

# "Strike Them Hard!" The Baker Massacre Play: Staging Historical Trauma with Blackfoot Children

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*In 1870, the United States army massacred the Blackfoot camp of Chief Heavy Runner. The author's great-great grandmother survived the Baker Massacre. In 2006, the author suffered the loss of her 22-year old daughter to suicide. "Strike Them Hard!" The Baker Massacre Play was submitted as a final project towards the fulfillment of the author's requirements for a Master of Education degree. This paper is a reflexive critique of how the telling of this story through theatre serves to validate why the arts matter to Indigenous education. It is also a testament to the healing power of Indigenous theatre.*

## *Introduction*

On January 15, 1870, United States Lieutenant General Philip H. Sheridan issued the following orders, via telegraph, to his soldiers stationed in the Montana territory:

If the lives and property of the citizens of Montana can best be protected by striking Mountain Chief's band, I want them struck. Tell Baker to strike them hard. (Ege, 1970, pp. 118-119)

Eight days later, in the early morning hours of January 23, Major Eugene M. Baker and his troops marched into Chief Heavy Runner's camp. Although he was clearly informed that this was the wrong camp, he *struck* anyway. Baker and his troops massacred approximately 217 Blackfeet lives that day (Phillips, 1996, p. 82). My great-great grandmother *Natohkyiaakii* (Holy Bear Woman) was one of the children who survived.

136 years later, I, too, survived my own traumatic experience. On October 28, 2006, I lost my oldest daughter *Apaisapiaakii* (Galina Natalie Brave Rock) to suicide. She was a beautiful, young 22-year old woman and a mother of two small children. She was also six months pregnant. Galina was planning on majoring in Women's Studies at the University of Lethbridge. Galina was a talented dancer, singer, and a creative writer. She possessed many gifts and was loved by many, and she loved to tell stories.

Suicide is a major issue among Aboriginal people in Canada. In fact, the suicide rates, according to Health Canada, are five to seven times higher for First Nations youth than for non-Aboriginal youth. I always knew that suicide was highly prevalent in my community, but until it happened in my own family, I had no clue just how devastating it is.

In October 2008, at the *Performing the World Conference* in New York city, a total of 23 Blackfoot children staged the debut performance of "*Strike Them*

*Hard!* The Baker Massacre Play that I wrote and directed. The play was submitted in fulfillment of my Master of Education project at the University of Lethbridge (Big Head, 2009). In addition to the play, this project includes a personal narrative of my own encounter with the story of the 1870 Baker Massacre. "*Strike Them Hard!*" The Baker Massacre Play was the culmination of a long and painful journey that led me to one of the darkest moments in the history of the Blackfoot people. Given that it was only a year after my own devastating loss when I began to seriously research and write the play, I suffered a tremendous amount of emotional turmoil. The pain from one event would trigger the pain and anger from the other.

In this paper, I will tell the story of the 1870 Baker Massacre and describe how the telling of this historical event through theatre serves to validate and enhance existing research on Indigenous theatre and education. Furthermore, as a mother who lost a child to suicide, and as a drama teacher, I desperately needed a reason to keep theatre alive in my heart, and the motivation to stage another play for my students. Since 1996, I have directed approximately 24 drama productions involving over 200 Blackfoot children, so I knew that my students were looking forward to another play that year. It has since become clear that:

The arts matter to children. We know this as parents. We know this as teachers. And we know this from our memories of our own childhood. And now we have writings by knowledgeable authorities, reports by government committees, curricula from ministries of education, and research from expert academics, that document and articulate the role and power of the arts in the lives of our children. What we knew in our hearts was right all along. (Booth, 2004, p. 9, cf. Robinson, 2008, p. 38)

As I take a reflexive look back at my MEd project, six years after my daughter's death and from a newfound perspective as a doctoral student and novice academic scholar, I now have a deeper understanding and appreciation for the significance of this work and its contributions to Indigenous theatre and education. Quite frankly, I am simply amazed that I was able to complete my project and fulfill my MEd requirements at that particular time in my life. Ultimately, it was the children, who by breathing life into the script, succeeded by breathing life into my spirit as well.

