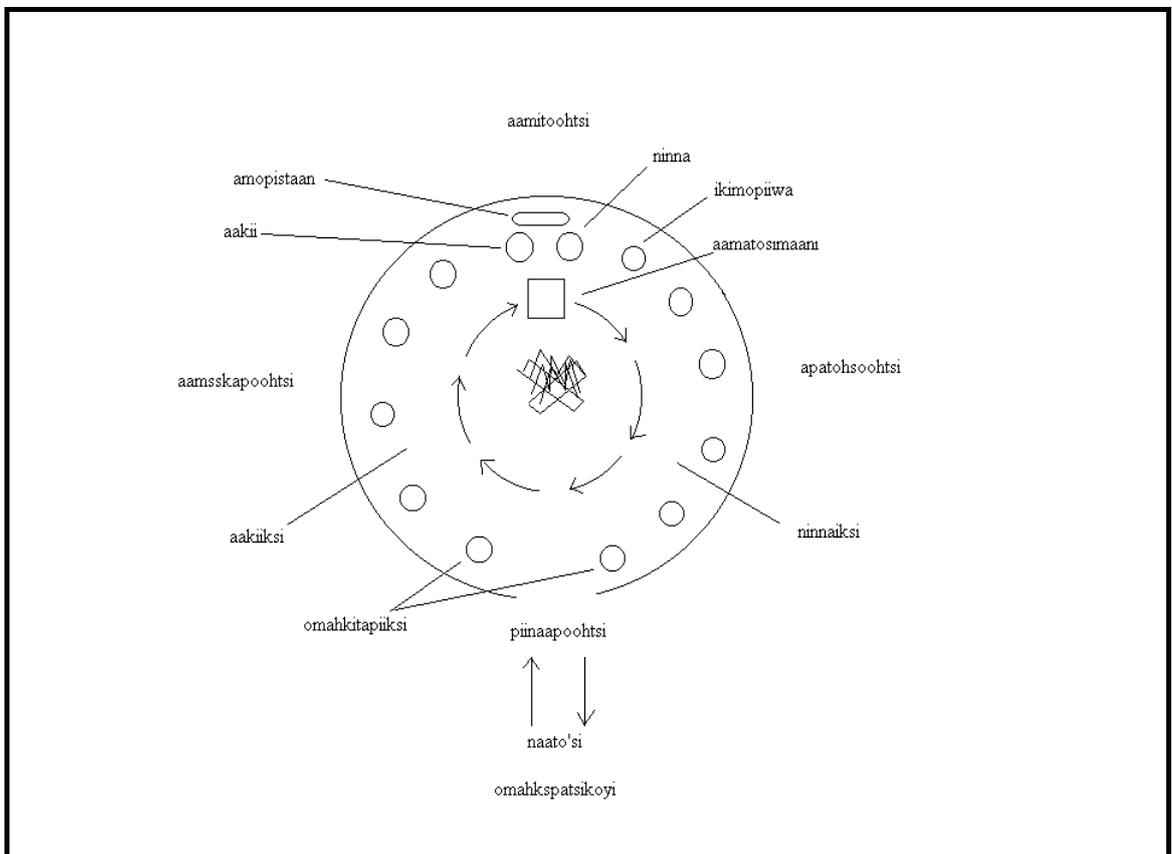
There is also an aspect to moyis that relates it to other notions of the body. This is inherent in the sound “m-”. In Niitsitapi anatomical terms, this prefix m- is always a

feature of any embodied structure without further qualification. The *mouth* by itself is maoóyi, the *stomach* móókoan, the *leg* or *foot* mohkát, the *body* in its entirety moistómi. As indicated in the first chapter, it is interesting that the latter notion, moistómi, or the *body*, can be understood as comprised of the prefix m- attached to a pronominal base – iistó. In Niitsi’powahsini, to say *me* or *I* in the abstract sense is niistó, *you* becomes kiistó, *he* or *she* is iistówa. It is not the objectified “body” that underlies these impressions of personhood, but rather a sense of *self*. Therefore, niistó, kiistó, and iistówa might be better transliterated as *my-self*, *your-self*, *that-self*. Niitsitapi elders would also point-out that, because each of these forms uses the same sound, iistó, unlike the rather extreme phonetic variation heard in the English I, you, and he, the Niitsi’powahsini terms may not reference entirely distinct selves, but rather particular manifestations of a shared *spirit*, motákka. The *body*, moistómi,¹¹ references this kind of self and is inflected both by the prefix m-, indicating that we are taking into account a physical manifestation of the spirit, and also by the suffix –mi, demonstrating a sense of possession or attachment. Thus, moistómi, the generic *body*, signifies a material and tangible aspect of the spirit. Every major feature of the Blackfoot anatomy carries this initial sound m- that we find in moistómi, the *body*, and moyis, the *transformative-enclave* or home, and similarly loses it when qualified by an adjective. A *long-leg* is innoohkat, a *rotund-belly* is soohkóókoani, and the *tipi* – amidst a variety of house styles found locally today – is now niitoyis.

As regards the metaphorization of human physiology as moyis, or *transformative-enclave*, it is worth noting that various parts of the traditional lodge carry anatomical titles themselves. The strip of canvass that runs directly down the middle of the lodge is

¹¹ Also noistómi, koistómi, oistómiwa respectively *my-body*, *your-body*, *that-body*.

mo'kakíkin, the *backbone*; the sides of the lodge are mohpikíistsi, or *ribs*; and the smoke flaps on top are mohtóókiistsi, *ears*. Drawing a correlation between the lodge and the landscape, as Saahkoma'pii did, a number of the geographic features of kitawahsinnooni also carry body terms¹²: mohkínsstsis, the *elbow river*; móókoanssin, the *belly* buttes; mónnikisisahtaa, the *teat-river*; mótookiokaas ómahksikimi, the *kidney-lake* (this being the southern-most pool of paahtómahksikimiksi, the *inner-lakes* from which Ksisskstaki Amopistaan derives); and nínaiistáko, the *man's-hardness*, now commonly censured as “Chief Mountain”.



Niitoyis Ground-Structure Configuration (drawing by author)

¹² In recent years Stan Knowlton, an environmental scientist and member of the Aapátosipikáni community, with guidance from his elders, has hypothesized an anthropomorphic mapping of kitawahsinnooni that includes representations of a man, woman, and child. Others – including myself – feel that while some anatomic terms are used to describe landscape features, these index mnemonics for thinking about events and processes. For instance, móókoanssin, the Belly Buttes, registers a story about the slaying of áísinokoop, a slurping monster, that serves also as a metaphor for terminal illness, as shall be described in a later chapter.

All of this terminology indexes reciprocal (i.e. multi-directional) correlates between Niitsitapi notions of the body, home, and environment – enclaves that foster cycles of deposition, birth, nourishment, growth, and departure, enabled by a continuous, but controlled flow of aqueous substances through permeable, rather than contained, structures. Moving into niitoyis, one finds in the social ordering of space further elaborations on these embodiments and transformations.

The openings to this real-enclave – one between the “ears”, and the doorway at its base - are positioned piinaapoohtsi, toward the east or *horizontally-downward-direction*, facing the sunrise. Naato’si, *sacredness* itself, or the Sun, bearing the warm light requisite to create life, enters through these passages and is believed to move in a “sunwise” fashion within niitoyis, indicated by arrows in the above illustration, and replicated through the ritual movements of people within this space. This is the same pattern of travel that was, for many thousands of years, followed by the people in their seasonal rounds throughout kitawahsinnooni, as mentioned in the preceding chapter. The sunwise direction, correlating with the English “clockwise”, is obviously drawn from human familiarities with the cycle of daylight’s progression, and the earth’s annual movement in relation to the Sun. The former is apparent through a shadow’s circumnavigation around the base of a sundial (or on the ground outside of niitoyis), as well as by the patterns of light cast upon the inner surface of a Niitsitapi lodge through the two orifices. The latter follows not only from the position of Naato’si in the sky throughout the year, but also from the seasonal fluctuation from warm to cold, summer to winter. The life-giving heat enters, and heads along the southern wall where the aakiiksi, or *women*, sit – those who are as conduits through which life enters this world. In Niitsi’powahsini, this is aamsskapoohtsi, the *brought-horizontally-upward-direction*.

When the lodge is not too crowded, the first section of this southern zone is also where kitchens are set up and food stored, staging the preparation of meals, and where visitors first entering the enclave will stand, waiting to be directed toward a seat.

Eventually, the creative potential of this heat reaches the last of the women at *aamitoohtsi*, the *horizontally-upward-direction* on the far west wall. In relation to *kitawahsinnooni*, this terminus would be the mountains. Here, at the *aamitoohtsi* position in the *niitoyis*, we find the principal *aakii* (woman) and *ninna* (man) of the household, wife and husband, sitting on either side of their *amopistaan*, or medicine bundle. Typically, the *amopistaan* is wrapped-up and hangs by a strap that connects at either of its ends and drapes over a peg tied to the westernmost support pole. The way that the *amopistaan* is wrapped is similar to the way that babies are bound in their mossbags. And when it's hung by its strap to the center pole, it is quite reminiscent of an infant sleeping in a hammock. In other words, *amopistaan* – like *Iipisówaahsi* in the *Pawakksski* story - is the renewed generation of life. Also at this position, directly in front of the husband and wife, we find an earth altar where *aamatosimaani*, or *incense*, is made in prayer. On the other side of this altar is the fire pit, another kind of enclave, fed wood that is transformed into heat for the lodge.

As the light of *Naato'si* continues its cycle, it passes through the *ninnaiksi*, or men, along the *apatohsohtsi*, the *behind-direction* or northernmost wall. For almost a year, during the research for this thesis, I could not understand how this orientation fit with the language of the overall cosmological schema. While all of the other cardinal axes of *kitawahsinnooni* reflected both landscape features and metaphorizations on the life cycle - i.e. being *brought-horizontally-upward* into this enclave through the women to the south, where one finds geographically the Big Horn, Little Rocky, Bear Paw, Judith,

Highwood, and Belt mountain ranges forming a kind of slope along the southern fringes of the territory – the apatohsoohtsi, *behind-direction*, was the only term that seemed somewhat out of place. In the lexicon of Niitsi’powahsini, the notion aapat, or *behind*, is extended toward conceptualizations of reluctance or hesitancy (aapatsska’si), as well as lateness and ill-preparation (áápatsii’yi). Neither of these ideas seemed to offer much clarity in terms of understanding how apatohsoohtsi blends with the social structure outlined, or with the path of creative movement. And in recognition of this problem, I began to assume that the *behind-direction* reflected a gendered perspective, be it derived from the viewpoint of men for whom this orientation would literally be *behind*, and/or from that of women who might find in its symbolic extension something humorous about the nature of their alter as reluctant, hesitant, or late. This is, however, until struck one evening by an epiphany. There is a very famous Niitsitapi story about a half-human/half-celestial infant boy who, upon touching the earth for the first time, became upset and returned to the sky world, where he is now represented in Káta’paopii, *never-moving* or the North Star. Thus, apatohsoohtsi is the direction associated with beings reluctant to remain in tangible form on earth.

This leads to an obvious and natural progression. After passing around the north end of niitoyis, through that dimension associated with a hesitancy to stay in this material realm, not to mention cooler temperatures geographically, the light and heat from Naato’si eventually flow back out the passageways through which they came, moving toward piinaapoohtsi, or the *horizontally-downward-direction*. In the social-structural arrangement of seating within niitoyis, omahkitapiiksi, or *old-people*, are positioned on either side of the door at this point. Significantly, when reflecting back upon kitawahsinnooni, this is the same downhill direction in which the rivers flow, most

intensely at the end of winter when the ice thaws, carrying the products of erosion and decomposition away toward omahkspatsikoyi, the *big-sandy* of western Saskatchewan, geographic site of the Niitsitapi afterlife. Indeed, it is in the trees along the shores of these rivers that, like the early spring flotsam, Niitsitapi people have traditionally deposited their dead.

It should be noted that all of these symbols are still quite contemporary. Because I am using the traditional niitoyis in my prototypical example, one might get the impression that this represents a system of thought belonging only to days now bygone. Such is simply not the case, and it would have been fairly impossible for me to have so rapidly developed what little understanding I have if it were. For one thing, it's been less than a century since most of the Niitsitapi population lived in such lodges year round – the last family to do so being that of Bull Head, among the Aapátohsipikáni, until his passing in 1963. Today, orthodox religious practitioners make use of this structure at least every weekend, hosting their ceremonies in niitoyiistsi during the summer seasons and in small one-room cabins (or similar spaces) during the winters. Moreover, in as much as they can, many families organize themselves and move within Western-style homes in a similar fashion as within the lodge. The majority of houses on the Akáínái Reserve, for instance, are built on an east-west axis. When the front doors of such houses face west, people will generally use the back doors as their main passages in and out of their homes, maintaining the eastward orientation which positions them toward sunrise, the downhill flow of rivers, and away from prevailing winds. In addition, the dining-room table is almost always transformed into the social circle for purposes of visiting; although the symbolic division of men from women is not entirely recapitulated here, other traditional elements of protocol are. On the other hand, when there are many

visitors, particularly during or following ritual occasions, furniture might be pushed aside so that the living-room floor can be utilized to reproduce the proper social and environmental order. The principal man and woman of the household still keep their bundles hanging from the walls above their beds, and use a wooden box filled with white dirt as their smudge altars. Newborns are still wrapped in moss bags or blankets, in similar manner as the bundles, and young mothers are often found to have hammocks for their babies, fashioned from two strands of rope, strung across their bedrooms, and anchored between one wall and another.



My niece, Hailey, in her rope hammock (2004)

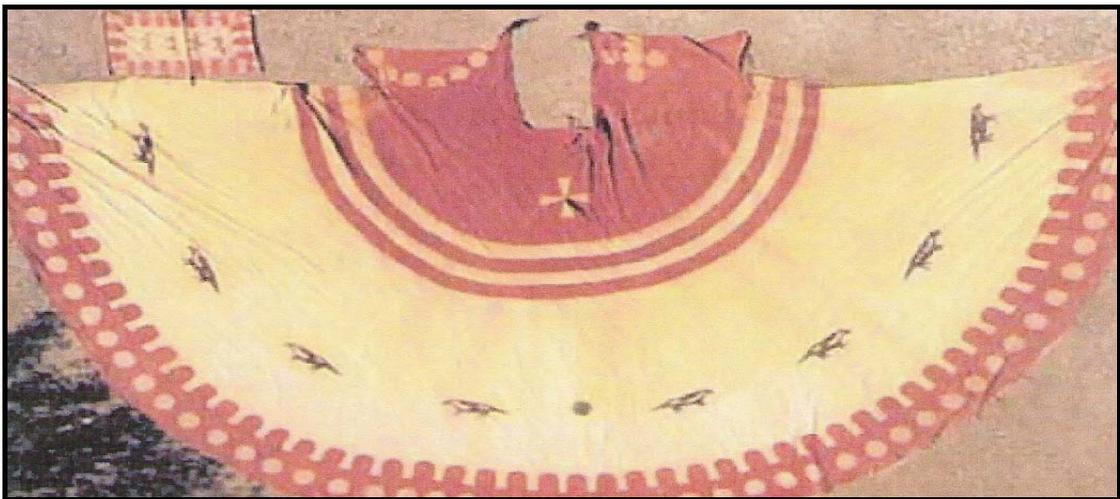
Outside of the home, public architecture also helps to recreate these social and spatial traditions. Many buildings, from schools, to medical centers, to council chambers and community halls, have large circular rooms built into them, where people can gather together in the appropriate order. Most of these rooms also have high conical ceilings, towering above their respective buildings, which incorporate the imagery of the four connected poles that serve as the foundation for niitoyis. This structure is even more

obvious in the design of dance arbors for the community powwows, with announcers' booths positioned to the west and dancers entering through an east gate. It's clear to me that, while the constructed spaces on Niitsitapi reserves may seem – at a passing glance – to resemble those of nearly any other sparsely populated area of western North America, most community members here are exposed to an entirely different spatial symbolic system on a daily basis, an arrangement that draws metaphoric and metonymic correlations between the landscape, home, and human body.

By now it should be apparent that the structure of niitoyis speaks not only to anatomical organization in terms of the protective shape of this enclave, but also – and perhaps more importantly – to its necessary permeability, and the bodily processes that transpire within. Being porous forms, niitoyiistsi, people, and the landscape all consume, transform, and release various aqueous substances: warmth, light, water, food, sound, odor, wind, etc. This deposition, conversion, and excretion of essential fluids is understood to affect the body in various ways, as each aqueous substance carries the potential to be both nutritive and toxic, depending upon how effectively their cyclical flows are managed. We've already seen some of the ways that light and heat, associated with life and synonymous with Naato'si, *sacredness* or the Sun, are expected to move through this enclave. Similarly, the rivers have been addressed as that which carries away detritus. And it is interesting, given the map drawn by Saahkoma'pii, that when camped in niitoyis during a rainstorm, one quickly learns that it is along the framework poles that water, entering through the opening between the ears, flows down to feed the grassy soil at the lodge's perimeter.

In the sacred paintings depicted on many niitoyiistsi, one finds at this ground level two standard elements of design: a series of humped or triangular shapes and a

corresponding lower chain of white circles called kakató'siiksi. Both of these designs elements can be seen on the Saahkoma'pii map, with the former depicting the mountains and hills from which the rivers flow, and the latter marking the position of Niitsitapi clans and their encampments. In the lexicon of Niitsi'powahsini, the term kakató'siiksi is applied equally toward both *stars* and *puffball-fungi*, evoking multiple significations in relation to the Niitsitapi experience. One of the associations meant to be fixed by the inclusion of these circles on painted niitoyiistsi involves a rather complex and important story from the oral tradition, mentioned just briefly above in relation to aapatohsohtsi, or the *behind-direction* of Niitsitapi orientation. This tale recounts the history of a marriage between a human being named Mohsóóa'tsaakii, *tailfeathers-woman*, and the celestial spirit Iipisówaahsi, *distant-food*, or the Morning Star. Although the account of Mohsóóa'tsaakii, like all other grand narratives of the Niitsitapi oral tradition, is certainly deserving of an in-depth analytical treatment of its own, to do so here would require diverting this analysis from its present course. We do, however, need to consider a few aspects of her story at least briefly.



Painted lodge design (Glenbow Museum Archives)

Having married into the sky, Mohsóóá'tsaakii eventually grows lonely for her terrestrial family and people, and so is sent back to earth by her in-laws, carrying with her an infant child. Before leaving the sky, Iipisówaahsi warns her not to let their baby boy touch the ground for two periods of seven, or fourteen days, and instructs her to paint a likeness of his own image (see the Maltese cross shape on the tipi design above) on the back of her lodge as a reminder of this warning¹³. The child, accustomed to his weightlessness as a disembodied sky-being, would be made upset if he were to realize his heaviness on earth too quickly, prompting his spirit to return back home prematurely. Just as we've seen in the care of infants today, and as with all of the sacred bundles, the baby from this celestial union was, from that point on, either carried or set in a hammock. But one morning, before the restrictive period had passed, Mohsóóá'tsaakii went out to gather roots and berries, leaving the child home with his grandmother. Not fully appreciating what the infant's restrictions were about, the old lady decided to be kind to this boy and let him crawl around. As soon as the infant touched the earth, he began to scream and wail. The old lady quickly picked him up and placed him back in his swing, where the boy covered up with a robe. When Mohsóóá'tsaakii returned home and pulled back this blanket, she found only a puffball fungus where the boy had been. And that night, searching the sky, a bright entity could be seen in the hole through which she had recently descended back to earth – this light being called Káta'paopii, *never-moving* or the North Star.

In one sense then, the white circles on the bottom portion of painted lodges, as well as the image of Iipisówahsi on the nape, are meant to evoke a memory of this story, to remind people that they should treat their children's spirits delicately, protecting them,

¹³ This Maltese cross shape is also multivocal, being synonymous with the symbol of apániitapi, *moth-life*, or papáitapi, *dream-life*.

and never failing to observe the various taboos by which their lives are bound. But there are alternative, yet related, ways to interpret these symbols as well. In the old days, the puffball fungi were used as firestarters and as punks by which hot coals could be transported, inside the protective enclave of a buffalo horn, from one campsite to another. Thus, their image on a lodge design also represents a good omen, for the family within will always have available the means to regenerate the heat necessary to survive the hardships of icy winters. In addition, and in relation, kakató'siiksi, as fungi, are symbolic of life on earth – they rise up mysteriously overnight, a manifestation of form from no form, body from spirit and cosmic process.

It will also be noticed that there are other depictions of kakató'siiksi on the ears, or smoke flaps, of the painted lodge. These too are important, and embodied, symbols. The southernmost design (five clustered kakató'siiksi) are called Mióhpokoiksi, *bunched-children*, the constellation of Pleiades. In kitawahsinnooni, this group is visible only during the winter, from October to late April, reflecting the annual cycle of seasons from the warmth of summer to the chill of winter. Its absence in spring marks the frost-free period, and signals to the beaver people that it is time to plant tobacco. There is, of course, a story that goes along with the name Mióhpokoiksi. One version of this tale begins with a number of impoverished young boys, disappointed during the springtime when all of their peers were receiving new red robes from the buffalo calves. Embarrassed by their own shabby, worn-out clothing, the oldest of these boys takes some weasel hair, spits on it, and blows it toward the sky, carrying all of them into the realm above. There they confer with Naato'si, the *Sun*, and Ko'komíki'somm, the *Moon*, requesting that the people be made to suffer for abusing their children. Hearing the account of the poverty they were made to suffer, Ko'komíki'somm, particularly

empathetic toward the plight of youth, convinces Naato'si to bring drought to the Niitsitapi. The very next day, an intense heat converges upon the territory. Soon the people are thirsting, and are forced to live in burrows to escape the severe temperatures outside, using their dogs to dig for water. On the seventh day of this drought, the dogs themselves begin to howl prayers to Ko'komíki'somm, explaining why the boys had not received new robes, and asking that she at least take pity on the innocent four-legged. Ko'komíki'somm, hearing these requests, deliberates with her husband, and brings rain on the eighth day. Since that time, the people have cherished dogs for their protective abilities, and kept conscious of the dangers inherent in depriving their children. As a reminder of these lessons, Mióhpokoiksi can be seen huddled in the sky for warmth on winter nights, and disappearing in embarrassment around the time when the buffalo calves are born each spring.

