

Painting the Prison 'Red': Constructing and Experiencing Aboriginal Identities in Prison

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Summary

Dominant Western paradigms of the social work profession have largely failed to integrate Aboriginal traditional knowledges and practices on healing and helping. This paper contributes to the promotion of a context-based approach to social work in prison by examining Aboriginality from both institutional and individual points of view. Drawing on documentary analyses and interviews with Aboriginal women prisoners in Canada, the paper sheds light on the prison's endorsement of a hegemonic vision of Aboriginality, and on social work practitioners' inclination to adhere to it. Conversely, we argue that Aboriginal women prisoners negotiate their passage into prison through Aboriginal self-identification configurations that often have little in common with the prison's vision of Aboriginality. Service delivery in prison may be enhanced by considering individual modes of resisting identity-based oppression in prison, and by challenging prisons' master narrative on Aboriginality.

Keywords: prisons, ethnicity, women

Introduction

Social work practitioners who provide services in prison face control/helping conflicts similar to those found in child welfare or psychiatric institutions. However, the prison compounds this endemic clash by the specific ways its activities are embedded in power, control and surveillance (Pollack, 2004). In prison, social work practitioners are called upon to provide services to captive and increasingly multicultural populations. The first contemporary reality regarding these populations is the enduring nature of cultural minority overrepresentation amidst prison populations (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths, 1991; Commission on Systemic Racism, 1995; Cheliotis and Liebling, 2006). The second reality is the larger number of cultural minorities more likely to (i) serve their sentence in institutions rather than in the community (Perera, 2000), (ii) be incarcerated for minor crimes (comparatively to individuals of European descent) (Reiman, 2004), and (iii) be revoked while on conditional release (Canada, 1999).

In Canada, Aboriginal peoples¹ constitute the single most overrepresented incarcerated group (Canada, 1999). As a result of imperialist colonization, they have been enclaved (Chartrand, 1991), and have undergone a process of acculturation whereby Aboriginal cultural knowledges have suffered increased pressure not to be exhibited, leading to their progressive disqualification through assimilation to whitemain majority (Restoule, 2000). Over-incarceration is one of the consequences of the enduring fragmentation and loss of identity that Aboriginals experience due to colonization. Recently, however, the Canadian government was pushed to deal head-on with the overrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in its prisons. As a result, federal institutions (which manage prison sentences of two years and more for serious crimes) implemented prison programmes based in Aboriginal spiritualities and cultural specificities, as legislated in 1992 in the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (hereafter, CCRA)—the most current federal legislative framework circumscribing federal correctional policies and practices in Canada. Through spiritual ceremonies and programmes, Aboriginal prisoners, now, often ‘learn’ of their cultural distinctiveness. Accordingly, they may either construct a new identity or harden different (and sometimes disparate) strands of a ‘racialized’ identity that already existed beforehand. Thus, it can be argued that Aboriginal prisoners experience their imprisonment *as* Aboriginal persons, and *because* they are Aboriginal.

The authors of this paper acknowledge the considerable extant literature on the theoretical debate surrounding the cultural appropriation of Aboriginal ways when ‘redescribed’ (Denis, 1997, p. 45) in occidental terms (e.g. Turpel, 1990). We also acknowledge that, as non-Aboriginal scholars, our ‘redescription’ of Aboriginal issues through Western eyes is inevitably distorted. However, this paper ‘reads’ the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and Canadian modern prisons in an attempt to subvert colonial discourse and institutions by deconstructing colonialist prison narratives via the critical positioning

of Aboriginal prisoners' voices. We are of the opinion that non-Aboriginal investigators of competence and sensitivity can contribute constructively to debunking the colonial enterprise when research is undertaken in a spirit of sympathy, goodwill and dialogue.

The present paper is predicated on semi-directed interviews conducted in 2003–04 with twenty-five women—who self-identified as Aboriginal—on their experiences of imprisonment in Canada. Specifically, eighteen Aboriginal women (former prisoners) were interviewed—via countrywide contacts with Elizabeth Fry Society offices across Canada—on their experiences of solitary confinement. The remaining seven women were interviewed on the role of imprisonment in their life trajectories; these interviews took place in public parks, women's shelters, as well as in the Québec Detention Centre (women's unit), Joliette's federal institution for women, and the Tanguay Detention Centre in Montreal. In line with ethical standards recommended for research with Aboriginal populations, the Native Women's shelter as well as the Native Friendship Centre of Montreal have both supported and ethically approved this project. Verbatim transcriptions were provided to each participant on several occasions as they were full contributors to the discursive construction of their own life trajectory.

Interviews bring forth analyses suggesting that Aboriginal women prisoners tend to seize little discursive space relatively to Aboriginal self-identification. That is to say that identity is not predominant in women's narratives. The examination of such a discursive absence is paramount to the adaptation of social services to clients of diverse cultural origins, especially when services are provided in institutional contexts of power and oppression—like the prison—where voices tend to be stifled.

Our discussion is articulated around three analytical components. The first section provides a brief historical contextualization of the *Aboriginalization* of Canadian prisons—a term used to emphasize the constructed character of prisons' conceptions of supposedly Aboriginal identity, and to highlight state-created 'Aboriginalism' as a legal, political and cultural discourse as well as a practice of contemporary colonialism. A second section discusses relevant theoretical underpinnings on identity, especially as these relate to Aboriginal realities. The third component is the elaboration of a typology of self-identifications as experienced by Aboriginal women. Self-identification and identity negotiation are conceptualized here as 'the ways in which people perceive themselves and others, talk about their [. . .] experiences, communicate and evaluate their situation in a new environment, express viewpoints and world-views, rationalise and make sense of their everyday lives under new circumstances' (Petrovic, 2003, p. 3). In light of this, the typology suggests that women make sense of their prison experience via a variety of self-identification configurations. Of note, these racializations do not appear to take the form of political claims-making. It is believed that this typology may contribute to further social work services with Aboriginal women in prison. As issues of Aboriginal self-identification are commonly found in Western societies and beyond, the

processes discussed in this paper have an empirical foundation that will reach well beyond the territory within which they were studied.