### *Indigenous Theatre is Storytelling*

There is a powerful movement towards reclamation, decolonizing, and healing from historical traumas among Indigenous peoples. The world of academia is definitely leading the way by ensuring that Indigenous perspectives are both accepted and respected (Bastien, 2004; Battiste, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Little Bear, 2000, 2004; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2009). Histories and stories from Indigenous perspectives have also succeeded in leaning ears towards voices that were once silenced (Archibald, 2008; Cole, 2006). Indigenous theatre, which is the focus of this paper, is, in my opinion, where the most excitement is taking place.

Storytelling among Indigenous peoples is what keeps the languages alive and the ceremonies strong. Storytelling, among other things, is our connection to the land, to our ancestors, and to the spirit beings, and "Indigenous theatre, like all theatre, is storytelling" (Driskill, 2008, p. 155). Gilbert (2009, p. 518) reports that "Indigenous theatre in Canada ... has become a significant force in the nation's cultural repertoire over the past twenty-five years, capturing the attention of both local audiences and the international performing arts market." Since the 1980s, the "most exciting development [in Native literature] ... has taken place in drama" (Knowles, 2005, p. 108). Why has drama become such a driving force behind Indigenous writers? One of the most prolific writers from Canada, who is also an Ojibway playwright, Drew Hayden Taylor (2005, p. 61), shares his theory:

... theatre is a logical extension of the storytelling technique ... it is the process of taking our audience on a journey, using your voice, your body and the spoken word. Moving that journey onto the stage is merely the next logical step. With their oral culture, Native people gravitate towards theatre.

Renowned Cree playwright, Tomson Highway (2005, p. 1), shares his perspective on his success on stage:

Why the stage? For me, the reason is that this oral tradition translates most easily and most effectively into a three dimensional medium. In a sense, it's like taking the "stage" that lives inside the mind, the imagination, and transposing it—using words, actors, lights, sound—onto the stage in a theatre.

In spite of the devastating impact of this massacre on my ancestors, their story still needs to be told. Jo-ann Archibald (2008, p. 7), a Stó:lō scholar, recognizes the need for Indigenous people to reclaim our stories, stating that, "indigenous stories have lost much educational and social value due to colonization." Māori scholar, Linda Smith (1999, p. 2), adds to this point:

Indigenous peoples across the world have other stories to tell which not only question the assumed nature of those ideals and the practices that they generate, but also to serve to tell an alternative story: the history of Western research through the eyes of the colonized.

Blackfoot scholar, Leroy Little Bear (2000), adds to the importance of re-storying our Indigenous histories by posing a question first: "How do Aboriginal people educate and inculcate the philosophy, values, and customs of their cultures? ... [through] storytelling. Storytelling is a very important part of the educational process. It is through stories that customs and values are taught and shared" (p. 81). For the first time, the story of the Baker Massacre, which is also referred to as the Bear River Massacre<sup>2</sup> or the massacre of Chief Heavy Runner's camp, was staged from a Blackfoot playwright's perspective.

### *1870 Baker Massacre*

The winter of 1870 was one of the coldest winters on record. It was minus 30 degrees Celsius when Major Baker's troops descended upon Chief

Heavy Runner's camp, located along the Marias River in northern Montana. Baker's troops, as previously mentioned, were looking for Mountain Chief's camp but came across Chief Heavy Runner's camp instead. Prior to this military expedition, General deTrobriand, Commander of the Military District of Montana, gave Major Baker a direct order that because Chief Heavy Runner and his people had "uniformly remained friendly" they were to be "left unmolested" (Ege, 1970, p. 120). Upon discovering that the army had surrounded the wrong camp, Joe Kipp, the scout who was hired to lead the troops to Mountain Chief's camp, informed Baker that this was:

"...not Mountain Chief's camp. It is the camp of Black Eagle and Heavy Runner. I know it by its differently painted lodges." And he was right. Since he had been there a few days previously, Mountain Chief's band had moved down the river about ten miles, and this band had come down and occupied the deserted campground .... Baker [replied]: "That makes no difference, one band or another of them; they are all Piegans and we will attack them." And then to one of his men: "Sergeant, stand behind this scout, and if he yells or makes a move, shoot him." And finally: "All ready men. Fire!" (Shultz, 1962, pp. 303-304)

The Baker massacre was a major historical event that led to the eventual final conquest and colonization of the Blackfeet nation. Yet, this atrocity remained relatively "obscure" for over a hundred years (Gibson & Hayne, n.d.).

