

IDENTITY, PREJUDICE AND HEALING IN ABORIGINAL CIRCLES: MODELS OF IDENTITY, EMBODIMENT AND ECOLOGY OF PLACE AS TRADITIONAL MEDICINE FOR EDUCATION AND COUNSELLING

A Mi'kmaq First Nation perspective

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Abstract

Identity and embodiment are central issues facing Aboriginal people. These issues are explored as sites of multiple meanings and associations related to prejudice and healing. Examples are chosen in the forms of racism and homophobia. Healing of identity is explored from the perspective of indigenous practice in wholistic and traditional Aboriginal medicine. Also, education and counselling are used as sites of inter-cultural dialogue. Models of healing in identity are proposed that rely on prior research, cultural awareness, and professional practice in counselling and education.

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An indigenous preface

To honour one aspect of traditional culture that places a new person of acquaintance in their familial and tribal context, please allow me to begin by introducing myself. I am Mi'kmaq and Métis and come from Mi'kma'ki, which is the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq First Nation. On the colonial map, I grew up in Nova Scotia. But citing a more grounded identity, my pre-colonial family heritage is intimately linked with the uniqueness of the summer grounds of the South Shore coastal region and the winter grounds of the inland lakes and rivers. Our more recent heritage includes a rich marriage of Mi'kmaq and Métis families with a documented history back to 1652, which began in Annapolis Royal, and includes migrations into New Brunswick during the Great Acadian Expulsion, and to the Eastern Shore where one of my ancestors founded Charlos Cove where the family lived for several generations.

This paper was written during a unique time, when I was reconnecting with Mi'kmaq culture and identity. I chose to use personal narrative analysis as a means to speak about this reconnection. In doing this, I also acknowledge other forms of identity that have important roles in this narrative. Being educated in the Euro-American traditions of the academe, being an educator and counsellor raises many challenges in dialogue with indigenous philosophy and practice. Some of this tension between worldviews is expressed overtly and covertly throughout this essay. I do not apologize for the apparent contradictions this may create. As a person of mixed cultural origins, I admit a certain degree of confusion is warranted—and that this process of dialogue through the literature is a necessary step towards mutual clarification.

It is important to acknowledge that this is a work in progress. My commitment to understanding and working with mainstream and minority expressions of identity is a life-long effort. This paper stands in the crossover between many paths, where identity is multifaceted and

when history lends us a time to pause and reflect on where we have been and who we are today. This is an ever-changing landscape of identity. As such, it ought to be clear that the Mi'kmaq cultural story in relation to colonization history, and more broadly inter-cultural contact, spans well over 500 years and results today in a highly complex cultural and personal identity. Arising within this collective and individual identity are layers of conflict, ambiguity and incongruence, as well as vision, clarity and integrity. Like any “medicine trail” there are many and varied spaces which express identity and all are sacred. This sacred approach to analysis requires that we acknowledge diversity in creation that allows us to respect each other's story, because our story is our “medicine”. Like the thousands of spirits who inhabit the local environment, so too identity is multifaceted and ought to be respected. There is no pure “local” just as there is no pure “universal” as all things are interconnected and diffuse in meaning, intention and power.

From a cultural standpoint, and in celebrating and honouring diversity in cultural identity, the teachings that come down to me from my elders suggest that I am Two-Spirited. To be a Two Spirit means that people see in you the capacity to carry the sacred medicines of both men and women. Some Two Spirits also have the capacity to love intimately someone of the same gender. In my community I am also asked to carry sacred medicines on behalf of the people. This is a deeply humbling responsibility that I can only learn about as life unfolds. In my cultural context learning does not happen overnight, and it seems that the Creator gives us only what we need for today, a little bit at a time. The focus of this paper is not on Two-Spirited traditions, and this field of experience and knowledge will not be explored in any depth. It is important only to mention here that this form of cultural identity is raised to bring awareness that identity is truly multifaceted and diverse among indigenous populations. Without making too many assumptions or generalizations,

we walk a difficult path to articulate identity from an Aboriginal perspective.

Another identity context relates to my working and living in Australia since 1998 as a university teacher in the field of counsellor education. Thus I wish to comment on the literature that has been at the forefront of my academic work in teaching counsellors in Australia. My comments about this literature come from my emerging critique of Euro-American models of education and counselling. It seems important to begin with this literature because it has occupied most of my energy over the past several years. It is also important for counsellors and educators familiar with this literature to read a different point of view on something that often carries underlying assumptions people may take for granted. By shifting into this critique of mainstream literature some readers will feel a sense of incongruence. This is okay. While it would be quite possible to continue this paper without analysis of the Western canon, this paper expresses the time in my own story when I had to put aside my cultural identity to work with the energies of the Western academe. The inherent cultural bias arising from the Western canon caused me enormous confusion, anxiety and chronic distress. Working toward a sense of congruence requires many of my people to confront internalized social and psychological distress—and this journey itself symbolizes one component of the resilience and endurance of Mi'kmaq ways of being. By sharing this journey in a microcosm such as this paper, the reader can intentionally engage in this confrontation with the Western canon that leads towards greater congruence and healing of identity.

A deep ecology for identity politics

I begin with the notion of identity. Identity in the mainstream literature is a site of multiple meanings, associations and ecologies. These frameworks express largely materialistic and

empirical notions that can be critiqued from indigenous standpoints. Regardless how you look at identity, it is important to acknowledge that the field of interest represents political and social values and meaning. What we have to ask ourselves is: “What meanings will be most useful for moving forward in education and counselling fields when considering an indigenous cultural stance?”

With intention in both my writing and in the ways that mainstream discourse overwrites cultural diversity, the following literature overlooks Aboriginal perspectives. To look at a small sample of mainstream literature often cited in education and counselling (which is assumed to speak to all people), Fowler (1981) suggests that identity may be a spiral of development, and like Corey (2003), Vaillant (1993) and Bee (2000), identity is a developmental pathway across the lifespan. In contrast, when exploring identity from a cultural stance, many indications from elders suggest that identity grows over time and is quite an organic process, much as trees, plants and animals grow. Aboriginal standpoints appear to observe and rely on empirical reflection combined with deep-ecological wisdom.

Various mainstream research fields attempt to address identity confusion, arrested development or other issues that arise, such as affirming psychoanalysis for minority populations (Cornett, 1995), in relation to spiritual awareness, crisis and transformation (Bragdon, 1990). Likewise, my knowledge of Mi'kmaq community experience weaves through many historical crises, challenges and opportunities that have in some respects changed the nature of identity while paradoxically deepening a sense of cultural integrity.

