

# Loving Indianess: Native Women's Storytelling as Survivance<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Native women writers are storytelling to create social change in their communities. Central to this writing is a perception of "loving Indianess" that acknowledges how we may articulate our worldview and experience our "Indianess" differently, yet produce a loving space for Native peoples as a strategy of cultural survival.

## RÉSUMÉ

Les écrivaines autochtones racontent des histoires pour créer un changement social dans leurs communautés. Ce qui est le centre de cet écrit est la perception de "l'amour de la quiddité indienne," ce qui reconnaît comment nous pouvons exprimer notre vue du monde et connaître notre "quiddité indienne" différemment, cependant en créant un espace où il fait bon vivre pour les peuples autochtones comme une stratégie de survie culturelle.

there are times  
when I am seeing how exquisite our being  
alive is  
whatever may be  
however it is our breathing  
that is so sacred and so huge  
it circles the earth.

Jeanette Armstrong (2001, 194)<sup>2</sup>

## INTRODUCTION Storytelling

We all have our stories. Sometimes, our stories are all we have. In his 2003 Massey Lecture *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* Thomas King reiterates this message throughout by saying "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (King 2003). Whether we are storytellers or rapt listeners, our stories of being Native in the here and now are defining for us, and those next seven generations, how to be Native in a world that imagines us as "vanished, dying, and dysfunctional"<sup>3</sup> or as "culturally frozen dime store Indians" (Kateri Damm 1993, 16). More and more Native women writers are telling stories of being Native in the here and now that fix a loving gaze on being Indian today. This sense of "loving Indianess," evident in many of our stories about being Native, may have begun as a "response" to the damaging and hurtful construction of the "female native" throughout history and the range of

implications that this has for Native women's bodies and souls. However, they are becoming more often expressions of a loving gaze; the ways that we imagine other Native women as the hearts of our nations (Lee Maracle 1996). These stories begin to unravel the falsehoods of both our "vanishment" (where through the denial of our current and ongoing material presence as "Indians" we exist only within the contexts of a dead, dying or suicidal race) and "over-determinedness" (in which, as Native women, our selves and bodies are hyper circumscribed by a Pocahontas or captured, civilized, and venerated, Mary March ((Demasduit)) ideology of what "real" Native women are) from the North American "cultural imaginary."<sup>4</sup> Our stories, however, focus less on how we are continually disappeared from our own cultural imaginary,<sup>5</sup> and more on the ways that we are giving witness to generations of ongoing cultural "survivance" in spite of the cultural genocide that surrounds us and marks us as "Indian" (Gerald Vizenor 1994). Our stories in fact bear witness and give presence to our "survivance" which Vizenor declares is a state in which we are moving beyond our basic survival in the face of overwhelming cultural genocide to create spaces of synthesis and renewal (1994, 53). The making and telling of our stories teach us to do more than react to and survive in this world; they bring us ways to heal our selves, our families, and our communities.

This story is a process. It was not created in any kind of linear fashion. Nor was this story produced overnight, fully and completely formed. Storytelling in the relative safety of the "ivory tower" did not spare me the pangs of anger, frustration, isolation, pain, or sadness. As a process this story grew out of my own desire to know what other Native women thought of our writing. I wondered about their "loving Indianess" and how this played out in their writing. As it was, this story came from other Native women who took the time to tell me their stories. These women continually support my efforts as a Native woman, a sister, mother, auntie and new storyteller. It is mostly their stories you are hearing here and my storytelling is my way to thank them for their guidance, to acknowledge what their story cost them, and to celebrate the gift of loving perception that they give to us as Native women. I am reminded that while some of us are doing more than surviving the cultural genocide informed by and enforced throughout Canada's colonial trajectory, not all Native women are surviving the most invasive moral, physical, emotional and material control of our bodies, selves, and imaginations that governments, social institutions, and our own communities have imposed upon us. For those of us who have not survived, for those of us who continue to struggle, and even for those of us who have "made it," our responsibility as Native women and storytellers remains the same, to create a loving space for Native women, regardless of where that space exists.