The Aboriginalization of prisons

The Canadian colonial enterprise has old and new faces that distort Aboriginal histories and cultures, and enfranchise its peoples. Among the more memorable colonialist policies are residential schools which were used from the late 1800s through to the 1980s (authors differ as to the time period) as the primary tool used by government in pursuance of its policy of assimilation of Aboriginal peoples. These schools led to the slow erasure of Aboriginal cultures and identity markers. Colonial policies also led to the widespread relocation of Aboriginal peoples via the constitution of 'Indian reserves' which are circumscribed portions of land where original peoples are confined. The reserve is entrusted with enclosing a stigmatized category of original peoples so as to neutralize the material and/or symbolic threat they are thought to pose to settler communities. Also noteworthy of colonial legacies is the Indian Act, passed in 1876, which intruded massively on the lives and cultures of status Indian people by giving the Canadian state powers, for example, to define how one is born or naturalized into 'Indian' status, or to administer the estate of an Indian person after their death (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Such Aboriginalist incursions—among others—have taken place in the socio-political context of historic and ongoing dispossession, on the one hand, and of contemporary poverty on the other hand. Thus, generations of original peoples of Canada have been—and continue to be—subjected to land, cultural and governmental authority dispossession and its corollaries: poverty and shame in identity. As a result, Aboriginal peoples in Canada have a well documented history of social and economic disadvantage, more notably in relation to employment (Drost and Richards, 2003) and educational attainment (Neegan, 2005) which—interwoven with significant social problems such as family violence (McGillivray, 1999) and substance abuse (Jacobs and Gill, 2002)—are often related to shame in identity (Restoule, 2000). Such problematic situations are responsible, in part, for the phenomenon of over-incarceration of Canada's Aboriginal peoples (Canada, 1999).

It was in 1967 that the Laing (1967) report brought forth, for the first time in Canadian history, the over-incarceration of individuals who self-identify as Aboriginal. Reacting at once, Aboriginal groups voiced critiques to the effect that whitestream criminal justice processes were culturally inadequate. To respond to such an indictment, the Canadian state began to modify its criminal justice apparatus to improve its fit with the cultural claims of Aboriginal groups. For example, sentencing circles sprouted across the country, and mediation became a preferred mode of intervention with Aboriginal offenders. In prisons, Elders were introduced, Aboriginal spiritual ceremonies were allowed, sweat lodges were built, and Aboriginal (round) rooms were designed while

prisoners were granted permission to carry medicine bundles inside prison. Culturally sensitive reintegration programmes ('Native' Brotherhood/Sisterhood groupings, Aboriginal gang reintegration projects, etc.) were also implemented alongside Aboriginal prisons to offer prisoners opportunities to practise and revitalize their cultural traditions and customs, thereby allegedly contributing to their successful reintegration into the community (Commissioner's Directive, 1995).

Aboriginal lobby groups have been significant players in the process of Aboriginalization of Canadian prisons. Indeed, Canadian criminal justice progressively Aboriginalized its apparatus as a result of a string of public inquiries, government reports, and pressures from Aboriginal lobbies with a goal of cultural re-possession following the massive colonial dispossession of Aboriginal peoples. In the midst, the Canadian government espoused one traditional vision of what Aboriginal culture is—a vision that has been legally (Statutes of Canada, 1992) and discursively (Solicitor General, 1998) devised and disseminated to Aboriginals throughout prisons. This traditional account of Aboriginality has underlain culturally appropriate programmes and activities offered to prisoners such as the 'In Search of your Warrior' programme where, among other things, Aboriginal prisoners are '*reminded* of their identity [and *made*] *aware* that they have a culture [...] a heritage' by learning 'all over again about their *own* culture, [and] going back to their spiritual roots' in order to 'get back in touch with their *real* selves' (Amellal, 2005, p. 6, emphasis added). Noteworthy is that this authoritative Aboriginality is built upon the identity criteria of the Canadian government—under the impetus of Aboriginal lobbies—and is a clear racialized construction of the otherness of Aboriginal peoples. When one enters prison (especially a federal prison), she is inevitably confronted to this institutionally imposed Aboriginality. Whether or not she will accept and endorse this version of Aboriginality as her own is another matter.

In this particular context, Aboriginal identity is constructed wholesale, as a single, all-encompassing object in which traditional—and susceptibly stigmatized—identity markers of Aboriginal cultures (such as sweat lodges, medicine pouches, and sweet grass) occupy a sizable portion. Aboriginal programmes, then, confer a certain traditionalism to a homogeneous Aboriginality promoted by the prison's practitioners. However, there are reasons to question such a degree of homogeneity as the concept of 'community' excludes the communal realities of increasing numbers of urbanized Aboriginal persons. 'cultural ceremonies' do not acknowledge the sacred dimensions of an Aboriginal woman's menstrual cycle, and sweat lodges are prominent in prison but foreign to Inuit cultures. It can be argued, therefore, that the prison participates in the construction of an oversimplified, over-generalized version of Aboriginal identity, and imposes it on its Aboriginal populations. A growing body of research has brought forth that Aboriginal identities, cultures and practices need to be differentiated between Aboriginal nations (Dawson, 1994; Voss *et al.* 1999). However, the prison's construction of Aboriginality necessarily subordinates and delegitimizes alternative representations of Aboriginality.