On the northern ear of niitoyis one finds a second constellation of kakató'siiksi, called Ihkitsíkammiksi, *appearing-grouped-as-seven* or the Big Dipper. It is worth noting that the word for *seven* in Niitsi'powahsini, ihkitsika, transliterates more accurately as *frozen-feet*, an embodied reference to a typical sensory experience endured throughout the seven winter moons. This constellation served, in past eras, to help the Niitsitapi mark time during the night, revolving as it does at a predictable rate around the North Star. And like with Mióhpokoiksi, the Ihkitsíkammiksi retain social significance today through their association with a classic narrative. There are two principle versions of this story, both of which begin with clandestine encounters between a woman and her lover. In one rendering it is a mother of seven boys meeting secretly with a serpent, and

in the other a young lady with six siblings being regularly despoiled by a bear¹⁴. In either case, the illicit affair is discovered by a younger family member and reported to the male head of the household, who – along with his clansmen - proceeds to locate and slay the intruder, chop him into bits, and feed these pieces into a fire. Similarly, in both scenarios, a tiny fragment of the butchered remains is overlooked, never being burned, and the affected woman, upon finding this piece, becomes enraged and commits multiple murders within their encampment. In response to this, the seven boys of the first version conspire with their father to kill their mother. And the six siblings in the second adaptation likewise deceive and execute their sister. The remains of the slain woman, in each account, are burned, but again pieces are overlooked and become the impetus for new embodiments of uncontrolled anger. In the story of the woman with seven sons, her final form is nothing more than a severed head pursuing them across the territory - creating a number of landscape features as they go – and eventually chasing them into the sky. In the alternative second scenario, the young lady re-manifests in similar form as her previous lover, i.e. as a bear, and chases her siblings up a tree, from which position they escape into the heavens. Whichever rendering one subscribes to, the underlying themes are the same, and *Ihkitsikammiksi*, in its movement during the night, and through its appearance on the northern smoke-flap of *niitoyis*, remains as a visual cue to reinforce and reproduce the narrative.

In each of the three predominant stories associated with the representation of *kakató'siiksi* as design elements on painted lodges - *Mohsóó'a'tsaakii*, *Mióhpokoiksi*, and *Ihkitsikammiksi* – we find a sense of parallelism between the cosmic orders of sky and earthly abodes. Emotional events that transpire amongst human beings become lasting

¹⁴ The term for *bear* in *Niitsi'powahsini*, *kiááyo*, is sometimes applied metaphorically to describe abusive or tyrannical people.

features of a Niitsitapi universe. And when these psychological currents are of a more destructive nature, they contribute to the permanence of cyclical hardships – the winter freeze that is charted through Mióhpokoiksi, and the periods of darkness tracked by the movements of Ihkitsíkammiksi. One also learns, within these stories, of the dangers inherent in exposure to excess. Kindness, as Niitsitapi virtue, is applied by the mother of Mohsóóá'tsaakii toward her grandson in manner that forces him prematurely to sense the weight of his human existence, prompting his subsequent avoidance of this life. The desire for wealth and status, in the tale of Mióhpokoiksi, leads to a neglect of the children from less fortunate families, causing them to run-away, while their people as a whole suffer from an abundance of the heat they refused to share. And both romantic attachments and protective inclinations, dealt with in the story of Ihkitsíkammiksi, carry the potential to become abused – leading, once more, to losses in the capacity of future generations, and associated lasting cycles of hardship experienced by the people en-mass.

In the image of the kakató'siiksi emplaced in-series on the ground below the mountains, Niitsitapi are reminded to position themselves in such a manner that the influences of sacred stories will flow as river waters through their lives, helping them in a style comparable to the puffball fungi, as firestarters and bearers of hot coals that ensure their avoidance of exposure to privations. Similarly, by locating key constellations on the mohtóókiistsi, or *ears*, of the lodge, people are counseled to *hear* or *consume* these narratives, as well as to become aware of their usefulness in processes of deflection and release. The secretive gossip that leads to escalations of trouble in the Ihkitsíkammiksi account can, like the movement of the cold northern wind in relation to its corresponding male smoke-flap, be redirected and drawn away from families through their practice of listening to the sacred stories. And, in similar manner, the toxic byproducts of necessary

generative endeavors – the smoke from fire, and accumulations of wealth – can be released by these teachings as through the vent above the lodge, carefully managed by adjusting the aperture of the more feminine southerly flap.

A fourth, less commonly depicted star arrangement on niitoyiistsi follows and expands upon this pattern of metaphoric and metonymic association between body, home, and cosmos. I refer here to the image of numerous kakató'siiksi spaced throughout the top section of some lodge paintings. When this design is seen, it represents makóyoohsokoyi, the *wolf-trail* or Milky Way galaxy, road of the souls that pass between this life and the next. The significance of makóyoohsokoyi in Niitsitapi experiences was first introduced in the first chapter, as both a course that one follows on his way into sstsiyyskaani, or *steam-making*, and as the path shown to Pawakksski for his return journey to earth after living with Naató'si and Ko'komíki'somm. As a trail, makóyoohsokoyi functions to conceptually connect various realms within the Niitsitapi cosmic space. As a cultural element of signification, it binds metaphor to metonymy as two complementary and partnered processes within the human experience.



Looking eastward along the avenue of makóyoohsokoyi (2003)

Most Nitsitapi today first learn of makóyoohsokoyi as that river of stars comprising the Milky Way galaxy, appearing massive and bright in the local skies, along which spirits travel as they come and go from this world. The elders, however, also recognize that this flow is mirrored in the movements of waters through the territory, along a sloping landscape. These two realms, the above and the below, complement one another as man and woman, Sun and Moon. In fact, when niitoyiistsi were constructed of buffalo hide rather than canvas, the mo'kakíkin or *backbone* was made of two skins sewn together, with male above and female below, their gender organs left intact. In terms of a symbolic order, we might understand Naato'si and his aqueous light as the ultimate metaphor, being condensed in that brightest of stars, and at the same time reflected throughout the universe. Indeed life here on earth would not exist were it not for this power of his light to be active in similitude everywhere at once. In gendered fashion, Naato'si *protects* the continuation of life. He is like áápaiai, *white-robed*, the weasel, in that he is intimidating and large while at the same time indistinct and camouflaged. His cycle is conducted on an annual scale, yet one may not directly observe his presence without either going blind or being forced to divert the eyes. Naato'si and metaphor are part of the sublime. In complement, Ko'komíki'somm, the water, the female gender, is also of a sublime nature, comprising the ultimate metonym. On her seamlessly fluid surface, one gleans co-occurrences. Through her capacity to *reproduce*, new manifestations of the collective spirit are brought into the world. Ko'komíki'somm gives form to this life, cleanses it, nourishes it, watches over it in the darkness of night, and blankets it with snow in the freeze of winter. Hers is a cycle of part-to-whole relatedness, each reproduction of form another manifestation of the next.

The notion of makóyoohsokoyi as a road lends connection to these two gendered meta-processes. It is a liminal presence, coursing between realms. In Niitsi’powahsini, the term makóyi is applied equally toward both *wolves* and *semen*. Neither should be understood as a transliteration, the lexeme itself being comprised of “mak-” and “-oyi”, or *bad-eating*, and having some relation to an embodied conceptual blend conversing with sensations of *lust* and *appetite*. But its application in makóyoohsokoyi is intended as a trail of reproductive fluid directing spirit matter between two extremes of the united cosmic body. What transpires in this space of interacting metaphor and metonym is that life which we experience, as children of this order, both resembling and co-occurring with that from which we have become manifest. Thus, just as makóyoohsokoyi echoes from the sky above and the water below, so too it finds renewed representation on land, as a route between the mountains of the west and the sand hills of the east. Part of this trail today proceeds through the Akáínaa Reserve, in the middle of kitawahsinnooni, along what is now a gravel road where many have witnessed the recently deceased trekking toward the beyond.

These three reflections - represented in Ksisskstaki Amopistaan as the manifestations of spirit associated with sspommitapiiksi (*above-life*), ksaahkomitapiiksi (*land-life*), and soyiitapiiksi (*underwater life*) – encompasses a parallelism that informs perspectives on the nature of human experience and worldly existence. Despite the emergent pan-Indian claim to a notion of “earth mother”, which has certainly found some voice in recent local discourse, the orthodox Niitsitapi elders argue that this is not their way, that our bodies, like the earth itself, are products of creation between the Sun and the Moon, light and water or, even less agentive and polarized, the result of iihstipáitapiiyo’p, the *means-of-life*, which feeds us experiential nurturance, embodied

through the process of *áístomatoó’p*, and becoming – in turn – that which we perceive in the world around us.

Feeding The Partnered Metaphoric And Metonymic Body

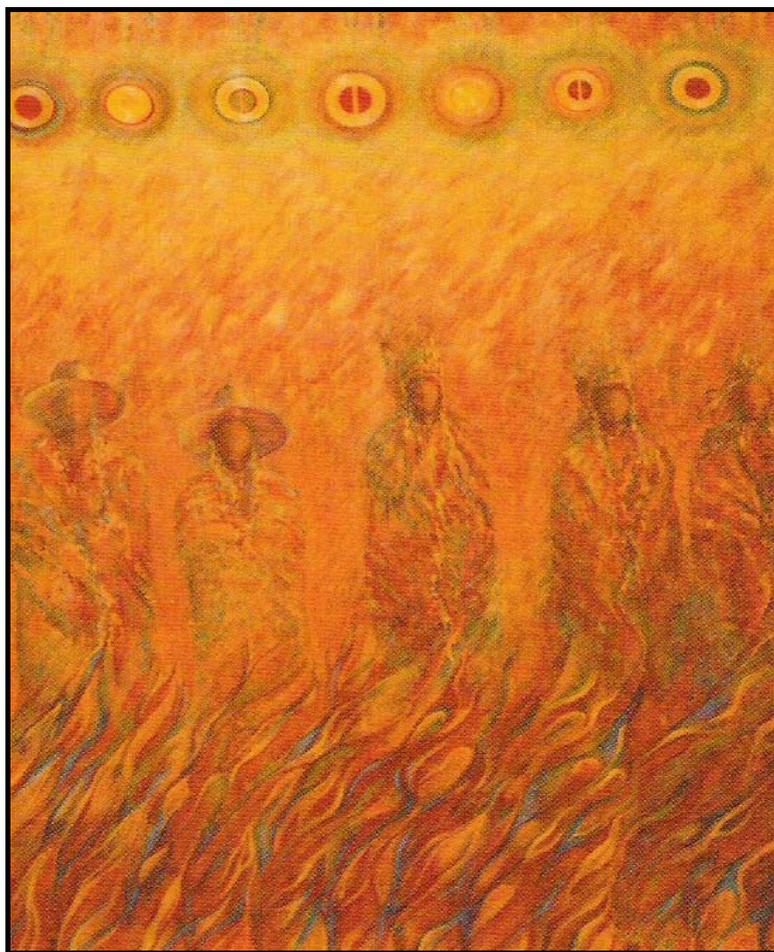
This chapter opened with the story of White Grass and the origin of Ksisskstaki Amopistaan, arising out of the underwater to become the first bundle ever given to the Niitsitapi people and that which, within its bindings, contains all of the manifestations of spirit in an entire universe, the essential elements that have gone into the creation of other bundles that have come since. Throughout the writing that followed this introduction, I have tried to impress upon the reader the realization that while this living being, Ksisskstaki Amopistaan, can be understood as *representing* the Niitsitapi cosmos, something like an object of art, in the sublime sense it in-fact *is* this world. And at the same time, it *is* the locally-emplaced human body. To infer or endorse the existence of a physical, objectified reality where any distinction can be made between organism, home, society, and cosmos is to miss the point of this thesis entirely.

In the Niitsitapi experience, there is a complex emergent metaphorization, a massive binding-together of similarities, which describes a living system as typified by streams of aqueous substance coursing through permeable, although guarded, enclaves, and becoming transformed to nourish sublimated identities that are ultimately indistinct from and feeding into one another. Likewise, there is an equally complex emergent metonymy, a binding-together of co-occurrences, which describes the organism as synonymous with the cosmos, and visa-versa, together creating a pool of reflections that ripple off all cultural structures in between. As we found in the proceeding section, ecological cycles, both the predictable and the erratic, recur in the somatic forms of society, household, and

individual. In the same way, emotive processes become mirrored on the landscape and the heavens. This is what I believe is meant when elders like Frank Weasel Head say that the Niitsitapi believe in a “theory of co-existence” – where the English morpheme “co-” is not so much intended to index the sense of “with” (assuming a fundamental separation), but more the notion of “as”. This characteristic is evident in the form through which Niitsi’powahsini describes the body itself, i.e. as moistómi, a physical manifestation of the collective spirit. It is also apparent in the Niitsitapi language of embodiment, the *accustomed-body*, where the suffix “-atoo’p” of áístomato’p signifies transitive intention, so that the entire construct fuses any distinctions between process and material, mind and matter.

Through the fractured, noun-oriented language of English, the closest that Western society has yet come to indicating a similar sense of blended existence is, in my opinion, to be found in notions like “embodied conceptual metaphor”, “habitus”, and “social structural coupling”. Each of these constructs signal a rudimentary attempt to merge substance and form in the academic discourse regarding human experience. But Niitsitapi thinking in this regard, and the representational tools they’ve developed to communicate their understanding, are far more holistically advanced than any of the available Western equivalents. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a single word in Niitsi’powahsini that does not, in the same manner as moistómi and áístomato’p, blend these experiential dimensions naturally. This makes my own endeavor to translate even a small percentage of the wealth of Niitsitapi knowledge and family-arity into the Western scientific language particularly challenging. Such efforts are patently criticized locally for “chopping-up” and “dissecting” what are, to the Niitsitapi, aspects of life perceived as indivisible. In this sense, the products of the ethnographic method, however

aimed they may be toward presentations of holism and the mutually-affective relationships between social groupings, still threaten to transform the illumination of a shared spirit into little more than a collection of static photographs. An Akáínaa artist named Delia Crosschild has, through one of her paintings, commented eloquently on this dilemma. Addressing the big-nosed, motionless portraits made famous by turn-of-the-century photographer Edward Curtis, she presents a Niitsitapi interpretation of her people's essential image.



“Take Your Hat Off, Edward Curtis”, a painting by Akáínaa artist Delia Crosschild (2002)

In this painting, all of the elements of the Niitsitapi world that I have described – the soyiitapiiksi, ksaahkomitapiiksi, and sspommitapiiksi, the creative partnering of

similitude and co-occurrence – are harmonized in such a way that no boundedness of individual or groupings exist. Rather, there is a fluidity throughout, which condenses cyclically into more tangible forms, only disperse again toward another manifestation. Here, the faces that had typically been the focus of Western photography are erased, so that identity can be understood as a sublime mergence with the whole of the cosmos. As Delia has often told me, of the process involved in her painting, it is as if the shapes of people emerge *from* the movement of her colors.

Failing to respect the complex interactions between the metaphoric and metonymic qualities apparent in Delia's painting, neglecting a life led in terms of those blended characteristics that define the body, home, community, and environment as "co-existent" manifestations of an eco-social spirit, inevitably results in the development of less fortunate events. And so we shall return, throughout the remainder to this thesis, to local experiences with sickness, *isttsiistomii*, or *bodily-pain*, and to the social and symbolic reproduction of more healthful states of being. Illness, in the Niitsitapi world, adopts numerous expressions – from the angry ghost, fugue state, and cancer that we witnessed in the first chapter, to the immobilities, arthritic conditions, floodings, heart failures, and burning sensations we'll find in the next. All are but symptoms, clues to the manner in which relationships between aspects of the eco-social spirit require attention.

To address these issues, the Niitsitapi typically attempt an adjustment of either the course or the intensity of nutritive aqueous flows through the eco-social body. Hence, again, the potency of the beaver in Niitsitapi medicine. But this endeavor to re-route appropriate fluids through form is not regarded conceptually as a practice of "controlling". Instead, their medicine is framed in terms of reciprocity - a sharing, giving, or *feeding* of the others who are truly the self. "Leaving an offering", as Frank says,

“that’s... our way”. Joseph Bastien (1985) has written of similar conceptual routines informing medical practices and bodily concepts of the Qollahuaya living in the Andes region of South America. In his analysis, these people are described as understanding their physiology in relation to a topographical-hydraulic model: “The metaphor is essentially a comparison of analogous qualities between Andeans and their environment. They understand their own bodies in terms of the mountain, and they consider the mountain in terms of their anatomy. Sickness, for example, is a disintegration of the human body similar to the landslide on the mountain, and health is restored by feeding the complete mountain” (ibid:598).

In Niitsitapi medical traditions, this kind of healing is accomplished by two means simultaneously, corresponding with their essential metonymic and metaphoric partnering. As regards the former, that co-occurrence of the individual and cosmological orders, the Niitsitapi rely upon a host of performative techniques to trigger or reinforce the sublime ontological expansion and indistinction of self. *Sstsiyyskaani*, or *steam-making*, is a method by-now familiar to the reader, having one’s face painted in the likeness of a celestial being is another. But perhaps the most intense confrontation with the sublime – that which, for lack of personal experience, I do not have the right to discuss in any detail here – is derived through the transfer rituals of the bundles themselves, where initiates become permanently allied with the diverse manifestations of spirit who originally gave their bodies and songs to the people. In fact, through such transfers, the initiates gain new identities altogether, symbolized through the application of body paint and a changing of clothes, so that they are transformed into *naatoyiitapiiksi*, *sacred-life*, beings not so much human anymore.

The other way that Niitsitapi address *feeding* the body in their attempts to restore health is through techniques aligned with their key metaphorization, the perceived similarities between ecological process and anatomical function. As with the performative techniques used to elicit or strengthen their sense of the sublime, Niitsitapi means of routing assorted nutritives through the eco-social body are, like the rivers and streams of this territory, varied in number and kind. A familiar example for the reader might be the practice of making offerings, or sharing accumulated wealth. Bastien's observations among the Qollahuaya again fit very well here. He has proposed that the health of their topographical-hydraulic model depends on "a process in which centripetal and centrifugal forces pull together and disperse fluids that provide emotions, thought, nutrients, and lubricants for the members of the body" (Bastien 1985:598). As an example of how this operates in practice, he describes their administration of herbal medicines, most often accomplished through a steeping of plant parts in a cup of boiled water, the underlying assumption being that the plant "concentrates and distils substances from the earth and then distributes these energies through the leaves" (ibid:601). Niitsitapi herbal medicines follow a similar conceptual schema, but rather than focusing on a gathering-together of nutrients from the soil, a kind of atomistic or bio-scientific model, here the plants used for tea, snuff, smoke, incense, etc., are selected for their strength of relationship to the other members of their immediate environment. Not just any plant of a particular species is gathered, but rather select individuals – those who are found growing strong amidst lush communities, those in which the gatherer can sense a well-nourished essence derived from the organism's active identification with its diverse co-existent family. In fact, not just anyone can harvest such a medicinal plant, but only

those who have had the experience of that gathering *done to* them through either transfer by their elders or direct intervention of spirit.

But as per Bastien's notion of centripetal and centrifugal forces as those anatomical processes perceived as effecting health, and consequent to the emplaced and embodied experiential history of a people living structurally-coupled with a sloping landscape, I find this observation very informative indeed. Considering once more that relationship between local ecology and the annual cycle of seasons on the northern plains, it should be observed that there are two principal periods of deposition and distribution each year. Over the winter, water collects in dense pockets of ice and snow, particularly along the mountains where nooks and valleys, sheltered from the wind, comprise natural enclaves for accumulating this product of meteorological interaction. When the Sun draws nearer in spring, these accumulations melt and disperse, nourishing and cleansing the life below. In the same way, throughout summer, the light and heat from the Sun is deposited and condensed in the enclaves of living organisms, stored in their tissues and fats which are, over the winter to follow, diffused through the eco-social body as food in a vast system of interdependent consumption between life forms.

In the ceremonies that mark the transition between these intense cycles of warmth and cold, just as with the spring dispersal of accumulated waters through the territory and the fall diffusion of light's stored energy through the body, Ksisskstaki Amopistaan is opened and the animals brought out to heal the people. Traditional foods like berry soup, crushed chokecherry, pemmican, boiled meat, and mint tea, prepared from that which grows wild in this country, are all fed to those in attendance, as are the sacred songs, stories, prayers, incense, and the dances of a variety of indigenous life forms. Together, these aqueous substances comprise the ingredients of Niitsitapi ritual healing. They are

routed into the moyís by naatoyiitapiiksi, *sacred-life*, digested by the metonymic eco-social body, and disseminated among the individual participants who come away nourished and bearing extra rations, not only of material food, but also of bits of the collective narrative stream, their bodies made ever more accustomed to the sensations and assumptions of a Niitsitapi-specific ethos. And as we shall find in the chapter to follow, it is from these reserves of embodied experience that people draw in framing their more personal explanations for illness and in constructing their expectations for healing.

Iitopiaapikkssiyi Apániiksi: Where The Moths Land



Paahatomahksikimi, (northernmost) *Inner-Lake* (2004)

Early into the first chapter of this thesis, I contended that in order to approach an understanding of the various conceptual interactions orienting significations in the Niitsitapi world (or any given community, for that matter), one first has to develop an appreciation for what it means to *exist* in their world, what forms such *being* might take, and how this knowledge itself is produced. To address these requisites, I've attempted to plot an analysis of some important aspects of the local ontological and epistemological orders via an application of the Niitsitapi notion of *áístomatoó'p*, in conversation with similar theoretical models currently being explored by Western anthropology and the cognitive sciences. This approach has allowed me to outline a partnered metonymic and metaphoric process that serves to symbolically structure perceptions of being and knowledge, reflective of a reciprocal exchange between a local ecology, material culture, narrative traditions, social organization, architecture, and the human body.

In exploring the Niitsitapi ontological categories, I have proposed that their most fundamental sense of being is of a sublime or cosmological grade, a notion of

numberless-ness and relatively unbound process that is as evident in the grammar of Niitsi'powahsini as it is in a variety of practices aimed toward the elimination of distinctions, and that I believe has emerged as an aesthetics somewhat endemic to their long history of social coupling with the northern plains environment. From this sublime class emerges individuated and grouped materializations of the more encompassing, yet basic, processes – what I have called, for lack of a better language, manifestations of spirit. Turning then toward the configuration and internal operations of the anatomical Niitsitapi body, I outlined a model whereby all forms are understood as deriving from complementary relationships between light and water, Sun and Moon, gendered aspects of iihstipáitapiyo'p, the *means-of-life*, correlated to experiential dimensions of metonym (co-occurrence) and metaphor (similarity). The union of these forces is defined by an aqueous exchange, where various fluidities coalesce as nutritive deposits in permeable but sheltered earthly enclaves, embodying the reproduction of a natural cycle of accumulation, transformation, and dispersal – the eternal rite of passage that characterizes all life.

Given this framework, admittedly based in my own limited experiential history as a socially immersed observant participant in Niitsitapi communities, I have attempted to demonstrate that áístomato'p, the *accustomed-body*, is one which – as the people themselves believe – has received its meaning in knowledge *done-to* it by co-existing manifestations of spirit. Embodiment, in this sense, is not characterized by a directionality of symbolism moving from universal sensations and structures of the individual organism outward, nor entirely from the reverse condition, but rather through an indivisibility of human beings and their eco-social relations. To co-exist is not to *be with*, but to *be as*. It is the very essence of metaphor and metonym. And even those not fully conscious of these dynamic relationships, the loggers of British Columbia for

instance, are eventually obliged to either participate in the requisite exchange or suffer and perish. A being that is fed must, by the cyclical law of nature, become in-turn a body that feeds. Accumulative deposits are ultimately cast-out.

