

# PLAINS CREE IDENTITY: BORDERLANDS, AMBIGUOUS GENEALOGIES AND NARRATIVE IRONY

**Neal McLeod**

Saskatchewan Indian Federated College  
University of Regina  
Regina, Saskatchewan  
Canada, S4S 0A2

## **Abstract / Résumé**

Within contemporary Aboriginal discourse, there is a growing tendency towards tribal specific nationalism, including that of the Plains Cree. With this movement towards essentialism, there is tendency to ignore the multi-layered histories of various communities who speak Cree today. Ethnographies and historical studies such as those by David Mandelbaum and John Milloy also contribute to the essentializing of Plains Cree Identity. By drawing upon the narratives of my family from the James Smith and Sandy Lake reserves in Saskatchewan, I explore the ambiguous genealogies and narrative irony of Plains Cree identity. In constructing my interpretative framework, I draw upon the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Gerald Vizenor and Richard Rorty.

Il existe à l'intérieur du discours autochtone contemporain une tendance croissante vers le nationalisme tribal spécifique. Ce mouvement vers l'essentialisme tend à ignorer la diversité des histoires des communautés qui parlent cri aujourd'hui. Les ethnographies et études historiques telles que celles de David Mandelbaum et John Milloy contribuent également à cette essentialisation de l'identité des Cris des plaines. Par l'intermédiaire de mes histoires de famille des réserves James Smith et Sandy Lake en Saskatchewan, j'explore les généalogies ambiguës et l'ironie narrative des Cris des plaines. Pour construire mon système d'interprétation je me sers des travaux de Mikhail Bakhtin, Gerald Vizenor et Richard Rorty.

## Introduction

There is a growing trend towards tribe specific nationalism among Aboriginal people throughout Canada. In Canada, Crees are the most numerous group with a population stretching from Quebec to British Columbia. At a gathering of Cree people at Opaskwayak Cree First Nation in 1994, attempts were made to create a Cree national organization. There have been similar meetings since that time at various Cree Reserves throughout Canada. As well, specific tribal cultural activities have taken place including the Cree unity ride, which started in 1998. The movement signals the emergence of tribal specific organizations which will certainly add interesting layers to the political landscape of Aboriginal political organizations.

Despite the long process of Canada subordinating and subverting Aboriginal political and religious structures (Dyck, 1991; Pettipas, 1994; Sluman and Goodwin, 1984), there has been a vibrant revitalization of Aboriginal cultures throughout Canada in recent decades. Indeed, since the late 1960s there has been an explosion of Aboriginal culture, with a revival of religious ceremonies, attempts to revive languages, the solidification of political structures at the national and provincial levels, and a proliferation of artistic and literary practices.

While the rebirth of Aboriginal consciousness through such endeavours has been vital and interesting, I think there remain many unanswered questions about the relationship between pan-Indian political and cultural organizations, and tribal specific ones, say for example the Cree ones which I mentioned. While the emergence of a tribal specific consciousness may add a great deal to the Aboriginal political discourse, it is doubtful whether this discourse will seriously compete with well-entrenched political organizations such as the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, the major association of Indian Bands in the Province of Saskatchewan.

Many Bands in Saskatchewan, for instance, at one time had people who spoke three Indigenous languages: Cree, Saulteaux and Assiniboine. However, in the last two generations, there has been a tendency for Bands to proclaim that they are "Cree" or "Saulteaux." The multi-layered genealogies are simplified. There has been a growing tendency in Saskatchewan, especially over the last two generations, to simplify tribal identity. In this paper, I wish to explore the role of ambiguous genealogies and narrative irony.

I began to think about the issues surrounding Nêhiyâwiwin (Creeness) matters in earnest about three years ago in the fall of 1996 when I began to teach for the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. I began to sketch out my Ph.D project which I had tentatively called *A National History of the*

*Plains Cree.* I had wanted to concentrate on the Plains Cree language (dialect) and religion of my family. I remember seeing Mandelbaum's (1994:13) map of the Plains Cree, and I was rather surprised that my Reserve, James Smith, was not included. I had always assumed that James Smith was part of the "Plains Cree nation" because that is how my family had always identified as such. I mention this example to point to the larger problematic of simplifying Band identity through the label of "Plains Cree."

However, as I began to talk to various old people from my Reserve, I became very aware of the contingency of the label "Plains Cree" for my Band. I became aware of the ambiguous genealogies that permeated my own family tree, as well as the narrative ironies that emerged when one tried to create a "national" discourse. In addition to the discovery of my own family tree, I became increasingly aware that the situation of James Smith was widespread, and the assertion of a pure, essentialized "Cree" identity (or even a Plains Cree identity) was extremely misleading and limiting.