At face value, the standardization and centralization of Aboriginal identity in prison is a significant step towards state recognition of the Aboriginal cultural specificities of prisons' most over-represented group in Canada. Without questioning the fundamental need for Aboriginal-centred correctional programmes, we want to take the reflection elsewhere, to an analytical space allowing the confrontation of an institutionally imposed Aboriginal identity with Aboriginal prisoners' viewpoints about their own self-identification as Aboriginal persons—viewpoints seldom accounted for in the discourse on the cultural transformations of the prison. We hope to further the analysis of power imbalances inherent in social work service delivery, and to broaden practices to include self-identification as a basis for emancipatory intervention. The latter must occur via an understanding of the ways Aboriginal peoples are positioned structurally as Aboriginal within the prison, and how, conversely, they position themselves individually as Aboriginal.

Aboriginal identity and criminal justice

Identity is political in that it is the product of culturally and historically located experiences as well as an act of resistance to colonial domination. Identity is also politicized in that it is a tool for the legitimation, domination and exclusion of others (Green, 2004). The interconnectedness of identity and colonization is affecting Aboriginal peoples all over the world; however, it is particularly salient for Aboriginal peoples in what is now Canada. This study is predicated on theoretical developments related to identity formation generally, and more specifically to institutional identity formation as well as self-identification among Aboriginal peoples.

Recent literature on identity formation informs us that individuals incessantly negotiate and manage identity issues in their lived experiences in an effort to navigate amidst power relations (e.g. Weaver, 2001; Lloyd, 2005; Ogbur and Green, 2005). In particular, 'who we are and who we perceive ourselves to be are subject to a dialectic of control that is both internally driven and externally defined' (Bosworth, 2003, p. 139) in the sense that identities are both internally constituted and externally circumscribed, and that individuals take up some of the surrounding discourses when constructing their identities. Consequently, identities are inherently subject to change, suggesting that self-representation is fluid and often requires adjustments when individuals encounter conditions in their lived experience which directly or indirectly assail perceptions of one's self, such as immigration, racial prejudice, lone parenthood, and imprisonment (e.g. Guy and Banim, 2000; Wesely, 2003; Martel, 2006). When experienced for any length of time, these conditions tend to engender ambivalence toward one's identity, leading the individual to 'negotiate' (implicitly or explicitly) personally acceptable images, while striving for *some* continuity of identity (Guy and Banim, 2000). Accordingly, such circumstances may lead to distinctive shifts in self-image.

Since imprisonment is based largely on an institutional attempt to regulate identity (Foucault, 1975; Howe, 1994; Hannah-Moffat, 2001), struggles to preserve a particular articulation of identity become painfully acute. Such struggles usually command re-conceptualizations of the self while adapting to prison conditions. A well established literature has acknowledged that circumstantial identities tend to be constructed and used to accommodate incarceration which constitutes a sudden and massive shift in social situations (Goffman, 1962; Irwin, 1977; Lemire, 1990; Schmid and Jones, 1991). Power relations, resistance and identity, then, become prominent matters for both correctional authorities and prisoners.

Further, not only is the process of self-realization complex and ongoing (e.g. Goffman, 1973; Tseëlon, 1995), it is mediated also by *life encounters*, that is social actors, situations or events that one meets along her life trajectory. It is the case, here, where our participants met with the prison, its Aboriginal-centred programmes and its vision of Aboriginality. At this juncture, the power relations, modes of resistance and identity work that are inherent to prison's vision of Aboriginality provide a full-bodied, cultural context for constructing Aboriginal social scripts.

These scripts impact on the identity of Aboriginal prisoners, yet self-identification with, or identity negotiation of, Aboriginality in prison are largely unacknowledged, and not subject to systematic inquiry within extant literature. Aboriginal identity is a complex and controversial topic. Neither is there agreement on what constitutes an Aboriginal identity nor consensus on appropriate terms (Restoule, 2000). For those reasons, issues of Aboriginal identity have garnered significant interest in the literature (e.g. Behiels, 2000; Foley, 2000; Moreton-Robinson, 2000; Behrendt, 2000), especially from Aboriginal scholars (Anderson, 2000; Restoule, 2000; Sawchuk, 2000; Simpson, 2000; Weaver, 2001; Lawrence, 2004; Andersen, 2005). However, although socio-cultural identities (e.g. Nandi, 2002; Bosworth, 2003) as well as gendered identity formation in prison (e.g. Hannah-Moffat, 1995; Zaitzow and Thomas, 2003) are more substantiated in the literature, there is only modest discussion of the impact of imprisonment on Aboriginal prisoners (Grobsmith, 1995) or on their self-identification as Aboriginals (see Waldram, 1997; Morin, 2002). Also understudied are the ways in which Aboriginal prisoners perceive prisons' Aboriginalization efforts, as well as their means for dealing with or resisting this form of racialization. The omission of Aboriginal peoples' perspectives from extant literature on punishment is common and, in our opinion, sheds light on two essentialist presumptions motivating their absence in scholarly endeavours. The first presumption is that there exists such a thing as *an* Aboriginal identity, while the second is that persons who self-identify as Aboriginal *want* to be (re)connected to a particular positioning of Aboriginal culture.

