

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

Location/Phase: Part 3: Toronto

Witness: Amy Hudson

Submitted by: Fanny Wylde, Commission

Add'l info: P03P03P0201

Date: JUN 12 2018

Initials

I/D

Entered

43

37

The Culture Carriers

Reflections on Southern Inuit Women's Stories

Research Report to NCC prepared by:

Amy Hudson

3/31/2015

Researchers: Amy Hudson, Dr. Sylvia Moore, Dr. Andrea Procter

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	p.2
My role as researcher and Southern Inuit woman.....	p.3
The 'voices 'of Southern Inuit women.....	p.4
Connection to land and sea.....	p.5
Storytelling.....	p.6
Lessons learned.....	p.7
Cultural identity and survival in the face of colonialism.....	p.7

“Our generation in my family now lives with the repercussions of having been brought up to consider our Native heritage, at very deep levels, to be meaningless. And yet, like a tough weed whose roots are pervasively anchored everywhere in the soil of this land and which therefore cannot be uprooted, our Native identity continues to manifest its presence in my family, even after a generation of silencing” (Lawrence, 2012, preface).

Introduction

This reflection paper aims to understand Indigenous identity and belonging through an academic and community lens- combining formal and informal interpretation and analytical skills. More specifically, the following discussion attempts to better understand and contextualize Southern Inuit women’s concepts of identity and belonging in NunatuKavut. The goal is not to produce an understanding of Southern Inuit life and culture that is absolute; rather, we aim to offer a way of understanding and interpreting how Southern Inuit women explain concepts of culture and identity in ways that are relevant to their everyday lives and which have implications for community and cultural survival. The complexities that have ensued due to colonial attempts to civilize and modernize the Inuit on Labrador’s south coast point to a history that is rich, vibrant, brutal and resilient. While there is much to share in telling this history that would enlighten the scope of this discussion, we will not do so here. Alternatively, we will discuss modern day ideas and concepts of belonging that have been conveyed by Southern Inuit women in light of a colonial history.

When interpreting community and individual concepts and perceptions of Indigenous belonging it is important to keep in mind the diversity of Indigenous cultures and experiences that are affected by various and differing degrees of “historical experiences with colonialism” (McGrath, nd, p.38). While diverse Indigenous cultures and communities share similar and different histories and realities, it is largely agreed that “there are core cultural commonalities that emerge as a consequence of particular political economies and world-views of land based cultures (McGrath, nd, p.38). This commonality is

especially evident when understanding western and Indigenous philosophies as it relates to viewing land (McGrath, nd). "It is the tie to the land that informs the core of Aboriginal culture and identities" (Green, 2009, p.39). This land based understanding of identity will be used to understand and interpret Southern Inuit women's expressions of Cultural belonging.

While attempts to colonize Southern Labrador have had many impacts on the life and society of people living in NunatuKavut, it has had particular impacts upon the lives of Southern Inuit women. Traditionally, women have been valued as integral to Indigenous community life-the culture carriers. The role and contributions of Inuit women in Indigenous society play a part in the functionality of daily life. Yet, the role of Southern Inuit women in NunatuKavut has been largely ignored, particularly in the cultural context which has consequentially created a gap in how Indigenous and non-Indigenous society perceive the life, history and culture of Southern Inuit. This has had implications for outsiders in their ability to understand and interpret Southern Inuit culture.

To better inform the discussion of belonging, we draw from recent conversations with women in NunatuKavut that transpired between female community members and a female academic research team, both of which I am a part of.

My role as researcher and Southern Inuit woman

As I am informing the scope of this reflection paper largely from interviews and focus groups with NunatuKavut women, I should acknowledge my position in this particular research endeavour. As an Indigenous researcher working with my own people, I have a dual role as it relates to being a part of this work. I come to this research as both a researcher and community member. While I share the goals and objectives of my fellow colleagues, I also share the concerns that community members sometimes have when it comes to research: what does it mean? What is it really for? What can it really do?

Those of us who work in and with our own communities know first-hand the complexities involved and the toll it takes-emotionally and intellectually. Indigenous researchers working within their communities understand that the work moves beyond a commitment to social justice. We work knowing that we are personally invested for our ancestors, for ourselves and for future generations. This is not the first engagement that I have had with research in my own territory. Yet each time I am confronted with a sense that we are in a race against time to fight back against the atrocities of colonialism (much of which has become internalized). My goal then becomes less about understanding a select group of Indigenous women from a given territory-I know the women- I am one of them. My goal is to better understand the ways in which we, the privileged, can assist in empowering Indigenous women and communities to become active in matters deciding the future of their lives as Indigenous people belonging to Indigenous lands.