Today, many people simplify their identifies in an attempt to "imagine their communities", to use Benedict Anderson's concept (1991). Instead of acknowledging multi-layered, ambiguous genealogies, people have simplified their identities to one tribal group. Historically, the Cree, Saulteaux and Assiniboine were allied with each other, and there was a great deal of cultural overlap among the groups. It was natural for people to be multilingual. With the rapid loss of Indigenous languages in Saskatchewan, people have begun to simplify their identities, and gravitate towards one tribal group. Some Bands have signs as you enter the Reserve, "Welcome to Reserve Y, Cree Nation" or "Welcome to Reserve Z, Saulteaux Nation." Such a discourse simplifies identity to one tribal group and ignores the other layers of tribal genealogy.

In Saskatchewan, it has become fashionable politically and culturally to identify as Plains Cree. Many Reserves, which historically had both Plains Cree and Saulteaux elements, have gravitated towards a Plains Cree identity. I have noted this particularity since I began teaching at the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College at Regina in southern Saskatchewan, through talking with many more people. Also, among Reserves which were primarily Cree speaking, it has become exceedingly fashionable to identify as Plains Cree (say as opposed to Woodlands Cree or Swampy Cree).

There are several factors which have contributed to people "imagining the Plains Cree community." First, Aboriginal people have been subjected to the films and ideas of the mainstream society. There is a lingering fascination with the Plains Indian in western society. Second, historically, at least as viewed by many Crees, the Plains Cree language had a greater prestige than other dialectics. For instance, during the Treaty Six negotia-

tions at Fort Carlton, some of the Plains Cree leaders refused to listen to a translator who spoke Swampy Cree. Third, the Plains Cree dialect is becoming the standardized written dialect. Thus, from the terms of written language, Plains Cree is generally considered to be more prestigious. Fourth, with the revitalization of Indigenous ceremonies in Saskatchewan which has occurred in my lifetime (since 1970), many of the ceremonies that have been revived have been Plains Cree ceremonies. Thus, there is a tendency for people to equate their culture with these ceremonies. Fifth, many writers have contributed to the notion of "Plains Cree" in their ethnographies and histories (Mandelbaum, 1995; Milloy, 1990).

Before exploring the archeology of a genealogy of Plains Cree identity further, I want to provide a brief geographic and demographic overview of the Plains Cree. The Cree began to move onto the Plains in the 1740s as they moved west during the expansion of the fur trade. The *Urheimat* of the Cree is the Hudson and James Bay area of Ontario and Quebec. However, as the Crees moved on to the Plains, they adopted the use of the horse and also various religious ceremonies, including the sundance. During their movement, it was very common for Bands to be linguistically mixed with Saukteaux and Assiniboine speaking elements (Sharrock, 1974; Albers, 1980).

### **Nakanasa: My Anishinabé (Saukteaux) Namesake**

It was natural to think of my Reserve as a Plains Cree Reserve. The language of the old people with whom I spoke was Plains Cree, close to the increasingly standardized form documented by Ahenakew (1987), and Ahenakew and Wolfart (1998a, 1998b, 1997, 1993). I equated language (dialect) with a nationalistic identity. However, as I came to explore the various layers of stories, I became aware that my initial ideas of Cree national identity could not stand the test of the evidence that I was encountering.

In retrospect, I think that it was natural for me to essentialize identity. I was not a fluent speaker of Cree. However, I was trying very hard to improve my abilities. The dialect of Cree spoken by my father and my uncle (actually my grandmother's brother, Burton Vandall whom I have always called my uncle) was Plains Cree. I wanted to recover this linguistic memory, and I assumed that my attempt to essentialize Cree identity through nationalism would generate a similar historical and political genealogy.

I continued to talk to various people and to search for answers about the origins and history of the people of James Smith Reserve. The Reserve system was put into place after the conclusion of Treaties and with a promise of land being given to Treaty Indians (Ahenakew and Wolfart,

1998:100-133; Morris, 1991:351-360). Before the Reserve period, Bands and people moved freely about through a large network of alliances and indeed the composition of Bands changed over time. However, the Reserve system solidified, localized and indeed simplified the linguistic diversity which once existed in western Canada (the focus of my paper). I became aware of how language reveals only the most immediate layer of genealogy.

