

REFLECTION

My Reflection of That Time

JEANNETTE ARMSTRONG

While there are many different stories to be told by different people in different ways in reflecting back to 1969, I choose to honour the *smaʔmayʔ*¹ – the oral narrative of my people, the Syilx Okanagan. As described in my doctoral research (Armstrong 2012), *smaʔmayʔ* is a form of historical record of personal witnessing shared to transfer the personal memory and personal perspective related to significant and life-changing events meaningful to succeeding generations. Just as did other Syilx Okanagan women before me, including Maria Houghton Brent (1935), Eliza Jane Swalwell (1939), and Mourning Dove (1990), I choose to document this *smaʔmayʔ* through writing. Where possible, to broaden the telling to include other voices, just as one would solicit others to add facts in during an oral telling, I add referenced voices.

The oral *smaʔmayʔ* is situated specifically to provide the listening audience with a personalized narrative view of the teller, including their interpretation of the events witnessed. As such, the oral teller moves fluidly between personal descriptive response and the provision of factual information, to which the teller encourages addition and correction. In the sharing of the teller's particular perspective of the events, anyone who was not witness in the same way to those events is required by *smaʔmayʔ* protocol to include the name of the original witness teller in their telling, as well as to add to or correct the factual information. This is my *smaʔmayʔ* of that time and is focused on the events that stood out and influenced me as witness. It is therefore not intended to include an exhaustive overview of significant events.

Many things leading up to the year 1969 helped to shape the events that reside in my memory as significant in shaping who I am and that I choose to share in this *smaʔmayʔ*. Those were exciting times for any young person in North America on many fronts. I was witness – both on the streets of my hometown and in my own reservation community,

¹ *smaʔmayʔ* is an Okanagan Syilx method of oral documentation (Armstrong 2012).

as well as on radio and TV – to the different waves of resistance that shook us all in different ways.

I am representative of and witness to a movement among “baby boomers”² across the continent during that time as we reached our teenage years. We grew up watching and seeing the courage of people in the civil rights movement and the horrific backlash that emerged. We met the draft dodgers who came to sanctuary in Canada. We heard the folk singers on radio, then bought their albums to play. We sang along to the protest songs against war, and we wore the psychedelic colours that emerged from mind-expanding experimentation with LSD. Just as we had seen the images of burning cities, burning flags, and burning bras all merge into a giant kaleidoscopic view, we also saw hope on the horizon to liberate ourselves from old established prejudices about race, gender, religion, and wealth. We saw and joined in to what flower power meant at concerts, rallies, and at small-town poetry readings in the coffeehouses that sprang up everywhere. We hitchhiked across the continent, each seeking freedom and finding our power in different ways. Free love, free clothes, free rides, and communes all promised a better way.

Many of us Indigenous persons felt the freedom to grow our hair and even dress in hippie clothes, and for the first time feel a new pride in wearing beads, braids, and fringes. Many of us were also on the move, as Indigenous youth joined in civil rights and resistance rallies and gatherings and met protest leaders of Indigenous and other movements. Even if we were not physically on the move, we lived the growing excitement of resistance as we knew and shared the anger of our parents about the years of oppression to our own ways through forced assimilation.

We knew the effects in our homes and communities of oppressive measures such as the Potlatch Law,³ which had banned ceremonial gatherings, as well as the 1927 amendment to the *Indian Act* forbidding the “soliciting or receipt of money from any Indian for the prosecution of any claim,”⁴ intended to stop the ongoing Indigenous resistance to injustice. In 1969, the dark years of residential schooling were ending as the last schools closed their doors in the 1960s. We heard the whispered stories of our parents, our aunts, our uncles, and our leaders and suffered with them the effects of the deep racism shown there. We were part of

² According to *Merriam-Webster*, “baby boomer” is defined in part as: “... a person born in the U.S. following the end of World War II (usually considered to be in the years from 1946 to 1964).”

³ Potlatching was made illegal in 1885, and the prohibition was not lifted until 1951 (Cole and Chaikin 1990).

⁴ The provision was aimed also at the Sun Dance ceremony among Plains Indians (*Indian Act*, RSC 1927, c. 98, ss. 140 and 141).

the new experience of “integration” into public schooling that brought fresh ideas through the broader awareness and resistance overtaking all youth.

As a result of all these experiences, in the late 1960s, our Peoples were raising their voices in different ways on many fronts. Our tools were to gather wherever we could, at all ages and levels, to talk and share information in any form that would convey our mutual growing solidarity and consciousness. As youth, we created and shared what we learned with and about each other in mimeographs, reporting on our leaders as they engaged in meetings provincially and nationally. We created our own youth information gatherings and shared stories of resistance events in other communities. We wrote info bulletins and added our protest poetry, to be carried around and distributed by hand in different parts of the country.