Last Gun was Chief Heavy Runner's youngest son. Last Gun was just a young boy at the time of the massacre. He, too, survived that day. One of Last Gun's grandsons is Darrell Kipp. Today, Kipp is a renowned Blackfeet tribal historian and educator who has researched the Baker massacre extensively. Kipp declared that, "in its day [the Baker Massacre] was a horrific blow to [the Blackfeet] ... and it's possible we still suffer the effects ... [and] the residue of that atrocity is still with us!" (Alberta Education, 2011).

This deliberate act of violence carried out by the United States Army did not go unnoticed in Washington. Public outcry deplored this inhumane slaughter. The angry protests included Vincent Colyer, Secretary to the Board of Indian Commissioners, who:

... charged in a letter read in the [United States] House of Representatives that Baker's troops had killed but fifteen warriors, the remainder of the 173 slain being noncombatants. Fifty of these noncombatants, claimed the outraged secretary, had been children under the age of twelve, many of whom "were in their parents' arms". Furthermore, Colyer claimed that the village had been defenseless because of a raging smallpox epidemic. (Hutton, 1982, p. 39)

However, according to Joe Kipp, there were approximately 217 bodies that he counted that day (Phillips, 1996, p. 82). These numbers do not include the many who froze to death as they made their way to nearby Blackfoot camps or to Fort Benton, which was 90 miles away.

The *New York Times* echoed Colyer's sentiments by referring to the Baker Massacre as a "sickening slaughter" (Hutton, 1982, p. 41). As cited in Hutton (1982, p. 41), Wendell Phillips, the famous American abolitionist and advocate for Native Americans:

... declared Sheridan's hands to be "foul with Indian blood, shed by assassins who acted under his orders and received his approval." "I only know the names of three savages upon the Plains," Phillips trumpeted at a Reform League meeting "Colonel Baker, General Custer, and at the head of all, General Sheridan."

In 1935, *Kyo'tokan* (Bear Head), a Blackfoot Elder, asked his friend, James W. Shultz, an author and historian who had been living among the Blackfeet for over 50 years, to write his story. Bear Head was 12 years-old at the time of the massacre and in his old age he wanted to ensure that this traumatic event would not be forgotten:

Apikuni [Shultz's Blackfoot name], how fast we old ones are dying off. Of those of us who survived the massacre of a great camp of our tribe by the white soldiers, sixty-five winters ago, only four are now alive: my cousin ... Comes with-Rattles, and I; Heard-by-Both-Sides Woman and Good-Bear Woman. Well, I am going to tell you again of that terrible wrong we suffered, and I want you to write it for the whites to read: for the whites of this time to learn what their fathers did to us. (Shultz, 1962, p. 282)

As I reflect on Bear Head's words, I can't help but feel saddened by the fact that this old man was sharing his story *for the whites*, yet, in a few generations, many of his own relatives, including myself, would have no recollection of this *horrific* event. The Baker Massacre was almost erased from the annals of history and, more importantly, from the local memory of the Blackfoot people themselves.

#### *First Visit to the Baker Massacre Site*

I was first introduced to the story of the Baker Massacre in the Fall of 2001. I had been teaching at Kainai High School, in my community of the Blood Reserve in southern Alberta, for about five years. The Blood Reserve is the homeland of the Kainai people. The Kainai are part of the Blackfoot Confederacy, which consists of the Siksika Nation and Apatohsiipiikani or Piikani Nation on the Canadian side of the international border and the Amskaapiiikani of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation on the US side.