Identity in the mainstream is also thought of as a state of being, and existentialists focus on anxiety, fear, loss and grief or states of joy, peace, wonderment and bliss (Corey, 2003). Likewise, humanists like Rogers (1980) concentrate on the experience of the moment—personal awareness—and attempt to apply “core” counselling

and relatively passive skills that assist the client or student to find their own path. Others suggest that identity gives consistency and resilience to the personality (Bee, 2000). These notions of universal identity formations, as well as core counselling skills applied without regard for cultural differences, are being strongly critiqued by postmodern and postcolonial voices. For example, Sarup (1996) suggests that identity is transient if not completely illusory.

Indigenous authors Battiste, Bell and Findlay (2002) critique the assumptions of liberal humanism and other Eurocentric theories of education as inadequate to indigenous contexts. They are inadequate not only for indigenous people but for everyone—hence what many people call a “postmodern” moment of deep and more profound questioning of the underlying epistemological assumptions that support our ways of knowing. My understanding of Mi’kmaq philosophy, cosmology and spirituality relies heavily on a “wholistic” (as opposed to a holistic) approach that works within a psycho-social-eco-spiritual multiple perspectivism. This approach focuses on the whole, and each part is understood within a relationship to each and to the whole. As a form of postmodern neo-idealism, Mi’kmaq philosophy relies on an ancient communal science of observation and trans-generational storytelling combined with a diffuse mental agility that is rooted in an ontological-poetic (ontopoetic) aesthetic.

Looking at this form of identity in a more wholistic way, I might suggest that a post-colonial ecology of identity needs to be supported. To explain, using a cultural and spiritual teaching from my tradition, from a cultural stance identity is expressed in the Mi’kmaq saying “Msit Nogama” or “All My Relations”. This way of knowing deeply interconnects local, familial, tribal, regional, global and cosmic ecologies into a wholistic ecology of identity. This is such a profound awareness experientially that it is difficult to convey except by bringing people into a kind of therapeutic and transpersonal awakening that breaks through

the inertia of everyday material and ego-based existence that tends to dominate mainstream cultural environments. Traditionally this breakthrough is encouraged via embodied and ecologically grounded activities like fasting, sweat lodge, vision quest or—as said to me by an elder when a young person might go on portage to retreat for a time—to retreat during significant transitions in one’s life. Always these experiences are understood within a familial and community context, where personal transformation brings new ability to respond to the needs of the community. These responsibilities are taken seriously and change a person as they grow older. Identity, then, is a quite complex manifestation of cultural and spiritual energies grounded in the everyday needs of the community. This way of knowing identity is more akin to a complex system science than to the rather static ideas of identity found in the counselling literature cited above, which is often framed up by the Euro-American traditions of developmental theory. In my reading of the tradition from an indigenous perspective, the traditions of humanism, existentialism and empiricism leave much to be desired in today’s post-colonial world (McConaghy, 2000).

With a note of irony, allow me to cite a source from the Euro-American tradition whose critique of standard practice in education is still timely (and largely ignored, albeit that his theory arises from an Aboriginal context, which is perhaps why it has endured as one of the more powerful and controversial approaches in the field of education and empowerment for critical consciousness). I highlight the frameworks of empowerment and liberation from Friere’s (1973) notion of education for critical consciousness in the Latin American context. His model still holds enormous relevance in Australian Aboriginal education and counselling efforts, where ongoing and unreflective cultural bias and prejudice continues to enable colonial systems of knowledge to be perpetuated without critique. The frameworks we use to teach educators and counsellors are not

working for the mainstream so why would we think they might be effective for indigenous people?

Other mainstream authors suggest that once theory moves beyond blanket Euro-American models of humanism, existentialism and empiricism, a poststructuralist critique opens a space for acknowledging culture, location and difference (Fekete, 1987; Lather, 1991). For me, this movement was and continues to be a breath of fresh air, allowing me to acknowledge an indigenous standpoint as an important contribution to teaching, learning and scholarship. But in spite of these movements toward inclusive politics based in acknowledgement of difference, the relatively mono-cultural and culturalist-based systems of Western nations continue to produce policy and practice that wishes to return to modernist forms of amnesia. Unless alternative voices are encouraged to stand up within the academe, culturally different and affirmative action only gives lip service to neo-liberal ideals. Indeed, these ideals have not been adequate to address the very wide gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations in Australia, Canada and the United States.

When proposing a deep ecology for identity politics, we are reflecting on the need to acknowledge Aboriginal traditional knowledge and ceremonial practice. By simply honouring these teachings we begin to reflect and manifest in our work a more congruent discourse that articulates the complexity and interconnectivity of a tribal way of being—an indigenous ontology. This goes a long way towards assisting current and future generations in celebrating the rich repository of cultural knowledge, which is not still lost to the stereotype of an “oral tradition”. This myth is another colonial construct made to discredit what has always been a written and material culture and tradition among my people—from the written records found on rock and stone to those found in the complex written language of our ancestors to the orthography used today.

Addressing wider issues of prejudice in education and counselling

On a daily basis I notice that the disciplines of education and counselling sit in the middle field, where these agendas of political value play themselves out. I have chosen to engage analysis of these fields precisely because they represent the current fractured landscape and perhaps even one of the central battlegrounds of continued colonial invasion of Aboriginal nations. But, more personally, this critique is offered as a gift from hard-won insights during the past couple of decades of work in these mainstream fields.

Education, counselling, spiritual and cultural work are all intimately related to each other; when we are working in one area we are touched by all the rest. A wholistic poststructural analysis of our work suggests that when we influence one part of the ecosystem we tend to render change throughout the whole system. These ways of working are deeply political, even when we work unaware. Practitioners actively engage in the politics of identity, culture and difference even when they deny and overlook these dynamics (Bowers, Plummer, & Minichiello, 2005a). Bowers' (2005a) research suggests that bias and prejudice are common among education and healthcare professionals precisely because issues like racism and homophobia are inherent within cultural ways of knowing. By linking racism and homophobia I am suggesting a psychology of prejudice is at play that, in one sense, transcends distinct expressions of minority status. Race, Aboriginality, sexuality, gender, ability, age and other forms of difference are underwritten in Western cultural spaces by a fear of and or reaction towards difference. Because of the prevalence of this largely misunderstood approach to difference among helping professionals, improving caring services is an issue within the mainstream cultures of countries like Australia, Canada and the United States, where practitioner's bias needs to be more effectively addressed on a cultural-wide

scale as well as within each profession's ethical standards and models of training.