It was the social media of the day. It was a way to keep up with significant events across the country with what was called the “moccasin telegraph,” through young Indigenous people who were the travelling telegraph, moving from one community to the next as witnesses. They brought the news of a growing discontent. Many lived in urban centres with high populations of Indigenous people. Anger about the poverty in our communities prompted the movement to cities, seeking jobs that “integration” promised but were never there; instead, movement to cities more severely increased poverty and the experience of discrimination. Those of us in our own communities met the urban Indigenous, heard their discontent, and listened to what was going on in Ottawa, Toronto, Thunder Bay, Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vancouver, and in US cities alike. Since many of our territories span the borders that separate our lands and our families from each other, our youth like our parents and older generations crossed the border freely to visit relatives and to live and work on the US side.

The formation of the National Indian Brotherhood⁵ in Ottawa in 1968 was an outcome that brought together Indigenous leaders from across Canada to discuss and act on issues of common concern. In all provinces, Indigenous leaders had been gathering at tribal, regional, and territorial levels to form organizations to express their voices of concern over the many injustices perpetuated by statute and policy and or lack thereof regarding land and rights, as well as social and economic issues. Out of such gatherings, a strength of solidarity was growing across the

⁵ In 1968, the Status and Treaty aboriginal groups formed the National Indian Brotherhood (AFN 2010).

country. They brought to the forefront the deep and ongoing injustices by Canada in its interpretation of s. 91(24) of Canada's Constitution⁶ through its divisive and continuing discriminatory policy in the federal duty to Indigenous peoples, specifically relating to the Crown's recognition of their land's rights and title.

Here in British Columbia, the formation of the Union of BC Indian Chiefs (UBCIC) in 1968 had brought young informed leaders together with older leaders from earlier days of gatherings across the coastal and Interior communities during the resistance actions of the Allied Tribes.⁷ Led by Andy Paul, the Allied Tribes rallied for continued legal support and prompted the passing of the laws in the *Indian Act* prohibiting the hiring of lawyers by "Indians" to support what then was known as the "Land Question."⁸ The question, foremost, was about the outstanding issues of the federal government's duty in British Columbia to fulfill Article 13 of the Terms of Union. The article had laid out the requirement of the federal government to assume the responsibility for completing the colonial duty in acquiring lands for the use of the Crown⁹ in order for British Columbia to join Confederation in 1871.

The "Land Question" was at the forefront of all discussions during those meetings and gatherings here in British Columbia. For the most part, it was sharing information on the question that was then as it still is now: *How legal is it for the government of British Columbia to be taking without our permission land and resources that damage and obstruct our fishing, our hunting, our foods, our medicines, and our waters?*

My recollection is of listening to the meetings in my own Nation, in my community. Most of those that left the deepest impression took place in our family home, discussions that brought our thoughts to the attention of many of the leaders, to the travelling youth, to those strong Elders, and to the spiritual leaders of those times. In my remembering of voices from those times, it was never about *settling land claims* on the biased terms of government just to allow them to be ravaged further. It was about reclaiming what was ours to relearn, and it was about recovering our ways. It was about recognition of our rights and title to

⁶ *The British North America Act*, also called the *Constitution Act, 1867*, 30 & 31 Vict., c. 3. Section 91(24) gave the federal government exclusive authority to make laws in relation to "Indians, and Lands reserved for the Indians."

⁷ In 1916, the Indian Tribes of British Columbia and the Interior Tribes of British Columbia met in Vancouver to form the Allied Indian Tribes of British Columbia (Tennant 1990).

⁸ The controversy and legal questions specifically in regard to lands in British Columbia (Mitchell 1977).

⁹ The duty to the Crown as expressed in the United Kingdom at the Court at Windsor on 16 May 1871 (Canada Senate 1871; Queen Victoria Privy Council 1871).

determine what we were willing to share and what we needed to protect. “Self-determination”¹⁰ was a term that came to be used.

A significant event occurred in October 1968 in the Northwest Territories when Joseph Drybones¹¹ challenged charges brought against him under the *Indian Act*. He was acquitted and subsequently the Supreme Court of Canada upheld that acquittal based on his challenge as to whether his offence under s. 94(b)¹² of the *Indian Act* was discrimination against Indians under the Canadian Bill of Rights. That challenge, regardless of the circumstance, was a legal win and opened new avenues of resistance, which had been against the law for Indians under the *Indian Act* a few short years before. The Drybones decision represented a major step forward and was spoken about in meetings and gatherings at all levels; it set the stage for other cases to follow. We heard it discussed at most of our young leaders’ meetings, and they discussed how it might help us.