For the remainder of this thesis, I would like to turn to a couple of very concrete ethnographic examples demonstrating how these proposed dynamics play-out in contemporary, everyday lives, where the nutritive fluids of relational experience become bundled together and redistributed in the context of regular cultural practice. While I might have just as easily drawn examples from the domains of formalized education, community politics, kinship relations, etc., I will instead return to a focus on rituals of healing – those events through which individual, social, and cosmic lives are deconstructed and refashioned anew in terms of a Niitsitapi-specific symbolic order. Within the cultural schema described above, the body can be seen to face at least two basic endangerments: either 1) becoming too heavy with amassed substance, or 2) starving from lack of nutritive flow. In both scenarios, the threat does not only affect the individual organism but, like flood and famine, it endangers the entire eco-social environment – that network of interdependent co-existence which, as I've proposed, the Niitsitapi conceptualize in terms of familiarities with near-far spatiality and household relationships, expanded to encompass alliances with all of the manifestations of spirit perceivable in their traditional world. Thus, when someone falls ill in these communities, it may not just be the people themselves who conspire to reconfigure his or her troubled body, but other manifestations of spirit as well – the *soyitapiiksi*, *ksaahkomitapiiksi*, and *sspommitapiiksi* – who are similarly dependent on the continuation of life. The story to follow relates one such instance, a series of events and transformations that fed into my

wife Adrienne's experience with arthritis, which ultimately required an intervention on behalf of *iihtsipáitapiyo'p*, the *means-of-life*, represented through an underwater spirit.

Waterman Gives Her Legs

Not too far from where White Grass and his wife were transferred Ksisskstaki Amopistaan, along the shore of the more northerly Paahtomahksíkimi, or *Inner-Lake*, just west of the Akáínaa Reserve, my mother-in-law likes to host a biannual barbeque for select family members, related by blood, marriage, and/or bundle affiliation. Pam usually arranges these events during the liminal days of late spring and early fall, those transitional periods between intense cycles of deep freeze and blossoming life that characterize the annual succession on these northern plains.

Our excursions to the mountains are loosely organized a day or two beforehand, when Pam calls around to invite those she'd like in attendance. Sometimes, the notification only comes early the morning of departure. But either way, the hours preceding the barbeque are typically a scramble for food, wood, and passenger coordination, followed by a speedy convoy west across the reserve and into Waterton National Park – a small lakeside tourist town out of which hikers can embark on trailheads leading through nearly two-hundred miles of Rocky Mountain “back-country”. Our procession only travels to that point where the road ends, in a series of quiet cul-de-sac parking lots equipped with wind-shelters and wood-burning stoves. There, the women set to work cooking beef flank or steaks, bannock, potatoes and hot dogs, all but the last of these simulating dietary staples remnant from the days of buffalo, biscuit root, and wild turnips. While the women cook, we men sit around smoking and conversing, drinking pop or tea. Sometimes Pam brings along some raw beef kidney for the older

guys to snack on, again suggestive of a traditional diet. Our children, for their part, busy themselves exploring rocks beside the lake, occasionally braving its icy waters, or walking into the nearby town to rent bicycle-buggies and buy candy.

Despite its semi-carnival atmosphere, this park in the shadow of the mountains does seem the place where, like in the reflection off the lake's surface, the sky, earth, and underwater – three realms of the Niitsitapi cosmos – coalesce in unequalled magnificence. It's one of the few places remaining in North America where you might still catch a glimpse of a bighorn sheep, or have an unexpected run-in with a grizzly bear. For those living out on the prairies, within sight of the Rockies, the splendor of places like Waterton call-out for human visitation, their very presence inviting our re-creational activities. To some, these locales signal adventure and wildness. For my mother-in-law, Pam, as for many Niitsitapi, the mountains are elder beings, revered for their beauty, and are equated with family and home. When visitors arrive from afar, they are brought to these places, shown first-hand the majesty of kitawahsinnooni. For those who have been away, the sight of Nínaiistáko, the peak where Pawakksski fasted, and from atop which Náápi and his animal companions resurrected the land after the great flood, is an affirmation of having returned to the sanctuary of normalcy. Its silhouette serves as the crest of many tribal organizations and businesses, its image hangs alongside family portraits in living-rooms across all Niitsitapi reserves, or as screen-savers on band members' computers. The mountains are, in a way, like role-models for these communities, legends come to life. They are metaphorically personified with moral attributes of strength, persistence, up-rightness, and purity that the people themselves desire. Many of the most potent herbal medicines come from the mountains: *sáóka'simm*, the *horizontal* "power" root of the Horn Society; *omahká's*, the *big root* of

the Beaver Bundles; kátoyiss, the Ninnaimsskaiksi *blood-clot*; and the illustrious seventh paint, a fine ochre with mercury sheen, known to disappear before the eyes of those ill-prepared to collect it. It is amidst all of this that Pam calls us to gather for our lakeside barbecues each year.

During the spring season preceding my thesis studies, our trip to the mountains was particularly memorable. At the time, my wife Adrienne was just beginning to recover from a severe episode of rheumatoid arthritis, a disease she'd been diagnosed with a year earlier when a sudden onset of inflammation in her ankles, knees, and hands swiftly stole away her mobility and tactile faculties. In fact, we had settled permanently back into kitawahsinnooni in large part because of the disease. The first three years of our marriage had been spent in migratory limbo between her parents' home on the Akáínaa Reserve and my folks' abode in western Oregon, where we had a contract to research and repatriate ceremonial regalia and human remains for the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde. It was while working that contract, during a month-long whirlwind tour of museum collections across the United States, that Adrienne's arthritic pain began. By the time we returned to Oregon from that trip, she already needed assistance to walk. And, after trying unsuccessfully to locate adequate medical treatment, both in the Bureau of Indian Affairs Health Services and in traditional native healers of western Oregon, we determined to find out what could be done for her in Alberta.

Initially, we only intended to visit kitawahsinnooni for a couple of weeks, talk to a few elders on the Akáínaa Reserve, see Adrienne's family doctor in Lethbridge, and return south to continue our work with the Grand Ronde. But within days of our arrival, each of these parties had diagnosed her condition, and courses of treatment were set out that would keep us in Alberta permanently. From a rheumatoid specialist to whom

Adrienne's physician had referred us, we learned that she had a disabling form of arthritis that often set upon women of twenty to forty years of age and typically manifested itself in an immuno-attack upon the cartilage of the knees, ankles, and wrist joints, precisely where she was experiencing her pain. The causes of such arthritis were unknown, and the disease incurable, but with proper medications (weekly gold-salt injections and a regiment of anti-inflammatories) the doctor was confident that its progress could be stopped, and that Adrienne would regain most of her mobility. This assurance was far more promising than anything we'd found in Oregon, but in other ways our visit to this specialist proved disturbing. When I requested more detailed information about the disease, the side-effects of the proposed medications, and the physical means by which it inhibited the progress of arthritis, Adrienne's rheumatologist offered only curt, frustrated answers, cast in a tone that seemed to betray an air of superiority, as if she were the guardian of knowledge we couldn't possibly comprehend. This encounter left Adrienne and I with feelings of distrust toward the doctor, whose terse responses to my questions seemed to signal classism if not racism.

From the Niitsitapi elders we visited, no such tensions arose. Working with our account of the disease's onset and with knowledge of the biomedical diagnosis made by the rheumatologist, they talked to us about a number of possible causes for the disease. These ranged from curses cast by someone feeling jealous over our marriage, to our exposure to human remains and grave materials while working for Grand Ronde, and from Adrienne's sorrow over the loss of one of her grandparents earlier that year, to the effects of modern diet and lifestyle. To this list, Adrienne's immediate family added the possibility of genetic inheritance, as a few of her female ancestors had been known to suffer arthritic symptoms (although none as extreme, or at such a young age). They also

thought it likely that a dislocated hip injury from Adrienne's childhood might have aggravated this predetermined condition. Each of these speculations offered potential, or likely, candidates for rationalizing the illness. It's treatment, from the elders' prospective, was the same in any event: keep moving, don't give up, eat good [approximating traditional] foods, stay warm, soak in the rivers, feed the bundles, make offerings, get Adrienne's face painted, pray, and transfer into relationships with the spirits. In other words, concentrate on traditional Niitsitapi medical practices.

Over the next year, Adrienne and I tried almost all of these techniques, and then some. Adrienne took her prescribed medicines, tried to eat healthily, dressed warmly, danced with bundles, and had her face painted. I participated in sweats, danced either with Adrienne or on her behalf with the bundles, and was transferred the song of the Loon, Matsí'sai'piyi, or *fine-charger*, admired by the Niitsitapi for never cringing before an enemy. In addition to these approaches, Adrienne began seeing an Okinawan healer, locally reputed for his unique application of body knowledge gained through karate practice as a form of physical therapy often successful in treating diabetes, rheumatoid conditions, and fibromyalgia. Of Adrienne's various dealings, it was these Okinawan therapies that seemed to bring the most immediate improvement in her mobility. And following the advice of the Niitsitapi elders made her feel like a resolution would be achieved, and that we were doing the *right* things to deal with the disease. On the other hand, the weekly gold-salt injections and the daily regiment of anti-inflammatories not only failed to relieve Adrienne's physical discomforts, but also provoked some further distress, as she worried about the long-term effects those drugs would have on her liver, kidneys, and reproductive organs. In fact, once the Okinawan treatment proved somewhat successful, Adrienne quit having her injections administered altogether. By

the following spring, and the time for our lakeside barbeque, her pain was on-again, off-again, with the disease seeming to be slowly fading from her system.

That particular day in the mountains, her pain was on-again, and as much as Adrienne would have liked to help her mom and sisters cooking our meal, or to have taken a walk with me along one of the park trails, she had to settle with sitting and watching the younger children, and feeling somewhat encumbered and inadequate. Luckily, though, she had the company of Frank and Sylvia Weasel Head, an older couple who are, to our family, as affinal grandparents. Frank himself had suffered through many years of arthritic pain that, at times, became so bad that he could only move around his house on hands and knees. He had been one of the elders we approached early-on for Adrienne, recommending that she keep warm, soak her legs in the rivers, and never give up (or *iiyika'kimat, try-hard*). On a number of occasions, he had suggested that she sample various herbal remedies that he himself found effective for his condition, topical ointments and dietary supplements sold in health food stores around the city of Lethbridge, and a big-leaf sage found in ravines and gullies on the prairie to use as a compress. Ever hopeful, Adrienne had experimented with most of the commercial products, as well as the sage, to little avail. But with as many obstacles as she hit in these struggles to overcome the disease, Frank was always there with encouraging words, modeling an incalculably helpful undefeated attitude that she reflected in her own efforts.

The afternoon of our spring barbeque was no different. As everyone busied themselves cooking, visiting, and wandering around the park, Frank and Sylvia sat with Adrienne and talked arthritis. A few hours into our stay, some of the older kids came dripping back to our shelter, having wrestled one another into the lake. At this, Frank turned to Adrienne and suggested that she wade into the water as well, just until she was

in above her knees. It would take away her pain, he said. Adrienne had never tried soaking her joints in the rivers, as Frank had previously suggested, because those waters that coursed around and through the Akáínaa Reserve seemed filthy to her – there were thick coats of algae on the rocks, and who knew what got washed-in from the farms upstream. The mountain lake, on the other hand, was the very image of purity – a clear, glacier-fed pool, with nothing above it but forests, stone, and snowy peaks. Encouraged by this, Adrienne rolled-up her pant-legs and walked, with my assistance, down the shore and into the lake. The water was numbingly, but also refreshingly, cold. Slowly, we made our way further from the banks, and by the time she was in above her knees Adrienne was excited to continue further. Eventually, she made it into waist-deep water, and stayed there for some minutes before turning back toward the shelter, her pains much relieved and her attitude elated.

For several days after her soak in the lake, Adrienne established – through her daily conversations – the positive effects that the waters had on her condition. In many ways, the brief and seemingly insignificant episode represented a transition point in what is yet an ongoing labor for her. Following the barbeque, and throughout that summer, Adrienne’s pains subsided completely. She attributed this principally to the ongoing benefits of her work with the Okinawan healer, though recalling fondly her dip in the mountain waters, and began to consider herself more-or-less cured. Her sessions with the healer became infrequent, and she started to enjoy again the kinds of unfettered activities that had been available in her life before the disease had come.

While Adrienne took pleasure in her recovery experience, three members of her extended family passed away – a newborn niece, a grandmother, and an uncle. Then, as the fall season approached, Adrienne stepped awkwardly off a sidewalk curb one day,

badly twisting her ankle. Compensating for the injury, over the next couple of weeks, she walked in a manner that favored her good leg. Soon, her other ankle was injured as well, and her knees began to hurt. A few months later, as I started the work for this thesis, it was again apparent that the arthritis was progressing dangerously. Under Frank's advisement, rather than relying solely on her regular family doctor, Adrienne also began to see a second physician working in the health clinic on the Akáínaa Reserve – a Native woman who Frank felt could be more thoroughly trusted for unbiased biomedical counsel. Over the course of that winter, as Adrienne's condition worsened far beyond anything she had previously experienced, her regular doctor prescribed her first a walker, then a wheelchair, and the physician on the Akáínaa Reserve sent her to sessions of physio- and hydro-therapy twice a week. This latter doctor also referred Adrienne to a different rheumatoid specialist, a Chinese gentleman in Calgary whose patients, I would observe over the next year, were predominantly non-European immigrants. Adrienne found this man to be far more amicable toward any inquires she had. What's more, he did not – as her previous rheumatologist had – merely glance at the level of Rh-factor in her blood count and prescribe appropriate injection doses; he also brought-in, at various times, other specialists of the feet, bones, and joints, to thoroughly test the impact that arthritis was having on Adrienne's body, and to prescribe various therapies that would help speed her recovery.

Throughout that winter, and into the next summer, the accepted explanation for Adrienne's relapse among our family and elder advisors focused upon the emotional difficulties incurred through the deaths of the previous year. This time was also a period of exceptional depression for Adrienne, because she had again tasted, however briefly, a life without the disease, and this made the reversion all the more difficult to cope with.

In our conversations, she expressed a feeling that her suffering might be the result of a kind of karmic influence, that she had committed some form of immorality which had brought the illness upon her. During such moods, Adrienne occasionally hinted toward suicidal contemplations as well. But aside from this self-blame, she also sought explanation externally in the biomedical care she had received. Particularly suspicious was the possible influence that an appendectomy, one year before *any* of her arthritic symptoms appeared, may have had. During that operation, her surgeons had inflated her belly with a gas, made three separate incisions near her navel, and through these removed her appendix and severed a number of adhesions left-over from her pregnancy some years before. We later came across an article in a medical journal that suggested Adrienne's form of arthritis might be caused by bacterial leakage from the intestines, where there were certain organisms with the same shape of surface membrane as occurs on the cells of cartilage in the joints; the immuno-system attacks the bacterial cells, and then continues on to the joints, unable to distinguish between the two. With all of the intrusion into Adrienne's abdominal cavity during her appendectomy, it seemed reasonable to assume that such a bacterial leakage could have occurred, and that her subsequent arthritic symptoms were then a result, ultimately, of careless doctoring.

That spring, as we juggled such explanations, trying to make sense of the relapse and weigh various courses of therapy, another important event transpired. We had acquired some deer meat late one evening and had to go to bed before we could finish separating and packing it all away. What we couldn't process, we left soaking in water. In the middle of that night, Adrienne awoke startled. Through a dream, she had seen herself at her aunt and uncle's residence beside a river, where the waters were flooding up to the edge of the house. Adrienne was in their kitchen with her mom and dad, and

Frank brought an old man, dressed all in white, to see her. When Frank and the old man arrived, Pam told Adrienne to stand-up, but she couldn't. Then the old man danced toward her, with Frank and Adrienne's dad holding him up by his arms at either side. The expression on the old man's face scared her, and when he got to her, he reached down and put his hands on her knees. Then he danced backwards out of the kitchen and announced that the arthritis was gone, that Adrienne would have no more pain, and indeed she was able to stand without effort. When the man left, Adrienne noticed that her dad was acting odd. Pam told her that the old man had scared him too, but that nobody needed to be so frightened, that he was just very ancient.

Down a-ways from this house, there was another little settlement. Through a kitchen window, Adrienne could see some people boating on the river by that place. As she watched, their vessel began to sink into the water. The river was raging, and she realized that they would drown. At this point, the window she had been peering through shattered and fell away. And when it did, Adrienne climbed outside and ran along the flooded riverbank, intending to save the desperate people. As she approached, they began floating further downriver, calling out to her not to worry, that the "Waterman" would help them. Then, out of the corner of her eye, Adrienne noticed some movement below the water's surface. She looked over and saw a glowing object emerge rapidly from a flooded stand of trees. It circled sunwise behind her and come around to the main river. There it stood up, and Adrienne could see that it was a greenish being, something like a cross between a human and a fish. This waterman surfaced only briefly, and then went back under and hurriedly gathered all of the drowning people, bringing them to shore. At that point, Adrienne turned back toward the house, and made her way into the window. Standing again in her aunt's kitchen, she saw a number of children, some of her

nephews and nieces, come into the room and begin dancing strangely around the dining table. In their dance, they all picked-up knives and held them to the sides of their heads, in such a way that it appeared to Adrienne as if there were blades coming out from between the children's eyes. This scared her badly, and she awoke. For the next few minutes, she laid in bed beside me with her eyes open and a sense that there was a presence in the room watching her. Finally, she woke me up too, insisting that we finish putting the deer meat away. I agreed, and while we worked on the deer she told me about her dream, and the way it made her feel that we had done something wrong in leaving the meat out to soak, and that she needed to talk to Frank about it.

Over the next couple of days, there was some conferring among our family about the dream. I maintained the quiet opinion that it was a good omen related to Ksisskstaki Amopistaan, from which I had transferred the song of Matsí'sai'piyi, *fine-charger*, who was also leader of the underwater fowl and the only bird species with solid leg bones. After discussion with both her husband and Frank, Pam corroborated in determining that the dream signalled beneficial assistance from the soyiitapiiksi. In Pam's interpretation, however, these underwater people had come to help Adrienne because of their association to herself. Pam's Blackfoot name was Sai'píiaakii, *Charging-Woman*, a title that had been exposed through the testimony of a friend who had, upon their first meeting, recognized Pam as an underwater person she had encountered in a dream. The flooding Adrienne saw out of the kitchen window, always a sign that something was being purged from the earth, was thought to denote the recent deaths of family members, events that had provoked her toward relapse. And the old man, as well as the blurred figure in the river, were those of the underwater, come to help her. Nothing was said regarding the children with the knives, although this too represents an important cultural

motif in relation to sickness, as I shall later reveal. Adrienne's sense that the dream was related to the deer meat was similarly disregarded.

Following this dream episode, Adrienne was instructed to go to the river with a tobacco offering, and to do a smudge there, praying to the underwater people for their assistance. At the same time, her description of the old man in the dream had reminded Pam of an herbal healer she knew of – an elder Cree fellow who lived in the area of that house by the river. Through Pam's sister, this man was approached, and he sent Adrienne a brown paper bag full of finely-chopped herbs to drink as a tea in washing away her arthritis. With all of this orientation toward the waters as a locale for therapy, Adrienne again began to dwell on the effects she had felt when going into the mountain lake, and Frank's numerous appeals for her to soak in the rivers. Still hesitant to enter into waters she considered polluted, Adrienne began accompanying me to a university campus, where she could swim in an athletic pool. Doing this a few times a week throughout the summer and into the fall season, she was able to strengthen her body and regain enough mobility to move out of her wheelchair, back to the walker, and then to leave those supports behind altogether. By wintertime, she had quit swimming and purchased an exercise bike. And by the following spring, she felt able enough to seek and gain employment as a technical support representative for an internet corporation.

Current to the writing of this thesis, Adrienne has expressed the belief that there is a valuable reason for her to suffer arthritis, that she feels somehow *meant* to do so. By navigating her way through the most intense periods of pain and immobility, she has gained an experience that can be transferred to others who become similarly burdened. Indeed, during the first summer following her recovery from the wheelchair, Adrienne was already being consulted by afflicted persons, and referenced as a model of

perseverance by elders like Frank Weasel Head, who had served her in similar capacity. She has continued to increase her physical activities, to partake of occasional dips in the northernmost Paahtomahksikimi (which she now views as an auxiliary means of purification, parallel to a man's sweat), and to visit the Chinese rheumatologist in Calgary. During her most recent appointment with this rheumatologist, after a lapse of six months between visits, he expressed astonishment over her improvement, admitting that when he'd first met Adrienne he'd privately predicted that she would soon require the full-time assistance of nurses. In addition to these continued sessions in Calgary, Adrienne returned full-time to her family doctor in Lethbridge for administration of the medications prescribed by the rheumatologist. Her choice to revert entirely back to the physician in Lethbridge, rather than continue seeing her doctor on the Akáínaa Reserve as well, was based mostly on the proximity of the former to our home. Finally, Adrienne's family members and elder advisors continue to pray for her sickness to be "put away" during sstsiysskaani rituals, and both she and I maintain a practice of attending other bundle ceremonies where we can dance and have our faces painted.

As a concluding note to this account, I have been asked to incorporate commentary made by one of our religious advisors, Alan Pard, familiar to readers from the first chapter. Upon his review of this thesis, learning more of the detailed history behind Adrienne's struggle with arthritis, and particularly in relation to her dream, Alan scolded me for not accepting greater responsibility for her continued condition. "How many sweats have you put up? How many offerings have you made?" he asked me. "All the signs are right there in front of your face, telling you guys what to do, and you're just letting other people take care of it for you," he said, implying that we needed to be seeking more transfer relationships ourselves, instead of merely attending those rituals

hosted by others. “You should write what I’m telling you into that thesis,” Alan insisted. “You guys aren’t out of the water yet.”

Of Transference, Co-Existence, And Purpose

Adrienne’s story, one that I have intimately shared and collaborated in narrating and emplotting over the course of her nearly five years of experience with rheumatoid arthritis, offers an excellent case study for consideration related to the other ideas presented throughout this thesis. My decision to include it here reflects that commitment toward socially immersed observant participation as the *modus operandi* of my anthropology. There is no doubt that, in compacting these years of her life into so many pages, I have overlooked or excluded a great deal that another researcher, operating from whatever distance, or even Adrienne herself, would have incorporated. Moreover, I would not attempt to deny the possibility that I have made, of her circumstances, something particularly useful toward confirming an analysis that has been, in its fashion, not only conceived along the way, but also influential in terms of contributing toward and shaping some of the events described (particularly during the last year or so as my thesis work was being conducted). And as a husband, father, apprentice, in-law, or associate, I remain heavily subjected to social pressures – from Adrienne, her family, our advisors, and the Niitsitapi community at large – to develop a *proper* portrayal and interpretation of her story and the other episodes presented in these pages.

