

Reflections

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This reflections paper is comprised of a number of my responses to the various issues discussed in *Native Studies* 498.3. When I registered for the class, I had no idea that it would effect me on the emotional level that it did. I took the class because it met the requirements I needed for my university degree. I did not realize that I would be dealing with issues that would bring to the forefront my own personal issues, ones that I had long ago locked in a little box in the back of my mind. No matter what we discussed in class, I could somehow relate it back to my own life, or to a friend's or family member's life.

Sometimes, at the end of class, I would be walking to my car and the tears would be falling. Sometimes, I would be filled with immense anger, and, at other times, helplessness. However, there were were days when my heart would be filled with a sense of indefinable hope, pride and joy. My emotions came to an intense high when I began reading materials on abuse and violence for my essay and presentation. The door on that little box I had locked flew open and an immense amount of pain was released. The pain first manifested itself in my body. I could not sleep at night and I had nightmares when I did fall asleep. I began to throw up every time I ate something, so I quit eating. I thought I had the flu, I tried to convince myself I had the flu, but deep down I knew what was happening. My mind began to swirl with pain and ugliness, terror. I was ready to drop the class, I could not handle this again. I remembered what I had gone through before, and I didn't want to go to that place of darkness again. At that point, I sought help and I'm glad I did. Afterwards, I understood that everything happens for a reason. I could not drop this class, I was *supposed* to, *needed* to, open that box of pain. I had to learn that no matter what size lock I put on that door it would never keep everything in for good. I had to realize that my door is going to be flung open again and again, and that I had the strength to stand against the pain that would come forth.

Reflection One: The Question of Identity

Sometimes I feel like I'm adrift, not knowing exactly which shore to land on. You see, I'm a person who does not really fit into any cultural category. I am a woman of colour, but not just one colour: I am a woman of many

colours. It angers me when White people meet me and automatically label me because of the shade of brown that covers me. They cannot see beyond that, they do not see who I am.

I was raised by my mother and her family. Some of my family were Métis, some were Cree, and some refused to acknowledge any Indian blood whatsoever. My one Grandmother taught me the meaning of what it felt like to be the object of racism from a very young age. My other Grandmother, my Kohkom, she taught me what it was like to be accepted. As a child I was not comfortable within the whitewashed boards of the White school in the White town, I never belonged there. At the powwows, at the feasts, at the round dances, on the reserve, this is where I felt accepted. Surrounded by beautiful shades of brown, I belonged.

The Rez

Haven't been back for a while. Forgot how the dust leaves its blanket on the car, on me. As a kid, I loved that smell. It welcomed me to a world where I felt I belonged. Do I belong now dressed in my eighty-dollar-smart-chic-fashion-victim-outfit? I pull into the driveway. Aunties, Uncles, Mom, Cousins, Kohkom, Mosom, already there, waiting. The house still looks the same. Paint chipped green and white, bare wood in places. New addition to the front. A plank of plywood leading up to a ramp. Plank covers the mud when it rains. The ramp is for Kohkom, who can no longer walk. I step out of my car, heels immediately sink into the soft ground below me. I take them off and throw them in the back seat. Mangy mutts run up to greet me with tails wagging and wide grins. I see myself in the reflection of the sky. A girl-child with cocoa skin, braids hanging down my back. No shirt on, shorts made of various pieces of material. Myriad patterns: stripes, stars, flowers. A burst of colours against my dark skin: hippie orange, lime green, fuschia, turquoise, deep purple, loud. (Mother later made oven mitts with the same material.) I ran free here, always

with a multitude of kids who are the same shade as I. In town that shade of brown stood out like a beacon in a sea of whiteness. There were always kids here back then running in and out of the little shacks, one of which was Auntie and Uncle's home, the other ones housed the chickens, but they all looked the same. The reflection fades and I realize I have stood there for I don't know how long, but Auntie's voice bellows, "What are ya standing there for, waiting for us to roll out the red carpet or what?" I hear the laughter of all inside and I smile too. I take the ramp instead of the stairs. As I open the door the smells welcome me. Dried leather, crushed pemmican, grease bannock hot out of the oiler, sweetgrass hanging, waiting for me.

Reflections Two: Racism

I knew my father was a Black man, but I didn't know what it meant to be a Black person. To a certain extent, I still do not know. I knew, as a child, I was part Black but I did not have any exposure to a Black community. I saw my father once when I was four years old. Growing up, I never knew any Black people. The only knowledge I had came from school textbooks written by White males. The White school kids also provided me with another lesson.

One day at school a group of White boys taunted me with a word: niggersquaw. I did not understand the connotations completely, but I understood the hatred in their voices. What I could not understand is why they forgot about my White blood. My Grandpa told me I was not only Cree, but Irish, Scottish and French, too. I ran home that day, crying, hating these White boys who hated me. They did not see beyond my brown skin, they did not see who I was inside. I vowed to renounce the White in me that day. I was not about to be one of them, one who hates.