To effectively address issues of bias and prejudice we need to suggest wholistic and balanced models of working with identity, prejudice and healing in Aboriginal and other minority contexts. This requires awareness of the many mechanisms of prejudice suggested by Bowers, Plummer, & Minichiello (2005b). In their research of minority experiences of growing up different, and of mainstream services such as counselling, they convey that these mechanisms include various layers of silence, suspicion, trial, accusation, blame, quarantining, threat, solitary confinement, aggression, violence, fear of contagion, guilt by association, alienation and separation of people who are otherwise equals in their humanity. For a detailed exposition of these and related issues see Bowers (2002, 2005a, 2005b).

Following these sources, it is important to acknowledge that mechanisms of prejudice transcend Aboriginal, racial, gender, sexuality and other forms of "difference" (Noel, 1994). Although the mechanisms have specific manifestations in each case, they nonetheless convey strong themes of how prejudice is deployed in social interactions and towards specific and strategic outcomes (Plummer, 1999). In this sense, cultural-wide expressions of cold war are ongoing on a daily basis in relation to issues of race, sexuality and gender difference, where codes of acceptance dictate a fairly narrow definition of identity. These appear in quite "innocent" forms of attitudes about what it means to be a man or woman and what it means to be white or black, and in the commonly accepted positioning of racist arguments in media or in other forms of discourse (McConaghy, 2000). These undercurrents are found in social and political policies, such as the Indian Act in Canada (Lawrence, 2004), and in the entrenched tactics of the previous Howard Government in Australia that largely dismantled key infrastructure in Aboriginal education, social and health services over the past decade.

We can see these same attitudes expressed in colonial and historical actions sanctioned by the invaders of Aboriginal territories (Harris, 1990), as well as in the historical mistreatment of women in European traditions (Lather, 1991). These undercurrents of prejudice surface daily in many countries today in ugly and concentrated forms of hate crimes like homophobic bashing, racial violence and rape (Plummer, 1999). At other times these same mechanisms of prejudice become institutionalized in concentrated forms of group identity and in government (Harris, 1990). All these expressions of intolerance and entrenched prejudice appear to relate to similar psychological and social dynamics, regardless the particular target or concentration of attitudes and actions (Pardie & Luchetta, 1999). Lisa Noel's (1994) work on intolerance is important reading in this regard as she maps the themes of intolerance across many moments of culture, space and time.

By understanding wider social trends we give rise to understanding local and personal experience. For example, a lesbian person grows in awareness of wide social trends of gender bias and homophobia. She comes to understand that the experiences of her personal crisis, social isolation and violence are not really about her as an individual but more about her as a member of a minority group targeted by mainstream social pressures and pathologies. The Western mainstream tends to manifest psychosocial pathologies that project prejudice onto others—whether they are sexual and gender minorities or Aboriginal and First Nation people. The underlying dynamic appears to be similar. Likewise, for an Aboriginal person to realize the systematic nature of the oppression of British authorities, not only in Canada but North America, Australia and many other locations around the globe—issues of poverty, violence, substance abuse, unemployment and lack of access to essential human services appear within a wider context of colonial invasion and what could be called a form of non-sustainable postcolonial oppression. The status quo needs

to change. But these experiences, which can be personally devastating, do not arise because we are bad people, but because we are good people who are coping and surviving during rotten and challenging circumstances.

Identity as healing post-trauma

In my work as an educator and counsellor it is necessary to take a position of empowerment and liberation within the standpoint of minority interests. This is both a professional ethical obligation and a personal necessity. In identifying as Aboriginal and a Two-Spirit person who carries sacred medicine, many challenges of working within mainstream and minority spaces arise. After all, my people have endured and successfully made the transition to new possibilities over more than 500 years of colonization. Naturally our sense of culture and identity has faced many challenges. For those of us who are also Métis, our mixed racial origins raise other challenging questions of identity. These questions led me back to Mi'kma'ki after living in Australia for almost a decade, seeking answers to the identity questions that came up for me while working with Aboriginal people in Australia.

By continually challenging myself to base my identity within traditional cultural ways of knowing, my identity as Two Spirit is affirmed and comes forward. Identity is something that emerges over a long time, and grows from interactions with culture, family and the stories shared around the circle. These experiences of growth in indigenous identity fit well with my professional counsellor identity. As a counsellor and healing-oriented practitioner who acknowledges the value of intuition, vision, creativity, chant, drumming, dance, ritual and ceremony, my work is often not understood in the many contexts I find myself working and teaching. These times offer opportunities to discuss different ways of knowing and to suggest to people from mainstream and Aboriginal

backgrounds the value and power of indigenous epistemology, ontology and cosmology. By honouring our traditions, and by honouring our ecology and the country from which we come, we naturally challenge the dominant values of the wider world. We stand up and give voice to ecological integrity in a world that wishes to exploit indigenous creativity and vision for the sake of corporate progress.

By naming these underlying epistemological, ontological and cosmological values and differences in worldviews, many spaces open up for dialogue. It then comes to light how identity is fractured by trauma-as-prejudice in the ways that Aboriginal nations' ways of knowing are denied any relevance. Post-trauma recovery stories of residential schooling in Canada and stolen generation experiences in Australia represent many lifetimes of post-trauma recovery and healing across generations (Atkinson, 2002; Atkinson, Kennedy, & Bowers, 2006). These realities harm everyone, oppressed and oppressor alike. Attitudes of intolerance and prejudice diminish others and make the one carrying the attitude less flexible and able to cope with reality on planet Earth (Pardie & Luchetta, 1999).

Needing to maintain silence about these issues at all costs shows how dangerous difference can be and questions why it needs to be subjected to solitary confinement. In Foucault's (1978) terms the mechanisms of difference gain their power through being hidden. Part of this hiding of prejudice occurs when racism or other prejudicial attitudes become normalized in social policy and practice, and internalized by minority individuals and groups (Lawrence, 2004). Exposing these factors requires a widespread analysis of all forms of discourse as well as attending to the voices from the margins for insights and directions of how to proceed. For a quite significant study of these realities in Canadian contexts, read Bonita Lawrence's (2004) analysis of Indian politics, identity and history. Lawrence is a Mi'kmaq scholar whose work is rich and challenging.