I wanted my research to pursue this earlier network of alliances on the micro scale. I was interested in learning more about my grandfather, John R. McLeod, who died in 1980. As I tried to recover fragments of stories and to immerse myself more and more in the historical memory of my people my *mosôm* [grandfather] was an important source for knowing my past. Part of my search involved finding the true meaning of our last name which we got from one of my ancestors. My last name "McLeod" is a derivative version of a Cree name of *Mâhkiyoc* ("the big one"). Apparently, a Scottish missionary in the 1870s gave *Mâhkiyoc* his "English" name of McLeod.

I had been told before that his name was *Mâhkîwic*. I spent a great deal of time with a good friend of my grandfather, Robert Regnier, who told me that *Mâhkiyoc* had another name, "Nakanasa" ("the one who comes first" or "Thunderbird") and that *Mâhkiyoc* was from the Lake Winnipegosis area in Northern Manitoba which is due east of James Smith. I continued my search and found that *Mâhkiyoc* also had an English name, Albert McLeod. He died in the 1920s. My great-grandmother's sister, Betsy Head, confirmed what Robert Regnier had told me. She had known Nakanasa and was in her late teens or early twenties when he died and noted that his name was Nakanasa.

The interesting thing about Nakanasa is that he was *Saulteaux*. The *Saulteaux* are also known in Canada and the United States as the *Ojibway*, *Chippewa* and *Anishinabêk*. I also learned from my Aunt Barbara McLeod that my grandfather, John R. McLeod called Smith *Atimoyoo*, a man very involved in the revitalization of Indian culture in Saskatchewan in the 1970s, *nîci-nâkawiyiniw* ("my fellow *Saulteaux*," as Smith *Atimoyoo* was part *Saulteaux* himself). Today, it is interesting that the *Saulteaux* stems of Cree genealogies are systematically ignored in the construction of a Plains Cree identity. These aspects, these "untidy" details, have largely been "forgotten."

My ancestor Nakanasa took treaty with the James Smith Band. Given the fact that he was *Saulteaux*, and the fact that he was from the bush country, it would be a reasonable conjecture that he would have been involved in the *Midêwin* ceremony. The *Midêwin* is a healing ceremony practiced by the *Saulteaux* and *Ojibway*. However, the genealogies of

Saulteaux religious traditions on the James Smith Reserve have been completely severed in the present age.

Throughout much of the 20th century, the Anglican Church played a central role on my Reserve. Albert's (Nakanasa's) wife, Betsy McLeod from Pâkwâw-Sâkihikan (Shoal Lake, which is a Swampy Cree community) was a strong Anglican. Betsy McLeod, Kêkêhk-iskwêw (Hawk Woman), had a great deal of influence on the upbringing of nimosôm, John R. McLeod, my grandfather, as his father, Abel McLeod (the son of Nakanasa), was often away involved in politics. She used to lecture him from the Bible and at the same time lecture him on the Cree traditions with which she was familiar. Included within this lore would have been the story of Pîhkahin Okosisa (McLeod, 1998).

Abel's wife, Maggie McLeod (néé Constant) was also a descendant of people further east and was not of Plains Cree pedigree as I had previously believed. Her mother, Philômene Constant (néé Lussier) was from the nearby Métis community of Pêhonahk Creek (Waiting Creek). Maggie's father was Robert Constant. Robert Constant's father was Bernard Constant. Bernard Constant was one of the signatories of Treaty Six. The school today on our Reserve is named after him. However, Bernard Constant himself was born in Montreal, very far from the plains.

By examining my own genealogies, I became increasingly aware that there was ambiguity, in that there was no foundational location to which I could return. The past, like the present, had shifted and was multilayered.

The story of Nakanasa disrupts recent constructions of Plains Cree identity. The story is one example of how the genealogies of Crees include many elements. My point is not to say that the project of holding on to a Plains Cree identity is an artificial construction, but rather to demonstrate something of the historical development and contingency of this identity.

## Wîhcikos

There was another relative of mine who made me aware of the ambiguous genealogies of the Cree. He was the grandfather of my great-grandfather Kôkôcîs' (Peter Vandall, whose stories are recorded in Ahenakew, 1987). Wîhcikos raised my grandfather until my grandfather was fourteen when Wîhcikos died. Wîhcikos never became a Christian and was a link to a time and place far beyond my daily existence and field of imagination. He lived most of his life in the bush and had the ability to talk to animals. My uncle Burton told me that Wîhcikos prophesized (ê-kî-kiskôwîkêt) the coming of the train, but everyone thought that he was crazy. Wîhcikos also had the ability to communicate to animals through dreams.