All of the potential shortcomings in my rendering of Adrienne’s experience amount to challenges that, I would argue, must be negotiated by any anthropologist, whether influenced by proximities or coercions derived from within the subject population or without. Objectivity, perhaps the principle ethical and stylistic character to step forward

in indicting this deliberately-transparent essay as betraying suspect qualities is, as we are mostly aware, a useful fiction in itself. What I am concerned with here is the attempt to contribute an experientialist account toward a topic of theoretical discussion, which in this case involves the body's interactions with a local socio-ecological environment in formulating and reproducing symbolic knowledge about the human condition. For this purpose, I view my intimate involvement with Adrienne's life, and the Niitsitapi social obligations this entails, as more beneficial than obstructive. And while every individual's encounter with illness or disease is unique, making any claim to identifying a "typical Niitsitapi expression" somewhat essentialist, I have certainly heard enough reports from others in these communities to have confidence that my inclusion of her story in this thesis is well-founded.

Reviewing the transformative series of events that manifest from Adrienne's arthritis, one may begin to appreciate the complex negotiations surrounding the ways that nutritive fluids of relational experience become metonymically bundled together by, and metaphorically transferred between, interdependent beings in both the context of everyday happenings, and while specifically directing attention toward illness and healing. Throughout the progression of this account, all three of the Niitsitapi ontological awarenesses are found to be felt and lived concurrently – but it is the sublime that takes center stage as the most powerful and prevailing instrument for explaining and curing disease. Similarly, while Adrienne often feels isolated in her circuits through various stages of pain and recuperation, those around her are certain that these conditions reflect a transference of emotive substance between herself, a variety of social players, and the collective spirit generally. In fact, even Adrienne initially suspects that she has done something karmically "wrong" to bring about her ailment. This indivisible perception of

self, society, and cosmos, along with the potential to reproduce or be affected by the qualities of another, define an interaction of co-occurrence and similitude in Niitsitapi embodiments that operates on principles beyond directionality, indexing a relationship of structural coupling between people and their eco-social environment. In the end, it is an intense, vivid dream – deeply symbolic and cathartic – that synchronizes these dimensions of experience and, in doing so, serves as the catalyst for reconceptualizations of the illness itself, leading eventually to personal and social expressions of recovery.



Adrienne at the Old Man River (2004)

The exchanges that are registered in Adrienne's encounter reveal how essential the sublimated self and cosmological ontic order are in Niitsitapi lives. For instance, rather than focusing predominantly on the cellular mechanisms that science has described as distinguishing arthritic symptoms from the plethora of recognizable syndromes, or on the

medications that might be introduced into the body to effectively resist the depredations of an immune system gone inexplicably awry, the most prevalent motifs in Adrienne's story involve much wider expanses of normative and cyclical movement. Instead of concentrating on anomalous happenings transpiring within the contained boundaries of an autonomous organism, Adrienne's experience centers around the interrelationships between her self and a permeable eco-social body.

At the beginning of her story, with the onset of disease, we learn that Niitsitapi are at particular risk for health problems while journeying away from the meta-enclave that defines their traditional territory. One of the initial measures taken to remedy Adrienne's condition, after finding both Western clinicians and the native healers of Oregon entirely ineffective in diagnosing or treating her illness, was our committed passage back into a more fundamental emplacement on the Akáínaa Reserve. Once there, the elder advisors and family members we consulted immediately suspected that associations with the dead – either through the repatriation work we were involved in with Grand Ronde, or by way of Adrienne's sorrow over the loss of a grandparent - had played a key role in the development of her disease. Their assessments were founded in the sublime sense of *being*, and entailed a correlation between this ontological mode and near-far orientations. Like the dead, whose essence is swept away from kitawahsinnooni by the rivers, those whose lives have taken them to other places are always in danger of not *being* any longer. When this conceptual association was applied toward the fact that we had indeed been out there working with human remains, and that a family member had passed away in the interim (a virtual abandonment for Adrienne), it was only reasonable to deduce that her arthritic symptoms were at least partially the result of a wrongful emplacement. By transforming our visit to the reserve into a more permanent move we had taken the first

step in a necessary effort to become re-acquainted with the life-giving qualities of the Niitsitapi eco-social body.

From there, the elders' suggestions all directed Adrienne toward methods of strengthening her relationship with this greater environmental being. She should feed the bundles, make offerings, undergo transfers, have her face painted, pray, soak in the rivers, eat indigenous foods, keep herself warm and moving, and never give up. Likewise, I myself became viewed as responsible for maintaining exchanges with the cosmos that directly effected Adrienne's health. Thus emerged the social, or the grouped, from the relationship between the sublime and individual ontic orders. With this, Adrienne's parents, elders, siblings, and friends united in their conviction that a range of interconnected explanations existed for her illness, a collection of influences that typically described underlying social dilemmas that had made her the target of hurtful intentions, and which could be remedied through behavioural changes not only on her behalf, but also through actions undertaken by myself and the other members of our kin group. Events of Adrienne's past were explored in conversation for potential occasions during which such animosities may have arisen. It was suggested, for instance, that our marriage had invited some unknown community members to direct jealous emotions toward us. And even those explanatory models that relied on biomedical knowledge carried social implications: lifestyle and nutritional changes (combined with possible genetic predispositions), inadequate or impersonal health care, and bacterial leakage all ultimately accused Naapiikoaiksi (*Náápi's-kind-of-people*) of exhibiting either negligence in their relationships with the Niitsitapi, or outright hostility and racism.

Each of these rationalizations for Adrienne's condition focused upon ways in which she had become an *object* of mistreatment. Her ontological standing had changed from

one of being somewhat disembodied (i.e. normal), to that of conspicuous individuality or, in the case of racism, limited group association. In terms of the historic Niitsitapi gaming and hunting gestalt, Adrienne had become distinct, more readily targeted by the harmful intentions of others. The remedies, therefore, were predominantly oriented around various practical means through which she, and those most directly connected to her, could alter this dangerous status. It is interesting to observe that, while incorporating biomedicine into her treatment regime, Adrienne took measures to remove herself physically from the perceived abuses of uncaring or hateful Europeans. She felt comfortable with the Okinawan healer who treated her whole body, with the Native physician who prescribed physio- and hydro-therapy, and with the Chinese rheumatologist who brought-in other specialists to plan for her recovery. In contrast, and quite reasonably, she felt neglected by the quick and impersonal diagnoses offered by her regular physician, and victimized by the condescending attitude of the European rheumatoid specialist in Calgary who refused to answer simple questions. What's more, these latter doctors, operating entirely under the containment and warfare metaphors of the Western world, understood Adrienne's condition as involving a linear progression that would inevitably result in loss – the best they could propose was an opportunity to introduce potent, biologically dangerous chemicals, into the symbolic campaign and hope that this would keep the enemy from advancing too far forward. It is little wonder, given these major cultural differences, that Adrienne came away from her encounters with the European doctors feeling more harmed than healed.

In medical anthropology, it is sometimes assumed that patients involved in curing rituals do not need to comprehend the machinations and theories employed by their therapists in order to generate a confidence that healing will occur. It is surmised that

what matters most is a “belief” in the efficacy of the medicine and the superior knowledge of the healer. In a recent anthropological film series produced and televised by National Geographic, Carolyn Marvin (2004) has said, “Very few people who go into the doctor’s office have a really clear idea of exactly what it is the doctor knows. We simply accept on faith, and in our culture the doctors are the people that are empowered to make these decisions and make these conclusions, and we follow them. That’s not different from what other cultures do.” While I applaud the relativism underlying such statements, from my observant participations in Niitsitapi communities it would seem that these suppositions are mistaken. As will be discussed further in the next chapter, the premises and techniques underlying medical therapies find most of their value in the fact that they contribute toward and reinforce embodied narrative themes and aesthetics shared by all members of a particular social group. While Western doctor-patient relationships may be characterized by a common faith in science, where aspects of the clinical encounter serve to remind participants of the practical benefits of bio-medical knowledge, and the necessity of extreme social stratification to generate the specialized professionals able to study and internalize that knowledge, eventually delivering it to the masses in the form of powerful potions and methods of surgical exorcism, these narrative elements do not blend well with Niitsitapi ideologies of co-existence and transference. Patients in these communities expect to benefit not only physically, but also intellectually, socially and spiritually, through their healing transformations, these four aspects of life being indivisible in their awareness.

For Adrienne, the first real signs of recovery appear very rapidly when she begins her work with the Okinawan healer, and it may be useful here – both as a comparative model to weigh against her experiences with the Western doctors, and in approaching a

better sense of Niitsitapi medicine in particular - to describe their relationship in greater detail. Taka Kinjo is something of an emerging local legend in kitawahsinnooni. He holds the only ninth-degree karate black belt in Canada, has practiced in Lethbridge (just outside the Akáínaa Reserve) for more than a quarter of a century, and was recently given an honorary doctor of laws degree at this city's university. The style he teaches is called Gohakukai, a mixture of twentieth-century Japanese goju-ryu and ancient Okinawan tomari-te, with both systems being retained in their entirety. As a tomari-te specialist, and a native Okinawan, Kinjo identifies strongly with the indigenous. And as a goju-ryu practitioner, and immigrant to western Canada, he advocates for the cross-cultural exchange of beneficial knowledge. In both senses, his approach fits well with what the Niitsitapi expect from introduced medical therapies. When Adrienne first visited his dojo, and told him of her arthritis, Kinjo immediately expressed confidence that the disease could be cured, and that he could show her how to do it. His only stipulation was that she formally request his help and, when she did, he assured her that he would not accept any payments for his assistance until the arthritis was gone.

Over the months to follow, we went to see Kinjo three or four times each week. On every occasion, he would have Adrienne carefully perform karate techniques and stretching exercises, using her own willpower against her body's rheumatic resistance. His theory was that Western physiotherapists did more damage when they themselves artificially manipulated their patients' joints, that real healing involved muscle memory for healthy movement and proper posturing that could only be gained through steady voluntary practice. Each time Adrienne completed a series of exercises that he had prescribed, Kinjo would take her aside and use his hands to draw pain out of her body. This method of extraction involved floating both of his palms over either side of an

effected joint, sensing the point of irritation, and then concentrating on the removal of her pain. To Adrienne, when Kinjo used his hands in this fashion, it felt like a very cold wind was rushing between his palms and her skin. Once the pain was removed, Kinjo's hands slowly closed on the joint and, as he sometimes instructed me, in doing this he was channelling all good things into her body. For Adrienne, this felt like an intense heat.

While Kinjo's methods and his underlying theories were not by any means Niitsitapi-specific, they fit very well within local medical traditions. *Áísokinakiiksi*, *making-goodness-visible*, the Niitsi'powahsini title for "healers" or "medicine men", follow similar routines in their own practices of purging the body of pain, and feeding it with nutritive substance. The commonality of procedure describes a cyclical flow in which dangerous elements are condensed and dispersed, creating an opportunity for new life-substance to enter fluidly into the patient. With Kinjo, this process could be assisted through karate exercises, and the subsequent removal of pain by-hand. With the *áísokinakiiksi*, physical exertion is also stressed (i.e. the elders' advice to "dance" or "keep moving"), and dangerous concentrations of illness are extracted either by sucking with the mouth through a hollow bone tube, or by the patient's ingestion and subsequent expulsion of prescribed herbal brews.

There are other similarities between these two traditions as well. Kinjo professed that his abilities to heal derived from a spiritual transfer that occurred in exchange for a vow made during a time of extreme danger – an occasion when, as an airplane passenger caught in a violent storm, he had determined that should his flight arrive safely, he would commit his life thereafter to helping people. Having made this promise, Kinjo felt immediately comforted, as if the exchange had been confirmed. The weather cleared, their plane landed and, thirty years later, he was still fully honouring the terms of his

pledged relationship to life. This account bears an incredible resemblance to the classic experiences of áísokinakiiksi in gaining their own healing powers, and also to local conventions surrounding bundle transfers. In both cases, the entry into more intense relationships with iih̄tsipáítapiyo’pa, the *means-of-life*, are premised on vows made during periods of intense hardship or mortal danger. Typically, one commits to such a vow when a potentially fatal illness threatens the life of a close family member, as we saw in the first chapter when the man in Brocket determined to seek transfer of a Ninnaimsskaahkoyinnimaani to help his wife escape her cancer. Once such a promise is made, the identities of those persons involved – be they individual áísokinakiiksi, or couples who have taken bundles – become forever transformed, and a much wider kinship network is revealed.

It should be noted that healing of this sort, in Niitsitapi communities, has never been a contained experience, restricted to exchanges within the immediate clan, or even the tribe. Instead, Niitsitapi in illness have consistently sought to break from such constraints. As I conducted the various interviews that went into the research for this thesis, many of my advisors told me of occasions when they or their parents had travelled long distances to visit áísokinakiiksi in other communities. Frank Weasel Head, from Adrienne’s story, commented specifically about how I should emphasize that contemporary excursions to see healers outside of the reserve – in nearby towns or distant cities, Westernized or otherwise – represented a persistence of Niitsitapi medical traditions. Given that one is metonymically indistinct from those persons already in intimate relationships of the everyday, when unfortunate events like sickness transpire, people may find that the most direct routes to healing are ineffective, that those medicines possessed by one’s usual associates are also being influenced by the same

processes that are involved in generating the illness, so that an expansion of eco-social relations is necessary to both disperse the dangerous accumulations and to gain access to nutritive flows. Usually, among the Niitsitapi, these extensions are accomplished by way of visits and transfers conducted with members of other closely related communities. But this is certainly not the case on every such occasion. There exists, for instance, a long history of Niitsitapi medicinal exchange with the Tsuu T’ina, or Sarcee, which continues into the present. Outside of speaking a different language, the Tsuu T’ina have adopted many culturally-Niitsitapi traits, and have participated creatively in the overall bundle tradition. It is difficult to say how much the Niitsitapi have themselves gained from this exchange, but I am told of at least some lodge designs that originally came from Sarcee. The relationship between these two populations also serves as an excellent model for what the Niitsitapi anticipate in their dealings with other polities who settle within their territory. Those who wish to stay should actively participate in the collective expression of *kímmapiiyipitssini*, *habitual-kindness*, coming to understand themselves as co-existent manifestations of spirit in the eco-social body. This is, in fact, what was desired of Europeans when the Niitsitapi entered into *innaihtsookakihtsimaani*, the *peaceful-deciding* that became uncongenially represented as “Treaty 7”. “We thought they were going to become like us,” elders often say. Even at present, many are still waiting for Europeans to learn their appropriate place in the local kinship order, and those who enter Western clinics for medical treatment do so with the expectation – or at least the hope – that these relationships will be properly honored.

Taka Kinjo, in his dealings with Adrienne, approached this understanding quite naturally. In addition to offering his assistance without promise of getting any particular payment in return, he contributed regularly to the construction of our new relationship –

taking us out for coffee, inviting us to dinner, showing us into his home, and introducing us to his family. For our part, we returned the exchange by opening our doors to his visits, and by bringing him gifts of deer meat, glacier-melt mountain water, berries, even some furniture we had made of wood salvaged from my then-current job in a cabinet shop. Aside from these material offerings, there was also a great deal of intellectual and cultural sharing between us. Kinjo told us about his native religious tradition, and offered to train us in his healing practices. We, in turn, described our own spiritual beliefs, and related what we knew of the local places and animals that he was quite fascinated to learn about.

Within this relational context, Adrienne's first period of recovery arrived with a swiftness and surety that amazed her Western doctors. They could not explain how their patient, whom they'd fully expected to undergo a lengthy and painful degeneration of body, had – within a matter of months – completely reversed her condition. Whereas before they had always found a high level of Rh-factor in Adrienne's blood, now there was none to be seen. She had gone from being nearly immobile, barely able to use either her arms or legs, to fully tractable. She could even jog. It was also during this time that Adrienne's dream became foreshadowed through her dip into the northernmost Paahtomahksíkimi, an experiential event that would bind together many of the necessary elements that later became very important for her health. Eventually, though, Adrienne began to take her initial recovery for granted, and our visits to Kinjo's dojo decreased to a couple times per week, if that. It was in this latter period that Adrienne's extended family suffered a series of rapid losses, with three members passing away in succession. Just a couple weeks after we had attended the last of these funerals, Adrienne twisted her ankle, and before long found herself in the worst condition yet, completely unable to

walk, bound to a wheelchair, and entirely depressed. She did not return to Kinjo, because she felt that he was by then too familiar, and that therefore his therapies would not be as effective as they had previously been.

The next and final shift in Adrienne's condition was signalled by the vivid dream. In terms of local healing routines, I cannot emphasize enough how critically important the experience of dreaming is. To the Niitsitapi, dream-space represents one of the only venues through which people may directly communicate with the collective spirit. There are no perceptual obstacles to interfere. Like with *sstsiyysskaani*, the normal sensations of vision, hearing, smell, taste, etc. are either absent or altered; the enclave-body lies dormant, while one's essence traverses fluidly between cosmic dimensions. In the hierarchy of rationales behind Niitsitapi social action, the dream experience takes precedence over everything else. Medicines given to people through dreams are stronger and more personal than those accrued in ritual. Even a sacred vow is not considered as powerful as a dream, because in the latter case it is the spirit itself, *iihtsipáitapiiyo'pa*, in whatever form is taken, that initiates the communication and exchange. This is why we as human beings have very little control over the events that transpire in such spaces.

In Niitsi'powahsini, there are a couple of words applied toward descriptions of those manifestations of spirit whom one might encounter in a dream. Perhaps the most common of these is *paapaitapiiksi*, *dream-life*. But another name for the same kind of being is *apániitapiiksi*, *moth-life*, or simply *apániiksi*, *moths*. These latter terms index experiential similarities and co-occurrences that the Niitsitapi associate with sleeping and dreaming. They say that certain features of the human face, when asleep, particularly those areas around the eyes and nose, resemble a large moth with wings spread. And the buzzing that one hears from these insects in the dark of night is thought to announce the

approach of a spirit. The apániitapiiksi image comprises the second level of meaning behind the Maltese cross found on painted lodges – that which we learned of in the previous chapter as associated with Iipisówaahsi, *distant-food*, or the Morning Star. This design element also identifies the entire lodge painting as originating in a dream, and it is prayed to by those dwelling within the lodge who are in hopes of receiving important messages from the other realms. Through this blend of signification, one may sense that apániiksi are like heralds of renewed life. Indeed, when selecting campsites in the old days, people are said to have confirmed their agreement to pitch tent in a proposed area by stating “iitopiaapikkssiyi apaniiksi” – *this is where the moths will land*.

Over the course of the research for this thesis, if there was one constant in the many healing events I witnessed and heard tell of, it was the transformation that occurs following dream episodes. Niitsitapi take these experiences very seriously, as gifts, and as messages compelling them to amend certain problems becoming manifest in their lives. The dream, in this latter sense, is often a critical warning. If left ignored, people can in-fact die. In terms of dreams that address illness, one may be tempted to assess these experiences solely as mental phenomena, where all of the socio-physiological dimensions that have contributed to explanatory models, heretofore disparate, coalesce and shift in unison, leading affected persons toward a clarity of action. But to stop there, halting the dream’s significance at its Western boundary would be, I believe, a terrible injustice. Such analysis refuses to accept, as equally valid to the objectified containment of Euro-centered thought, the embodied co-existence, the indivisible interdependence that Niitsitapi have with their eco-social environment, the cosmos itself.

Almost as a testament to the spiritual nature of Niitsitapi dreams, and certainly as evidence for the power of áístomaato’p, it is often the case that people fail entirely to

understand or recognize the classic symbolic constituents of their experiences, and must resort instead to consulting more knowledgeable elders for translation. On the other hand, the dreamer usually does sense what it is they need to do, and how they might go about doing it. The elder advisor may certainly assist in these areas, but time and again I heard, during my interviews, people claim that they awoke from dreams immediately knowing that they had to make an offering, perform a smudge, host a sweat, visit a family member, cease partaking of some unhealthy habit, or change their normative attitudes and social approaches. When a dream is meant to be therapeutic, people awaken with the sensation that their undesirable conditions are already beginning to change. All they need to do is follow-up on the spirit's advice.

In Adrienne's case, her dream was both deeply symbolic and therapeutic. Before going to sleep that evening, she and I had been busy butchering a deer that would provide us with meat over the weeks to follow. Late in the night, with a sizeable portion of one of the hindquarters still unprocessed, we decided to turn-in, and left the unfinished share soaking in a cold bath. In other words, our food was abandoned in standing water. This theme carried into Adrienne's dream, where she found herself at the home of her maternal aunt, who would be, in Niitsitapi terms, synonymous with her own mother – a giver, or host, one who feeds by nature. The house was, like our deer meat, in danger of becoming trapped in flooded water. And in the midst of this, Adrienne herself was immobile, seated on a chair in the kitchen, unable to stand. Frank, her guide and model for dealing with arthritis, brought a spirit-man to see her. This being was not only old, but *ancient*. His presence even frightened Adrienne's father, a man not easily intimidated. The ancient one was dressed all in white, like snow deposited in the mountains, or the shape-shifting weasel of winter. And just as if he were one of the

animals in a bundle, this elder is supported by human consorts as he dances up to Adrienne, touches her knees, and in effect gives her legs. “The arthritis is gone, you’ll have no more pain,” he announces, receding away. Indeed, once he leaves, Adrienne is able to stand without effort.

Throughout this first part of the dream, we can see that what is at issue is the cycle between accumulation and dispersal. The former is connected with Adrienne’s sense that we had done something wrong by leaving our food in standing water, and this becomes echoed in the imagery of the flood, her immobility, and the white-robed spirit – all signs of accretion, or heaviness. Dispersal begins with the movement of this spirit, supported by Martin and Frank, key male figures in Adrienne’s daily experience. The ancient one dances near and touches her knees, then withdraws from the room and, when he is gone, she can stand-up. Mobility has been returned to her life. It is important to note that the entire episode transpires in a kitchen, a place of cooking and feeding. And it is not just any kitchen, but that belonging to her maternal aunt, a mother by traditional kinship. The opportunity presented is one of regained access to nutritive flows.

Once she is standing, Adrienne is able look out at life through a window, but what she observes is disturbing. There are people in a sinking boat upon the raging river, and they are in danger of being drowned. As the gravity of this situation is realized, the glass partition separating Adrienne from the outside world is shattered, and she is able to venture onto the flooded riverbank in an attempt to lend assistance. But the people are already being drug further downriver, and it is at this point that the waterman becomes evoked. No sooner do they mention his presence than a blurred figure can be seen to move swiftly through the currents below. His route defines a circle encompassing both

Adrienne and those she'd hoped to save. After surfacing before her, just briefly enough to be glimpsed, he swims out to gather the imperilled people and bear them to shore.