Identity, however, is as much about personal trajectories as it is about self-identification with a social group's collective claims-making. Drawing on the literature, we argue that there exists a plurality of relationships to Aboriginal identity which are negotiated, contested, and accomplished in interactional

settings in the midst of constituting social relationships. Representations of Aboriginal identity, therefore, must be envisaged as situational and contextual. To a large extent, people learn who they are through idiosyncratic interactions with their social environment.

We wondered how, in view of the recent Aboriginalization of Canadian prisons (and its concurrent imposition of a hegemonic Aboriginality through a variety of symbols and identity markers), women prisoners self-identify as Aboriginal and as women, and how they experience these. Are they as Aboriginalized as assumed by the prison apparatus? Or does self-identification work in more nuanced ways that do not deny the agency of Aboriginal women prisoners?

Situated selves: the many ways of being Aboriginal in prison

Being Aboriginal means different things to different people, and one's self-identification as Aboriginal is dependent, among other things, on gender, band belonging, constitutional 'Indian' status, urbanization levels, or contact with whitestream criminal justice (Weaver, 2001). Identifying is a process of being and becoming what one is in the moment. It problematizes typical conceptions of cultural identity that can be constrictive and colonizing, especially when Aboriginal identity assumes a permanence and rigidity that is co-opted by institutions like the prison (Restoule, 2000). As such, we use 'identifying' when referring to women's embodiments of Aboriginal cultural markers. Self-identification depends on experiential constraints, social mobility as well as on the material and symbolic capital available to individuals. To even suggest, then, the idea that choice in identity exists implies that there may be more than one manner to live one's Aboriginality, even in prison. An example of such choices is that most interviewees use Aboriginal identity markers only sparingly while in prison, contrary to what could be expected—from a whitestream modernity's point of view—in the context of institutionally promoted discourses on Aboriginality within the prison. Also perplexing are the multifarious relations to Aboriginal self-identification of which only one is aligned with the hegemonic Aboriginality constructed in Canadian prisons. Nineteen of our interviewees (out of twenty-five) racialized their experiences of imprisonment. However, when these women self-identify as Aboriginal persons, they do so on the basis of an assortment of identity configurations, thereby shedding light on the many ways of *being* Aboriginal in prison.

We have divided conceptually these different Aboriginal self-identifications into four distinct configurations, which emerged from the data. Quotes taken from women's narratives were grouped according to similarity, with each group of quotes being subsequently conceptualized into the four configurations. The latter should not be seen as either mutually exclusive or exhaustive of Aboriginal self-identification, but they represent, nevertheless, the spectra

of our analyses. Although identity configurations are diverse, a minority of participants (seven women) made use of one single configuration throughout their narrative, while the majority (twelve women) reverted to multiple Aboriginal self-identifications according to circumstantial interactions, thereby echoing scholarly work introduced earlier and suggesting that self-representation is fluid and requires circumstantial adjustments. Here, the use of more than one Aboriginal self-identification by a single woman must not be seen as contradictory but rather as a negotiation process influenced by, and influencing, the particular context in which the woman finds herself while in prison.

Table 1 summarizes the characteristic features of each configuration. The table comprises two types of numerical figures that aim to organize raw qualitative data into a compact and readily accessible form (Huberman and Miles, 1991). The first set of figures indicates the number of different participants who used one configuration or another when narrating their experiences of imprisonment—each woman having the opportunity to feature in more than one configuration, depending on context. The second set of figures is the number of quotes extracted from the transcriptions of interviews and assigned to each configuration. The two sets of nominal data are used in combination to better appreciate the degree of influence of each self-identification configuration within the narratives.

Table 1 Aboriginal self-identification configurations in prison

	Aboriginal self-identification configurations			
	Adopting hegemonic Aboriginality	Refusing identity	Stereotyping identity	Claims-making
Characteristic features of the configuration	Accepts cultural and traditional Aboriginal symbols endorsed by the prison; reinforces pre-existing Aboriginal self-identification or establishes initial contact with Aboriginality through prison programming.	Refuses to acknowledge an Aboriginal identity as result of (i) past traumatic experiences or (ii) direct contact with imprisonment.	Enacts clichés of the 'Indian' to acquire privileges from staff or secure better treatment from prisoners.	Requests modifications to prison conditions using politically charged claims of Aboriginality; engaging in identity-related political acts.
Number of different women using configuration	12	11	6	5
Number of quotes referring to configuration	23	13	10	9

Adopting prison's hegemonic Aboriginality

The most frequent standpoint among interviewees was their self-identification to Aboriginality while accepting—at least not wilfully rejecting—the institutionally imposed hegemonic Aboriginal identity. In fact, twelve women from a total of nineteen women who racialized their incarceration adopted predominantly this configuration. Within this standpoint, language becomes an important identity marker as women used multifarious denominators to self-identify as Aboriginal, such as the blanket epithets 'Aboriginal' or 'Native', or nuanced Aboriginal belonging via self-identification with Aboriginal nations (Cree, Métis, Montagnais or Inuit). Others, yet, established their distinctiveness in relation to juridical provisions or social stratification. For example, self-identifying as a 'Treaty' woman establishes one's positive Aboriginality in comparison to Non-Treaty women who historically lost constitutional rights and privileges, and have been categorized negatively as lesser Aboriginals by state authorities and Aboriginal communities alike.