The 'voices 'of Southern Inuit Women

During community discussions with women in NunatuKavut, (the first phase of a research collaboration between Memorial University and NunatuKavut Community Council), we sought out to bring Southern Inuit women's voices to the fore in an attempt to inform Southern Inuit life, history and culture, through an Inuit female perspective. The women's initial conversations provided information for thoughtful discussion. In reflecting on these conversations it became apparent that the women were providing the context for understanding and interpreting their expressions of cultural identity. Before moving into a discussion of women's expressions of cultural identity and belonging, we will describe some of the prominent research themes and consequent reflections that have surfaced out of conversations thus far, which are directly relevant to the cultural identity discussions which follow. In addition, we highlight some of the obstacles that have presented themselves to the research team and which have implications for understanding the women's expressions of cultural identity.

The themes that permeated in the discussions with the women are central in understanding Southern Inuit cultural identity and belonging. However, in attempting to understand the way(s) in which Southern Inuit women (that we spoke with) express their cultural identity, we observed that this was done through less transparent means. Thus, the ability to understand the richness of the conversations in a way that does justice to understanding Indigenous society, requires the use of a lens or framework that is embedded in Indigenous ideology and feminism. The formal and informal education and skills that I have attained due to post-secondary experience and being a Southern Inuit woman myself, are therefore integral to shaping my understanding as to how Southern Inuit women conceive of and express their Indigenous identity in these ways. The primary themes include: a) Connection to land and sea; b) Storytelling.

Connection to Land and Sea

In Southern Inuit society “it is important to maintain a constant and intimate relationship to the land” (Hanrahan, 2000, p.233).The connection to a geographic space-the land, the sea, the community, was evident in discussions with women. Women voiced their knowledge and expertise in ways that reflected connections between women’s sense of place and identity in relation to the land on which they grew up; that of their grandmothers, great-grand mothers, and so forth. The idea that the connection to the land and sea cannot be removed from women’s sense of self or taken away from them, reveal a source of strength and connection to the land and sea that is unrelenting. The idea that the land and sea serves as a teacher-teaching values that are core to Southern Inuit life was discussed in various ways. Furthermore, the idea that one needs to connect to the land and sea was articulated in a holistic way. For example, connecting to the land provides an emotional security to the women, but in addition to this, a physical connection to the land and sea was discussed as central to health and well-being. Indeed, in Southern Inuit society, a healthy and active relationship to and with the land have positive

implications for health; socially, emotionally mentally and physically (Hanrahan, 2000). And this includes the ability to live and move freely on the land as their ancestors had for so many generations before them. Our conversations also spoke to the way in which nature must be respected for all that it provides and for that which it can take away. Overwhelmingly, the necessity of knowledge and skills to survive on the land given the harsh and unpredictable weather was conveyed and cited as imperative to life in NunatuKavut.

Storytelling

The women explained that storytelling is vital to informing the knowledge base of future generations and this knowledge includes the necessary skills and education needed to survive harsh climates and terrain and to live off the land. The women expressed the importance of sharing stories with each other and with children and youth as necessary. Equally important is the sense of a deep loss between sharing of stories among generations. However, we also noticed that women were less inclined to talk about them-selves directly and always shared stories that reflected and embodied strong kinship and community ties. The way in which all social networks-all parts of the community, are interconnected was evident. This inclusive way of storytelling and the way it was demonstrated by the women in conversation becomes a way in which the women become and are active in 'cultural survival' (Quoted from a discussion with Dr. Andrea Procter).

In reflecting upon the stories the women shared, and the manner in which stories were told, it was evident that the women did not feel as though they were, or should be, the sole authors of the stories, nor did they appear interested in attaining this ability. The reference to other story tellers in telling the stories as well as the way stories were deflected to other women in the room for comments was consistent and reflected the way in which women's identity cannot be explained or understood in isolation from other community people. The women did not always directly connect their method of

storytelling to their sense of cultural identity (or at least not that we were aware of at the time). Yet, the way in which Inuit society and Inuit women in particular, refrain from drawing attention to themselves, taking care to not sound boastful, but rather, share stories that reflect learning experiences as children or younger adults (McGrath) is consistent with storytelling in Inuit society.