A visit to the Baker Massacre site was included as part of Kainai High School's Elder/Mentor program that was developed by my colleague *Aippiomahkaa* (Dr. Dwayne Donald) and I. We enlisted the help of tribal historian and respected Elder *Kinakksaapo'p* (Narcisse Blood) to accompany us to the massacre site. It was on the two-hour bus ride from Kainai to the Baker Massacre site when Narcisse began telling me the story of the massacre. He informed me that the Blackfoot referred to the site as *Otsito'totsahpiwa* (the place where they were burned). *Natowapiisaakii* (Carol Murray) is the Tribal History Project Director at Blackfeet Community College in Browning, Montana. She has also done extensive research on the Baker Massacre and is a leading advocate for ensuring that this story will never be forgotten. Carol interviewed many of the Blackfeet Elders in Montana and reported that they refer to the massacre site as "the bad place" or the "place where something bad happened" (Big Head, 2009, p. 6).

The Elders and students from Kainai spent that afternoon in September 2001 listening to descendants of the survivors of the massacre tell their stories as they were passed down in the oral tradition of the Blackfeet. Later, the entire group spent some time walking around the site. I personally felt the deep heaviness and sombre atmosphere that permeated throughout the entire area. As we made our way back home that day, I sat in silence and the only thought on my mind was that this story needs to be told. *And the best way I know how to tell a story is to put it on stage.*

#### *Theatre and Cultural Teachings*

The setting of the opening scene takes place at *Isokoyoomahka's* (Chief Heavy Runner's) camp a few months before the massacre. A traditional Blackfoot naming ceremony is underway. Chief Heavy Runner is transferring the name of his late brother *Kyo'tokan* (Bear Head) to young *Itoomohkitopii* (First Rider). First Rider is Bear Head's 12-year-old son. If you recall, this is the same Bear Head who, in 1935, asked James W. Shultz to write his story "for the whites" (Shultz, 1962). Today, my good friend and traditional ceremonialist from the Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Joe Kipp, carries on the name of his ancestor *Kyo'tokan* (Bear Head).

In a traditional Blackfoot naming ceremony there is usually a prayer offered along with an honour song. Fortunately, I had two young boys in the cast who were gifted singers. They were able to learn Chief Heavy Runner's honour song and sing it for this scene. This honour song has been passed down for many generations and is now known among the Blackfoot as the *Grey Horse Society* song. The first time I heard the song was on January 22, 2008, in Browning, Montana, during the Blackfeet Community College's commemoration of the 138th anniversary of the Baker Massacre. The Blackfeet drummers and singers who honoured us that day were Paul Old Chief and Kenny Old Person.

There are two significant details to keep in mind as this scene was blocked, rehearsed, and eventually performed for the world. First of all, my cast consisted of 23 Blackfoot children ranging in ages from seven to 18 years. Some of the cast members did not have traditional Blackfoot names and were witnessing what an actual naming ceremony looked like for the first time. Secondly, Chief Heavy Runner's honour song is still alive and we were able to incorporate this song into the play, thus ensuring the authenticity and integrity of the song, capturing it within the performance of this play. This is a testament to the strong traditional Blackfoot ways that are still very prevalent among the Blackfoot people.

The Aboriginal peoples in Australia share a similar colonial history with the First Nations peoples of Canada. Upon examining various arts education projects and case studies among the Aboriginal communities in Australia, I recognized some similarities in Indigenous theatre and education as well. For example, one school in Queensland created a dance troupe

in partnership with the local Aboriginal community. One of the benefits of this dance troupe was that it provided the opportunity for participants to "reconnect with their culture and become more actively involved in the life of the community" (Piscitelli et al., 2004, p. 27). Some of the students' responses to a survey conducted on this particular project revealed that "the arts are a major vehicle for learning about their family's cultural background", with one student suggesting: "I use the arts to learn my culture" (Piscitelli et al., 2004, p. 31). Later, as we travelled to New York city for our debut performance, two cast members received their traditional Blackfoot names atop the Statue of Liberty by one of the Kainai elders, *Iiksaiskinii* (Dale Low Horn Sr.), who accompanied us on the trip. This is a lesson and a blessing that these two young children will never forget!