This middle aspect of the dream reveals multiple significations as well. Floods, in the Niitsitapi experience, always represent a purging of death from this world, just as discussed in the previous chapter through the topographic-seasonal model of orientation, and its conceptual associations with the lifecycle. For this reason, the family members and advisors who Adrienne later consults about the dream all concur in their assessment that the rising river and endangered people reflect her concerns about the welfare of those relatives who had recently passed away; the message being that she need not worry any longer, that the waterman would eventually gather them back up and return them to earth. But I believe there is another level of meaning to be considered here. The people in the boat are not recognizable to Adrienne, they have come from a neighboring house that she is unfamiliar with. All the same, she expresses apprehension about their predicament, an empathy so strong that it bursts the divide between them and sends her out into the water in her attempt to help. Only when she arrives, and finds that they may actually be too distant for her reach, is the waterman called upon to save them. By all accounts, there is little doubt that this being is the same white-robed spirit who had given Adrienne her legs, simply appearing in another form. But perhaps only Alan Pard, and Adrienne herself, recognized that his assistance might entail a need for reciprocation. Having received the gift of renewed movement, Adrienne was now responsible for using this experience to help others. That is the sacred exchange. And as Alan insisted, so long as this responsibility is left unhonored by Adrienne, and by myself as her complement or partner in life, we should not consider ourselves to be out of the water just yet.

Partially to reinforce this sense of mission, the dream closes with a final message. Adrienne returns to the house, back to the family she knows, and there in her aunt's kitchen witnesses her little nephews and nieces dancing around the dining table. As they move, they pick-up knives and hold them to the sides of their heads, so that it appears as if the blades are protruding out from between their eyes. This imagery, which frightens Adrienne into awakening, is again constituted entirely of a classic theme – one that has become so much a part of the embodied aesthetics of Niitsitapi lives that none of our advisors specifically commented upon it. I recognized the significance of the children dancing with knives only because of my familiarity with the classic stories.

On the Akáínaa Reserve, there is a distended rise of earth that Niitsi'powahsini speakers call Móókoanssin. English speakers know it by rough translation as the Belly Buttes. This place name derives from an ancient story about a young man called Kátoyiss, or Blood Clot, who was born to an elderly couple in a time of crisis, when their own son-in-law was allowing them to starve. One day, as their son-in-law butchered a buffalo, the old man managed to sneak a blood clot into his quiver. That evening, as the elderly woman boiled the clot into a soup, a cry came from their rawhide bowl, and when they looked inside it was discovered that the blood clot had become a baby boy. Under the infant's instruction, the old people tied him briefly to each of their tipi poles, starting from the one just south of the lodge door and working sunwise until reaching the pole on the other side of that opening. As Kátoyiss hung momentarily at each pole, he grew larger, so that by the time he was untied from the last pole he had transformed into an adult man. The next day, Kátoyiss killed the son-in-law who had been cruel to his elders. Afterward, he set out across kitawahsinnooni and became a hero of the people, ridding the land of all cruelty, viciousness, parsimony, and oppression.

One day, having just recently settled a wicked affair occurring in the southern territory, Kátoyiss determined to head north. The old ladies he was staying with warned him not to go that way, that there was something dangerous happening there. This was all that he needed to hear – if trouble was afoot up north, that’s where he should head. Travelling with his faithful dog, Sisomm, Kátoyiss took a route that led him along the mountains, and eventually arrived at a place where a sudden wind began to pull him out toward the prairie. This pull became so strong that soon he was unable to walk without holding on to something. As he was taken along, he grabbed all kinds of plants and trees, the wild cherries, the poplar, even willow and sage. But the force of that wind was too intense, and finally Kátoyiss determined to let things take their natural course. He stood up, closed his eyes, and ran along with the wind for quite a distance, until reaching a place where the thrust suddenly dissipated. When he again opened his eyes, he found himself in complete darkness.

For a little while, Kátoyiss stood listening, hearing heavy breathing and the sound of a huge heartbeat. The place was hot and dank, and smelled like raw meat. Eventually, he decided to try moving around, walking slowly at first. He hadn’t gone far when his foot bumped against something solid. Reaching down to feel the obstacle, Kátoyiss discovered it to be another human being. And as he felt around more, he realized that there were many people in that place, crammed side by side against each other, and amongst them were animals and birds. Some of the people he found were still alive, while others were dead. Even those that still lived were very weak from lack of air, food, and water. In a moment of insight, Kátoyiss came to the realization that they were all being eaten alive by áisinokooa, a giant *slurper*. Thinking quickly, he took out his long flint knife and tied it to his headdress. He found the place where the throbbing sound of a

heartbeat seemed to come from, and there he called to all the people that still had a little life in them, asking that they join him in a dance. He told the people to stand in a line behind him and, when he began singing, they were to dance the same way he did. If they were too weak to do so, they were told to at least bob their heads. Kátoyiss began his song, and danced by hopping up and down, shifting his heels from side to side. While dancing in this fashion, he walked around in a large circle, with all the people following him. They danced that circle four times and, on their last round, the flint knife tied on his headdress penetrated the giant being's heart, bringing it death.

Móókoanssin, the Belly Buttes, is the remains of that ásinokooa stomach, a being that many people refer to today as a “dinosaur”. Lesser hills connected to it are called Somata'pokoanssin (*beginning-of-the-belly*) and Issisststaan (*washer*, or tripe). Just below these highlands flows Mookoansiítahtaa, the Belly River, which defines the western boundary of the Akáínaa Reserve. Between Somata'pokoanssin and the river is an expanse of flat grassland that, for most of the year, remains devoid of human and animal activity. But toward the end of the summer season, it is to this place that the Akáínaa people move collectively, camping together for a number of weeks in niitoyiistsi, organized by clans into the large permeable circle called aako'kaatssini, otherwise known as the Sundance. When Akáínaa tribe members speak about their culture, it is not infrequent that they reference this event, aako'kaatssini, as the epitome of what their *way* is all about. Some elders would go so far as to say that *everything* one can possibly understand about Niitsitapiipaitapiiwahsini, *real-people-way-of-living*, is to be found there - where the people, bound one and all by ties of kinship, come together with their medicines, their bundles, the life of the cosmos, to dance... hopping up and down, shuffling their heels from side to side.

In effect, the children dancing with knives in Adrienne's dream were telling her "iyyik'kimat", *try-hard*, the crucial lesson that Kátoyiss had learned when – despite attempts to cling to herbal supports - he too was slurped downriver into a darkness. And, like with Kátoyiss, it was not only for Adrienne's benefit that an exchange had been offered by the ancient water spirit, nor just for the welfare of her contemporaries that found themselves similarly immersed, but – perhaps more importantly – it was the future generations who will come to depend upon our actions of today. And for this reason, if no other, Adrienne must dance steadfast.

Waking from this experience, Adrienne immediately set to work addressing the factors in her life that she sensed to be at issue. We got out of bed, removed the deer meat from the water, and finished processing and storing it. By the next day, she was discussing the dream with her parents and, through them, with Frank. In this way, some of the symbolism was deciphered for its social implications, and Adrienne was instructed to bring a tobacco offering to the river, to thank the *underwater-life*, soyiitapiiksi, for the message, and ask their continued assistance. Over the weeks to follow, Adrienne began to sense that there is a connection between this dream and her feelings of relief when wading into Paahtomahksíkimi. Up in the mountains, sore from arthritis, she had gone into the freezing water just enough to cover her legs. And coming back to shore, out of this amassed fluid, her pain had been significantly reduced. Similarly, through the dream, Adrienne was becoming trapped in flooded waters, and the ancient white-robed spirit, an embodiment of such accumulation, touches her legs and recedes. The pain and immobility were gone.

Sensing, somewhat intuitively, these various interconnections between her dream, the cosmic order, and her experience at Paahtomahksíkimi, Adrienne became determined

to reproduce the cyclical process of immersion into, and withdrawal from, standing water. She began travelling to the University of Lethbridge athletic pool a few days a week, casually swimming for an hour or so on each occasion. And through this therapy, the cyclical and metaphoric repetition of mergence and separation, she found herself eventually able to walk again, and her wheelchair soon became just a dusty artifact in a corner of my office space. With her legs restored, we even began making the occasional round back into the mountains, where she would re-enter the lake in a personal sort of metonymic ritual that she considers likened to a man's sweat. But unlike her first period of recovery with the Okinawan healer, the Blackfoot-specific dream cure left her with a very different sense of the future. Adrienne no longer considered her arthritis to be something that needed casting-out; nor was it regarded as a "disease" against which her body would eventually be forced into collapse. Rather, this sickness was transformed into an opportunity to become "well" – framed in terms of an expansion and strengthening of her relationships with family, society, future generations, and the ecological being that is both the body and world. Illness, as a natural aqueous substance within the enclave, needed only be routed toward sacred, life-generating purpose.

The complex symbolic ingredients that were brewed together in the context of Adrienne's experience with arthritis comprise one example of the manner in which a history of eco-social relations can be understood to *feed* contemporary Niitsitapi bodies, informing even their most visceral, physical knowledge. Indeed, her story falls into a very gendered local pattern where women – understood as human embodiments of the same metonymic forces registered in Koko'míki'somm (the *moon*), and in the cyclical dynamics of water movement, from a winter condensation to a spring release – find themselves, through dreams, to be in direct conversation with iihtsipáitapiyo'p, the

means-of-life. Ultimately, this female role is one responsible for the birthing and nurturance of the next generation, so that the spirits themselves are seen to demonstrate concern for the maintenance of their wellness.

Niitsitapi men, on the other hand, while still embodying aspects of the eco-social relations I've outlined, tend to be more the manifestations of metaphoric forces, of resemblances and similitudes. They do not enjoy such a given degree of empathy from the spirits, but must instead – in times of danger – both turn toward their fellows, and overtly seek to have their own identities recast in the likeness of another. We have already seen instances of this gendered narrative unfold in sstsiyysskaani, *steam-making*, and the related story of Pawakksski. But in the next, and concluding, chapter of this thesis, I would like to offer two final, more concrete instances of the manner in which Niitsitapi men, through contemporary encounters with illness, re-live *their* roles in the socio-ecologic relationships that maintain the continuity of life and, in doing so, contribute likewise to the reproduction of a local symbolic order.

Misamitsinikssini: Embodying The Long-Time Story



Móókoanssin, the *Belly Buttes*, Akáínaa Reserve (2004)

Throughout this thesis, I've relied heavily upon classic, orthodox Niitsitapi narratives to help structure and convey some of my current understandings regarding the manner in which systems of signification represent multi-directional, interactive processes taking place between a host of cultural products, including that most elaborate of constructs known as the physical human body - its sensory capacities, spatial orientations, and anatomical form. This reliance upon narrative as a principle means of comprehending the phenomena we witness and experience is an unavoidable aspect of the analytic project. For instance, Lakoff and Johnson, in their account of the metaphorizing procedure that moves from tangible familiarities toward understandings of the ephemeral, make use of a variety of Western narrative traditions that describe unilinear trajectories of history and evolution, and that distinguish the "intellectual" (mind) as separable from - and somewhat more complex than - the "physical" (body). For even while they demonstrate

that Western science and philosophy are intimately connected to visceral awarenesses and the most primitive of image schemas, they neglect to identify these latter perceptions as being, themselves, equally elaborate constructs informed by our interactions with culture. They would, however, also be the first to acknowledge the imagined nature of their theory, and it is for this very reason that I have set out to address their ideas from another cultural perspective, introducing the notion of áístomatoo’p, the *accustomed-body*, as an alternative model for the interplay of significations.

The notion that stories are one of the essential substances supporting human existence, or feeding áístomatoo’p, is absolute in Niitsitapi traditions. In fact, to suggest that the connection between narrative and nutrition is “metaphoric”, in the literary sense of this word, rather than simply a fact of reality, can betray the analyst as naïve. What such an assessment fails to recognize is the important influence of metonym, of part-to-whole relatedness, where narrative is considered to be food on the basis of a categorical organization grounded just as strongly in perceptions of co-occurrence as in similitude. In Niitsitapi culture, stories are not *like* food, they *are* food – because the category *food* itself is not descriptive of a “thing”, but of an aspect of a dynamic process experienced as a gestalt. Food is part of ísootsspi, *feeding*. And like stories, it passes through and nurtures us. In Niitsi’powahsini, food is aówahsin, my best transliteration of which would be something like *customarily-moving-through-an-aperture*. The term aówahsin is comprised of the morphemic aspects wao-, oo-, and –wahsin. The first of these, wao-, describes an opening in a greater totality. For instance, áókskaawa is *having-a-hole*, aokstsíma is *chewing-a-hole-through*, áónima is to *pierce*, áoo’tokiaakiwa is *breaking-a-hole-through-ice*, etc. The second sound, oo-, signifies movement, as in áítapoo or *going-toward*, and miistapoowa or *going-away*. The final -wahsin, itself synthesized of

multiple soundings, indicates that the subject is typically associated with a particular group or life form. Niitsi'powahsini, for instance, infers that this *real-manner-of-speaking* is one *customary-to* a certain people, namely the Niitsitapi. It is interesting that the final –wahsin appears on only five categories: i'powahsin (language), aoówahsin (food), awahsin (habitat), niipáitapiiwahsin (life-style or habitus), and niitsistowahsin (kinship). These can be correlated fairly directly with the principal symbolic domains that Western anthropology views as interconnected aspects of any given culture¹⁵ except that, among the Niitsitapi, they are thought to hold for other life forms as well, so that one hears of ponokaowahsin (*elk-food*) and piitáí'powahsin (*eagle-language*), for instance.

That stories, or communication, function in the manner of food - i.e. as aqueous substance that becomes deposited within, disbursed through, and evacuated from bodies, thereby nourishing these tangible manifestations of spirit - is also reflected in the local emphasis on *listening* as a discursive practice. I doubt that a week goes by when I do not hear someone present the argument holding that socio-economic problems on the reserves derive from aural inadequacies, or from exposure to the wrong stories. This contention takes one of two broad forms – either the young generation is presented as refusing to listen to their elders, preferring instead what they hear through rap music and television, or the Europeans are depicted as failing to listen to what Niitsitapi in general have to say, opting instead to consult books, documents, and their own experts at those times when they should be in direct consultation with members of these communities. In either event, aural deficiencies are understood as a primary cause of psycho-social illness. A failure to hear the *right* stories is expressed in symptoms of habitually destructive

¹⁵ I'm referring here to the anthropological breakdown of culture into: language (i'powahsin), subsistence and economics (aoówahsin), ecology (awahsin), kinship and political organization (niitsistowahsin), and ritual/belief (niipáitapiiwahsin).

behavior that harms not only the autonomous self, but also one's family, community, and environment. Worst of all, it endangers the welfare of children, the next generation of life. Therapy, for this condition, involves exposure to the proper forms of communication, periods of interaction with elders and the sacred.

Within such healing contexts, *place* is of considerable importance. One can't hear certain voices and stories just anywhere. Rather, one needs to be positioned in such a way that action and sound coalesce harmoniously, so that what is heard becomes embodied. Among the Aamsskáápipikani, Carbough (1999) has written of ideal places for Niitsitapi "listening" as having three essential qualities: a visual scene of natural beauty, an aural tone of tranquility, and a history of valued cultural activity. As Two Bears told him in regard to such places:

"You can come out here and sit down. Just sit down and listen. In time, you might hear a raven and realize that raven is saying something to you. Or you might talk to a tree. But you have to listen. Be quiet. Be patient. The answer will come to you... We are realists. We are part of all of this (gesturing to the plains, to the immense 'backbone' of mountains to the west, trees, grass). We listen to this." (ibid:255)

As we learned through Pawakksski in the first chapter, going outside and exposing oneself to the nutritive flows of the sublime cosmic voice is indeed one of the more important practices through which Niitsitapi learn to hear properly. In fact, while conducting the interviews for this thesis, a number of informants – young and old – described isolated areas of the reserve where they liked to go and sit for a few hours when depressed or overcome by the strain of social tension. There they might be told what to do about their problems. But outside of this consciously sublimated milieu, there are other kinds of places for listening that are just as crucial. Dream-space, of course, comes most immediately to mind as a principal venue for hearing vital messages.

Another place in which listening is practiced, one not so noticeably colourful as the dream-space or the serene hilltop, can be found within the metaphoric and metonymic eco-social body of the everyday residence. When I go to visit with my advisors, whether conducting research or not, we almost always engage in a rite commonly held in households throughout Niitsitapi communities. The ritual structure of this custom is predictable. As a guest, I will travel to someone's house, often unannounced, walk through their front door, call out a greeting, and be shown to the host's dining table. If a woman is present, she'll make coffee or tea. But in any event, I'll be offered something to drink. Then we'll talk, casually at first, exchanging little morsels about the weather, recent events, summaries of what we've done in our lives since we last met. If it is the first time I'm visiting someone, this opening conversation is about self-definition: who I am as a guest, who my relatives are in the community (in other words, what is the nature of my connection to the host that he or she should want to feed me). These are all so many discursive appetizers, priming our senses for the potential meal to come. And when it arrives, it is often dished-out in generous portions, with the guest holding the privilege of declaring when he's had enough.

I'm told that if a person wants to be assured that he will acquire the knowledge he's seeking through such ritualized communicative exchange, he should be the one to invite the elder for a meal, rather than just showing-up at this advisor's door expecting to be fed. When an elder has finished eating, and later, after he has gone home, the host can inspect this advisor's plate for leftover food, and eat whatever he finds remaining. Then he will have taken-in what that person wanted to give him. And if there is no food remaining on the plate, perhaps he should try again, and make sure to fill his guest.

Of course, not all visits are so highly structured. Most of the time, people stop in to sit for a couple hours with their friends or family just to be around them. But no matter whether these exchanges of conversation are conducted formally or casually, they are almost always situated at a dining table – perhaps the most essential material element in contemporary Niitsitapi households. When Adrienne and I moved out of her parents’ home on the Akáínaa Reserve, and into the nearby city of Lethbridge, I was happy to go without too many furnishings, thinking it might be nice to have some open space. But this did not sit very well with our visitors. “Where are you going to eat if you don’t have a table?” they would ask. Or, employing a more useful coercion, and nodding toward our daughter, “That little girl needs a place to eat”. Before long, Adrienne’s sisters absolutely insisted on our acquisition of the requisite table, and decided to bring one out to us, reminding me with a triumphant smile, “You can’t refuse a gift”. And so it sits, like those in many homes I’ve visited, the stomach of the household, accumulating deposits of our daily affairs – newspapers, used coffee cups, decks of cards, our daughter’s toys, video rentals, what have you – signs of casual consumption and recreation that, when guests arrive, are quickly swept away, stored in cupboards and drawers or sent to that final organ preceding evacuation, the small kidney-shaped trash bin that sits off to the side of the kitchen. Like any biologist studying the subsistence habits of a specimen organism, I’m sure there would be much learned by paying attention to the stomach contents arrayed each day on the average local dining table – but then, of course, such focus on material remains only detracts from one’s ability to hear more directly the voices of the spirits telling stories there.

One table I attend fairly regularly in Niitsitapi communities is that belonging to Alan Pard, a name which should by now ring familiar. Alan had been one of my

principle advisors for some years prior to this thesis, and in fact was the first gentleman to transfer into a relationship with the Ksisskstaki Amopistaan that I had helped to bring home from Harvard's Peabody Museum – the event that served as my initial introduction to Niitsitapiipaitapiiwahsini. Since then, he in turn had transferred me into relationships with Iinisskimm (the *buffalo-stone*) and, when Adrienne was suffering her arthritis, Matsí'sai'piyi (*fine-charger*, the loon). On most of the earliest occasions when I visited with Alan, his table was obscured by a cluttered mixture of quarter-horse literature, various documents pertaining to the business negotiations and policies of the Aapátohsipikáni tribal government, and – almost always – a tape recorder he'd use in the mornings to practice his sacred songs. In later years, however, Alan's political files were moved to a bookshelf and replaced by a constantly replenished bowl of fruit. In the interest of completing this initial survey of áístomatóo'p, the Niitsitapi process of embodiment, it would be beneficial to examine two final stories, simultaneously ancient and contemporary. The first of these regards just how that bowl of fruit came to be there, an account for which we'll need to return once more to the buffalo, and to the day that Alan had invited Dustin and I to join him for the sstsiiysskaani in Brocket.

“Backing Someone Up” – Safety in Size and Number

One constant through the thousands of years of Niitsitapi occupation on the high prairies has been a custom of long-distance travel. To my knowledge, no other society prior to European conquest controlled as much of North American territory as did these well-organized and allied tribes. As mentioned previously, the traditional homeland, framed in colonized language, can be understood as bounded in the west by the Rocky Mountains, defined to the north and south by the Saskatchewan and Yellowstone Rivers,

and sprawling east to the great Sand Hills. Today this represents half the Province of Alberta, almost all of the State of Montana, and into Saskatchewan. It is enormous. Within this vast expanse, people related by blood, marriage, and spiritual bundles once travelled about in groups of patrilineage, hunting buffalo, visiting distant family, and defending their resources from incursion by enemy tribes. Even still, this land was merely home base. Trading and raiding parties trekked as far as the Pacific Ocean, the Great Lakes, and the pueblos of Mexico. The prominence of travel in Niitsitapi lives and awareness is evident in the titles of the eras by which they organize and reference their history: *iitota'simaahpi iimitaiksi* (*when-used-for-transportation dogs*), *áóta'sao'si ponokáómitaa* (*mounted horse*), and *áómaopao'si* (*settling-down or the present*). From the dog days to contemporary automotive and jet transportation, part of Niitsitapiipáítapiiwahsini has always involved being accustomed to movement.

Globetrotter though I may have imagined myself prior to relocating to kitawahsinnooni, I was not entirely prepared for the long hours that one daily spends on the roads between home and work, family and friends, even to go grocery shopping. The day of the *sstsiyysskaani* in Brocket was no different. I had left my house in Lethbridge, just outside the north end of the Akáínaa Reserve, and drove for nearly an hour before I came to Alan and Dustin's place, in the coulee bottom of the Old Man River below the Porcupine Hills. From there, it was another twenty or thirty minutes into Brocket, taking a short-cut on the dirt road. As we drove along, with Alan in the passenger's seat and Dustin in back, we talked casually about a number of different topics. Predominant among these was my car, a Dodge Shadow that I'd purchased earlier that year, after my old Ford pickup fell into too extreme a state of disrepair. Driving the rough dirt roads in that little car added a degree of worry that I hadn't had with the truck. Being low to the

ground impelled me to constantly scan the area ahead for big rocks that might damage the undercarriage, and for potholes that could cause us to bottom-out. Surprisingly, even with these precautions, I could still maintain a pace of between sixty and seventy kilometres an hour, just a bit slower than I would have driven in my truck. And as we went along, we talked about these things – how different it was trying to get by with a car on the reserve. I framed its benefits in terms of money. The Dodge was cheap on gas and, having bought it used, it only cost me a couple thousand dollars to begin with. If any serious damage ever befell that car, I wouldn't have too difficult a time replacing it. I told Alan and Dustin that, to me, it seemed absurd to throw away twenty or thirty thousand dollars buying a brand new truck, or even ten thousand to buy a used one. But Alan objected. Having recently made such a large investment himself, he brought it to my attention that, in his case, it made sense to put big sums of money into such things, as a kind of “life-insurance” for his family. A couple years back, Alan had been rushed to a Calgary hospital after suffering a heart-attack that nearly killed him. “Nobody’s going to give a guy life insurance after something like that,” he told me. So, in order to make sure his family would not suffer, in the event that any further unfortunate incidents occurred, Alan bought new cars, horses, cattle, immediately useful and mobile bodies that maintained some future monetary value.