For women of multiple cultural descents, 'double consciousness' (King, 2003) was established through their acknowledgment of having '[some] Aboriginal blood', being 'part Native' or being a little bit 'blended'. Women also expressed their pluri-ethnic descent through simple enumerations of their cultural origins lacking significant emotional investment, as described wittingly by Holly (pseudonym) (Québec):

H: I am Aboriginal. I have some black, I have some Greek, and I have some Chinese.

Interviewer: Black means Jamaican, African, Haitian?

H: Yeah, in those areas (laugh)

Interviewer: And some Chinese

H: And some Greek! (laugh)

Holly, like a majority of participants, did not emotionally invest this particular identity potentially perceived as incompatible or devoid of resonance with her personal life-course. Conversely, emotional investment into Aboriginal self-identification was manifest for others, but contrary to our expectations, it was not associated with an assertive and proud avowal of one's Aboriginality. Rather, it was linked to a deliberate refusal to self-identify as Aboriginal.

Among the twelve women discussed in configuration 1, eleven women denoted their cultural distinctiveness indirectly, through subtle references to 'my history', 'my tradition', 'my culture' or 'our culture' to mark also a sense of belonging. Women may also construct a personally acceptable Aboriginal self-identification, or reinforce an already existing one, via access to Aboriginal-centred programming or cultural activities offered in the prison. This access allows for the continuation of their prior involvement in cultural or spiritual

practices, but only within those practices which the prison endorses. For others, access amounts to an initial contact with Aboriginal spirituality, traditions, beliefs and values. Both encounters ultimately produce racialized self-identifications, but of a different sort:

I never used to have a lot of belief in the things I wanted to do. I always had a closed mind to everything. Now [in prison] I am getting involved with my culture. I want to respect Mother Earth, and learn to respect man and woman, and respect who I am, a two-spirited person. That is what they call lesbians, gay guys with their two spirits. In the culture they are gifted, that is something that the Creator only gives certain people. I have learned so much through my culture. We as women are life givers and we are the ones that nurture the land. I started going to sweats and building my strength inside in dealing with a lot of my childhood issues (Carla, Alberta).

* * *

After [spending time in solitary confinement], I got into talking with an Elder. Before that I wasn't into it but then I saw it, saw the racism and felt it first hand. That is when I got into doing [Aboriginal] things up there [in prison]. Otherwise, I wasn't into it. Too bad it took something like that to make me understand, see what it is really like. Before, I never noticed those kinds of things until I experienced it [sic.] (Adrianne, Alberta).

Both the first and second narratives are exemplary of identity racialization processes stemming from contact with the prison's hegemonic vision of Aboriginality. Through historical recapitulation of socio-cultural dispossession and aims of reconnection to this lost culture, Aboriginal-centred correctional programming tends to construct one's sense of distinctiveness via racialized world-views that may go in opposite directions, as evidenced above. For the first woman, contact with Aboriginal programming in prison produced a positive self-identification, anchored not only in self-esteem and collective pride but also in 'womanhood' and sexuality as pivotal aspects of her self-identification. This woman's Aboriginalization became a personal emancipatory project. For the second woman, the racialization process produced a more antagonistic self-identification. In this case, contact with an Elder—and that Elder's own Aboriginal self-identification—participated in the construction and cultivation of oppositional consciousness where this woman's self-identification narrowly (and negatively) demarcated one's possible interactions with the *other*: the non-Aboriginal. Without contesting that systemic forms of racism abound within criminal justice, it is feasible to conceive of prisons' hegemonic Aboriginality, as well as Aboriginal actors themselves, as participants in the construction of this common form of Aboriginal identity in society. This situation is not unique to prisons, however, and much of the prevalent academic arguments and Aboriginal political representations are embedded into particular world-views that naturalize (i.e. cause to appear natural) and demonize relations of power which engender the marginalization and victimization of Aboriginal peoples. It may be argued, then, that colonization conditions both the colonizer

(i.e. Europeans) and the colonized (i.e. Aboriginal peoples), and may elicit racist analyses by both groups.

The two cases illustrated above are representative of most participants' relationships to Aboriginal descent, and their chosen self-identification as Aboriginals have in common that they are underlain by an acceptance of the cultural and traditional symbols endorsed by the prison. Those symbols were taken as a personally acceptable account of what these women perceived themselves to be—wanted to be or ought to be—as Aboriginal at the time of their interview, although we understand that identifying fluctuates through space and time. Hence, Aboriginal self-identification may transpire through participation in Aboriginal correctional programming, and acceptance of its core Aboriginal symbols.

Aboriginalization, however, is not a *sine qua non* process for all Aboriginal women in prison, as some may choose to confront their Aboriginal origins by eclipsing them.

Refusing identity

The second configuration most often reverted to by women was identity refusal (eleven women). Women often translated their refusal of Aboriginal self-identification by making either self-effacing or blunt statements such as: 'I am Treaty [Indian] but I just consider myself Caucasian.' This personal positioning toward Aboriginal self-identification was equivalent to an invisibilization of one's self. Two rationales underlay such identity disavowal in prison.

First, women may refuse to self-identify as Aboriginal because that particular identity summons up past distressing experiences with which they prefer to dissociate for the time being. Acute poverty and rejection by one's Aboriginal community as a result of a criminal record were brought up by the interviewees, as was sexual assault in Clara's case:

Back then, there were no [Aboriginal] programmes. I didn't want any programmes for Indians because I didn't like being an Indian, [because of] everything that happened with my dad. Since then, I hate Indians. I didn't have any Indian friends inside [prison], and I didn't speak to any Indian there [in prison]. When they [correctional officers] asked me if I was [sic.] Aboriginal, I told them I was Spanish (Clara, Québec).