#### *Antecedent Action*

Approximately two years prior to the massacre, Bear Head Sr. was murdered by his son-in-law, Owl Child. Owl Child becomes a key player in the events leading up to the massacre. Owl Child is described as a "strong willed man .... of terrible temper" (Shultz, 1962, pp. 287-294). The two men engaged in a deadly quarrel during a war party:

Owl Child claimed to have killed a Cutthroat [Assiniboine] who without doubt had been killed by [Bear Head] .... When the party returned, bringing ... the terrible news of [Bear Head's] death, Owl Child was not with them. He had gone to his own relatives in Mountain Chief's [emphasis added] camp. (Shultz, 1962, pp. 294-295)

After the above incident, Owl Child gets into another quarrel with a white man, Malcolm Clarke, who was given the Blackfeet name of Four Bears. The history of these two rivals involves Owl Child's wife. One version is that "Four Bears had tried to steal [Owl Child's] woman" (Shultz, 1962, p. 299). However, according to the Blackfeet Elders' accounts, *Natowapiisaakii* (Carol Murray) uncovered that Clarke had, in fact, raped Owl Child's wife resulting in the conception of a child.

Clarke, one of the more prominent citizens in the Montana territory, was married to a Kainai woman, *Iikohkookiaakii* (Cutting Off Head Woman). Cutting Off Head Woman and Owl Child were cousins. Apparently, the rape occurred while Owl Child and his wife were visiting the Clarkes at their ranch in Montana. As a result of this incident, Owl Child hastily left the ranch and it was later discovered that he stole some of Clarke's prized possessions. Clarke and his son, Horace, pursue Owl Child in order to retrieve the stolen property. It was reported that Clarke struck Owl Child with a whip and humiliated him in front of the entire camp (Shultz, 1962).

Eventually, Owl Child exacted his revenge on Malcolm Clarke. On August 17, 1869, five months before the Baker Massacre, Owl Child and a few of his fellow comrades paid a visit to the Clarke ranch and murdered Malcolm Clarke and severely injured his son Horace with a bullet wound

to the face (Phillips, 1996, p. 13). This incident was highly covered in the media of the day and it ultimately sealed the fate of Heavy Runner's camp.

Much is written about the Clarke murder, but little is known of the reaction of the Blackfeet. *Kyo'tokan* [Bear Head] provides insight:

It was not long after the murder of our three men at Many-Houses [three Blackfeet men were shot in cold blood at Fort Benton that same summer of 1869] that visitors brought more news: Owl Child, leading a few of his friends, had gone up to Wolf-Also-Jumped Creek [where the Clarke ranch was located] and had himself killed Four Bears [Clarke]. I was present when Heavy Runner and other leading ones of our band got together to talk about it. They agreed that Owl Child had been justified in killing him. Much as I hated Owl Child for killing my father, I had to admit that he had good right to kill this fire-hearted, quarrelsome, white man. Four Bears had tried to steal his woman; and failing that, had struck him, beaten him. In no other way could Owl Child have wiped out that terrible disgrace. Well, that was naught to me. I was not forgetting my vow: The time was coming when I would make Owl Child cry for what he had done to me and mine. (Shultz, 1962, p. 299).

As you can see, the situation in the Montana territory was highly volatile that summer. Thus, the army was called in to search for Owl Child and the others who were responsible for the Clarke murder. It was well known, at that point, that Owl Child was living among his relatives in Mountain Chief's camp. From that point on, my great-great grandmother, Holy Bear Woman, and the others in Heavy Runner's camp would only have a few precious months left to live in relative peace and innocence. She and the entire camp had no idea what was looming over the horizon.

#### *Exposing the Poison*

Cree playwright, Tomson Highway, acknowledges the power of theatre in the healing process of First Nations peoples. However, he states that "before the healing can take place, the poison has to be exposed" (Taylor, 2005, p. 67). The most difficult scene to write was the actual massacre. You can imagine how heart-wrenching it was to even attempt to stage the following account of Bear Head on that fateful morning of January 23, 1870:

Chief Heavy Runner ran from his lodge toward the seizers [soldiers] on the bank. He was shouting to them and waving a paper writing that our agent had given him, a writing saying that he was a good and peaceful man, a friend of the whites. He had run but a few steps when he fell, his body pierced with bullets. Inside the lodges men were yelling; terribly frightened women and children, screaming—screaming from wounds, from pain as they died. I saw a few men and women, escaping from their lodges, shot down as they ran. Most terrible to hear of all was the crying of little babies at their mother's breasts .... Oh how pitiful were their screamings as they died, and I there, powerless to help them! (Shultz, 1962, pp. 301-302).