Models of healing in identity

To move beyond the problem and suggest pathways forward requires a form of vision quest. This for me has involved many years of solitude, study and prayer during a time of reconnecting with my identity as Two Spirit and Mi'Kmaq. By speaking from the perspective of narrative analysis and autoethnography I intend to honour the limits of my voice and attend to professional knowledge, but also to place my words within proper contexts. Holt (2003) suggests that narrative autoethnography is a form of writing that stages representation of self and others carefully by foregrounding perspectives grounded in culture, history and place. For me this means attending to the discomfiting and the inspiring parts of my story. It also means disclosing my identity and speaking in solidarity with Aboriginal concerns while supporting the politics of empowerment for minority people.

Figure 1 illustrates these reflections by borrowing and revising a diagram from Bowers (2002). Here the diagram is broadened from reflecting on homophobia to prejudice in general, at first applying wider contexts to the notions of local identity, but in the process transforming and "indigenizing" the model from a local perspective. The diagram reveals a certain indigenous intuition in the use of overlapping circles as spheres of influence. Following the cultural model of how a person grows within their family, community and through experiences of schooling, learning and sharing ritual in the bush, woods or prairie, in church or through other forms of cultural practices, I show how these processes often occur for minority people under marginalized circumstances within a wider dominant culture that invariably impacts on the identity of family, community, school, local organizations and the self of children growing up within these systems. Identity in this diagram is overshadowed by racism, social-violence and histories of genocide that are ongoing and felt on a daily basis. Figure 1 also suggests that the function

of a circle, like that of the skin of the body, is to keep good stuff in and bad stuff out, and to eliminate bad stuff from within when necessary. The circles of family and community work to protect the growing child from outside harmful influences, while at the same time, the circles that overshadow youth may limit their freedom of development to a certain extent as part of how communities attempt to manage within difficult circumstances.

The image also suggests a sacred circle that creates a space in which personal spiritual work can be undertaken. As an expression of our families and communities, we form sacred circles socially for various purposes to maintain family and community identity and cohesion. This space allows us to engage in the sacred business of feeding our loved ones with natural foods from the earth, from culture and from spirituality. Likewise, we form a circle with our environment. Sacred dreaming stories in Australia hold powerful lessons and laws for Aboriginal friends and family, and command respect regardless from which nation on earth you come from (Knudtson & Suzuki, 1992). These sacred circles are similar to the "medicine way" of Canadian Indian traditions, which are living expressions of Creator and creation arising in contemporary culture (Lacey, 1999). Laurie Lacey is a Mi'kmaq scholar and herbalist who has spent many years in the study of traditional herbal medicine. His work and life have inspired me in many ways, suggesting respect for traditional ways of knowing that lead to healthy lifestyles. The medicine way he advocates can form intentional sacred circles for learning, healing and other forms of personal growth that involves our natural environment. These ritual spaces are where people find silence and peace, can reflect on their experiences and gain a new insight, or seek awareness of ways to change or find new directions for the future. Sacred circles can be expressed in relationships with specific land formations where the energy of the "Grandmother" and "Grandfather" can be felt, whether in Australian dreaming or

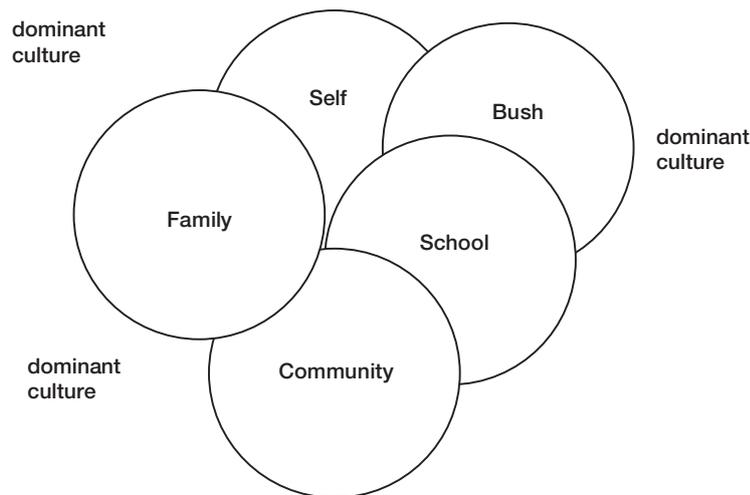


FIGURE 1 The phenomenon of prejudice.

in Turtle Island medicine paths. Thus Figure 1 suggests many layers of both dealing with the mechanisms of prejudice as well as healing paths that exist and that people of different minorities have articulated.

Walking through the shadows

More so, in this discussion, I acknowledge how individuals, families and communities appear to navigate healing paths that open up change and that reframe and reclaim difference in ways that make life more bearable in post-trauma circumstances. As I am reading and re-reading the sources that speak to Aboriginal experiences of racism and ongoing colonialism in Australian and Canadian contexts, a pervasive and powerful realization overwhelms me related to the collective weight of trauma and the intensely necessary spiritual healing journey of our peoples in these two unique and geographically remote continents. For example, when I place Bonita Lawrence's (2004) Canadian work next to Professor Judy Atkinson's (Atkinson, 2002; Atkinson, Kennedy, & Bowers, 2006) seminal work in Australia, we cannot help but suggest that transgenerational trauma and healing must be central to how we do education, counselling and community development efforts on the ground. Aboriginal families'

post-trauma experiences are ongoing through the felt impacts of colonization, whether in current, past or more distant generations. For many indigenous people our sense of time and temporality is fairly expansive—thus, whether a massacre in our family happened two or three generations ago (as is the case for many Aboriginal Australian people) or as many as 12 to 14 generations ago (in relation to early conflicts among invaders and East Coast tribes on Turtle Island), the spiritual legacy of these experiences lives on in conscious and unconscious ways that play out in trauma-cycles and re-enactments of the underlying psychic dissonance of these events.

This is also true for families from mixed racial origins. The children of mixed families bear the brunt of the attitudes of each family of origin, and may carry the scars of division for countless generations or find strength and resilience through the combined wealth of nations that make up their heritage (Lawrence, 2004). In similar ways gay and lesbian children gain strength from their path of self-realization and through confronting the prejudicial attitudes of their families (Kaufman & Raphael, 1996). As such, people can carry post-trauma recovery to varying degrees across a lifetime of healing and or re-traumatization. In many cases people find a healing path through their pain, loss and grief. It is this healing path that interests me the

most as an educator, counsellor and Two-Spirit healing practitioner. By learning about this way of growing through the shadows we can help one another through our hard times and find strength in what remains.