I've encountered racism in many different shapes and forms. Sometimes it is intense hatred; other times, it is like an insidious poison emanating from words or actions. It is hard to describe what racism directed towards you feels like. Sometimes it is like a bad taste in your mouth; other times it assaults you at the very core of your being. "Spirit murder" is what Patricia Williams calls it. It is hard sometimes, really hard, to deal with and I fear for my son when it comes time for him to experience it. But I know that my

spirit will never be destroyed by their hate and ignorance. I know that I can teach my son and help strengthen his spirit to face the assaults that he's going to come up against.

untitled

It's hard to be in that place,
feeling enclosed by words of white.
Wanting to break free, to have
them see me as not just another
brown face. At times many of them
are colour-blind, lumping us all
together because we do not share
their ivory peach creme pale face.
Instead, we appear as one
indistinguishable lump of shit. The
old adage: "If you've seen one, you've
seen them all."

Stop . . .

Look at me! Look at me! Don't label
me! Don't mistake me. Don't generalize
me. I am a person. I am one of many,
but I am unique. I have my own gifts
to offer if you would just take off those
blinds maybe you could see and receive
all that I could give you.

untitled

What island are you from?
They ask me.
What, you have Indian in you?
That must really bother you.
They say.
What Island is your father from again?
Ah, it doesn't matter. . . . To me,
those people all look the same
anyway.
Your son is so fair. What happened
to him?
How come your hair isn't kinky?
What tribe are you from?
I have nothing against Indian people, but . . .

Anger rises inside of me
until

it erupts, spewing out of my mouth
like hot lava.

I match ignorance with knowledge
and

when they hear the truth, their
arguments deflate like the air
out of a hot balloon

and

they become silent
for you have stolen their words
and turned them into power.

Your power.

They looked at me when
my angered voice became silent.
They were left with nothing to say
but

the uncomfortableness etched
in their faces spoke volumes.

Reflections Three: Violence and Abuse

When we began to talk about women and violence, I found myself lost in the women's pain and my own. I recognized the cycle of violence and abuse. I had seen it before in the lives of my aunts, my closest friends. Women who had been beaten by husbands and boyfriends. Some of them were able to escape and some are still trapped in the cycle. Some of them had been trapped in the cycle of violence and abuse since they were children.

In Memory

Distant voice on the telephone
so small so sad

I remember you
with strength
belying the fragility
of your bone structure.

Has he broken those white
frames yet?

Smack

Large tanned hand
callused from years of work
leaves its imprint
on the side of your

face
blood vessels rise
to the surface then
break
staining yellow-purple-black

I remember you
with your head held high
shoulders back
Has he whipped you
into submission yet?

Crack

the wide leather belt
strikes between your shoulder blades
the small of your back
your buttocks your legs
Your eyes follow the ground
not daring to find a
blue sky

I remember you
smiling a grin
so wide
it captured anyone who
happened to be near
Has he stolen that too?

Thump thump

taking the stairs two by two
as your body
falls from the push

In Memory
I remember you.

I find it hard right now to write what I'm feeling. I talked with a friend of mine today, her life and mine parallel one another in terms of abuse. It was so strange, she was telling me what her abuser had told her in one incident and his words were almost verbatim to what my abuser had said when he attempted to rape me. "You've grown so beautiful, what did you expect?" "If you didn't look so good this wouldn't have happened." "You deserve it." "If you say anything I'll kill myself, you don't want to be responsible for that, do you?" "Why don't you come and stay with me for a while?" As I write these words I feel sick to my stomach and a slew of memories come forth.

Imprint

She remembers
frigid hands
slithering
inside her pants
groping pinching hurting
She remembers
slimy mouth
on her eyes in her ears all over her body
She remembers
taste
of
sex
on her lips
at age seven

It will not go away, it is here to stay forever in the back of my mind, like a scar that never fades.

Reflections Four: Taking Back

I said before I believed that everything happens for a reason. Can I apply that to my entire life? I think I can. Reflecting on my pain, I realize that I do have something inside me that has enabled me to survive and to cope for this long. What was done to me was wrong and I no longer take responsibility for it. I give the responsibility back to those that have violated my mind, spirit and body. I take responsibility for coming as far as I have in my life. I take my mind, spirit and body back. Who I am today is framed by my life experience and to erase my life is to erase myself. I can not do that, I will not do that.

A Final Reflection

Taking this class has brought me farther in my quest for knowledge than any other class I have taken in the past three years. This class is representative of what university should be all about. Learning, not only about the world around you, but about yourself as well. Knowledge can be difficult and painful, but it can also make your spirit soar. This is what your class and your teachings have done for me and I thank you.