He had a pre-arranged marriage with a Plains Cree woman. He went to the Church although he had never met her before. However, when he was walking down to the altar he realized that she was "mâmâsîs ê-osîhiht" ("she was made poorly", that is *she was ugly*). He then "kêtahtawê ê-kî-tâpasî" (as my father tells the story, *he fled suddenly*) and left. However, he could not go back to his community because they had a pre-arranged marriage. Thus, he had to stay in the south and eventually married another Plains Cree woman.

The interesting part of this story, of this aspect of my genealogy, was that Wîhçikos was Dene. While the Dene shared many common beliefs with the Woodlands Cree about hunting, they were traditional tribal enemies. Indeed, Wîhçikos (the little Wîhtiko, a being who attacks other people because of greed) was closely associated with this Cree woman who was assigned the task of dealing with the remains of the enemy—including the Dene—after battles.

Wîhçikos' marriage to a Plains Cree woman is ironic as I uncover one line of Cree genealogy. First, it is ironic because it demonstrates that a great deal of cultural information flowed across languages and not simply within the isolated rubric of "Plains Creeness." Second, it is also ironic that Wîhçikos, who was close to a woman who had the task of dealing with the remains of Cree warriors, would himself marry a Cree woman. Third, the story points to another layer of irony in that my family's linguistic identity has come primarily as the result of a Cree woman; today most Cree Band membership codes are written within the rubric of genealogies through the father.

## Mandelbaum's Construction of the Plains Cree

David Mandelbaum's important book *The Plains Cree*, first published in 1940 and reprinted in 1994, is an informative discussion of the Plains Cree and is consulted extensively. The book is an extension of the Americanist tradition developed by Franz Boas and Edward Sapir. Mandelbaum completed his dissertation in 1936 (Mandelbaum, 1994:xii) after having studied with Sapir. Mandelbaum later edited a volume of Sapir's collected writings (Mandelbaum, 1958). Mandelbaum, in the spirit of the Americanist tradition outlines why he chose to write the book that he did:

So a principle reason for concentrating on the older way was because these survivors and their vivid memories would all too soon be gone and much of their knowledge lost unless we made special efforts to record it (1994:xiv).

While his book is extremely valuable as a resource, his account does contribute to a Cree "nationalist" discourse. For instance, Mandelbaum's map (1994:13) is quite misleading.

The map oversimplifies the genealogies of the people of the Saskatchewan Plains and parts of Alberta. Mandelbaum describes his map as the "range of the Plains Cree as of 1860-1870" but he also shows "present day (1936) Reserves Plains Cree" (*ibid.*:13). In fairness to his account, Mandelbaum does note the ambiguity of the genealogies to some extent: "Some of the Plains Cree territory, enclosed in the lines of the crosses [the territory mapped out as Plains Cree] was shared with bands of Assiniboin [sic], especially in the south" (*ibid.*:13). While this statement makes some mention of the ambiguous nature of the territory, he does not mention that Bands within this territory were hybridized. The Nêhiyâwi-pwâtak [Assiniboine-Cree] were a fused band of Crees and Assiniboines. Chief Payêpwât was a leader of this Band.

Also, Mandelbaum's map includes one Reserve, Carry the Kettle, which is an Assiniboine Reserve. Furthermore, the map ignores the large Assiniboine presence in the North Battleford area where he did much of his fieldwork. For instance, Chief Poundmakers (Pîhtokahanâpiwiin's) father was Assiniboine.

Mandelbaum's map also distorts tribal genealogies by ignoring the Saulteaux presence in the vast region. My own Reserve, James Smith, where Nakanasa settled is not included, while the Little Pine Reserve is included. Indeed, it is from the Little Pine Reserve that Mandelbaum received a great deal of his data. My father, Jerry McLeod, told me that two of Nakanasa's brothers did not want to take Treaty and went further west where they would have joined the more independent River People. The River People, under the leadership of Mistahi Maskwa (Big Bear), and Little Pine strove for better terms for Treaty.

To further stress the ambiguous genealogies of the "Plains Cree" individuals, it is important to note that Mistahi Maskwa (Big Bear), often considered to be a quintessential Cree leader of the River People, was the son of a Saulteaux (Ojibway) leader from Ontario; there was a strong Saulteaux component in the River People. Also, many of the groups such as the Rabbitskins and Calling River people, who lived to the south-east, had elements of their Bands which were primarily Saulteaux-speaking.