The ways people heal are also many and varied. Gay and lesbian children, who are rejected outright by their families, may take years to build new support networks and their own families of support and acceptance (O'Neill & Ritter, 1992). Because gay and lesbian children "pop up" in any and all cultures their experiences are quite helpful when looking at the parallel experiences of race, ethnicity and Aboriginality. For those who endure racial prejudice, a path of self-affirmation and relying on the strength of cultural traditions and stories may become central to personal and social identity (Sarup, 1996). When people sustain experiences of prejudice they can tend to accept the behaviour as normal, even though it is obviously harmful and horrible. By accepting the attitudes of others that cannot be changed the individual might retreat into themselves to find a place of safety (Noel, 1994). Over time this place might help them transit out of the shock and dismay they feel. A new strength might emerge that allows the person discriminated against to stand up and fight back in a way they are comfortable with, even if this challenges them to the core.

The isolation circle created by prejudice is both a blessing and a curse. It is a great paradox that our identity becomes formed into a relationship to the very obstacles we have had to overcome (Bowers, 2005b). Gay and lesbian people have, in a way, been marked and defined by the homophobia they have faced and continue to face every day, even in the contexts of education, counselling and health care, where practitioners carry the prejudice of the dominant culture into their work with minority populations (Gelso, Fassinger, Gomez, & Latts, 1995). We wear the tattoos of our identity forced upon us by the dominant system. We cannot really be separated from the shadows we have to walk through. The shadows, fears and

totems of power we encounter will often transform our identities in radical ways (Bowers, 2005b). In a similar way First Nations North American and Aboriginal Australian people's identity is influenced by the racism, colonialism and paternalism of dominant cultures, and the path to recovery and healing lies through the valley of these shadows of death.

Part of the paradox is that, to find out who we are, we sometimes need huge challenges that test us to the limits. Naturally life has enough challenges. No-one needs prejudice, no-one deserves to be treated unfairly, and we all deserve what Australians call "a fair go". But we also know from experience that equity and modern professional ethics are myths of liberal humanism used strategically for lip service, while the cities of domination across the landscape continue their rush of blind progress and the professions of helping that support this forward thrust continue to engage in prejudice masked by well-meaning intentions (Bowers, Plummer, & Minichiello, 2005b; McConaghy, 2000). Thus in post-colonial spaces each minority needs time to articulate to the dominant culture the ways in which they wish to define their boundaries, celebrate their uniqueness and engage in practices of self-governance. The great irony is that the very mechanisms of prejudice that damage our lives so much actually need to be turned on their heads, because they hold the keys to our empowerment and liberation. This happens in part by doing the opposite—by not continuing the cycles of trauma by engaging in negative and harmful behaviours and by learning from the mechanisms how to treat each other with respect and kindness. This healing path is vitally important for individuals and communities.

Figure 2 illustrates this path of healing resulting in a well-formed identity; that is, when we feel okay in our skin in relation to the world around us. The dominant culture has receded in its powerful influence because the self is rooted in solid ground and is in the right relationships of respect, honour and courage within the

family, community and local environments, be they school, church, sweat lodge or bush fire. Aboriginal identity is here represented not as a form of individualism, nor as a totally community-focused or nation-focused identity, but suggests a more complex mixture of personal vision quest and familial/communal groundedness. The circles suggest a relation of trust with the environment, where the ecologies of self, family, community and Mother Earth are in balance (Letendre, 2002). This place of identity may be a place to which we aspire, but I have seen this form of identity consolidation, time and time again, manifested in people’s active engagement with their personal and cultural healing of identity through educational, counselling and Two-Spirit healing work in various contexts among various minority people. Thus it is important to put this information out into the literature as well as to give this knowledge back to my community.

land of the North Eastern Door to the land of the Aniwani, Kamilaroi, and Waradjuri people in New South Wales, Australia. The changes of place, geography, climate and culture heightened my awareness of cultural differences. Although the global English monoculture was still strongly in evidence in Australia, significant differences were observed in people’s way of life, language, social interactions, values and seasonal patterns of lifestyle. In many respects the global monoculture masks these differences, and there is an unspoken expectation that English-speaking people can and will function in the same way regardless where one is located. Also it was expected that one should be able to function without much of a learning curve in relation to education and counselling practice. My experience did not support these monocultural claims, and I came to realize that “multiculturalism” is a code word for English monocultural dominance in racial, ethnic and Aboriginal contexts.

Identity, ecology and place

At a whole different level of analysis, Gjinisgam (Great Spirit) asked me to move from my native

For instance, it was observed that no services existed for international students who were English-speaking. We were expected to integrate well on our own and to cope with issues of immigration without assistance. It appeared that in certain ways cultural differences and

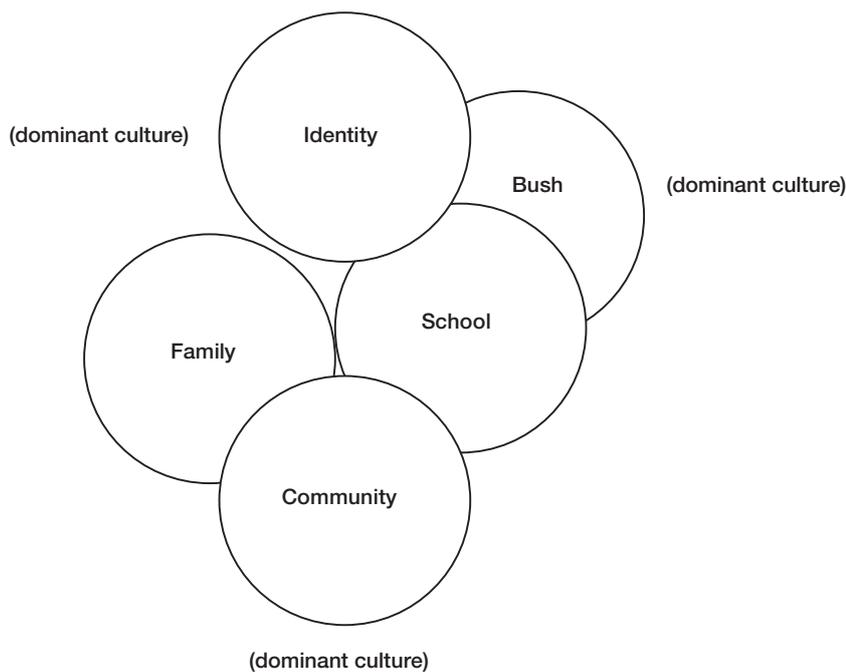


FIGURE 2 Healing from prejudice.