I considered this as we drove along, the changes that Alan’s brush with death had brought to his life, and its close proximity in his everyday thinking. Back when it happened, Alan had been in the thick of reserve politics, an Aapátóhsipikáni counsel member with an approaching election that could have made him chief. He had grand ambitions for transformation in his community. Raised from childhood amidst traditional ceremony, Alan hoped to bring all of his knowledge of Niitsitapi culture and history to

the highest offices of economic influence on the reserve, and from there to advocate a restructuring of Aapátohsipikáni government, development, and education. His strong and often judgemental stances made him a controversial figure in the community, and it was to the social stresses associated with this role that he attributed his heart attack. Arriving at the hospital that day, he had flat-lined for nearly seven minutes, and recalls experiencing himself in spirit form, travelling down the Old Man River. When he was revived, and following cardio-surgery, the doctors told him that food and tobacco had been the major culprits in his illness, causing his veins and arteries to narrow while fatty blockages built-up inside of them. If he were to avoid further troubles, he would have to change his diet and, even more importantly, quit smoking.

Alan had ignored similar orders some years previous, following a lesser heart attack. This time would be different. Beginning with his at-home recovery, Alan abruptly quit politics, became an avid fruit eater, and – as difficult as it was – left his cigarette smoking habit behind. A few of his best friends, rallying to his support, also gave-up smoking, and none of them ever went back. Since then, they have often shared their recollections of that event with me, each one proudly claiming that they “backed him up”. But for Alan and his family, the residual effects of this experience went far beyond these early interventions and the dietary adjustments prescribed by his doctors. The proximity of death continued to be a locus of consideration, of daily thought itself, pervading many aspects of their lives. Over the next year, all four members of his household increased the intensity of their involvement in, and sponsorship of, Niitsitapi religious ceremonies. Dustin, once ambitious to move away and play professional ice hockey, determined instead to stay back, helping his dad to enlarge and manage their cattle herd and racing-horses while attending a local university. This business kept Alan

at home and away from Indian politics for about two years, enabling him to further enhance his bonds with his wife and children. Only under threat of a dwindling bank account, and perhaps wanting to accumulate more “life-insurance”, did he eventually accept a consultant position with Alberta Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Development, a provincial government job in Edmonton that would enable him to affect policy changes for Treaty Seven Niitsitapi tribes without making his involvement the focus of controversy at home. But his concern that another heart attack might, at any moment, strike him down, never went away.



Alan and Dustin Pard on a ridge overlooking Náápi's Gambling Place, at the headwaters of the Old Man River (2004)

Alan's experiences with the trauma of heart failure were, in many respects, not all that dissimilar from the kinds of accounts that have surfaced across North America. When his heart stopped, he recalled a descent downriver toward the Niitsitapi afterlife, just as

Christians in near-death often see a tunnel of light leading them to the heavens. Revived, given another chance at it, Alan withdrew from social stress, reconnected with the importance of family and religion, and adopted preventative habits that would, hopefully, keep him alive for many years to come. But what is most interesting to me about his episode is the fact that some of his friends quit smoking along with him, not so much because it was a good opportunity for themselves, or because his experience had frightened them into reconsidering their own habits, but – in their words – because they wanted to “back him up”. This, I am now ashamed to admit, was not my own reaction to Alan’s predicament. When I sat at his dining table, visiting him on occasion in the weeks and months following his heart attack, watching him pace around the kitchen and listening to him talk longingly of his urge to smoke, I merely refrained from flaunting my own habits in front of him. But as soon as I’d driven away, there would be a cigarette in my mouth. Even at this, at least I had travelled to sit with him. Some of his other friends, learning of his struggles and also somewhat timid of approaching a man who had nearly died, avoided visiting altogether.

Only Alan’s family members and very best friends truly stood beside him in his quest to regain confidence that life would continue. When his partners later told me that they had “backed him up”, it was in English. Most other times I’d heard this phrase used among the Niitsitapi, it was either in reference to dancing on someone’s behalf in a ceremony or to helping someone out during a fistfight. This, therefore, is a clue to one sense in which these fellows framed their participation in Alan’s recovery, and in which others understand their contribution toward healing rituals - as companions in battle. But warfare, in kitawahsinnooni, is itself structured and conceptualized quite differently than that combat practiced and understood by Westerners. It has always been - even to this

day, when members of these tribes join the Canadian and American armies, attend political negotiations in distant cities, or journey seasonally away from the reserves in search of work (just a few of the contemporary activities that the Niitsitapi think of and talk about partially in terms of “war”) - a game of survival and prestige. Far less important, even to the point of absence, is the conviction that war entails a conflict over morality, that its object is to conquer evil, to free victimized innocents from oppressive regimes, or to force good ways of living upon otherwise backwards societies. These are the principles that motivate the youth of colonialist governments to take up arms or, similarly, that inspire scholars to seek-out and argue truth.

It is certainly interesting though that combat, of whatever sort, becomes associated by way of similitude to so many diverse cultural experiences. Lakoff and Johnson venture hazardously near unilinear evolutionist theory in proposing that the warfare concept, at least among English speakers, or “rational animals”, derives from the institutionalization of brute physical combat, and that such battle becomes further controlled and sanctioned through more sophisticated forms like academic argument (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:62-65). I would hazard to suggest, however, that a good many non-Western peoples would disagree that either of these conventions, intrusive warfare or confrontational scholarship, could be considered preferable to a fist-fight in terms of civility or complexity of thought. In any case, there are other metaphorical extensions of combat language that can’t readily be explained by this progressive “institutional” schema, particularly those battle terms applied in the realm of medicine: the “fight” against cancer, the germs or bacteria that “assault” the body, the immune system that “defends against” and “attacks” such impostors. Clearly what is most relevant to the association of combat language with other cultural experiences is not the social

sanctioning of a primitive instinct to violent action, but rather whether or not the *self* is perceived as endangered.

The dimensions of this self are, in turn, conversant with the basic ontological notions of a given culture. In the Western sense, where *being* is understood largely in terms of autonomous containment, in-out orientation, and opposition, this self is always conceptualized as a discrete body, as an object – the individual agent or the metaphorically bounded social unit. Everything outside the borders of this most centralized entity is potentially menacing. And as there truly is no distinction to be made between mind and body in human experience, it needn't matter whether the perceived threat is physical or psychological. Thus, we find combat language as prevalent in medicine, academic argument, sport, and economics, as it is in actual warfare.

I've suggested that embodied conceptual metaphor should not be understood as resulting from a directionality of signification moving from bodies outward, but rather as developing through *áístomatoop*, a process through which histories of experience bring together routine clusters of co-occurrences and similarities that play a collaborative role in fixing significations of both the body and its environment. Just as the sensual features of human combat blend with a variety of other experiential domains, so too might the latter feed perceptions and rationales for violence more generally. Koenigsberg (2004:2) has, for instance, quoted Hitler in expressing Nazi ideologies as intent on eliminating a “bacillus infecting the life of [German] people”. In this instance, the intrusion scenario that has shaped biomedicine becomes, in turn, extended to frame violent activities within a social body. This language seems, to me, none too distant from that heard, during the writing of this thesis, in the presidential campaigns of the United States, where both John Kerry and George W. Bush promised that they would “hunt down and kill all terrorists”.

Of course, neither of them were actually referring to *all* of the menacing parties in the world home, but particularly those who would threaten the physical, economic, or psychological welfare of the middle-class American body politic. Combat feeds medicine, and health nourishes eugenics and genocide, all through a symbolic order where the in-out, self-other, or us-them dichotomy is fixed by limited, objectified, ontological categories, where “difference” does indeed assume “conflict”.



Popular T-Shirt Logo from the 2004 Plains Powwow Circuit (www.coyotescorner.com)

When the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11 and during the research for this thesis, Niitsitapi assessments of the politics involved in this conflict were two-fold. On the one hand, there was a strong identification with those brave enough to attack the colonizing forces. I was present during many conversations where analogies of this sort were offered through such statements as, “If this were the Middle East, we’d be the Taliban”. A popular t-shirt logo along these lines made its way through the plains

powwow circuit during the summer of 2004, depicting a small group of Geronimo's Apache warriors, posing with their rifles - the caption for this image reading "Homeland Security: Fighting Terrorism Since 1492". On the other hand, when conversations about these affairs occasionally strayed toward pacifistic sentiments, adopting moral positions against war in general, elders were often quick to recast the narrative, insisting that "we've got no right to criticize the United States, since we get the economic benefit" from their campaigns. In this way, Niitsitapi interpretations of contemporary world affairs function to reproduce their own long-held rationales and ethics for human behavior - battle is staged to intimidate unwanted intruders and to thieve from the abundance of their enemies.

For those who speak Niitsi'powahsini, "war" is awahkáóótsiiyssini, *playing-against-one-another*. The process underlying this term is áwaawahkaa, *playing*. To get a better sense of what this means, the same word can also be applied toward someone who is *taking-a-walk*, or it can be extended to describe artistic activities as in awahkáísínaakssini, *playfully-made-visible*, a sketch or drawing. The final -otsiiyssiin at the end of awahkáóótsiiyssini merely indicates that the action is being reciprocated by another party, hence my transliteration of *playing-against-one-another*. The goals of awahkáóótsiiyssini include gaining an advantage over one's opponent (locally called inaamaahkaa, or *acquiring-[enemy's]-weaponry*), returning home with wealth and/or prestige, and above all exercising the wisdom needed to escape any dangers. In the old days, an aged warrior who had lived through many campaigns was a particularly ideal target for enemy parties. Such a person's scalp, if taken, would become a prized trophy among the bands of enemy tribes, evidence of their superior skills and relationships to the powers of creation; such a scalp might even become incorporated into an already famous

bundle. Therefore, the more renowned a successful warrior or leader became, the more important it was for him to blend-in among his peers, so that those out to take his life would have difficulty identifying him in a crowd. Similarly, for individuals in the heat of battle, it was usually better to be surrounded with one's comrades than to be separated, this because the lone fighter – regardless of status – made for a dangerously easy target.

In claiming to be backing Alan up, his friends became participants in framing the illness episode within a Niitsitapi-specific warfare gestalt, creating a metaphorization through which Alan could be likened to the renowned warrior whose existence, as a trophy, was sought by any number of clandestine enemies. The doctors at the hospital had indicated some of the lifestyle practices that they believed put Alan at particular risk for further developments, and to these were added his own sense that tensions and jealousies surrounding his political standing isolated him further within the Aapátóhsipikáni community. Taking all of these factors into account, Alan strategized various means to eliminate some of the more prominent risks from his life, to transform his situation within this game of chance. His friends, knowing that his prospects would be better if he were not alone (i.e. distinct) in this transformation, determined on the one hand to camouflage him within a group of similar bodies, and on the other to build a united front against that which threatened – they “backed him up”.

Comparing this therapy with *sstsiyyskaani* and the story of Pawakksski, the male gendered pattern of seeking refuge in indistinctness seems, in my opinion, to become even more strongly established. When threatened with illness or death, especially if preceded by a traumatic event, Niitsitapi men undertake to become simultaneously more intimidating and less conspicuous. These characteristics may seem to contradict one another, but they are every bit the essence of the sublime. One way to recognize their

natural co-existence would be to consider the archetypal symbol for this ideology in Niitsitapi culture: áápaiai, *white-robed*, the ermine or weasel. This animal is revered for its refusal to flee from an enemy; when a predator comes after áápaiai, the latter rears its back and fiercely displays its teeth. But at the same time, the weasel is also respected for its ability to harmonize within and benefit from ecological patterns; its coat alternates brown to white with the changes of season, and its anatomical form reveals a brilliant adaptation that lends áápaiai advantage among the multiple burrowing communities of the high plains fauna. The Niitsitapi so venerate these combined attributes of the weasel that they use its winter skin, that which carries it through the most intense periods of hardship and danger, to decorate their ceremonial regalia. The original self-assumed name of the Akáínaa was Áápaiaitsitapi, *white-robed-people*, referring to their affined relationship with this weasel, and their use of its skin in adorning their clothing. Only after colonization was this title mistranslated as Aapáítsitapi, *or blood-people*, the English name by which they are now most familiarly known. In any case, when challenged to the game of life or death, those who carry both the ability to frighten and blend-in, like áápaiai, certainly have the greatest advantage.

It is in this sense that I think one can begin to appreciate the metaphoric quality of various Niitsitapi therapeutics directed toward the male gender. Sweating away impurities, eradicating the scars of trauma, cloaking oneself in vapor and darkness, using pain to induce a state of disembodiment, fasting to eliminate tell-tale human odors, having one's face painted in the likeness of a celestial being, and blending-in with one's comrades in arms are all forms of medical practice premised upon culturally-specific attitudes toward illness, directing patients toward experiences of similitude and, ultimately sublimity. Although informed, in some measure, by embodied experiences in

localized warfare traditions, which are in-turn conceptualized through familiarities with gaming, I would also suggest a coherence between the value of indistinctness and the realities of cooperative buffalo hunting, which has shaped a conceptual inheritance and behavioural habitus that functions into the present.

Recall from the second chapter the fact that buffalo hunting, especially before the advent of *iinisskimm*, but certainly to a lesser extent thereafter as well, was a particularly dangerous aspect of men's everyday lives, revisited time and again over thousands of years of Niitsitapi occupation on the high prairies. In the days of the *pisskan*, dozens of men would have had to work closely together to frighten stampeding *iiníí* over cliffsides, or into wooden enclosures. And even after the introduction of the horse, what was once an encounter at ground level merely transitioned into an equally dangerous high-speed chase amidst the frantically running herds. Throughout most of Niitsitapi history, this practice put male lives directly in the path of potential death. Thus, as we found earlier, in the riverside wager between first woman and *Náápi*, and in the original transfer of the right to hunt animals, there emerges an important narrative stream which juxtaposes the gamble, or risk of death, with the normative condition of male life. While the Niitsitapi warfare gestalt that is alive and well today may be informed by familiarities with gaming, this practice is in-turn inseparably connected to the requisites of a buffalo hunting subsistence pattern – the very same which defined the patrilocal arrangement of residency and interspecies communications that linger yet in practices like “backing someone up” and the notion that “education is our buffalo”.

Today, although the *iiníí* – as physical manifestations – are virtually absent from sight in *kitawahsinnooni*, the voice of their spirit remains loudly reflected in the shadows that *Naato'si*, *sacredness* itself, casts upon this landscape, and upon the embodiments

perpetually revisited through the normative dispositions and social activities of the Niitsitapi people. The role of the buffalo in Alan's encounter with heart failure, addressed somewhat indirectly through a narrative form perhaps more *lived* than necessarily *spoken*, represents one of the most complex gestalt factors in what might be called *misamitsinikssini*, the *long-time-story* that both structures and becomes shaped-by the maintenance of co-existent relatedness, of sublimity, in the everyday experiences of local lives. Which is not, of course, to say that there have been no changes incurred in the Niitsitapi symbolic system through its past century of interaction with Western, colonial significations. Indeed, in the last story I will offer, we'll see what happens in the life of a man who, when facing a potentially terminal danger, finds that he can no longer rely upon his fellows to back him up.

The Power Of Paint – One Man's Means To Healing

In describing the conceptual and experiential histories that frame the Niitsitapi meta-narrative, referenced as *misamitsinikssini* above, it is important to be aware of the correlations that occur between gender roles, modes of signification, and routines of cultural practice. Through Adrienne's story, in the previous chapter, it was apparent that both a metonymic identification with the eco-social body and a metaphoric reflection of its natural cycles heavily influenced explanatory models aimed at rationalizing arthritic effects, proposing therapies, and making sense of her eventual recovery. But within this blend of co-occurrence and similitude, there were certain aspects of the encounter that might be understood as more feminine. For instance, the causality and remedy of Adrienne's condition focused predominantly on themes of water, and its seasonal transition from a less mobile state to one that is more fluid. This prototype for aqueous

process is, as previously described, more strongly associated with women than with men – with the Moon and the recurrent birthing and nurturance of life. In fact, because the female body is viewed as actually *reproducing* such cyclical flows, women in Niitsitapi society are regarded as being more directly connected with the forces of metonymic creation, or part-to-whole relatedness, than their protective male counterparts. They do not need to enter *sstsiyysskaani*, nor do they have to depart from their regular daily activities in order to communicate with the sacred. Theirs is a union assumed. And in Adrienne’s case, this was most evident in the way that her medicine ultimately *came to her*, rather than she having to *seek it*.

For men, on the other hand, negotiations around illness and healing entail a more dynamic and metaphoric pursuit, often accomplished through the management of those activities occurring at a distance from the household. Hence Alan’s comments about my lack of support in Adrienne’s recovery, “How many sweats have you put up? How many offerings have you made?” As my complement in life, Adrienne would certainly have taken on the female role during such rites, but it would have been largely my duty alone to arrange for and sponsor their production. I was even counselled on a few occasions to consider *itsiiyissini*, *becoming-fragrant*, or “vision-questing”, as a means to locate a cure for her affliction. And had I followed this suggestion, it would have required a period of isolated fasting that Adrienne could not have participated in at all. It is interesting to note that, while conducting interviews for this thesis, many of my elder advisors responded to the proposed questions with recommendations urging me to think about my research largely in terms of traditional medical practice, or at least to use it as a preparatory move toward such endeavors. Consider, for example, the following statement made by Jasper Buckskin, an Akáínaa beaver man:

Well, you know, like... if it was up to me, going out asking these elders these questions, I would... like I told you, approach them the right way, eh? [in ritualized manner, humble, garbed in blanket and moccasins] I would maybe go after more, like, healing. You know, like the traditional Blackfoot style, eh? And understand it more, and spend more time on it, eh? I know there's no money in it, but – it's not the money – it's thinking the best for your fellow... maybe your wife... So, you're thinking the best for her, eh? And you want to find something out there. And, it's out there. You find it. But it's up to you how you do it. In time, you'll find it.

Although I did pursue the medical orientation of this thesis partially as means to address what could be done, traditionally, in response to Adrienne's condition, or how we might at least come to *understand* her situation, shamefully enough, my more overriding interest lay in a theoretical fascination with the development of cultural systems of signification, and in what could be learned of this topic through a study of Niitsitapi language and practice. I had separated these two facets of my life, family and scholarship, into domains mistakenly perceived as incongruent. Just as I had continued smoking cigarettes after Alan's heart attack, when I should have been backing him up, so too had my engagement with Adrienne's struggle become relegated to certain performance milieus, and anthropological study to others. I unconsciously conceptualized a private existence apart from my social world, a body distinct from the collective spirit. It was only by a fortunate synchronicity that, in the course of the research for this thesis, I found myself able to contribute something useful toward Adrienne's experience. Perhaps, in this sense, both my own imagined interests and those of Niitsitapi society have been served, for certainly I hope that the lessons gained from this error will inform my future activities as a husband to Adrienne, and as a male constituent of the Akáínaa community.

In order for men in this society to serve their gendered roles, to protect their loved ones from privation and sickness, they must also be willing to abandon their fears. This

correlates, as I've explained, to that long history of structural coupling with the buffalo, the harsh winters of the plains, and the related practice of awahkáóótsiiyssini or *playing-against-one-another*, but it is equally applicable and no less embodied in the colonized context of the present. A man's life, in the Niitsitapi world, has always been framed by an unavoidable gamble, the stakes of which are physical survival. And, as we saw in the story of Náápi with the first woman, the origin of sickness and death, men ultimately have no control over this wager's terms or design. The only route by which they may acquire any sense of influence over their own lives is through taking the necessary risks, and setting forth to attain their behavioral ideals regardless. Thus, the ethical discourse surrounding participation in orthodox religious practices that I experienced in the social pressures to more actively pursue the kinds of co-existent relationships that would help Adrienne's condition, impose a sense of apprehension, and yet also offer the only true escape from such anxiety.

As we saw in Alan's encounter with heart failure, one of the means of navigating through periods of danger is by building strong alliances with other men. When Alan had his heart attack, attributed partially to the bad talk that people were directing at him as a political leader, his friends came to his aid, masking him in a body of resemblance. But what happens when a man's closest partners are the very same people who try to keep him down? This is the situation that will be presented through the largely self-narrated story of Chris McHugh's encounter with cancer. Like with Adrienne and Alan, it will be apparent that both metonymic and metaphoric processes blend together in Chris's experience to generate his identification with, and reflection of, the eco-social body. And the reader's attention should also be drawn, again, toward the important role that dreaming plays in his healing process, as a form of knowledge *done-to* him, and thereby

internalized. But unlike the more feminine account, focused on the metonymic reproduction of an aqueous cycle, the causality and remedy of Chris's cancer is oriented heavily toward his metaphoric identification with Naato'si, *sacredness*, or the Sun, signified most strongly through symptomatic sensations of being burned alive, juxtaposed against a therapy that involves getting painted in this celestial being's image.

I first met Chris several years prior to this research, while assisting with the repatriation of another Ksisskstaki Amopistaan, one that eventually played a role in his healing experience. He agreed to have one of our dining-table conversations recorded for the purposes of this thesis, with the stipulation that I exercise some editorial caution in regards to the names of certain persons identified through his narrative. Although the interview is presented, for the most part, in its entirety, there are several bracketed sections where I explain information that has either been withheld, or that was assumed in the context of our meeting. Chris's telling is a fair testament to the complexities and persistent influences of the meta-narrative that I have called *misamitsinikssini*, the *long-time-story*, as he incorporates – indeed takes for granted - many of the tales I've already introduced, and a good number that I haven't the space for. Because Chris's telling serves as a fine example of just what the everyday practice of *íisootsspi* entails, and since he has offered it as nurturance for both myself and the reader, I thought it best to present his words in their raw, un-dissected form:

Chris: Hania. Okay. Well, I already made a smudge, I already prayed about it [this interview], and I asked for a sign what to do. So I got my sign. So let's start. Okay, when I was about twelve or thirteen years old, this... we were playing out here, we used to have pellet guns. Pellet gun wars. We played with them, pellet gun wars. And I was

hiding in the brush over here [off the side of his house], this tree-line here. One guy, his name was... his name was Leon McGuire. He was standing over here, and I shot him. I shot him. And my sights on my gun were really good, and I shot him between the legs [we laugh]. And he right fell, and I took off, and I ran around the corner, and I found my brother was standing there. He told me, "Okay, game off! Game off!" And we all came together over here, just right there. And we were standing there, and that Leon, "Okay, who shot me in the nuts?" Everybody laughed and I didn't say anything, by the way I acted I admitted that it was me. And he was angry. He grabbed me, he grabbed me here [in the crotch] and he grabbed me by the shirt. He held me up and he shook me really hard. And one of my testicles swelled up really bad. And it took a long time for it to go down. I went to the doctor, because it was scarring. It was never the same, and I was always kind of worried about it. But I didn't focus on it, I didn't think anything of it. So we went through all that story of how I started the Horn Society [something we'd talked of during a previous discussion], me and my members. We went in the Horns. And that one testicle didn't go back to normal, it was always kind of big. As we got into the sixth year I was in the Horns...