Like others, Clara encountered imprisonment with her personal history of relationships and experiences which shaped how she made sense of her incarceration. Even prior to encountering the Aboriginalization project of the prison, Clara—like Penny in the excerpt below—chose for herself an identity in which Aboriginality has little place, and on which Aboriginalization processes are likely to have less impact:

No, I don't trust Inuit at all, they're lower. I mean, I'm Inuit, but I don't trust any Inuit as [correctional] staff. I don't rely on Inuit people. I'm not a racist but I just don't trust them. I'm an Inuit, yeah I know, but I don't care for what I am and who I am. I don't rely on other Inuit people cause one

little word you say goes to another person [and it] becomes a different story, and [it] becomes a lot bigger! I don't wanna be like them, the Inuit. I refuse to hang out with Native people who are low life, who are drinking in the street and prostituting. I've got beautiful kids but I'd never show my kids I'm going to the bar and get drunk and come back home and get beaten up while my kids watch me (Penny, Québec).

Identity refusal may also be the direct result of one's contact with the prison. Here, identity refusal may be a disavowal of what an Aboriginal person is (or does) in the eyes of the prison. Women may consciously refuse to overtly self-identify as Aboriginal expressly to thwart prison's multi-layered stigmatization of Aboriginal persons. As Aboriginal offenders are more frequently incarcerated and segregated, are assessed as having higher risks and needs, and are less frequently paroled than non-Aboriginal persons, it is possible that women may repudiate this proposed identity, and recast themselves as someone other than just Aboriginal prisoners. For women, becoming someone 'other' than an Aboriginal offender may be more emancipatory—a lighter load to carry in prison—than would be sporting an Aboriginal identity. In this context, refusing to self-identify provides a buffer against a tarnished self-image which could carry very real harmful consequences in prison. Indirectly, also, such refusal to self-identify as Aboriginal may be a way to *aestheticize* one's own relation to Aboriginality, to separate the wheat from the chaff, to keep a 'pure' Aboriginal identity from the 'tainted'.

Displaying a stereotypical identity

Among the many ways of being Aboriginal in prison, women may adopt an Aboriginal self-identification that is stereotyped and utilized for strategic purposes. Although this configuration was used more marginally (six women), ethnic-based stereotypes tended to be powerful enough to be reverted to in hope to better position oneself in prison's social stratification. Similarly to other concentrated environments, prisons provide materials that can be used in the display and affirmation of Aboriginality such that there is always an audience present that requires face-work (Goffman, 1973); hence, women may perceive a need to negotiate social identities (public personas) in addition to personally acceptable self-identifications (for themselves). It was the case here where two lines of approach to a stereotypical self-identification were drawn by the interviewees: the use of the clichéd 'Indian' (i) by non-Aboriginal persons (e.g. guards, fellow prisoners), and (ii) by Aboriginal women themselves.

Women may be brought to face their own Aboriginality through the eyes of the beholder, either through those of fellow prisoners or of correctional staff. Indeed, Aboriginal women may be racialized by others who use racial identity markers predisposed to be stigmatized. In turn, women may adopt for themselves the same stereotypical 'Indian' identity that has been designed for them by others. The stigmatizing features or lifestyles of the 'Indian' are then utilized

by women as a self-identification resource to delineate for themselves a more envious place in prison. Here, Aboriginal identities are performed and enacted using techniques of framing and staging of culturally based stereotypes either to acquire privileges from correctional employees, or ensure better treatments from fellow prisoners as per the following excerpts:

There was this screw [correctional officer], Bill. I had been in jail for three days and [one night] I heard my cell door open. He came in and said 'I am bringing you a cigarette. Do you smoke?' So, we went and smoked. Then he started touching me and I said 'eeee . . . you don't work here [in the wing]'. He said 'I take the girls as I please'. I looked really good and I was Indian. I was a real toy for them. It's the girls who helped me out when I told them about it. Then the screw was scared of me. When the girls told him that I was Indian, he would come running. I said to him 'I want a temporary absence pass'. 'I'll do it right away. I swear I'll give you a 72 hour [pass] and I want you to come back', he said. 'Well, I said, if you call me a taxi to come back, then yes. If you don't call me a taxi, then I won't (laughter)'. I blackmailed him that way, but he was scared of me. He used to say: 'I don't mess around with them Indian women'. He was just like my toy (laughter) (Jane, Québec).

* * *

Here [in prison], the girls are afraid of Indian women; they think we're tough, us Indians. They don't hassle you a lot. I don't let myself be hassled (Rita, Québec).

* * *

I blackmailed a girl. I told her 'If you don't do what we say, we're gonna beat you up'. Me, I am an Indian, and when Indian women do something So, the girl went and did it right away. She was too scared of Indian women. Then, the screws ran around everywhere (laughter), and then we escaped for four days. The girls know that I am Indian. They know that I can do anything, and that I am more 'gutsy' than them (Clara, Québec).

Staging a racially stereotyped identity in prison means surviving contingencies that may be beyond one's control. It means seeking a higher standing in the 'pecking order' of the prison—an order based either on a hierarchy of criminality or of tribal belonging. Here, women put on a play and adopt gendered behaviours stereotypically believed to be characteristic of the dangerous and tough 'Indian' female prisoner in an environment where one's ethnicity is determined by others, and precedes women's entry into prison. Tracing a personal and social space within prison that guarantees enough respect (or fear) to circumvent abuse or ill-treatment becomes a way of life. The particular form an Aboriginal self-identification might take is always a question of power relations. For women prisoners who were staging a stereotypical 'Indian' identity, maintaining appearances served not only to protect—or acquire—a social standing, but to resist also the whitestream Anglo-Saxon model of femininity

which was one of prison's well established models of social control (Hannah-Moffat, 2001). Women's relationship to Aboriginality essentially consisted, here, of circulating between appearances with few wilful attempts to access what the simulacra concealed.