expectations around immigration had been reduced to having dark skin or speaking a different language as a measure of people's ability to cope in a new country. However, in conversations with people from Canada and other English-speaking countries, stories of coping with immigration into Australia suggested that while being able to speak English was a great asset, the emotional, social and psychological issues that arise during major relocation are just as demanding if not more so when they tend to be hidden, denied and dismissed. The notions of how identity becomes unsettled during major relocation really came home to me in a personal *and* academic way. Under the pressures of coping within a foreign (though assumed to be globally similar) culture, the displacement from my familiar surroundings, ecology and family were unsettling to say the least.

It was during this time that Aboriginal Australian stories of dislocation, loss and grief came to me in the form of "stolen generation" narratives via friends and elders of new acquaintance who reached out to me during the early days of living in this great Anaiwan country. During my first years in Australia an Aboriginal Australian partner introduced me to gay Aboriginal stories, and to the cultures of Western Australia. Being so personally confronted with the stories, emotion and traumatic experiences of Aboriginal Australian people caused within me a fresh acknowledgement of buried issues in my own family history. It took several years to unpack and to understand these identity issues, and this process, as many people have suggested, is a lifelong process of learning, letting go, discovery and reconnection. In more recent times many doors of sacred healing business has opened up new awareness, and "eagle medicine" and "dreaming" has come into my family and community circle. By taking space, formed first from experiences of trauma, isolation and fear, we have found a place to live on the margins of society that is generative, life giving and spiritually powerful. The utility of this story is how the processes of growing

in indigenous and minority identity are similar and useful to others in understanding that there is hope, power and relevance in applying a traditional cultural approach to living in the contemporary world. Likewise, the world of today has utility inside a cultural stance that deepens quality of life, meaning and value.

Learning about these different ways of being generated new insight about identity in relation to ecology of place, as expressed in Figure 5, and more will be said later on this. Not only place, but in how our local environments inform and guide our identity. Having moved from eastern Canada to eastern Australia, the ecology of these two tribal countries are experienced in their sovereignty and spiritual power. They naturally inform people's waking and sleeping times, and the birds, plants, earth, stones, four-legged crawling creatures and four-legged walking creatures, finned and winged creatures and the star formations in each sky are unique and inform a sense of the Dreaming and or tribal medicine that each place inspires (Lacey, 1999; Mathews, 1994). Being particularly sensitive to these energies, I found that the adjustments of coming to a new land opened up within me a major psychic, emotional and phenomenal transformation of identity that came to inform and guide my sense of doing education, counselling and healing, in not only different cultures but also, and more importantly, in the context of local ecologies that support and from which Aboriginal cultures grow and have their being.

Identity then, as suggested in Figure 5, comes from my unique ecological, social and historical experience and my indigenous point of view at this time. Echoing other indigenous narratives, identity is a wholistic phenomenon intimately linked to each place we live and sleep and do ceremony (Butler, 2004). Each place on Mother Earth is linked to an indigenous history and to tribal elders who are part of the landscape. Honouring these elders and custodians is an intuitive respect and appropriate level of concern that comes about when travelling in another tribal territory—it is important to gain

permission to come into a new tribal land both socially and spiritually. It is important for many reasons, and once you live in a place for a while the “Old Ones of the People” may come to visit you. They check you out. If you are aware of these realities, you will act in ever greater circles of respect, prayer and acknowledgment. I can speak for myself, no one else, and can only share my story of discovery. This limiting of my voice is a way of honestly taking a more humble and a more indigenous approach, which seeks to share stories as medicine without taking an expert stance on issues (Holt, 2003). There is no need to define these issues according to absolutes. Taking a path of respect for elders brings me to accept my contingency, limitations and subjective points of view because we are on a journey of discovery. While exploring my own identity and great confusion under these circumstances, during a time of reconnecting with identity as Aboriginal and Mi’Kmaq, and while living in relative solitude and intensive study of these issues, Figure 3 came to mind. The medicine wheel in Figure 3 is in the form of a circle with north–south, and east–west axes. The wheel reflects a personal story of discovery of parts of self, parts of identity that are then related to the energies of the compass. In this way the indigenous form of making

meaning of my circumstances and who I am relates to the geography, ecology, climate and seasonal changes that form an active part in an evolving consciousness of living in a land so vastly different from north-eastern Canada. The detail and particular expressions this conveys are beyond the scope of this essay. By naming these overall qualities in the circle there is a danger of generalizing, and some may accuse me of offering a generic “pan-Indian” or even a “new age” approach to indigenous meaning. To these charges I can only say with humility that my intention is not to displace or dishonour the teachings that I am given in my life, family and culture. Quite the opposite. In offering these models my hope is that people will search out local traditions, and ways of knowing will come forward that lead people to understand and support indigenous knowledge, which is always linked to local and regional ecology. In a similar way, very many local traditions honour pan-tribal knowledge, tradition, ceremony and culture. Like all nations of Mother Earth, the First Nations of Turtle Island have a keen awareness of other nations and their traditions. There is a myth of local cultural isolation among white mainstream discourse that assumes Aboriginal nations had no intercourse across national boundaries; this is historically

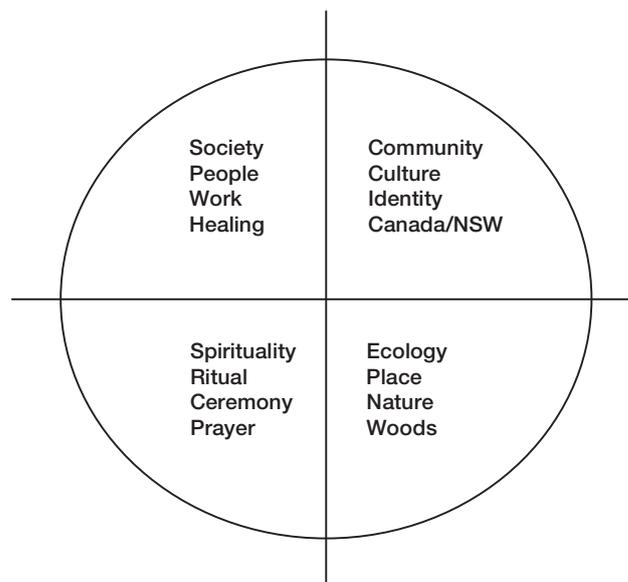


FIGURE 3 “My” medicine wheel.

untrue and dishonours the complexity of national tribal politics and identity.