Ryan: What year was it?

Chris: Ah... I think '98. It started to get bigger and bigger. And I started having dreams that I was getting cut down there. And I always thought it was just bad talk, eh? Somebody's trying to cut the balls of the bull [laughs]. The bull's horns... the leader, the leader of the Horns. I didn't do anything about it. It started to get bigger and bigger, and I didn't.... It started to get really scary, because it started to affect, you know, different

things. I started using the bathroom really lots. So I started getting scared, because we didn't have that ultimate ceremony in the Horns yet (i'tskaatowa'pii), and it wasn't looking like we were going to get it. Because at the time I was thinking, "Well, I'll use that ceremony to heal myself. I know it's powerful." But for a long time we couldn't get it going. So, at the same time, we went to, that's when we went to go look at that Beaver Bundle [at the Smithsonian, in Washington D.C.]. We went to go look at that Beaver Bundle, and Alan [Pard] started talking about Sun Lodges. Okan. So, I didn't tell him everything. I just told him, "I must have cancer". Because I was looking at some of the symptoms, and it kind of seemed like I might have it. I was scared to go to the doctor, so I didn't go. So, we went for a walk, we were walking, I was telling Alan, "Well you need help with grieving, and me I might have cancer. So, help me, I'll put up this lodge. I'll put up an Okan. And it will be for my health. And I'll do it for you too. And your daughter will be my... the woman. And I'll get the bundle, and all of that." So we walked, right on Dupont Circle in that park, and I took some tobacco and I vowed to make that lodge. So we went to the whole thing of putting up the lodge [the following summer], and that was a test in itself. All the spirits of the universe pestered me in all kinds of ways when we put up that lodge. I even met the devil himself, or what the white man would call the devil¹⁶. I even met him one time. He came and told me I wouldn't beat him, but we put up the lodge, so I did beat him. So anyway... we put up this lodge. And, you know, I never got any messages that I would be cured. I never got any messages that I would be cured. But I got messages of all kinds of other things. And I came home from that lodge, and I figured, "Well, something will happen." And this guy

¹⁶ In Niitsi'powahsini, the Christian devil is called áótotsóóki, *throws-us-in-the-fire*. In Niitsitapi tradition, when one wants to cast a curse upon his enemy, one of the techniques by which this is done involves painting a stick representing the foe and throwing it into a fire. This meeting between Chris and the "devil" will take on added significance as his interview progresses.

from *Wind Speaker* [newspaper] came and wanted to interview me, and I did quite an extensive interview on the Sun Lodge, and how things started here. But it never... it never got printed, because I phoned him back. I didn't want to go through all the big talk, hey?¹⁷

Ryan: Aa.

Chris: So, anyways, we had that lodge, and then we brought that Beaver Bundle home. And I still had the problem. I still had that problem. And I was getting really scared, and didn't know what to do. So I started putting up offerings. One night I had this dream. This old lady came to me. How the dream went was I was picking up bundles from the dead. I was in a camp, picking up bundles from the dead. And I walked into a tipi. And when I walked into the tipi, in the background I could hear, outside the tipi, I could hear [identity of persons withheld] talking amongst themselves, joking, saying, "Well, I'm [information withheld]." And they're talking crazy about [certain bundles]... that was transferred to them. And next thing [identity withheld] walked into the tipi and he pointed right at me, and he told me, "You're going to die. You're going to die. I've made sure that you're going to die." And this old lady came and she said, "Aaa, *maatsiikatsoka'pii, that's-not-good*. That's insane. That's insane what you're doing. It's really not good." So, the dream tells me all this... [identity of persons withheld] used their power on me, to shorten my life. Jealousy. So, I woke up from that dream, and we had a sweat. Still, nothing was coming. So I went to... I just prayed, I put up an offering, and I went to the... I used this Beaver Bundle, I told that Beaver Bundle.... What

¹⁷ i.e. he didn't want to be made any more distinct than he already was, as the youngest-ever leader of the Horns at Siksiká, and an aspiring Beaver Man.

actually happened was I took the pipe out of the Beaver Bundle and shook it, prayed with it, told him, “Well, I’m going to go to the hospital. And the part of me that’s sick, that doctor’s going to cut it off. He’s going to cut off that part. And I’m just going to walk out of the hospital with nothing wrong.” I didn’t tell anybody, I checked into the emergency. They checked me out, and sure enough I had cancer in one of my powers [we laugh]. So, I went through all that, I got tested and all that stuff. And I went through all that, and I went through the operation. Nobody knew. Nobody knew where I was or what I was doing. When the operation was all over, I got up and I walked out of the hospital, and somebody picked me up. I got one of my friends to just meet me in Calgary, and he picked me up and I went to a powwow. While I was at the hospital, the story went all over the reserve. And just the moment I walked out, my family walked in, told that nurse, “Well where’s Chris?” “Oh, he just walked that way.” And when I walked into the powwow, everybody was just looking at me. Thought I was going to croak. Here I was just singing at a drum [we laugh]. So, I walked out. I walked out of there [the hospital]. Now what happened, my mistake... it’s actually Naapikoaiksi, the white man’s doctoring system, eh? When you have transfers, or when you have anything niitsitapia’pii, the Indian way, fire’s really bad for you. When I told that doctor, “Well, that part of me you cut off, give it to me. I’m going to offer it to the Sun. So it won’t come back.” And he said, “No, I can’t.” He said, “I’m going to burn it. We’re going to put it in the incinerator and we’re going to burn it.” Well, I knew right there, if they burn that I’m going to be in trouble, eh?¹⁸

¹⁸ Recall my previous footnote about cursing, and also the story of Iihkitsíkammiksi, *appearing-grouped-as-seven*, from the third chapter, and the troubles that come when people attempt to burn the remains of that which they want to get rid of.

Ryan: Aa.

Chris: But I left it up to prayers that maybe I'll be okay. But sure enough, they burned it and four days later it came back, eh? They burned it, and it came back. And it spread all the way up here [into his abdominal cavity], all over.

Ryan: Geez.

Chris: It spread all over. Really bad. "Well, you've got to come in, and you've got to do chemotherapy, and you have to take these pills...". So I was really scared. It really scared me. He said it was my whole lower body. It really scared me. So that's when I really started to think, and started really thinking, "Well how the hell do you beat this thing? How do I beat this sickness?" Because I figured, once I cut that one part of me off, well then the rest is okay. But it didn't turn out like that. And by the way, I still have... part of it is still working good.

Ryan: Aa. [laughing]

Chris: So you're not talking to a eunuch. [laughs] You're not talking to a eunuch, I've still got the power. It only takes one. [laughs] Okay. So, I really got scared. I'm sitting there. And iiksstonnatsiiyiko, it's really hard, because every time [identity withheld] gets mad, I just feel like my body's just burning. Burning every time [identity withheld] gets

mad. Somebody with a transfer sent it to me.¹⁹ So the first thing I did was I tried to use the Horn clay. That clay from the Horns. And that worked for a while. It worked for a while. But it doesn't work when guys are using their... there's four things in the Horns Society that are used to drop somebody.²⁰ And when you use those, it doesn't work. So that one night, we were watching *Planet of the Apes*, that new movie, and all the sudden I felt that in my body. Like a burning. So I went to my room, and I tried that. It didn't work. I painted my face a certain way, the Horn leader's power.²¹ But it didn't work. Almost all night, it felt like my body was on fire. So I thought about it, I started thinking, "Okay, well, what takes away things. Okay, offerings take away things. Offerings help us." So I started thinking, "Well, what are the main things that we use to heal? Well, Scarface went to the Sun for his scar to be wiped away. Well, okay." I started to think about, what did we use a long time ago. First thing that I thought about was, okay, offerings take away things. Offerings take away things. Sickness, curses, anything. Bad talk. Anything, offerings will take it away. Okay, so I started looking into that. Okay, well, how do you, what are the most powerful objects. Sundance. I started to look into it. Okay, Sundance-man's the only one who's really qualified to put up [i.e. construct] offerings. Sundance-man, the reason why is because offerings come right out of the Beaver Bundle and the Sun Lodge.²²

Ryan: Hania.

¹⁹ Remember that, in the Pawakksski story, before he was a full guest in the lodge of Naato'si, he had to hide behind the liner or risk being burned.

²⁰ Throwing [the representation of] someone in the fire is one of these.

²¹ The same as that given to Pawakksski by the Naato'si.

²² The complementary coupling of the cosmic order – water and heat.

Chris: And that's the first thing I learned. Second thing is, okay, when a Sundance-man wants his offerings to be really powerful he'll paint his face black.²³ That's the second thing I learned. Okay, so we've got that part. So what else is really powerful? Fasting. Fasting is really powerful. Probably because if you're suffering it encourages spirits to give you what you want.²⁴ So then I thought, okay, what's the next thing? Sweatlodges. Sweatlodges. Okay. Pawakksski went to the Sun, his scar was right there, and he had four sweat lodges. Four sweats done properly has the power. Okay, and I was just thinking about what I'm going to do. So I sat there and I took all these ideas, and it was winter like this [the season in which the interview was conducted]. I know, if I go fast, I can't leave these bundles [at the time, Chris had the Horn Leader's bundle and the Beaver Bundle in his bedroom]. These bundles will get mad. They'll be mad at me, and it will affect the fast. I'll fast here in the house, I'll lock all the doors. But it is better to fast outside, that's what the spirit said. It's better to fast outside. So any elder that tells you to fast in your house, well it's wrong. Any elder that tells you that, the spirit says it's wrong. So I fasted... I took a black offering. A black offering. I was going to use a big offering, a yellow-covered offering, but I couldn't get a hide and I couldn't get the feathers. So I used a black offering. And I fasted in my room, and the Beaver Bundle was there, and the Horn Bundle was there. First night of the fast... Oh, to start the whole thing, I had a sweat.

Ryan: Aa.

²³ Black is the color used by the leader of the Horns, straight from Pawakksski, evoking the sublime.

²⁴ As children of the Sun and Moon, fasting, suffering from hunger and exposure, would naturally provoke their assistance.

Chris: First thing. And because there's no Sundance-man here that could take me through the fast, because the first times I went to fast there was a Sundance-man who took me to fast – Aanista'piinaamaahkaa, he took me to fast when I was young. He transferred it to me to fast. I've taken a few guys out to fast and none of them have made it. [laughs] The few guys that I've taken out... the one went one day, he came back, he was crying and I had to take him out. The second guy, he walked out of it. He got too freaked out by the second day. And the third guy didn't even get past the first part. So, all the guys I've taken out, none of them have finished, because it was too real [we laugh]. There's a big difference between the fantasy you see on the t.v. and the real thing that we do.

Ryan: Aa.

Chris: The real thing we do. And all of the old stories are true. The powers that they talk about, they're true. That's the very first thing. When somebody's going to go for healing they have to know this is real. Real. And all the stories that were told to us, they were real. And the bundles, the powers of the bundles, are real. And the connection to the universe is real. Everything is real. It has to be, it's all about faith, eh? It's all about faith. The first key is it's about faith. And so you get tested all the way along, about your faith and how much you believe.²⁵ So anyway, so I started, so I had a sweat. Had a

²⁵ Although "faith" is an introduced concept, omai'takssini or *belief* is inferred in many of the stories describing the origins of bundles – as with Pawakksski, where everyone else in his band thought him crazy for even attempting something so ludicrous as a journey to meet the Sun. Pawakksski himself might have quit at the ocean, if it were not for the swan who left the rattle under his robe, a material manifestation that reassured him of the veracity of his vision experiences. I heard a very nice speech recently at a Beaver Bundle opening, made by John Murray of Aamsskáápipikani. While introducing a white man who had made a vow to dance with the bundle, John told everyone assembled that, "It's up to us how we want to live with these bundles, how much we want to believe in them as human beings. This man's made a vow to

sweat. And I didn't tell anybody I was going to fast. I just prayed. The first night of the fast I painted the offering, I painted my whole body. My whole body I painted. Because if you look at the old stories, any transfers, any big kind of thing... sickness, *isttsiistoma'pii*, they paint the whole body. They don't just paint the face and your hands. In the old days... in the story of Beaver and the lodge, how Beaver transforms into a different person, how he turns into a different person, he painted his whole body yellow.

Ryan: Hania.

Chris: Scarface was painted from head to toe with black paint. Horns, when they get transferred they're painted head to toe with the paint. Sundance man, he's painted head to toe. The beaver people... certain paints they're painted head to toe. All these ones. So, I painted myself from head to toe with that red paint. And I fasted. I filled the pipe. And I told that holy spirit [of the Beaver Bundle], "Okay, I'm smoking this pipe." And it was really powerful. I went to sleep and I slept with that offering on my chest. That night, this man came to me, I'll use his exact words. You can change it for, during the writing. He said, "Okay, if you quit right now, I'll give you this woman. I'll give you this woman, and you can [content edited, 'be with her']. You can even [content edited, 'perform certain sexual acts with her']. If you quit right now." So I got up, and I was holding that pipe, "Okay, I'm not going to quit. I'm going to keep fasting. I'll give you this smoke. But I thank you for coming to talk with me." So I kept going. And then the second night, the second night I was told, "Pray for all the children, pray for all the ones who work for the children, Social Services. Pray for them too." The Beaver Bundle is

dance with the beavers, and it doesn't matter that he's a white man. All you need to do is be a human being, and I think he counts as that."

about children. We have the Beaver Bundles so children will grow up healthy. So I prayed for them. I put them in my prayers. And then, and later on that night, I had a dream. The Beaver Bundle came to me, it told me, it told me, “You know, this, what happened to you. It’s your fault, because how you guys were playing.”

Ryan: Way back?

Chris: Yep, way back. “It’s all from how you guys were playing.”²⁶ And he was real mad at me. He came to me as a person. He came to me as a person. When a spirit, when a Beaver Bundle or an animal comes to you as a person, he’s real angry.

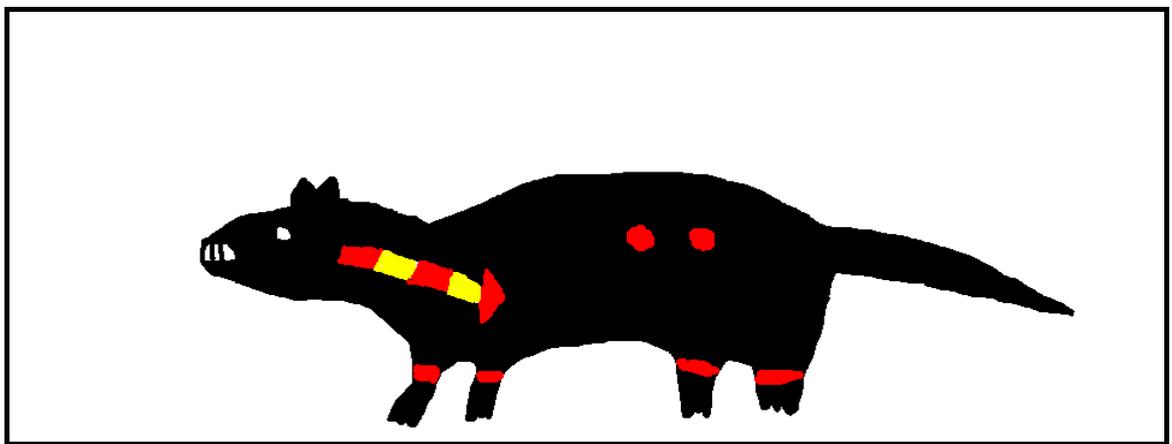
Ryan: Hania?

Chris: When he comes to you as an animal, they’re friends. When he comes to you as a person, they’re angry. So, I got up and I kept on praying with that offering. Kept smoking the pipe. Then the Horns came. They told me, “You have to come to this meeting. You have to come to this meeting.” I said, “Okay.” I got up, and I went to the meeting. And I had the meeting and prayed. I prayed about the fast. I didn’t drink any coffee of nothing. And the berry soup I had, I was told it was alright. “Okay, come and bring me berry soup.” So I ate berry soup. I ate sacred with the Horns. And I finished and I came back and continued. And that night, that night I dreamt I seen myself, four different sides of myself. The scared me, the me that you see right now, the angry me,

²⁶ As age-mates pretending to kill one another, an embodied experience that carried – in a more deadly fashion – into adulthood. Note that Chris had shot his friend in the same place that he himself developed cancer, a mark of co-existence or indivisibility of individual from group.

and the spiritual side of me. And they were walking to the river, and all the animals came and talked to us. And the birds told us, “We’re the ones that help to escape danger.” And I woke up. And I didn’t understand that dream at first. But later on I found out in our old ways we believe that there are four spirits within us: the spirit of, there’s the one... there’s four spirits within us. That’s why, when they paint animals, there’s four blocks from that arrow [as with the animals on tipi designs].

Ryan: Oh yeah, that...



Author's crude digital representation of a typical Blackfoot otter design, depicting the course of life into its body, kidneys to filter, and bracelets marking social affiliation. Note: This image is not an exact copy of any sacred designs I know of.

Chris: That arrow, there’s four blocks in that arrow. Representing the four personalities, spiritual personalities within a person. So, I dreamed that, then I woke up. So then I continued on. And before this fast, that night I was telling you about when I was burning, I had a dream this old man told me, “This sickness will always be with you all your life. When you get angry, it will come up. And when people curse you it will come up.”²⁷ I wasn’t getting help, eh. I was just getting told. So that’s why I went on this fast, because

²⁷ Harmful emotive substance, whether originating internally or externally flows through the body and constitutes sickness.

it was just trying to keep me tied up, hey? So anyway... Oh, but that old man told me, "When you pray, it will go away." That's what he told me. "When you pray, it will go away." And I saw blue things go in my veins, and they just stop here [not yet where the cancer was]. So I thought, "Well, this is kind of still not good. Because I want to be healed. I don't want every time I'm angry, or every time anyone's pissed off at me, to have that feeling and be afraid, eh. I want to do something more." So I went on this fast. And on the third night, there wasn't really much. So, on the last night... the last night was really wicked. I woke up in the middle of the night. I still don't know if it was a dream, or if it was a... like real. I was talking to that Horn Bundle, "Are you real?" And he told me, "Yeah, I'm real." "Well, show me that you're real. Show me that you're real. Show yourself to me. Because I've felt your power, but what if it's just in my head? I want to know if you're real. Because I'm not even getting better, and you're not even helping me." I was telling that bundle. And the bundle told me, "I can't jump over your blanket." He told me, "Move your blanket and I'll jump out, and I'll show you." So I moved all my blankets, and this man jumped out of the bundle with a headdress on. When I woke up my blankets were moved. And then I went back to sleep, and that lizard came to me, in the hallway. He said, "You're a real wuss. What's wrong with you? You're supposed to fast outside. You're a real wuss. And you're coming and you're asking us for help, and power. You're coming to us in a house? You're supposed to be outside. These bundles would have been okay. You're supposed to fast outside. Anytime you want power, you come outside. You don't fast in a house. And you're just acting like a real wuss." He told me. That lizard was standing there. So, I woke up and I thought, "Oh gee. Is this a dud or what?" You know.²⁸ So, that morning, the morning of

²⁸ It's worth noting here that many practitioners of Niitsitapi orthodox religion would have viewed Chris's

the fifth, the fifth morning, I painted that bowl, the way the Beaver People paint in the Sundance. They use that clay. And I broke my fast. I used the old sweatlodge. The offering I prayed with, I put it on a sweat. I went out to the sweat, and I tied that offering to it. And there was one more [edited content, vision experience that he does not want to lose by making it public].

Ryan: Aa.

Chris: To keep the power of that [last] vision, you should edit that part out. To keep the power of that vision. So I never got my answer through those four days. But the night after that sweat, after I was all done, I had a dream I was at a powwow. Sydney... that crazy Sydney with the braids, he was there, I seen him. And I seen Reg Crowshoe, the guy that ran my Sun Lodge. I told Sydney, "I'm going to go talk to him. I'm going to go see if he has any of that turnip. That omahka's [winter smudge for the Beaver Bundle]. I'm going to go see if he has it." So I went over to him, and I told him, "Do you have any of that turnip." He told me, "Yeah, I didn't come here for that. I came to you for something else. Come with me." So he brought me into this trailer. And in this trailer, there was a woman whipped. She was whipped, eh. There were whip marks. Sitting on the floor was Mike Swims Under [famous Beaver Man, recently passed-on]. And he told me, "Come here." He says, "Come here." And then he painted my whole body, and then I walked out. Then the whole thing happened again. They brought me back in there. This time it was Joe Crowshoe. He told me, "What do you want to get painted for?" And

fast as self-contradictory. As the leader of the Horns, and a Beaver Man, he was already a sacred being, tasked with taking care of the very bundles he was asking assistance of. If a message were going to come to him, it should have done so without his seeking it – which is exactly what finally occurs.

I couldn't control what I was saying or anything in my dream. I just told him, "I'm having a hard time with [identity withheld], and some people. They're using their power on me to try and make me die." He told me, "Okay." So he painted my whole.... He said, "Alright, I'll paint you," he told me, "I'll paint you." And I told him, "Well, Mike already painted my body." He said, "I know Mike already painted you. I'm going to paint you again." He just painted my face, and I woke up. And then, I was thinking about it and thinking about it. And then, I still didn't get my answer. So I went to sleep on my bed. And the next night I went to sleep again. Next thing, Mike Swims Under again. He told me, "Paint is the most powerful thing to take away any sickness. Any sickness, paint is the most powerful thing." So through the *whole* thing, it was paint. And he told me how to do it, how to paint. Gave me the instructions, how to paint someone to take away their sickness. The way he told me, I painted myself like that, and I went to bed, and it went away.

The Long-Time Story of the Niitsitapi Symbolic System

In writing about Niitsitapi embodiments and significations, I've tried to present *áístomatoo'pa*, the *accustomed-body*, as a composition in process. It is not a static thing, projected upon the world but, rather, an ongoing creation and recreation of self that derives its meaning through interactive experiences that, while human-specific, are also very much emplaced. To the degree that an exchange is recognized and consciously valued between people and their local socio-ecological environment, a group's sense of being and knowing will reflect this perception. Embodiment, from this perspective, is that which emerges in the context of relationships, what some Western academics seem to be approximating in their discussions of "conceptual metaphor", "habitus", and

“structural coupling”. The process itself, áístomatóo’p, is a human universal. What manifests from that development, however, is culturally specific, and determined by a history of experience that continues to ripple through contemporary symbolic practices. While I have focused mainly on a select collection of somewhat out-of-the-ordinary situations, encounters with serious illnesses in which Niitsitapiipáítapiiwahsini, the *real-people-way-of-living*, can be revealed through its reconstruction in the context of medical therapies – i.e. Adrienne’s metonymic association with the waters, and Alan and Chris’s respectively metaphoric acts of resemblance in relation to either their fellows or a more encompassing celestial order – there are just many examples of this local symbolism to be found in the everyday.