In March 1969, at a gathering of the Manitoba Indian and Métis Conference, Jeannette Corbiere from Toronto stated: “the only way to gain equality is not to ask for it, but rather to lay claim on it ... We will not only rock the boat, we will sink it if need be”¹³ (Lannon 2013). That statement reached us and created a ripple among the young travellers and young leaders I was by then connected to.

The federal government began a national program of consultation with First Nations communities across Canada on the *Indian Act*. The Department of Indian Affairs distributed information through a short booklet called *Choosing a Path*.¹⁴ The federal government organized informational meetings in key communities and, in May 1969, brought regional representatives to Ottawa for a Canada-wide consultation meeting. During the consultations, a solidarity of voices expressed concern about treaty rights, rights and title to the land, self-determination, and better programs for education and health care (Indigenous Foundations, 2009). I recall the bulletin and how it was discussed and

¹⁰ “‘Self-determination’ refers to a choice, not a particular institutional relationship. It is dynamic and not fixed on particular arrangements” (Imai 2008, p. 11).

¹¹ *R. v. Drybones*, [1970] S.C.R. 282.

¹² Section 94 of the *Indian Act* (possessing alcohol and being intoxicated off an Indian reserve was prohibited) was challenged under the Canadian Bill of Rights and was ruled inoperative by the courts (Sinclair 1970).

¹³ Jeannette Corbiere Lavell challenged discrimination against Indian women in *Corbiere v. Canada (Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs)*, [1999] 2 S.C.R. 203.

¹⁴ The short booklet was distributed to Indian leadership at formal meetings across Canada on discussions about changes to the *Indian Act*.

then discarded or recycled in the outhouses of our communities, which were still very much in use during those times.

In June 1969, in answer to the consultations, the Government of Canada produced their White Paper proposing to dismantle Indian Affairs (Canada 1969). The “Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy” or a “White Paper” for discussion, was released in June 1969. The White Paper proposed removing the unique legal status established by the *Indian Act* under the guise of the need for equality. It would do the following: (1) eliminate Indian status; (2) dissolve the Department of Indian Affairs within five years; (3) abolish the *Indian Act*; (4) convert reserve land to private property that can be sold by the band or its members; (5) transfer federal responsibility to the provinces and integrate these services into those provided to other Canadian Citizens; (6) provide funding for economic development; and (7) appoint a commissioner to address outstanding land claims and gradually terminate existing treaties (Indigenous Foundations, 2009).

We witnessed the shock and anger by all ages and levels of community members and leaders at the proposal. Many gatherings held across the country expressed outrage and ultimately set the stage for the subsequent years of activism to bring about change on our terms.

We read about and heard Harold Cardinal,¹⁵ who wrote *The Unjust Society* published in 1969, a scathing rebuttal of the White Paper that led to a nation-wide response of the Chiefs and leadership of the provincial organizations (Petten, 2017).

The grassroots response came from a younger and now more radical Indian youth in British Columbia, known as the Red Power Movement that had begun in Vancouver through the Native Alliance for Red Power (NARP).¹⁶ In 1969, however, the Trudeau government also ushered in political reform to the native communities by providing funding to elected political organizations. Most organizing before had been grassroots led, so many of us saw this as a dividing and controlling factor that would have consequences.

The year 1969 also saw the release of a short documentary film titled *You Are on Indian Land*.¹⁷ The fact that it was made by one of the first Indigenous film crews at the National Film Board inspired us and

¹⁵ Harold Cardinal exposed the White Paper’s “thinly disguised program of extermination” (Windspeaker 2017).

¹⁶ The Red Power Movement was an outcome of the movement of Indigenous youth throughout Canada and the United States (Lannon 2013).

¹⁷ The film was directed by Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell, who was finally credited as director in 2017.

triggered a call to action that moved us all. The film documented the people of Akwesasne protesting being prohibited from crossing freely and bringing purchases across the Canada–US border. The protest film was shown across the country and further raised consciousness in Indigenous communities on both US and Canadian sides of the border. It was electrifying for us as young Indigenous people. It sparked a response to take direct action against injustice by an informed leadership in Indigenous communities across the country. To my recollection, it was to be one of the most significant actions of 1969 – that momentous year and a rallying point that mobilized direct action across the country and into the United States for the following decades.

While there were many other significant events that took place for us as Indigenous youth during that time, these are ones that hold memory for me. I offer my smá?may? with a good heart and feel I was fortunate to witness the things I did.

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