As Native women's places in our communities are changing so too are our stories changing. In Janice Acoose's "'A Vanishing Indian? Or Acoose: Woman Standing Above Ground?'," Bonita Lawrence's *"Real" Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* and Emma Larocque's "Colonization of the Native Woman Scholar" each Native woman is writing about the ways our bodies and selves, theories and philosophies, laws and politics are vanished within academe and how this "vanishment" act has material implications for our survivance as Native women and Native scholars (2001; 2004; 1993). These stories remind us that our relatively new place in academia, although one of great privilege, is too often an unstable place fraught with polarities and contradictions. It is of

great comfort to me as an emergent Native scholar to have these stories and to know that they are working to create a loving place for other Native academics.

The power to tell our stories and to share them so widely is not new to Native women. We have been telling stories for generations. And as the medium for telling our stories changes somewhat over time, so too does the form, shaping and telling of our stories reflect the differences of the spaces we now occupy. This story that I am sharing with you now comes from within my own interiority. It is shaped by the constant need to see how other Native women are forming spaces for us to reclaim our power, spaces that are safer for Native women to occupy in the world today, spaces that are created with a perception of loving Indianess. It is also informed by those people I love: my children, father, mother, sisters, brother, aunties, and grannies; and because just being Native in the world is not always safe for them they are all deserving of a loving gaze.

The control over the production and representation of Native identity and ideology in academia, writing, and the media is always about power and control. In her story, *Says Who: Colonialism Identity and Defining Indigenous Literature*, Kateri Damm reminds us about the power of telling and knowing our stories in our words by saying,

When we express ourselves and we listen to the creative and cultural expressions of others, we must do so from an informed position so that we do not contribute to the confusion and oppression but instead bring into sharper focus who we are. By freeing ourselves of the constricting bounds of stereotypes and imposed labels of identity we empower ourselves and our communities.

(1993, 24)

Part of being Native in the world today is often about negotiating the dissonance between how we perceive ourselves as Native and how others perceive "Native" itself. One of the ways we are negotiating this discord between what we know about ourselves and what others would say we "are" is through our writing. In order for us to do more

than survive in this world as Native peoples, we must write our stories of loving Indianess back into our own cultural imaginary in our own ways. Writing for ourselves is not simply a practice of retelling our stories in a different medium. Anyone who has seen the Petroglyphs knows that we have always used writing<sup>6</sup> in some form for story telling. Writing from a Native world view is a strategy of being able to "imagine Native people engaged in a broad range of activities which do not, in and of themselves, satisfy the expectations conjured up by the notion of 'Indianess'" (Emphasis mine, King 1990, xv). I stress King's use of "imagine" here because this is a major point for me as a Native woman, a writer and an academic. As storytellers, Native writers have the creative power to fashion ways of being in the world. We can envision and enact ways to make our communities whole and healthy. Our stories, while at times humorous or playful, are not to be trivialized as quaint customs of an archaic culture. Many of us may know our stories of creation and we may understand their creative power. But Leslie Marmon Silko reminds us, in *Ceremony*,<sup>7</sup> that it is not enough to know our stories. In our move towards sovereignty we must control how our stories are told and who does the telling. Silko says,

I will tell you something about stories  
They aren't just for 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 the stories.  
Their evil is mighty  
but it can't stand up to our stories.  
So they try to destroy the stories  
let the stories be confused or forgotten  
They would like that  
They would be happy  
Because we would be defenceless then.  
(1977, 2)

This story is a part of a larger story; my master's thesis. As Native woman and Aboriginal scholar, I wonder what it means for other Native people to read and hear our stories. I still question why there is so much written and spoken about us by others on our behalf. I know that the silencing of

our voices and the ghettoization of our words as "traditional storytelling that uses legends or myths" (Damm 2000,13) is of concern for other Native writers and scholars. Craig Womack says that, as Native scholars, we need to go beyond the academic inquiries located in post-coloniality (which he says "misses an incredibly important point"). Womack says that we must shift the focus of our inquiry and knowledge production from how the world "sees" Indians, to asking "how do Indians view Indians" (1999, 13). This story is formed by listening to Native women writers and storytellers who are also concerned with the ways our writing is taken up and read/heard by Native people and by the necessity of telling and retelling our stories for ourselves in our own ways.<sup>8</sup> To tell our stories in our own ways means to acknowledge that at the heart of Native women's stories is a space for loving Indianess. But to know what "loving Indianess" means we need to know how we define both "loving" and "Indianess" from within our own worldviews. If, as Native writers and story tellers, we are writing to do more than survive - and I think we are - there must be a willingness to understand how over-determined and externally defined notions of Indianess occupy our interiority;<sup>9</sup> that is, how it occupies our imagined self, as well as our bodies, and therefore shapes our stories. Understanding the historical and ongoing production of Indianess may also give us ways of looking at how our ideas of loving Indianess are shaped and in turn shape our stories and ourselves.