One of the most common of such practices in Niitsitapi communities is called poohsapikinsstsakit, *bring-inward-hand*, a conventional greeting played-out through the use of a compulsory handshake that communicates a recognition and appreciation for the interdependent relationship between two people coming together in a shared space. This gesture is also applied toward departures, offered to people as they go away. In either case, it functions as one part of the expansive network of symbolic action that I’ve described throughout this thesis, reproducing a local ethos of interdependence and sublime “co-existence”. At base, the handshake reveals one level of embodied conceptual metaphorization, the cognitive association between kinship and perceptions of proximity. But it is also a practice that is culturally specific, embodied in a very Niitsitapi kind of way. However much it may *resemble* something done among other peoples of the world, this handshake’s most subtle implications are understood only by those who live in these communities, and practice it everyday.

Poohsapikinsstsakit functions, in part, because of the sensory capacities of our human anatomy. Aside from the fact that this somatic organization is itself very much culturally constructed, I think that we may universally view happenings as occurring more near or far in terms of spatial dimensions. Amongst some people, this orientation is augmented in a strong focus on notions of in and out as well. For the Niitsitapi, however, being in range of prolonged eye-contact seems, from my own experience, to be the prototypical factor in registering interpersonal near-ness and, by extension, interdependence. When people are close enough to look each other in the eye, it is uncomfortable to neglect the offer of a handshake – anyone doing so risks being perceived as impolite or, worse, not valuing their relationships to others. So at one level, the meaning of this handshake is connected to a universal sensory capacity to judge distance, which is then culturally shaped.

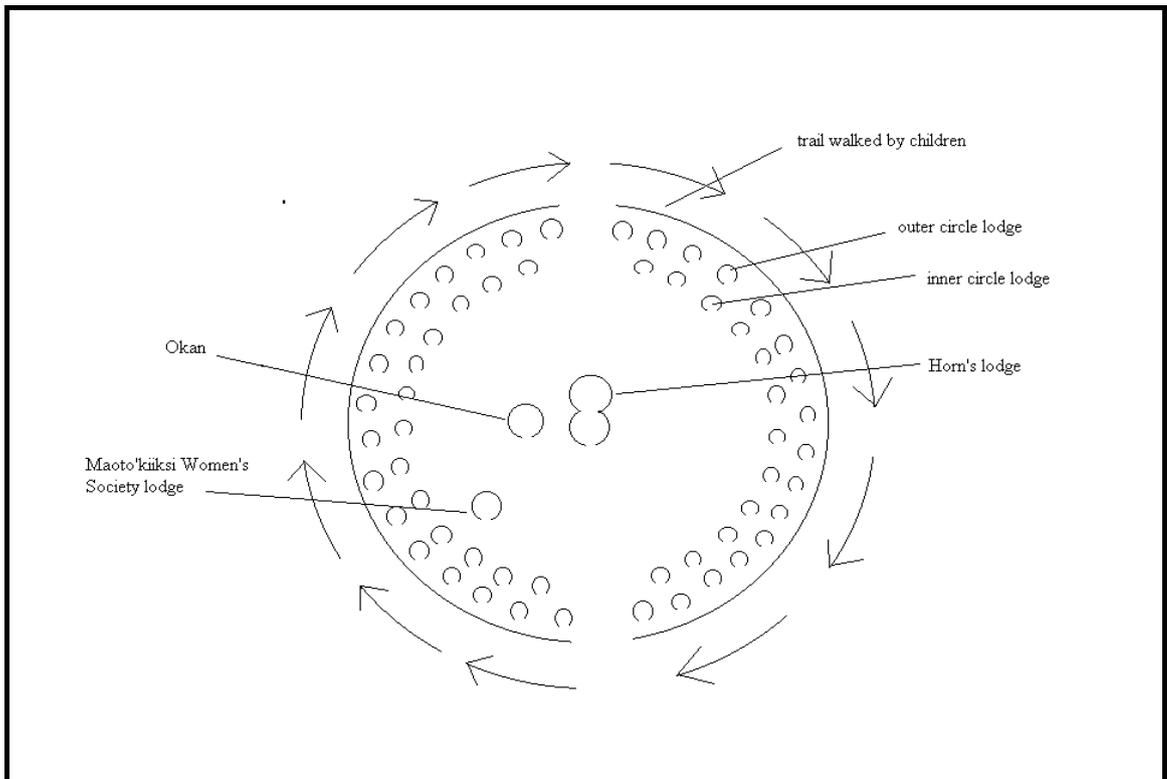
At another, but related level, the handshake works because it is touch – a kinetic demonstration of the link between two persons. The particular quality of touch employed by people in these communities is relatively gentle. It doesn't convey either competition or nonchalance. It is rather warm and committed. In addition, the link constructed between people through this handshake may be further amplified to emphasize the strength of their relationship through the gesture of a kiss. This is a connection of the mouth, a recognition of mutual *feeding*. Visitors to Niitsitapi reserves are often shocked when they spot a pair of grown men greeting one another with a kiss, or a couple of women similarly engaged. Usually, on such occasions, what they have witnessed is the conventional meeting between members of the Horns Society. But this is certainly not always the case. There is one elder lady, for instance, who kisses me in this fashion every time we meet, and I have never been a Horn. Had she not introduced me to this

practice, though, perhaps I would not have as fully understood some of the significations that I believe I do today.

The kiss that I write of is an elaboration on the same symbolic act as the handshake, both compel participants toward feelings of mutual dependence and the expression of *kímmapiiyipitssini*, *habitual-kindness*. In practice, the kiss is combined with the handshake, as if to register their similarity in function. But while the latter is a gesture shared by all members of these communities (with the exception, in some cases, of the relationship between mother-in-law and son-in-law), the kiss is one conducted particularly between age-mates, i.e. those who are most near in proximity. As such, it is a gesture passed between siblings (actual or affinal), and between grandparents and their grandchildren (actual or affinal). How, it might be asked, can this expression be one that is, as I've suggested, typically exchanged between age-mates if it is also shared between the elderly and the young? The answer to this question has, in a sense, already been revealed. It lies in the sublime Niitsitapi embodiment that emphasizes process over objectification, movement over station. Rather than thinking of proximity or age in terms of a linear scale, the Niitsitapi understand these aspects of human experience as transitional positions in a circular cycle.

The figure below, which should be somewhat familiar from the previous discussion on *niitoyiistsi*, or *real-enclaves*, is the same model played-out on a wider community scale – that of the *aako'kaatssini* encampment. If thought about in terms of *niitoyis*, and the correlation of social positioning with the life-cycle, moving sunwise, those who are coming into the world and those who are going out are both found near the east door, the *horizontally-downward* direction. Thus, elders are indeed those most proximal to the youth, age-mates of a sort. As beings most close in spatial distance, they are – by

definition – similarly positioned in the eco-social body, and therefore should be sharing the same nutritive flows. So too for those age-mates in all the other adjacent positions along the circumference of this model, who might similarly exchange a kiss with those most proximal to themselves. In short, the *more close* you are in this cycle, the *more nutritive fluids* you share, and the *more gestures* you exchange. While everybody shakes hands, only those adjacent to one another will elaborate with a kiss.



Aako'kaatssnini, *coming-into-a-circle* or Sundance encampment, ground structure

Within this schema, we can register yet another level of embodiment. Where I previously described the universality of spatial perception, and the important functional value of touch in the construction of these symbolic acts, now we must face the undeniable fact that the application of these universal human faculties is always heavily cultural. What I mean by “cultural”, in this instance, is that phenomena of deeply embodied habituations of exchange which occur between beings who have a *long* history of social-structural

coupling in a shared environment, such that their patterns of interaction become coordinated, recreated anew, and perpetually transformed through adaptation in each succeeding generation. What the elders learned in their time, they have the opportunity – by virtue of spatial proximity – to transfer once more to the youth. As for the latter, while they are being *brought-horizontally-upward*, they move through the women, a dual-metaphor on maturation and nurturance, so that when they reach their apex height, becoming of marriageable age, it is their time to be the givers, and then – in turn – to transfer these responsibilities on. At every step of the way, one’s sense of being is defined by kinship, exchange, and spatial positioning in a life-cycle that is echoed throughout the eco-social body.

The metonymic quality of this cognitive and ecological model is such that, while the individual exists, he is indistinct from family, society, and cosmos. All four dimensions of experience are connected in this single representation. We’ve already seen how this works in terms of *niitoyis*, but the structuring of the encampment, featured above, lends yet another way to arrive at the same conclusions. In a study of depression among the Flathead, O’nell (1996:57) outlined an “empty center” model of identity, comprised of concentric circles, one inside the other. In her analysis, the middle circle was the domain of the ancestors, or the “really-Indians”, while the next circles out from that were grades of traditional practice among “contemporary Indians”, and that space outside all of these was relegated to “non-Indians”. O’nell noticed that people stationed at any given position within the outer circles always defined themselves relevant to the emplacement of the person asking the question, and in relation to their own approach toward center. For example, someone positioned in an orbit perhaps midway to the center circle might, when talking with a non-Indian or a young person, present himself as

a representative of the traditional. But when talking to one of his own age-mates, he would readily admit his shortcomings and direct them further center. When O'neil got to those on the skirt of the very middle, she found that these persons would reference their ancestors, the old people who *really* knew the way. Thus, the center, that which everyone was directed toward, was empty of living bodies – filled only with ideals.

This model, the “empty center” struck me as very familiar in terms of aako'kaatssini, and yet a bit different as well. Here, among the Niitsitapi, the outer ring of lodges is occupied by the general population, while the inner ring is comprised of those who have bundles in their homes. Beyond both of these circles is a path (represented as a line in my drawing) along which the children walk and visit with one another, and vehicles travel to and from the camp, so that by the time the weeks-long ceremony is over there is a well-worn road reminiscent of makóyoohsokoyi, the *wolf-trail*, wrapped around the outside of this circle. Where O'neil had located an empty center is, in the Niitsitapi model, the double lodge of the Horns (as well as the Okan and the Máóto'kiiksi Women's Society), a coupling rather than a singularity. This center is indeed occupied by ancestors, the Naatoyiitapiiksi or *sacred-life*, those who – as Chris has told me – are not so much human anymore. And the discourse surrounding identity, in terms of its directionality toward center, works very similarly to O'neil's model.

At the same time though, while the center of this structure is the abode of Naatoyiitapiiksi, these are also the Niitsitapi people of today, right now. It is not hollow, but rather filled with contemporary manifestations of spirit. And where O'neil's concentric circles had been drawn as closed, those in aako'kaatssini are all seen to be permeable in the direction of nutritive flows in and out of the world. People in this camp regularly walk free between enclaves, and can even go into the center to be painted.

Similarly, the Horns move about this camp and, in the final days, their rituals culminate in a dance that takes them outside, sunwise along the trail walked by the children, and eventually back again into the middle where they feed the assembled people and host a second, healing dance. Thus, in the aako'kaatssini encampment, we again find that classic Niitsitapi metonymic blend of self, household, society, and cosmos, permeable enclaves bundled together and subsisting on the nutritive flows of exchange between all factions co-existent.

This model, as with that of niitoyis, is also a reflection of the body itself, from its surface to its center. Novel experience, like that of the youth, courses around the periphery of this being as that which we sense anew in our day-to-day activities. This is one level of spirit, entirely indistinct from the external environment. At the next level in, the outer circle of lodges, the skin of this encampment, we find the general Niitsitapi population, that spirit which they see in themselves every day. Further yet toward center, as the soft inner tissues of the body, are the lodges of those who have taken-on the responsibility to care for individual bundles. And deep within the cavity itself are the Naatoyiitapiiksi, the *sacred-life* who, like the seasonal cycles of heat and water, condense within their coupled lodge and then disburse in a *protection* dance that takes them not only around the inside of the encampment for healing, like blood in the veins, but also – and perhaps even more importantly - around the outside, like voice.

This dance below the Belly Buttes, performed similarly to that of Kátoyiss, and reflecting the movements of constellations in the skies, reminds me of the nutritive flow of narrative, language, communication. It is the coordinated movement of storied substance and prayer which courses out of the body, wraps around its sublimated self, encompassing the whole of the Niitsitapi world and, through the practices of listening and

participation, eventually feeds back in. By the model of aako'kaatssini, that discourse which is valued, that which protects all of the spirits bundled within, is the voice of the sacred, transferred anew to each succeeding generation. This is misamitsinikssini, the *long-time-story* of Niitsitapiipáitapiiwahsini, aspects of which I've *tried-hard* to articulate in this thesis on the role of the body, through its interactions with an eco-social environment, in informing and being shaped-by the habituated behaviors and concepts imparted through local significations. Ki anni áwaani Naapiikoan.



Aako'kaatssini, the Akáínaa Sundance encampment (2004)

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Appendix A: Glossary of Blackfoot Terms

aahkoma'to'pa: *borrowing.*

aakii: *woman.*

aakiiksi: *women.*

aako'kaatssini: *coming-into-a-circle, the Sundance encampment.*

aamatosimaani: *incense made for prayer.*

aamitoohsi: *horizontally-upward-direction, or west.*

aamoyio'p: *twisted-mouth, or horizontally-upward-mouth.*

Aamsskáápipikani: *brought-horizontally-upward-fancy-robed, or Blackfoot Nation.*

aamsskapoohtsi: *brought-horizontally-upward-direction, or south.*

aanissin: *saying, any lexical utterance in Niitsi'powahsini.*

áápaiai: *white-robed, the ermine or weasel.*

Áápaiaitsitapi: *white-robed-people, the self-assumed name of the Akáínaa, referring to their use of weasel skins on their clothing.*

Aapáitsitapi: *blood-people, the mistranslated name of the Áápaiaitsitapi.*

Aapátohsipikáni: *behind-direction-fancy-robed, or Pikáni Nation.*

áápatsii'yi: *lateness / ill-preparation.*

aapatsska'si: *developing-from-behind, or reluctance / hesitancy.*

áísinokoopa: *slurping, the “dinosaur” slain by Káttoyiss.*

áísokinakiiksi: *making-goodness-visible, or healers.*

áístomatoo'p: *accustomed-body, becoming accustomed to, or embodying.*

Akáínaa: *many-leadered, or Blood Tribe.*

amopístaani: *bound-together-by-wrapping-around, or medicine bundle.*

áóhtakoistsi: *soundings, applied in this thesis in reference to the meaning-bearing,*

morphemic components of any Niitsi'powahsini lexical construct.

áómaopao'si: *settling-down*, current era of Niitsitapi history, describing the sedentary residency pattern experienced on reserves.

aoówahsini: *customarily-moving-through-an-aperture*, or *eaten* (i.e. food).

áóta'sao'si ponokáómitaa: *mounted horse*, era of Niitsitapi history when horses were used for transportation.

apániiksi: *moths*, the carriers of dreams.

apániitapi: *moth-person*, generic term for spirit being that appears in dreams.

apatohsoohsi: *behind-direction*, or north.

atsikin: *footwear*.

awahkáisínaakssini: *playfully-made-visible*, a sketch or drawing.

awahkáóótsiiyssini: *playing-against-one-another*, or war.

awahsin: *habitat*, any occupied part of the landscape.

áwaawahkaa: *playing*.

áyiisakiyi: *they-feed*.

a'kihtákssini: *mound-place*, term used for stone cairns.

ihkitsika: *frozen-feet*, or the number seven.

Ihkitsíkammiksi: *appearing-grouped-as-seven*, the Big Dipper constellation.

iihtaisinaakio'pi: *means-of-making-visible*, i.e. pencil, pen, camera, etc.

iihtsipáitapiyo'pa: *means-of-life*.

iiní: the contemporary term for bison, meaning *death*.

iinisskimm: *buffalo-stone*.

Ipisówaahsi: *distant-food*, chunked buffalo meat hung out to dry, also the Blackfoot name for Morning Star.

íisootspi: *feeding*.

iistó: *self.*

iistówa: *that-self.*

iistotóóhsiwa: *to be clothed or bearing-similarity.*

iitáitsiiyiiso’p: *there-becoming-fragrant, a vision questing site.*

iitota’simaahpi iimitaiksi: *when-used-for-transportation dogs, early era of Niitsitapi history.*

Iitskinaiksi: *Horns [Society].*

iiyika’kimat: *try-hard.*

imitái: *dogness.*

inaamaahkaa: *acquiring-[enemy’s]-weaponry, or counting coup.*

innaihtsookakihtsimaani: *peaceful-deciding, or treaty-making.*

innoohkat: *long-leg.*

issikatoyiiksistsikoyi: *finishing-holy-day, or Monday.*

ississtaan: *washer, or tripe.*

istot: *similarity.*

isttsiistomii: *bodily-pain, or sickness.*

isttsinaiksistsikoyi: *collecting-rations-day, or Thursday.*

itapi: *living.*

itsiiyissini: *becoming-fragrant, or “vision questing”.*

i’pakoyaakio’p: *open-mouthed.*

kakato’siiksi: *stars, also represents puff-ball mushrooms.*

kamotááni: *escaping-danger or survival.*

kanákkáatsiiksi: *all-comrades, generic name for Blackfoot religious societies.*

Káta’paopii: *never-moving, or the North Star.*

kátoyiss: *blood-clot*, refers both to the herbal smudge of the Ninnaimsskaa and to a Blackfoot culture hero.

kiistó: *your-self*.

kiistówaawa: *your-selves*.

kímmapiiyipitssini: *habitual-kindness*.

kipáítapiiyssinnooni: *our-way-of-living*, or our culture.

kitawahsinnooni: *our-habitat*.

koko'sinnooniksi: *our-offspring*, or children.

Ko'komíki'somm: *night-sun*, or Moon.

ksaahkomitapiiksi: *land-life*.

ksisskstaki: *cuts-wood*, or beaver.

ma ninna iihpawakksskiwa: *that man of-scarred-face*, refers to Pawakksski.

maatomáístomatoop: *bodies-not-yet-accustomed*.

makóyoohsokoyi: *wolf-trail*, or Milky Way Galaxy, road of the souls between Blackfoot territory and the afterlife.

Mamioyiiksi: *fish-eaters*, a present-day lineage clan on the Akáínaa Reserve.

maoóyi: *mouth*.

matapii: *human-ness*.

matapiiksi: *people*.

matsí'sai'piyi: *fine-charger*, or loon.

ma'tsi'pa: *taking*.

Miistákiistsi: *hard-on-edge*, or the Rocky Mountains.

míistsa'pssini: *hardened-growth-type*, or wooden.

miistsísa: *hardened-growth*, or tree.

Mióhpokoiksi: *bunched-children*, the Pleiades constellation.

misamiipaitapiyssini: *long-time-living.*

misamitsinikssini: *long-time-telling, or an old story.*

mohkát: *leg or foot.*

mohkínsstsis: *elbow, also Elbow River.*

mohpikíútsi: *ribs.*

Mohsóóa'tsaakii: *tailfeathers-woman.*

mohtóókiistsi: *ears.*

moistómi: *body.*

mónnikisisahtaa: *teat-river.*

móókoan: *stomach.*

Mookoansiítahtaa: *Belly-River.*

Móókoanssin: *Belly Buttes.*

mottáka: *shadow or spirit.*

mótookiokaas ómahksikimi: *kidney lake.*

moyís: *enclave, or home.*

mo'kakíkin: *backbone.*

naaipisstsitsikin: *cloth-footwear, or sneaker.*

Naapiikoaiksi: *Náápi's-kind-of-people, or white people.*

Náápi: *white-[haired-old-man], Blackfoot trickster/creator figure.*

naapioyis: *white-man's-house, i.e. the familiar architectural design of western homes.*

Naatoyitapiiksi: *sacred-life.*

Naato'si: *sacredness, the Sun.*

nípomakii: *chickadee-ness.*

niistó: *my-self.*

niitoyiistsi: *real-enclaves, or tipis.*

niitoyis: *real-enclave, or tipi.*

Niitsitapi: *real-people.*

Niitsitapiipaitapiiwahsini: *real-people-way-of-living.*

niitsítsikin: *original-footwear, or moccasin.*

Niitsi’powahsini: *original-manner-of-speaking, or the Blackfoot language.*

Nínaiistáko: *man’s-hardness, or Chief Mountain.*

ninna: man or leader.

ninnaiksi: men or leaders.

Ninnaimsskaahkoyinnimaani: *leader-saving-food-pipe, or the Thunder Medicine Pipe Bundle.*

niitsistowahsin: *similar-food, referring to a relative or brother.*

Niitsitapi: *real-people, any member of the Blackfoot kinship system.*

Niitsi’powahsini: *real-manner-of-speaking, or the Blackfoot language.*

okan: holy woman’s lodge in the Sundance ceremony.

omahká’s: *big-root, the winter smudge of the Beaver Bundle.*

omahkitapiiksi: *old-people.*

Omahksiítataa: *big-river, or the North Saskatchewan.*

Omahksipisskan: *big-buffalo-pound, the Niitsi’powahsin name for what has been mistakenly called “Head Smashed-In” buffalo jump.*

Omahksspatsikoyi: *big-sandy, the Great Sand Hills in western Saskatchewan, the site of the Blackfoot afterlife.*

Otahkoítahtaa: *yellow-river, or the Yellowstone.*

owahsin: *food.*

oyi: *mouth-like-space.*

oyiwa: *eat.*

oyíyis: *bird's nest.*

Paahmahksikimiksi: *inner-lakes* - Waterton, Sherburne, Saint Mary's, and Two Medicine Lakes.

Paapaitapiiksi: *dream-life.*

Pahtsiipisówaahs: *mistaken-for-Morningstar*, name of Pawakksski after his stay at the Sun's lodge.

Pawakksski: *scarred-face*, a Blackfoot man who travelled to the Sun's lodge.

Piikáni: *fancy-robed.*

piinaapoohtsi: *horizontally-downward-direction*, or east.

pisskan: *enclosure*, the term used for old-style buffalo drives and jumps.

pómmaiksistsikoyi: *trading-day*, or Saturday.

poohsapikinsstsakit: *bring-inward-hand*, or "shake my hand".

Saahkoma'pii: *state-of-youth*, or Bachelor, co-producer of the 1801 HBC map of kitawahsinnooni.

Sai'piiakii: *charging-woman*, Niitsitapi name of Pam Heavy Head, author's mother-in-law.

sáóka'simm: *horizontal-root*, the "power" root of the Horn's Society.

Siksiká: *black-footed*, or Blackfoot Nation.

sinaakssini: *made-visible*, i.e. piece of writing, map, photograph, etc.

sisttsí: *bird-ness.*

Somata'pokoanssin: *beginning-belly*, a place name on the Akáínaa Reserve.

soohkóókoani: *rotund-belly.*

soyiitapiiksi: *underwater-life.*

sspommitapiiksi: *above-life.*

sstsiyysskaani: *steam-making*, or sweatlodge ceremony.