Lessons learned

In speaking with the women, there was much to be learned, not the least of which was the idea that perspective and worldviews amongst Indigenous society differ to those of non-Indigenous society in intricate ways that have implications for knowledge production. For example, the research team's questions that centered on women specific ideas with the expectation of women centric answers were met by the women with a certain level of defensiveness. As such, their responses reflected the totality of human life-demonstrating that all parts of community life are interconnected. At the same time, the research team also understood that the women were expressing modesty in their unwillingness to discuss themselves entirely and we learned that to speak of oneself in this way was a form of "bragging" or arrogance that was not a part of who they are.

While there have been many negative effects as a result of the colonial influence (i.e., internalized colonialism), which have brought consequences for Indigenous community life in what is now known as NunatuKavut, colonial society has not yet defeated the Indigenous histories of the people.

Cultural identity and survival in the face of colonialism

The women of NunatuKavut overwhelmingly expressed their understanding and sense of cultural identity vis a vis an articulation of their relationships with people and the natural environment. This was done directly by some women, making direct connections between culture and land while others expressed similar sentiments, but did not draw direct connections in this way. This is not to say that

those women who did not articulate the relationship directly, did not understand it in this way. The nature of the discussions with the women were not ideal for in-depth discussion as there were multiple women involved in community conversations, sitting and discussing together, in turn.

The themes that have been discussed above were evident and permeated all of the conversations that took place with the women in Nunatukavut and they point to the way in which Southern Inuit life and culture is understood and perceived by Southern Inuit women who live in NunatuKavut communities. The way that the women articulated their everyday lives, and that of the people before them, in their communities, is central to beginning to understand Southern Inuit cultural identity and belonging in NunatuKavut. The significance of the women's relationship to the land and their articulation of the importance of storytelling for children and youth was demonstrated in a way that revealed how these discussions reify who they were and are as Indigenous people. The relationship to the land and sea as necessary for survival (physically, emotionally socially and mentally) reveal the way in which people are deeply connected to the land and their roots-to the people that came before them. The women described a sense of belonging to the land that was articulated with a sense of pride and privilege. I understand this discussion in this way because as a Southern Inuit woman myself, I too understand that there is no greater way to explain who I am and where I come from, then by explaining a connection to the land to which I belong.

The way the women acted as storytellers during our discussions demonstrated the way in which all parts of community life are interconnected. The women refrained from acting as the authors of the stories that were shared and directed the conversation to other women and their experiences to inform and elaborate upon stories and knowledge. This form of integrative storytelling revealed the necessity of community in matters pertaining to community life and history. A sense of community solidarity and togetherness describe the way in which the women spoke of their connection to the land and sea, its

importance in theirs and community life, as well as the significance of storytelling so that future generations learn and understand the way of life of ancestors, of parents and grandparents, and ultimately, of a culture. Indeed, "storytelling is Connected to our Homelands and is crucial to the cultural and political resurgence of Indigenous nations" (Corntassell et al., 2009, p.137). The stories shared by the women, the way in which they participated in informing Southern Inuit life, history and culture, reveal how their expressions of cultural identity, and the way that they explain and understand concepts of culture, are central to cultural survival in modern day NunatuKavut. Whether the women knowingly do so or not, whether they are aware of the significant role they play in community life- the women of NunatuKavut continue to be the 'culture carriers.'

Reference List

Corntassel, Jeff, Chaw-win-is and T'lakwadzi. (2009). Indigenous storytelling, truth-telling, and community approaches to reconciliation. *ESC:English Studies in Canada*, 35(1), 137-159.

Green, Joyce. (2009). The complexity of Indigenous identity formation and politics in Canada: self-determination and decolonization. *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, 2(2), 36-46.

Hanrahan, Maura. (2000). Industrialization and the politicization of health in Labrador metis society. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 2(2000), 231-250.

Lawrence, Bonita. (2012). *Fractured homeland: federal recognition and Algonquin identity in Ontario*. Vancouver, BC: UBC Press.

McGrath, Robin. (n.d). Circumventing the taboos: Inuit women's autobiographies.

Turner, Dale. (2006). This is not a peace pipe. *Towards a critical Indigenous philosophy*. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press Inc.