### INDIANESS

I've often wondered how much external ideas of Indianess inform our identity processes. I've had my own experiences, of being both "not Native enough" and altogether "too Native," in the eyes of others. While recently reading King's Massey Lecture and found myself laughing through so many of his stories. In the story, *You're Not the Indian I Had in Mind*, King confronts numerous challenges to his own, as well as others', ideas of what "Indian" is, (such as a tramp freighter cook who decided King didn't fit his picture of "Indian" at all), (2003, 48). While there is humour in King's story, the production of Native identity is often a political and material<sup>10</sup> concern for Native people who are often confronted with and forced to reconcile other's ideas of who "Indians" are.

Damm (1993), talks about our psychological vulnerability in these moments when we don't live up to "fictions of Indigenous stereotypes." At these moments our lived "Indianness" gets erased. King looks at this disparate power relation between how we "are" and how we are "seen" and he muses,

So it was unanimous. Everyone knew who Indians were. Everyone knew what we looked like. Even Indians...Yet how can something that has never existed - the Indian - have form and power while something that is alive and kicking - Indians - are invisible? (2003, 53)

Consistent with King's and Damm's experiences of not being "authentic Indians," Native women relate varying stories about our experiences of not being Native enough for someone else. In a recent conversation with a community Elder, I was reminded that these questions of how "Indian" we are stem from the historical and political contexts: denying the fiduciary responsibility to Native populations, denying, circumscribing or otherwise subverting our self-identities through various legislative practices to the point that we question each other and ourselves about our own "Indianness."

Stories have ways of coming around again so that we get the chance to hear things we may have missed in the prior telling. Recently I watched Shelley Niro's short film *Overweight With Crooked Teeth* (1998), which is based on Michael Doxtater's poem (1978). In the opening scene Doxtater walks up to the camera in a three-piece suit and black sunglasses and asks, "What were you expecting anyway? Sitting Bull? Chief Joseph saying 'the earth and I are one'?" (1998). Niro's short challenges stereotypes, not by reference to externally constructed identities, but by focusing on our own notions of Indianness in ways that make us flesh and blood and breath in the here and now. Her emphasis on being Native *today* defines her audience as decidedly Native and produces what Laura Mulvey would call a paradigm shift in our "to be looked-at-ed-ness"<sup>11</sup> from being "looked at" (and in turn looking at ourselves from this view) by others to looking at ourselves and wondering who "we" are and deriving pleasure from this view (1975, 63).

In conversation with Niro (2004) she explained that her films and photography are ways for her to do more than just respond to the negative or self-destructive (all too readily available) images of us present in mainstream media. Her work expresses the complexities and fluidity of Native identities. Niro affirms that as Native people we need to retain control of what those expressions of Indianness will be. She uses irony, humour, camp, parody and a play on signs to point out the frailties of the stereotypical "Indian," yet there is a continuous thread of understanding the degree to which we engage or reject these ideas of Indianness in our everyday negotiations of our identities as Native peoples. We need these stories, the sad ones, as well as the funny ones, for as King reminds us, "if we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives" (152).

### LOVING

Whether we grew up urban, on Reserve, with our biological families, extended families, or in an a different kind of community, we all have had different stories of Indianness or about what it was like for our parents and their parents growing up. These kinds of stories do more than establish family histories; they also tell us how to be in the here and now. These stories bear witness to our cultural survival. While King and Silko tell us that stories are all that we are, Womack reminds us that these stories do more than preserve our various Native cultures; our stories acknowledge that our cultures are largely intact because our stories tell us how we are adapting to the challenges we are continually encountering in our communities (1999, 11-12). Our history of adapting to our environment and moving beyond survival in spite of so much cultural genocide is at the heart of our survivance. The stories that Native women are writing address the complexities of what happens to those of us who don't have stories of survivance or stories of being Indian that are infused with a loving perception of Indianness. My father was an example of a generation of Native peoples who were forced to hide or deny their Indianness just to survive, to stay out of residential schools or government custody. My father's experiences give flesh to my own stories which focus on our absence from social narratives, our misrepresentation in cultural theory,

and the denial of ourselves. These stories, which are often concerned with those of us who had different stories about our families and what it means to be Native in the world, show me that there is no one way, or right way, to be Native in the world. Even my father's denial of his Indianess was his way of being Native in a world where it was so completely unsafe to be Native. While all of our stories of Indianess may be different they are still about being Native in the world today.