Claims-making based on identity

The fourth configuration entailed a proactive and intentional political engagement, and was predicated on an explicitly avowed Aboriginal self-identification. It is through politically charged grievances or requests that some women chose to relate to their Aboriginal origins. They made use of selected identity markers of Aboriginality to access cultural symbols in prison that were personally significant to their self-identification, like Isabelle, who contacted an Elder in a federal institution to request sweet grass so she 'could do [her] night, [her] native medicine'. The granting of this request comforted Isabelle in her Cree identification as the cultural markers that underlay her claims-making were also accepted by the prison as legitimate cultural markers of Aboriginality. Conversely, women also used cultural markers to protest their ill treatment in prison, and request either access to cultural symbols, special privileges, or to demand Aboriginal-centred programming. Depending on the personal resources (or lack thereof) that women had at their disposal—such as the personal integration of a lesser or stronger group consciousness (King, 2003)—these claims can be expressed as was Carla's in a provincial prison in Manitoba:

After a month, I told them [that] I wanted to see an Elder. They [correctional officers] actually let me make a phone call, but then time progressed and nothing happened. Then, I was told that the Elder did come and see me, but they said [that] I was sick and made up lies and everything. So, I never got a chance to see an Elder (Carla, Alberta).

Such claims may be asserted more forcefully, for example, by reaching out to governmental authorities, as did Eli when she contacted the Ministry of Indian Affairs to 'set the record straight' about a sympathetic Aboriginal paralegal worker who, as a personal favour, had brought a pair of pants into the prison for her, not knowing they were brimful of illegal drugs.

Others, yet, used cultural markers to make a statement, without going as far as requesting formal modifications to the institution's treatment of their Aboriginality. In commenting about the lack of Aboriginal-centred programming in provincial prisons, Edith indicated that she did not 'know much about [her] history' in one Ontario prison; Bronwyn added that she 'wasn't allowed sweet grass' in an Alberta prison; and Crystal emphasized that she was forbidden to keep her medicine bundle in a Manitoba prison. However, Edith, Bronwyn and Crystal did not pursue the matter further with correctional authorities. Here, Aboriginal cultural markers were used in a stance appearing to be less politically

charged than the stance chosen by the women who engaged more actively in identity politics in prison. This does not mean, however, that the cultural symbols used by Edith, Bronwyn and Crystal were not deeply meaningful to their personal relationship to Aboriginality. Every institutional denial of personal requests may very well strengthen the legitimacy of their chosen Aboriginal self-identification or, on the contrary, put a strain on women's efforts to actualize that self-identification:

I was on my time, having my period, and they wanted to strip search [me], and I was just like 'come on!' I told them: 'part of my culture, my belief [is that] that is a woman's thing, that is sacred to a woman, that is a ceremony'. 'Oh, we don't care, they said, do it or you will get charged' [with a disciplinary offence]. What are you going to do? I didn't know how severe the charge could be. They did it [the strip search] anyway (Crystal, Manitoba).

In all cases discussed, Aboriginal self-identification must be conceived of as a political act where cultural markers are used to voice one's Aboriginality, and take a stand toward an improved fit between conditions of imprisonment and Aboriginal practices with which women identified. They sought discursive spaces to establish and consolidate their Aboriginality, and take control of the situation. Either through the 'Native' Sisterhood movement or the prison's formal grievance system, women request modifications to their treatment to align it better with their Aboriginal self-identification. The claims-making standpoint toward Aboriginal identity must be viewed, then, as a strategy of self-identification, as exemplified below by Penny—an Inuit who felt her 'Aboriginalness' compromised upon transferring from a men's prison to a women's facility:

Amos jail [remote provincial prison] it's for Aboriginal guys. I was eating my country food there. I'm not even allowed to eat my own traditional food here in Tanguay [urban women's provincial prison]. Why's that? What's the difference? Oh! in Amos they cooked it for all the Native people and at least we could have fish like shark, salmon, caribou and beluga wale (Penny, Québec).

Of particular interest to our argument was the fact that this claims-making standpoint is far from dominant in our interviews. In light of the significant efforts to Aboriginalize Canadian prisons, one was safe to assume that, through contact with traditional practices, Aboriginal prisoners would Aboriginalize themselves to an extent, and use this to establish their claims-making. In actuality, however, outwardly asserted self-identifications were not found to be significantly allied with politically or culturally based claims-making strategies in prison. Such claims-making strategies—when intertwined with Aboriginal self-identification—were more infrequent than expected (five women). The near absence of this configuration brings forth a potential contradiction between the objectives of the Aboriginalization project and its outcomes on those it targets. One may reach

the reasonable conclusion, here, that the apolitical racialization of Aboriginal women's prison experiences may be the result of race/ethnicity issues being less cognitively accessible, and thus not relied upon to interpret one's world. For social services providers, the development of an ethnic-sensitive social work practice may mean not emphasizing prison's unidimensional vision of Aboriginality as a significant influence on individual self-identification. A move away from the 'expert' model of service delivery, then, may be desirable toward the development of interventions that are more inclusive of clients' experiences and incorporate social work providers' acknowledgment of individual modes of coping and resisting to oppression in prison.