After having lived in Australia for almost 9 years an affirmation of my identity was necessary to allow who I am not to be lost, and to cherish parts of myself that might not be reflected back to me in the everyday world of Australian society. In many respects this experience parallels the experience of other minority people who do not see their identity reflected back to them in the media, culture and values of mainstream societies. To simplify the essence of things that I valued in my identity, Figure 4 came to express something within me.

I became aware that what I value the most were things that Great Spirit asked me to sacrifice personally for a greater good in coming to Australia, and in giving my life and energy to projects undertaken in this new country. What I value most are relationships that happen in specific contexts that can never be replaced or recreated—the history and culture of the maritimes in Canada, and the contexts of personal and social struggles within this history of colonization and coping with all the daily pressures of life. By stepping out of the flow of history and place within my indigenous Canada, I had taken the path of the “Great Whale” and become a different being in a different land beyond

the ends of the “Great Waters”. As a “Whale Person” my story takes place under radically different circumstances, and yet the stories of my ancestry suggest that these shifts of identity occur for many people who may even stay in one community all their life. Other values celebrated relate to how social and historical meanings are also spiritual processes of learning, growing, letting go and reconnecting. These experiences are intimately linked to the place where, for me, being connected with the land is vital and a daily experience. For this reason I seek out rural places of sanctuary where my energy can be renewed and where I can actively nurture Mother Earth through gardening, bush walking, hiking and sharing times with friends in nature. These ways of knowing are a humble expression of Mi’kmaq teachings and stories of change, like that of a little boy who later became a member of the “Whale Nation”. But it was not my intention to share that story in this context, only to suggest a general pathway that people can follow.

From another angle on analysis, the sacred circle of the diagram represents the vertical axis spectrum of work/doing/enjoying; and the horizontal axis spectrum of identity/belonging/being. These two energies work together and in balance for health and wellness. When they are

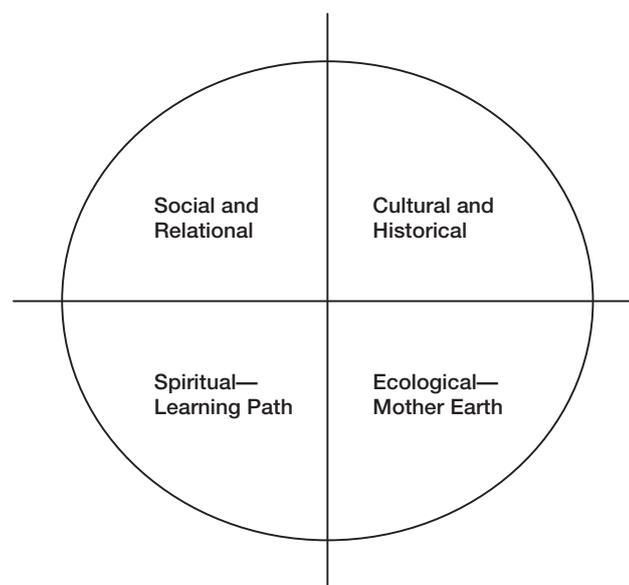


FIGURE 4 Medicine wheel revisited.

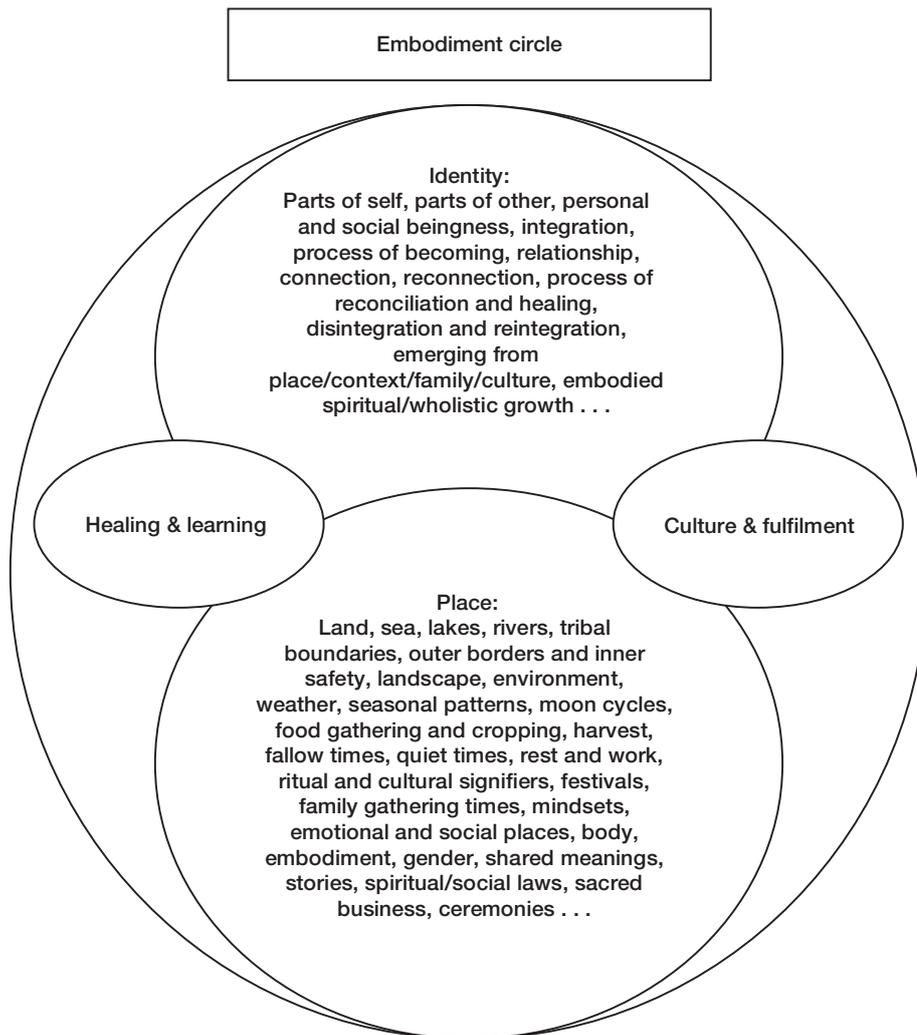


FIGURE 5 The embodiment circle.

out of balance sickness and identity confusion result. From these reflections my study turned to a more indepth analysis of identity from a cultural point of view. This led me to articulate what I came to call “the embodiment circle” (Figure 5).