Although most of my work focuses on how Native bodies get written into theory by, for, and about us, for me it is always about love. The theoretical frameworks for articulating "loving Indianess" are provided by bell hooks (1992) and Maria Lugones (1990), and from what I understand as the space between the imagined and the real of being Indian. "Loving blackness," according to hooks, is a political and critical strategy to affect anti-racist theory and practice. According to hooks, theorizing about Blackness, when fixed with a loving gaze, allows for solidarity in fighting against oppression. hooks' strategy "provided a space for the kind of decolonization that for her makes loving blackness possible" (10). Similarly, Lugones suggests that "loving perception" is a critical lens with which we can perceive ways of "cross-cultural and cross-racial loving" where "love had to be rethought and made anew" (1990, 392-93). For both theorists, a loving perception is necessary in the face of so much ongoing racism and oppression. For me, a loving perception means loving Indianess in the face of our ongoing cultural genocide. It means that even while I'm walking in cities across Canada where our people are living on the streets and being ravaged by histories of cultural trauma, I need to be proud of the strength, courage, and optimism that being a Native woman has given me. All the while I still need to acknowledge that all this negative and hurtful history is a part of being Indian today, and is surely killing us. I also know that we need to continue to speak it, to address it in order for our cultural survival to continue.

Too often, however, for Native women it is not enough for us to love Indianess to keep our bodies safe. I am reminded far too often that Native women's bodies are not regarded in the North American cultural imaginary with a loving perception. The conflation of desire and power with loving bodies is far too prevalent in many of the

representations of women's bodies in general. For Native women there is far too often the added vulnerability of being located within the social context of economic poverty in which our bodies become even less "loved." Sadly we don't need to look far to see how Native women's bodies are not loved. The maddening case of so many missing Native women from Vancouver's East Side is just one story among many. However, I want to make it clear that a part of our over-determined representation often means that stories of loving Native women's bodies are not talked about. And just because the good stories are silenced doesn't mean that they don't exist.

My own theorizing of loving Indianess comes from acknowledging the need to create and nurture a space to articulate our own loving. While other theorists may provide insights into how loving exists within their own selves and across cultures, my own theorizing of loving Indianess comes from my everyday of being Native in the world. Coming to understand how I want to articulate loving Indianess so that it is not simply derivative of so much cultural "Other" theory means for me to understand the ways that we are silenced, absent, too present, where we are, where we are not, how we see ourselves, how we see each other, and what that means at the end of the day to me as a Native woman. I want to address the ways our bodies are far too often written about in ways that deny our own ability to theorize about ourselves. I want to see our bodies expressed in theory in loving ways. The question is how to talk about bodies - how to theorize them - in concrete ways that do not lash them to fixed ways of being Indian (that do not reify the "only one way to be Indian rule" far too prevalent in so much that is written about us), yet acknowledges how our bodies are marked as Indian, both the real and the unreal kind, and the material and emotional consequences of being in this marking/marked space. I think it comes back to the intimate knowledge we have about, and the ways that we love, these Indian bodies that we are theorizing. Simply, the stories we write about ourselves are markedly different from stories written about us when the storyteller has a loving perception informed by a Native world-view and as such they manifest a material difference to us as Indian Peoples. These stories written by us and for us give me hope, allow me to connect with other

Native women, and share with each other the emotional and spiritual support we need to continue along this academic path.

For myself, loving Indianess offers a way to articulate the ways I want to see our bodies made material in theory, to acknowledge that we are never separate from that which sustains us (no matter what nation we are from). This story is about the production of loving spaces through our writing. It addresses my own concerns about being a Native academic and the responsibility to my communities that this identity requires. In a recent conversation with Kim Anderson (2004), we talked about what having a loving perception means in our work as Native women. For Anderson, undertaking a loving perception, while necessary, is complex in that it is about establishing intimacy and responsibility while simultaneously acknowledging the problems in our Native communities.