One of Heavy Runner's daughters, Samakiinakii (Spear Woman), also survived the massacre. She shared her account in 1932:

[She] herself rushed to a tent where there were a number of sick and dying people. She hid under a backrest on one of the beds. While she lay there, she saw a knife cut a slit in the tepee [sic] and a soldier thrust himself through the opening. He fired at every moving body. Finally, when convinced that no living creature remained, he withdrew. He had not seen the small Indian girl who, in terror, had watched him in his bloody deed. Spear Woman remained paralyzed with fright behind the backrest. ("Massacre of Piegan in 1870", 1932)



Carol Murray uncovered some equally traumatic stories in her interviews with the Blackfeet Elders:

At the onset of the attack .... many of the children ran to the nearby riverbanks. They did not have time to take any winter clothing with them. The children frantically dug into the frozen riverbank with bare hands [in order] to make a hole to crawl into ... [in order to] shelter [themselves] from the flying bullets. (Big Head, 2009, pp. 13-14)

It was at this point in my research when my level of emotion had reached a point where I honestly did not know if I could go on. The following is an excerpt of my personal journal while I was in the midst of writing this scene:

I still find it extremely difficult to read the story of the actual massacre. The images in my head and the sounds I hear consume me. Amid the sounds of guns, I hear heavy breathing of those running for their lives. I hear the screams of women, children and babies. I see red blood everywhere. I hear the silence of those who were killed instantly. I see Galina hanging in my basement. I hear my own screams as I panicked in fear. I hear the banging on the washer and dryer as I tried to get help. I didn't feel the cold on my bare feet as I ran outside screaming for help. My God! This is so hard! The pain is unbearable. A mother should never have to see her dead child ... (Big Head, 2009, p. 52)

The connection between the Baker Massacre and my daughter's death was strong. The pain I felt from both traumatic incidents was of the same magnitude. Eventually:

I began to understand why I could write this play. My own personal trauma had given me the gift I needed to write. I know what it feels like to be so terrified and helpless when death is right in front of me. [I imagine] I felt the same feeling of shock and trauma as Kyo'tokan [Bear Head], Samakiinakii [Spear Woman] and Natohkyiaakii [Holy Bear Woman]. My body was numb and lifeless as I sat there in the aftermath of Galina's death. I will never compare my tragedy to the Baker Massacre, I only know that it is possible to experience that same kind of shock and pain today. (Big Head, 2009, p. 53)

### *Indigenous Theatre as Decolonizing and Healing*

Indigenous scholars expressed the importance of examining and healing from the traumas resulting from colonialism. In 1996, the "first generation of Indigenous scholars accomplished in both Eurocentric and Indigenous thought" (Battiste, 2000, p. xviii) convened for 10 days at the University of Saskatchewan and addressed all aspects of colonization:

Through our sharing, listening, feeling, and analyzing, we engaged in a critique of the trauma of colonization. We examined the frameworks of meaning behind it, we acknowledged the destructiveness that it authorized, and we imagined a postcolonial society that embraced and honoured our diversity. (Battiste, 2000, p. xvii)

Although there are many layers to decolonization that are screaming for attention, my research into the story of the Baker Massacre, however, provides insight into the importance of decolonizing the mind and heart through re-storying or re-telling our stories in creative ways and from an Indigenous perspective. What resulted, for me, was recognition that the necessary healing from traumatic experiences can flow freely as we begin

to peel back the layers of hard truths. I definitely came to understand that “through the naming of our wounds, the healing can take place” (Driskill, 2008, p. 157).

As you can see, Indigenous theatre provides an effective medium for decolonization and healing. According to Driskill (2008, pp. 155-157), “through it we can learn what decolonization and healing feel like. Native theatre helps us understand our histories, tell our stories and imagine our futures ... [and] Decolonization and healing go hand in hand.”