Conclusion

Through processes of acculturation, colonial policies have resulted in a detraditionalization of Aboriginal cultures which increases life choices but also problematizes self-identification among Aboriginal individuals. In prison, specifically, Aboriginal women express a progressive loss of identity resulting from a life path of intense institutionalization and multiple identity disruptions (through child protection, youth placements, residential schools, etc.). As a result, Aboriginal identities are constructed and self-identifications—while impermanent and fragmentary—may have little currency outside prison. The paper brings two components to light: women's self-identification to Aboriginality while in prison and their ongoing motion through various identification configurations. Indeed, a majority of twelve women reverted to multiple configurations depending on institutional constraints, thereby suggesting that self-identification is malleable and subject to structural pressures and locally based contexts (prison, in this case). Echoing transcultural social work literature (e.g. Lum, 1999; Gray, 2005; Coates *et al.*, 2006), the paper brings attention to the importance of locally based contexts in shaping practice, and the adaptation of social work interventions to prisoners' self-identification as Aboriginals (Ferguson, 2001).

Two general conclusions stem from our analysis. The first is that two configurations—hegemonic Aboriginal identity and stereotypical identity—are mostly the direct result of imprisonment while the other configurations stem from self-identification choices prevalent *before* women's encounters with the prison. Identity refusals already forged before imprisonment, for example, may impede the Aboriginalization efforts of the prison. As identifying is situational and historical, pre-carcer lived experiences must be taken into account in social work practitioners' attempts to grasp more fully one's relationship to their Aboriginal origins as these lived experiences may engender identity impermeability—a forged self-identification enclave that may not allow permeability to alternative (even positive) discourses on Aboriginality in prison. As unproblematic as this form of resistance to state imposition may appear, it

remains that social work practitioners espousing the prison's hegemonic vision of Aboriginality may take little notice of women's degree of authority in defining self-identification choices.

The second general conclusion is that all Aboriginal self-identifications discussed here (with the notable exception of one) point toward a lack of fit between the institutional construction of a hegemonic Aboriginality and individual self-identifications as Aboriginals. Such situated selves tend to contradict the intention of the prison regimen and hegemonic Aboriginality in general. We suggest that there is an obligatory reference to tradition that is implicitly found in the hegemonic Aboriginality constructed by correctional authorities, and explicitly put forth in Aboriginal cultural programmes in prison. This obligatory reference renders difficult the legitimation of alternative standpoints toward Aboriginal self-identification more in line with the life-course of Aboriginal women prisoners—a life-course permeated less by traditionalized symbols (disseminated with nostalgic undertones), but more by the contemporary realities endured by Aboriginal peoples (e.g. increasing urbanization, homelessness).

Without challenging the inclusion of Aboriginal teachings in prison, we wish to emphasize that the constant reinvention of cultures enjoins the prison and Aboriginal teaching providers to adapt the teachings to contemporary and disparate self-definitions. Currently, the Aboriginal content in Canadian federal prisons is predicated on a homogeneous and over-generalized traditionalism with little attention to non-traditional markers of Aboriginality. As a result, beyond correctional authorities' efforts to Aboriginalize prisons—or, as our title invokes, to paint prisons in red—Aboriginal women prisoners do not appear to Aboriginalize themselves to the same extent. In their current form, Aboriginal teachings available in Canadian prisons are potentially oppressive, not only because they lack synchronization with prisoners' self-definitions as Aboriginals, but because prisoners' participation in Aboriginal-centred programmes is increasingly mandatory to their release (e.g. Braun, 2002). The risk, then, is that 'authentic' Aboriginal identity is decided *for* prisoners who would do well to adopt or exhibit the prison's mainstreamed Aboriginal identity markers until Aboriginal prisoners are rendered similar to the prison's master narrative on Aboriginality.

As clients' self-identification with their culture conflicts with the structure and organization of social service within an oppressive environment such as the prison, the need to practice social work from the perspective of the client comes strikingly to the fore. At an institutional level, social work practitioners must challenge the quasi-mandatory nature of prisons' Aboriginal-centred programmes which makes them part of the oppression, not part of the emancipation, of Aboriginal prisoners. They must also challenge programmes' potential neo-colonial character, and question to what degree appropriation is at work within Euro-Canadian prisons. In sum, prisons' hegemonic vision of Aboriginality confines both Aboriginal persons and Aboriginality into authoritative

representations which construct a distinct assembly of power relations, modes of resistance and identity work. Social work practitioners would do well to acknowledge this potent social script.

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Note

1. Expressions such as 'Native', 'Indian', 'Amérindien' (French form) or 'Aboriginal' originate from 'outside-naming' (Chartrand, 1991)—a process whereby settler people attach settler (often derogatory) names to describe the descendants of the original inhabitants of what is now Canada. As a constant source of confusion to commentators, labels used in reference to First peoples have garnered valuable discussions (e.g. Chartrand, 1991; Sawchuk, 1985, 2000; Simpson, 2000; Paci, 2002; Lawrence, 2004). While acknowledging the sensitivity of identities to outside manipulations, we adopt the term 'Aboriginal' as it appears to be associated with an emerging emancipation of ancient societies from political and social domination as well as from outside-naming (Chartrand, 1991). Moreover, Alfred and Corntassel (2005), suggest that many First peoples have embraced the Canadian government's label of 'Aboriginal' as a self-reference for the groups denoted in the 1982 amendments of the Constitution of Canada (1982 Constitution Act, being Schedule B to the 1982 Canada Act (U.K.) 1982, c.11).

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Exhibit: *National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls*

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Submitted by: Bernard Jacob

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