In both *A Recognition of Being: Reclaiming Native Womanhood* (Anderson 2000) and *Strong Women Stories* (Anderson and Lawrence 2003), the desire for Anderson was to produce something that Native women recognize as their own. In conversation Anderson says, "I'm not particularly interested in writing to an audience that does not include the majority of people in my community" (2004). The responsibility of a loving perception means knowing your community. *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (2000) is a text that is both intimate and responsible. Anderson provides a teleological tracing of the ways Native womanhood have been historically venerated within Aboriginal communities, and vilified and commodified in Canada's colonial trajectory, and goes on to show how the power of Native womanhood is currently being reclaimed by Aboriginal women and communities as the source of our history, present and future - the hearts of our nations. In my opinion, this book is a loving story of how we have been seen, are seen and will be seen as Aboriginal women and what this means for our own identity formations and political activities.

For *Strong Women Stories*, Anderson says, "I wanted people to read *Strong Women Stories* and say 'Right on'...I recognize that...I'm dealing with that problem myself" (2004). As the co-editors of *Strong Women Stories*, both Anderson and Lawrence know we need to control both the

presence and the absence of ourselves within the production of any theory. Loving Indianess also allows us the space to acknowledge and respond to the materiality of Indian bodies in theory. Simply, we must love our Indianess as a strategy, a political and critical strategy. Loving Indianess creates spaces for us as Native women, writers, academics, mothers, sisters, aunties...whatever we may be, to first acknowledge the shared intimacy we have with our cultures and to articulate the way we may differently undertake the responsibility to ourselves and our nations that comes along with that intimacy.

Recently another story about Loving Indianess came to me. Throughout conversations with other Native women I repeatedly heard that we need to talk about our bodies in more positive, open and loving ways. This is the only way to begin healing our bodies. We need to address the ways our bodies have been silenced and made a cultural taboo for ourselves and for other Native women. After our conversations I wondered why it is that we don't write sexually about our bodies in loving ways. In *Erotica Indigenous Style*, Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm also questions "how the stereotypes, combined with a lack of realistic images, was affecting our self image" (2001, 147). She says that the absence and silencing of our own ideas of erotic "is not permissible" and that "I, like others, absolutely refuse! The erotic must be reclaimed." (147). Damm tell us that,

...we need to see images of ourselves as healthy, whole people. People who love each other and love ourselves. People who fall in love and out of love, who have lovers, who make love, who have sex. We need to create a healthy legacy for our peoples. (2001, 148)

Damm also talks about connecting with Greg Scofield's poems *Love Medicine and One Song* (1997). My own story of loving Indianess is connected to Scofield's poems. I was asked to introduce Greg Scofield at his reading of *Love Medicine*. The day before the reading, I was reading his poems on the bus, on my way home. In my introduction of Mr. Scofield, I told this story of reading his poems on the bus and being so entranced with them that I missed my stop a number of times. I was surprised at this context of loving

and hadn't considered it before in my own understanding of loving Indianess. This was a new way of being in the world.

### RESISTANCE

The purpose of my writing has always been to tell a better story than is being told about us. To give that to the people and to the next generations. The voices of the grandmothers and grandfathers compel me to speak of the worth of our people and the beauty all around us, to banish the profaning of ourselves, and to ease the pain.

Jeanette Armstrong (1997, 498-99)

Keeping the power of telling our stories in mind, it is also quite possible that if we tell our stories for ourselves we will change our lives. In Anderson and Lawrence's introduction to *Strong Women's Stories*, they say that a goal of telling our stories, "finding our voices," is "about articulating the circumstances we encounter as we work to bring about social change" in our communities (2003, 17). For years Native women writers such as Anderson (2000); Anderson and Lawrence (2003); Armstrong (1993); Cooper (1995); Gunn Allen (1986); Harjo and Bird (1997); Harlan (1999); Larocque (1993); Lawrence (1996); Monture-Angus (1999) - just to name a few - have been shifting the focus of Native women's inquiries from stories told about us to the stories we tell about ourselves. In *By, For, or About?: Shifting Directions in the Representation of Aboriginal Women*, (2000) Jo-Anne Fiske says that, "Resistant and 'protest' literature are perhaps the most critical categories embraced by Aboriginal...critics to describe the politicized activity of writing."