The story of Mistânaskowêw (Badger Voice) also demonstrates the importance that Saulteaux had in the formation of Cree collective identity. The story is the origin story of the syllabics which was in common usage as a writing form throughout the area inhabited by Cree-speaking peoples. Mistânaskowêw left his body and travelled to the Creator's lodge. The



Creator gave Mistânskowêw the syllabics because he is told that in the future Cree-speaking peoples would have a difficult time remembering their language (the writing is said to be of help).

In several accounts of the story that I have heard, Mistânskowêw was a member of the Midêwin society which is a Saulteaux (Ojibway) healing ceremony. Today, that society is all but extinct in the area of the "Plains Cree." However, the story demonstrates the importance that the society had at one time. The importance of the society is stressed in being a conduit for the emergence of writing amongst the Cree-speaking people.

The syllabic form of writing was used widely by the Anglican Church. The Bible was translated into Cree in 1861. It is interesting that Abel McLeod (my greatgrandfather, the son of Nakanasa) was not a member of the Midêwin, but rather was a strong Anglican. However, his mother, Betsy McLeod, Kêkêhk-iskwêw, the wife of Nakanasa, had a Bible in syllabics. Also, the son of Wîhcikos, Big John (as I know him), had a Bible in Cree syllabics. Thus, I would argue that the Bible in Cree syllabics solidified the hegemony of the Cree language, and was part of the process of the hegemonizing process of simplifying genealogies.

Patricia Albers discusses how tribal genealogies have been simplified by historians. In a review of the reprint of Mandelbaum's *The Plains Cree*, Albers offers a criticism of Mandelbaum's "cultural idealism" (Albers, 1980:219). Albers notes: "While Mandelbaum never explicitly states that the Plains Cree are a self-contained group, this view is implied in much of his writing" (*Ibid.*: 218). In contrast to Mandelbaum, who portrays the Plains Cree as a monolithic group which has historical roots in the east, Albers points out the ambiguous nature of tribal genealogies on the northern plains. Albers adds:

...that the Plains Cree were not a socially exclusive nor a culturally discrete group. Rather they were embedded in a polyethnic system where social relations and cultural institutions cut across tribal *qua* ethnic lines (*Ibid.*:219).

Albers stresses the fact that the picture of the Plains Cree which Mandelbaum presents is not as clearly defined as he supposes.

In another piece, "Changing Patterns of Ethnicity in the Northern Plains, 1780-1870" (Albers, 1996), Albers expands on her theme of pointing out the ambiguous genealogies of the Plains Cree. Albers then stresses the relationships between the Cree and their Plains allies:

The historical situation of the Plains Assiniboin, Cree and Ojibwa did not conform to typical tribal models where territories were divided, claimed, and defended by discrete ethnic groups,

nor did it fit descriptions in which political allegiances were defined primarily in exclusive terms (1996:91).

It was very common for people in the Bands included in Mandelbaums' map to be multilingual, often speaking Cree, Assiniboine and Saulteaux. Historically, these groups were allied with each other and intermarriage was common.

Several epidemics hit these allied peoples throughout the 18th and 19th Centuries. In order to face the challenges of these epidemics, such as the whooping cough outbreak of 1819-1820 and the smallpox outbreak of 1780-1781, many Bands merged together. A state of diglossia (and indeed triglossia) was common. The Bands were also woven together through extensive intertribal marriage made easier, for example, by the fact that the Crees and the Saulteaux were bound by very close linguistic and narrative similarities.

Many prominent "Cree" leaders such as Mistahi Maskwa, Pîhtokaha-hâpiwiyin and Payipwât [Piapot] were all part Cree and part Saulteaux or Assiniboine. The process of identification as Cree intensified after the establishment of Reserves perhaps because Cree was the *lingua franca*.

I have been trying to uncover the layers of Plains Cree identity and the relationship of language to this identity. Cree was the *lingua franca* of the allied Confederation of the Crees, Saulteaux and the Assiniboines. It was also an important language of trade and diplomacy. With the creation of Reserves in the 1870s and the 1880s, the ability of this large confederacy to interact was greatly reduced. Also, coupled with the implementation of the residential school system, the linguistic diversity of Indigenous people was greatly simplified. English gradually became more widespread. Further, the effect of living on a Reserve, of living a sedentary life, also had an impact on the "imagining of Creeness." Like the borders of modern nation states, the Reserves created stabilized populations and produced a situation in which Cree, the former *lingua franca*, began to be increasingly favoured as the primary Indigenous language.