#### *Aftermath of the Baker Massacre*

It was reported that Joe Cobell, an Italian immigrant and scout hired by the army, fired the first shot that killed Chief Heavy Runner. Cobell was married to Mountain Chief's sister and it was reported that he promised his wife that he would ensure Mountain Chief's safety. Cobell justified his actions by claiming that he was looking to retrieve six head of horses that Heavy Runner had allegedly stolen from him (Phillips, 1996, p. 80).

Phillips (1996, p. 94) reports that, “Congress never launched an official investigation of the massacre... and none of those responsible for carrying it out were ever censured or cashiered.” General Sheridan, who had been persistently lobbying Washington for complete control of Indian Affairs, never did get his wish. According to Horace Clarke, who accompanied the army on this expedition, “it [was] an undeniable fact that Col. Baker was drunk” (Gibson & Haynes, n.d.b, p. 8). Baker was “thereafter known in army circles as ‘Piegan’ Baker, he never rose above his rank ... of major” (Hutton, 1982, pp. 42-43). He died at the age of 48 from cirrhosis of the liver (Gibson & Haynes, n.d.a, p. 3).

When she and other Indigenous scholars met at the University of Saskatchewan in 1996, Marie Battiste (2000, pp. xvii-xviii) discovered that, “we could not be the cure if we were the disease.” As painful as it was to trudge through this project, I was definitely able to release a tremendous amount of hurt, anguish, and loneliness for both my daughter and my great-great grandmother. Today, I still shed tears and I'll probably shed many more in the years to come. But, I also have peace in my life and a deep sense of gratitude for the unexpected gifts that we receive from the most unlikely experiences.

#### *Arts-Based Research: Performative Inquiry*

Through a literature review into art-based research methodologies, I discovered, with a tremendous amount of relief and gratitude, that I was not alone in my area of research. As I take a reflexive look at my MEd project, the methodology that can best be applied to my work on the Baker Massacre is found in Fels' (2004) work. I can relate to her experiences as a performing arts educator and was inspired by her subsequent doctoral studies where she “conceptualized and articulated performative inquiry

as a research methodology: a mode of inquiry in which the researcher or educator engages in *performative explorations* with participants as a means of investigation and learning" (Fels, 2004, p. 79), or, in other words, "a research methodology that uses the medium and processes of drama as a way of knowing" (Belliveau, 2006, p. 7).

Although arts-based research is relatively new to the world of academia, the ongoing efforts of academic scholars in this field have provided the necessary terminology or language to engage in fruitful dialogues on projects such as *The Baker Massacre Play* and its impact on the students who participated in the production.

In spite of the heaviness of the topic, I chose to stage this play with children. My rationale was based on the fact that most of the survivors of the massacre were children and I wanted to share their resiliency with our current generation of Blackfoot children. I have this idealistic notion that if today's children can recognize the strength and spirit of their ancestors, then perhaps they can emulate those same qualities as they face today's challenges. I want to live to see the day when suicide is eradicated from our Indigenous communities. I wanted to end the play on a positive note to show the resiliency of the Blackfoot. The following are the stage directions for the last scene of the play, titled "We're Still Here!":

Child enters with a hand drum and begins singing Heavy Runner's honor song. The children enter the stage as if they were still walking the 90 miles to Fort Benton: the first ones will still be in that day, the next ones will show a progression of walking through time; from the early 1900's to today's modern dress: a fancy dancer, a traditional dancer, a graduate, an athlete, a doctor, etc ... Finally, we'll re-enact Chief Heavy Runner walking from back stage center to down stage holding the paper in his hand. (Big Head, 2009, p. 126)

A reflexive critique of my MED project served to provide what Fels (2004, p. 79) refers to as "a theoretical underpinning for the work I do in drama education." As Fels (2004, p. 80) shares her own personal journey into performative inquiry as a research methodology, she states that:

Performative inquiry ... in which performance is understood as an improvisational space of interaction, may be understood as a co-evolving interaction between participants and their environment within which moments of learning emerge, just as life dances into being within the interrelationships.

The entire journey of *"Strike Them Hard!" The Baker Massacre Play* has indeed shown me an example of "life dancing into being" for my cast, my crew, and our community. For example, every one of the 23 children in the cast had to perform an audition piece. Some sang with their front teeth missing, some told stories, some danced, and some performed monologues. Everyone who auditioned was selected for the production. At the close of the auditions, I went to my planning committee and declared that since we *didn't have any money anyway*, we were taking all 23 children to New York city!