The increasing writing activity of Aboriginal women in North America since the 1980s is producing a generative cycle of writing and critique in which Native women are writing about their own "victimization/survival, rage, grief, grievance, personal and collective pain arising from alienation...and cultural and linguistic genocide" in which they are engaging a process of "storytelling as a strategy of survival" (Fiske 2000, 19). Resistance, according to Anderson (2000), Womack (1999), Blaeser (1993) and Monture-Angus (1999),

is a part of the process - "a practical staging of the deconstructive turn" - where renewal and healing is the beginning and the end. A part of our writing cycle is about healing ourselves and our communities. Anderson says, "This is true for many Native women - the process of writing creates a space where they can deal with anger, pain and sadness and then begin to kindle positive feelings about their identity" (2000, 141). Anderson says, "Writing offers both a means to resist and an opportunity to invent" (140).

It is important to honour the stories of the women who have come before us so that their words remain strong today. It is also necessary to note the shifts taking place in stories produced by Native women today. I understand this shift in writing as a shift from "survival" to "survivance" and from "resistance" to "renewal." Gerald Vizenor's idea of "survivance" affirms that we not only survived the trials and genocide of coloniality but we thrived and produced generations with hope, with a "native sense of presence, a motion of sovereignty and a will to resist dominance" (1994, 53). For me survivance provides an apt framework to describe the emerging direction of Native women's writing. Vizenor's theory of survivance also offers ways to regard our writing as more than resistance literature. In it there is a centrality of Native thought and political action that we may not want measured against mainstream critical thought, where our theorizing and action are far too often regarded as derivative and found lacking.

While some of our literature still can be considered "resistance" literature, it is becoming more specifically generative and imaginative, thus providing us with different means of community renewal. Our storytelling, while evolving, has always been political and critical. As Aboriginal theorists writing ourselves into being, we need to ask different questions now in order to find out what Native women are saying about themselves, where we see ourselves going, and how we are going to get there. We need to ask how we interpret, categorize and locate ourselves in our own writing (or if we even want to do any of these). We need to ask ourselves, is it enough to simply tell our stories to affect change in our communities, to create a space<sup>12</sup> where we can love Indianess? We need to know how to sustain that space in the years to come.

**RENEWAL**

These stories are turns on the circle. While my story is an old story told many times before, it is one that needs telling again and again. We may change it a bit in each telling, to make sure that new ways of being in the world are included, but the story is the same. We are Native women creating ways, through our writing/storytelling, to love ourselves, our nations, and our Mother. We are making our worlds and our selves renewed through our words. Part of this renewal process is reclaiming what Theresa Harlan calls "Indigenous Truths" (1999). According to her, "Indigenous truths" are being expressed through the work of Native image-makers. She says,

Native image-makers who contribute to self knowledge and survival create messages and remembrances that recognize the origin, nature, and direction of their Native existence and communities. They understand that their point of origin began before the formation of the United States and is directly rooted to the land. These Native image makers understand that the images they create may either subvert or support existing representations of Native people. They understand that they must create the intellectual space for their images to be understood, and free themselves from the contest over visual history and its representations of Native people. (1999, 140)

It is our own knowledge of our communities, ourselves, and our Nations, which needs to be spoken because we know these as our truths. Our responsibility is in maintaining what is real for us.

I want to leave you with yet another story. I started down this path to understanding the renewal of our communities through our writing a number of years ago. My way along this path has brought me across oceans and land, from away to home, from small towns on the bay taking boats to work and into major cities and the 401 Highway, all the while talking to women about their writing and what they think it means to produce Indigenous knowledge of what it means to be Indian today.

During one of my forays home, I was sitting with a woman whose work is a great source of comfort and Native pride for me. While she was feeding me we were talking about her work. She said that she wanted to make something that people "got." She wanted her films to be understood and she worried about this kind of knowledge translation. She asked her family members to watch her film, in particular her father. She was a bit dismayed that after viewing this particular film he just wasn't "getting it." After watching her film myself, I came to the understanding that my "getting it" had more to do with being a Native woman than being Native. I knew her character was created with so much love and nurturing, she was in some ways a daughter in need of guidance. I understood this character and connected with her in her search for what it meant to be a Native woman in the here and now. When we met again, I said "Maybe your dad can't get this film because he's never been a Native woman looking for her own truths." It was one of those moments. I know that my own truths were echoed in this film and they reverberated in me something that I could articulate as a perception of loving Indianess.