This circle came to me during “ceremony” and reflects a deeply felt Mi’kmaq worldview. In the circle reflecting embodiment, identity grows and emerges out of place. One can not grow unless planted in the ground. Mother Earth and her places are the environments in which we have our being, discover our blessing and come to live our quest or to waste our chances. We can not exist apart from place. In my research the place of place, as it were, seemed like a vital link in the chain of meaning. In most of my writing place has been invisible

and not articulated. Yet place defines identity in all its manifestations—whether we are talking about the physical environment or the family environment which co-exists with the ecology. Thus, across two decades of studies into identity issues, the role of place in forming and reshaping identity seems significant through the processes of healing and learning as well as culture and fulfilment. For each person coming to terms with their identity (be that a marginalized identity such as native or Aboriginal, gay or lesbian, black or foreign), these processes suggest a path of re-orientation and gaining new ground in which to grow. By redefining oneself a path of healing opens up, new energy is released and greater freedom to articulate one’s experience is found.

These realities are also planted in our bodies—so the notion of embodiment is how our bodies reflect who we are in our identity (Bragdon, 1990; Cornett, 1995; Cortright, 1997). We are gay because we live in a gay body that has the potential to love someone of the same gender. We are native because we live in a native body that is connected to a family and cultural history and place that is “Mother” and “Source” and “Being”. This identity is also a story that is unfolding and may change from time to time. Traditional Mi’kmaq identity is always phenomenal and subject to shape shifting. Identity must also in some ways be embodied or become embodied over time to be whole, and to be a ground upon which a tree can take root and find fulfilment. The body is not only physical and genetic. Bodies are emotional, intuitive, energetic, psychic, intellectual, psychological, social, historical, temporal, expansive, timeless and spiritual. It is impossible to enter into the medicine way without addressing in some basic way people’s limited notions of their bodies, and thus their identities—and thus how they may limit and need to expand their capacities and possibilities for healing (Keeney, 1999, 2001). This is most often accomplished via stories as medicine rather than as direct confrontation. As Figure 5 suggests, place is also many things, including the landscapes of Mother Earth and of self or other, rich in meaning. Again my intention in this essay is not to give you any in-depth understanding of Mi’kmaq or wider indigenous culture but to suggest some very basic tools I have found useful in my narrative and autoethnographic exploration of identity. As an educator and counsellor I have found these tools really helpful, but as points of beginning only, where students or clients can begin to explore their own cultural understandings and meanings. This can lead to a very deep appreciation and honouring of our parents’ and grandparents’ struggles and gifts that have been passed down to our generation.

Conclusion

Identity is a rich and fertile garden that begs us to take strips of ash bark to weave into beautiful baskets, even while offering gifts of tobacco and caring for the bushes and trees that sustain our lives. During time with elders it was important for me to make birch boxes in a traditional way. This helped me to understand my father and grandmother who came from the Mi’kmaq nation. This helped me to reconnect with who I am as a Mi’kmaq Two Spirit.

We have explored expressions of this weaving of identity and models of healing that suggest personal, social and communal potentials for “dreaming” and for “medicine”. These forms of dreaming and medicine in each respective tribal nation draw on the spiritual and ecological power of our local and regional sovereignty.

In generating any future applied practices in education and counselling we can feel confident in our healing that we are able to apply indigenous cultural and spiritual ways of knowing to our work. This is an important value that I have tried to convey in my work. Not from any place of claiming identity or a right to even speak about who I am, but from a more humble cultural place of acknowledging that the Mi’kmaq “Red Road” of spirituality is not easy. Taking any path of learning is never easy if we are honest with ourselves; I am finding that my identity is informed by the Mi’kmaq medicine way much more than by mainstream notions of counselling or education. This naturally includes a great diversity of expressions (Orr, 2000; Orr, Paul, & Paul, 2002). In acknowledging this I stand in solidarity with Mi’Kmaq first nations and Métis, and together work toward the social and political goals of empowerment and liberation from oppression.

This paper suggests that the identity that emerges from place expresses local truth intimately linked with the geophysical and ecospiritual qualities of each tribal location. Yet we also share insights and wisdom that hold the keys to unlocking many of the current

ecological and identity crises facing humanity. This place itself holds the power of insight for those who listen, and is where a people appear and grow. Tribal peoples today in all our changes, and after eons of prejudice, are still listening to local ecologies. Our “Mother” births a “people” and individuals find their source and purpose for being through identification with these felt and known mysteries. These might well be ancient truths but they are just as alive today because Aboriginal law is written in the stones, creeks, rivers, lakes and sky. These notions inspire various technologies and strategies for healing in the fields of transpersonal psychology and spiritual psychotherapy. As such it is important these insights and healing approaches are given back to indigenous communities if and when Aboriginal people wish to take up this path of dreaming and of medicine.

Thus we can conclude that identity grows over time and eventually recedes again into place, for the land is our mother and the tribe our origin, and from where we came we will one day return, because the native Turtle Island “circle medicine” and the Australian Aboriginal “rainbow serpent dreaming” usually finds its way back to the beginning. Identity is terribly important and causes many problems, raises conflicts in the self, causes discontent in families and communities, sometimes wages war and harms others, yet also gives much strength, great or twisted character, and in later life must be let go of when the second childhood overtakes us and we must pass beyond identity into the realm of shadows.

Glossary

	English translation
Aniawan, Kamilaroi and Waradjuri	Aboriginal Nations in NSW Australia
Gjinisgam	Great Spirit
Métis	of French Acadian and Mi'kmaq ancestry in Eastern Canada
Mi'kma'ki	the “Red Dirt Country”, the home of the Mi'kmaq First Nation in North Eastern North America
Mi'kmaq First Nation	the First Nation tribe in Eastern Canada and the North East of the USA
Turtle Island	the First Nation name for North America

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