This was, by far, the largest undertaking in my career as a playwright, director, and as a teacher. During the Summer of 2008, there was excitement in the air as the students and I collaborated on each scene. I would rush home after each rehearsal and commence working on the scene for the next day. Today, you can ask any one of those 23 children about the Baker Massacre and they will answer all your questions just as Marvin Calf Robe Jr. did. He was about 12 years old when he was cast as *Kyo'tokan* (Bear Head) in the play:

When I hear about this Baker Massacre ... I always feel like I want to get up and talk about it ... When people talk about it, the way I see it, is that they tell a complete different story. They just talk about the massacre. And they always say about what happened there. But really, if I got up and told them, they would know why it happened and how it all got started and when it happened. (Alberta Education, 2011)

Not only do these 23 children know the story of what happened to our ancestors on that fateful morning of January 23, 1870, but their parents know and their grandparents know. In fact, the world knows because we performed it on Broadway in New York at the *Performing the World I* conference. Plus, we also had two sold-out shows at the historic Empress Theatre in Fort Macleod, Alberta, and a final performance on January 23, 2009 at the Commemoration Ceremonies of the 139th anniversary of the Baker Massacre, hosted by Blackfeet Community College in Browning, Montana. I calculated that this play was performed to over 1,000 people throughout all its shows combined; there's a good chance that this story will not be forgotten ever again, especially among the Blackfoot/Blackfeet people.

The experiences of this project validates what Lea Whitford, Chair of the Blackfeet Studies Department at Blackfeet Community College in Browning, Montana, now believes: "students *can* create and they *should* take our histories and they *should* create with it" (Alberta Education, 2011).

### Conclusion

I realize that this entire paper is a difficult read. It is hard to reconcile the traumatic experiences of a massacre of an entire camp and a suicide. I struggle with the intellectualization of such personal and painful experiences. Yet, I've come to realize that in order to tell these stories in a safe and caring way, we need some kind of lens with which to make sense of these kinds of experiences. If we want to make a difference within Indigenous education, then we have to be real. As awkward and uncomfortable as it is, we simply have to tell it like it is. Our children deserve to hear the truth from their ancestors' perspectives. I also want to point out that the writing of this paper and the reliving of the experience definitely served to enhance my own personal healing journey. I would like to end by sharing three letters: one to my students, one to teachers, and one to my daughter.

To Students:

You are the reason why I chose to go through this painful process. I never wanted you to stumble across this story of our ancestors and ask the same question I did: "Why didn't I know this story?... I give you this story with a charge that you keep this story alive. Remember the strength and resiliency of the children who kept putting one foot in front of the other despite the freezing cold and devastating loss of their loved ones .... Don't ever give up. We're still here! Walk ... with the dignity and grace of your ancestors who walk beside you.

To Teachers:

I hope my experience has not deterred you from taking on a project such as this. It is my hope that you will take this work and add to it. Once it is in your hands, the story becomes a part of you .... The arts are a powerful tool when they are used in the classroom. There is no better way to connect with our students than the arts .... I encourage you to talk about suicide with your students .... We are all affected. For that day that you decide to stage this play, I already give you my blessing.

To my dear Galina:

My girl, you gave me the strength to do this. I didn't think I could carry on without you, but you gave me the courage to keep going. I dedicated this play to you, my girl, because you were the gifted writer. You were the story-teller. You were the creative one. You were the one who was not afraid to tell the painful stories .... You are in a place with the ancestors, and I hope they aren't too mad at me for the way I chose to tell their story. If they are ... can you take care of it? Until we meet again, MOM.

(Big Head, 2009, p. 59-61)

Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Blackfeet/Blackfoot are historically one nation. However, the distinction is that those on the American side of the Canada-US border are referred to as Blackfoot.

<sup>2</sup> The Bear River is the original Blackfeet name of the Marias River. The river was explored in 1905 during the Lewis & Clark Expedition. The river was renamed by Meriwether Lewis after his cousin, back east.

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