Throughout my work I have been looking for my own truths. As an academic, a mother, a daughter, or a sister - each one of these looks different. Since starting this work I have come to understand that renewal is a cycle, a process, which is continuous and ongoing. On my desk piled around me are articles, books, journals, videos, photographs, editorials, postcards, paintings, tapes and emails, all full of Native women's voices and bodies. We are here, we are telling our stories and we are being heard. When I started this journey over ten years ago, these things were meagre. Our books were not on the shelves because our words were not in books, at least not in the way that we intended them to be told; not in our own voices. I have come to realize that I have so many more questions about what it means to be Indian in the world today than when I first started out in this story. I do know, however, that all of our stories, no matter how different they are in their understanding of Indianess, need to have at their centre a loving perception so that our people, no matter who they may be, can be loved, give love, and love themselves as Indian peoples.

This is an old story, but it is one that needs telling again and again. We may change it a bit in each telling, to make sure the younger ones are included, but the story is the same. As Thomas King says,

Take this story for instance. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Cry over it. Get angry. But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now.  
(2003, 119)

## ENDNOTES

1. Womack, Craig. *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999).
2. This poem is not presented in its entirety. The original poem also included the Cree syllabics with the English version. While I hesitate to disconnect Armstrong's ideas in the poem from their mother tongue, for the purposes of this article I have decided to use the English only section of the poem.
3. Kimberly Blaeser uses the term "vanishment" to remind us that the active process of being made invisible by others, the denial of our literatures, our theories, our laws and ourselves through legislation, education, and larger social institutions is ongoing (1993).
4. See *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, General Editor Edward Craig, section Feminism and Psychoanalysis by Margaret Whitford for "the cultural imaginary (that is, the unconscious fantasies of a whole culture)."
5. See Craig Womack's argument in his introduction to *Red on Red: Native American Literary Separatism* (1999), for his compelling story of "vanishing" and being a "real Indian" in academia and literature.
6. See *Of Grammatology* (1976) for Derrida's critique of Strauss argument that the Aboriginal culture, the Nambikwara, was pure and uncontaminated because it was without writing. Derrida critiques this ethnocentric argument in that it relies on the Saussurian model of writing, "privileging the model of phonetic writing, an ethnocentric thinking itself as anti-ethnocentric, an ethnocentrism in the consciousness liberating progressivism" (120). Derrida claims "writing as the criterion of historicity or cultural value is not taken into account" (121). From Derrida's argument we can understand more clearly that the crisis of writing lies not in the practices of writing, but in the historic uses of writing as an exclusionary practice to differentiate cultures
7. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: Viking, 1977), 2.
8. See Craig Womack's argument in *Red on Red: Native Literary Separatism* (1999) where he says, "that tribal literature is not some branch waiting to be grafted onto a main trunk. Tribal literatures are the tree, the oldest literatures in the Americas..We are the Canon. Native peoples have been on this continent at least thirty thousand years, and the stories tell us we have been here even longer than that... for much of this period we had literatures."
9. Interiority is used here in the way Judith Butler (1990) discusses it as a "psychological interiority" in which the imagined self is a "social fiction...[a] publicly regulated and sanctioned form of essence fabrication" (279).
10. The material vulnerability of Native women's identity as "Indian" is further problematized within feminist theory and the deconstruction of "woman." Native women's claim to an essential Aboriginal origin is inexorably linked to their material survival. The Canadian government's insistence that Native women "prove" their Aboriginal authenticity first in order to access band resources and be included in land claims is grounded in the narrowest colonial understanding of Native identity. This proving "Indianness" further marginalizes Native women who cannot meet the criteria that First Nations have adopted out of a desperate attempt to allocate precious, and already distressed, community resources. Native women argue that to deconstruct the category of "women" by Western feminist theorists is a denial of the fragility of Native women's location in this category in the first place. In other words, Native women already hold a precarious position in the mainstream understanding of the category "woman."

11. While my observation of viewing and being viewed is very simplistic, and Mulvey's concern is a psychoanalytic treatment of viewing women and desire, the shift is important to note and deserves further consideration. For a complete understanding of this see Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Screen*, 16.3, Autumn 1975, where she describes "two kinds of pleasure - scopophilic and narcissistic. Scopophilic pleasure involves seeing others as objects of sexual stimulation. The latter type comes from recognizing or identifying with the image, a narcissistic pleasure, to do with the constitution or maintenance of the ego." (62).

12. Angela Zito (1997, 122) offers "special sense" of place and space that works well here because it describes our relationship to place and our connection to the land regardless of our position as urban or rural, reserve based or off reserve. Zito explains de Certeau's idea of place by saying "the order in accord with which elements are distributed in a relationship of coexistence... A place becomes a space only when it is actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it" (1984, 117).

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