

that they've suffered. I left my foster home when I was only 15 years old, never to return, and never to resolve or reconcile anything with my foster mom.

I did make the journey back to my home community, but not for three more years. And when I did it was not to my mother, but to my oldest sister, who led me to my family and to my community. She paraded me to my maternal aunts, uncles, and cousins. Her house became a place to bask in the familial love, and Maskwacis became my home.

My mother and my sister had a strained relationship. I did not reunite with my mother for the first few years upon my return to Maskwacis, not until we had a tragedy, not until my second oldest sister died. She passed away in the late 1990s. I drove home that sunny, summer day to bury her. And it was the longest drive. Navigating the rough reserve roads to my father's home for our sister's wake, I was filled with trepidation.

This had nothing to do with my father. It was because I knew my mother would be there. As I turned into my father's driveway, I gasped. My nervousness stole my breath. I pulled up to the house, and I parked. I turned my car off, and I sat there for a moment thinking and feeling like I had no idea what to do. I was left with no choice other than to get out of my car. Just then I saw my sister standing in the doorway. I found the strength to walk up those porch steps. She and I hugged, and she told me that our mother was on the deck with everyone else.

I knew in that moment that I had to go to our mother, the woman who abandoned me. And it seemed like a million steps to the doorway that led to the deck. The moment I walked on the deck, there was complete silence. The only sound I could hear was a summer breeze and my deep breathing. I just knew the woman that was sitting with my aunt was my mother. It was instinct. I stopped for a moment, I saw her, and she saw me. She looked at me, and then she quickly looked down. I know it was only seconds, but for me, it felt like it was minutes before I could move. And in those minutes, I saw her, human being, woman, and my mother, who had just lost a daughter, with a daughter standing before her that she had lost years before. I took the empty seat on the other side of her. I truly felt so bad for her—that she was about to bury a daughter. And without looking at her, I took her hand in mine. And without words, we held each other's hands. That silent conversation was one of the most important conversations of my life.

I now know that was reconciliation, and it was only in preparation for this presentation today did I realize that it was probably one of the first most powerful moments of reconciliation in my life. It was not just about holding her hand. It was about coming to terms with who I am, all the way back and all the way forward. It was about holding her hand, and knowing from where she came, all the way back and all the way forward. It's about holding my own daughter's hands, because I know where she goes, all the way back and all the way forward, and for my wee little granddaughter, it is the same. I am hanging on tightly to the thread that goes through me, all the way back and all the way forward, for all my relations. That is what I bring to this scholarship and to this research about reconciliation and about epistemology.

#### References

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## Mobilizing Indigenous Epistemologies: Re-visioning Reconciliation Through Literature

Eileen Marthiensen

My name is Eileen Marthiensen. We are here to share our own truths, our stories. I am so humbled and honoured to be here today and to be in front of the scholars I respect. I have read your words, I have reread your words, and I have quoted you. I have taken so much of your thoughts and your energy into my own heart, and I just want to thank you for the opportunity to share my own story with you.

I am Inuvialuk. I was born and raised in Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories. I am the Inuit member of the master's cohort and I have been welcomed with incredibly open arms. The program and learning opportunity have been such a privilege and an incredible journey. For me, it's been the reawakening and rediscovering about who I am and where I'm from. I have spent my life going back to the North, sometimes physically and sometimes in the recollection of memories, such as the sound of geese flying or the first snowfall. What I have realized through this learning journey is that I've carried much of the North with me.

To begin, I am W3-2449. This is the Eskimo identification number that was imposed upon me at birth by the Government of Canada. I am a recipient of what we called the Eskimo identification dog tag, implemented in order for the Government of Canada to track Inuit. This system was introduced and implemented until 1970; it demonstrates a denigrating and minimizing view and lack of respect for Inuit history and identity. Once the Government of Canada realized the Eskimo identification system did not work, they began Project Surname, led by Inuit leader and Northwest Territories councillor Abraham "Abe" Okpik. He travelled to every community in the Arctic, to ensure that every Inuk had a first name and a surname. The complexity is that, historically, Inuit only had one name. The traditional name given at birth recognized a respected person in the community with the intent to remember and honour their spirit. The Inuit person's singular name became their surname and, if Inuit did not have a first name, the missionary often provided one. Imagine the impact on one's family tree.

I have experienced much in my lifetime and I am representative of Indigenous students that I currently serve in my job. I understand their

struggle. I understand what it's like to come to school every day having had mobility issues and experiencing poverty. I believe this is what drives me in my job, to shift the opportunities and educational pathways for the Indigenous students that we serve in education.

The first time I recall leaving the North, the flight attendant provided me with an activity kit on the plane that included a text about Barbie who was a flight attendant. I recall reading this text, and it stood out for me because I thought what an amazing life Barbie must have and how different it was than my reality. Although I couldn't relate to the story, I dreamt of being a flight attendant for a number of years. I related this story to my brother-in-law and shared with him the power of that moment of being introduced to Barbie and seeing a book in my hand for one of the very first times of my life. Thanks to eBay, he provided me with one of the greatest gifts two Christmases ago, the Barbie book of my youth.

My presentation is about reconciliation, and about mobilizing Indigenous epistemologies and re-visioning reconciliation through literature. I am the supervisor of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Education for a large public school system, so this presentation has a personal connection for me. My work entails looking at curricula and pedagogy, which are really important to me and which includes literacy and, specifically, how students see themselves in the literature. How can we retell the truths of our own experiences?

I think it's so important to talk about how students potentially see themselves in literature. We can reconcile through literature by sharing our stories, our own truths, our epistemologies, our histories, and our experiences. When students can see themselves respected and reflected—in the halls, walls, and resources of their school communities—that's empowerment. When students see themselves as strong protagonists in the literature they read, we empower our kids and we shift the story of Indigenous people for all kids. We reconcile by creating relationships within our community and with our teachers, and by ensuring that the curriculum reflects the lives of our Indigenous students.

An important commitment for education at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission last year was the announcement that the Alberta curriculum from Kindergarten to Grade 12 will contain mandatory content so that all teachers and students will learn about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit history, experiences, and perspectives, including residential schools and treaty education. We have come a long way. That is so powerful for me. I want to make sure that through literature we rewrite our nation's history from our perspectives and experiences, that we rewrite our stories and place them in the hands of our students so they see themselves in the text. We need to ensure

that the texts are not written about or for us, but by us. That's reconciliation through literature. Imagine the power of a teacher learning about not only our historical context but also our current realities as Indigenous people. Imagine students sitting side by side, sharing their perspectives, talking about the history, and their lived experience. This is power and reconciliation, breaking down barriers and breaking down walls.

I can only imagine as a young girl if I hadn't been introduced to Barbie but rather had read titles written by Inuvialuk authors, books like *Fatty Legs* and *A Stranger at Home* (Jordan-Fenton & Pokiak-Fenton, 2010, 2011). Barbie's life and mine were in no way similar; in fact, the story of her life didn't represent me, didn't tell my story, or reflect my identity. Imagine the power of literature to contribute to reconciliation. We need to write our own stories, to create literature in which we can see ourselves and our kids can see themselves. We all need to reach out and share our stories. I thank you, very humbly, for listening to my story of identity making through literature.

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