Several factors led to the decline of the Saulteaux language on my Reserve (James Smith). First, due to the pass system and the administration of Indian Affairs, people were not able to travel to other Reserves. Second, Saulteaux ceremonialism, such as the Midêwin was no longer a force in the social life on the Reserve. Third, as an extension of the second point, the Anglican Church became the dominant religion on the Reserve. The Bible and hymn books in Cree syllabics were used extensively. Thus, Cree became increasingly the dominant language of religion, and widescale code switching took place.

There is another example of Cree becoming the dominant language on a Reserve, in this instance, the Mosquito Reserve in Saskatchewan where Cree was not initially the dominant language. Rather, Assiniboine was the dominant language of the community at the time of its establishment. However, at the turn of the century there were three Cree women from the nearby Red Pheasant Reserve (a largely Cree-speaking Reserve) who married into the Band. Because the children learned their first language from their mothers, Cree gradually replaced Assiniboine as the Indigenous language of the community. The process continued throughout the 20th Century until by the late 1970s, when the Reserve was completely Cree speaking. I have in my possession a certificate from the Reserve thanking my grandmother for her work in the establishment of the Cree language program on the Mosquito Reserve.

## Essentialized Band Narratives

As I alluded in my introduction, individual Bands and larger tribal groups have essentialized Band genealogies and tribal narratives. Essentialized tribal narratives justify historical and political claims. Bands have been in the process of "purifying" their membership lists in the vain hope of trying to determine who "really belongs on a Reserve." The search for foundational genealogies is ironic given the fluid nature of Bands before the Reserve system. It seems as though many Indigenous people in Canada have internalized the ideas that have been imposed by the Indian Act and the mainstream society.

A pivotal time for the change in Indigenous political structures came in the late 1960s. The provincial Indian organization, the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians, received their first operational grant in 1967-1968, allowing a major Indian association to become a political force both provincially and nationally. Later, in the wake of the White Paper of 1969 (*Indian Policy, Politique Indienne*, 1969) and Prime Minister Trudeau's notion of a just society, there was a massive decentralization of money away from federal agencies and to Indigenous governments. Thus, what initially had been a policy of termination in the White Paper of 1969 eventually became entrenched rights within the revised Canadian Constitution of 1982.

Indian political structures were transformed as Indian people became administrators of programs. Given the lack of external or internal controls on this new order of government, corruption and despotism became very widespread. Genuine pluralism does not exist today in Reserve politics as many Bands do not allow people in the city to vote. Putative "trouble-makers" are cut off from Band funding, and there is no formalized distribution of wealth on Reserves. While arguments involving tax exemption may be

valid from a perspective involving Treaty interpretation, there is absolutely nothing within this argument that precludes people from sharing their wealth. The old ideals of sharing have been eroded and a new ethos of greed and materialism has emerged. A new class within Aboriginal society has emerged, sometimes more oppressive than any Indian Affairs bureaucracy or officials.

Noel Dyck's useful and thoughtful study *What is the Indian 'Problem': Tutelage and Resistance in Canadian Indian Administration* is perhaps one of the most succinct descriptions of the way in which corruption emerged once Indians began to administer programs. In a telling story, Noel Dyck relates a night when he went with his friend Val Nightraveller to visit on Val's Reserve, the Little Pine Reserve. Noel Dyck notes:

Later that evening as we left the reserve I suggested to him that his father must be very proud of the work that Val, the one of the few Indian university graduates in Western Canada, was doing for Indian people through his activities in the provincial Indian association. After several moments of silence Val replied that his father did not agree with the activities of the association: 'He is afraid that I will end up doing in ten years what the missionaries and the Indian agents couldn't do in more than a hundred years...' (Dyck, 1991:33).

I find this quotation interesting because it gives us an insight into the thoughts of a man who was actively working in the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians at a time when it was receiving more funding. Val Nightraveller, a Cree, was critically reflecting on the process of how Indian organizations could bring about assimilation in a quick and effective manner. The reason why they would perhaps be able to succeed where the government had failed was that much of what they would do would be under the rubric of Indian self-government and Indian tradition.

An effort to use "imaginings of Cree tradition" to hold on to power has been the attempt to "purify" Band membership codes. There are rival factions which attempt to demonstrate that another group does not "really" belong on a Reserve. On the basis of often dubious evidence, factions trace group X's lineage up to the male ancestor at the time of Treaties. In an attempt to expel a specific group from the Band list, factions try to demonstrate that an ancestor of this group should not be a member of the Band.

One of the ways in which these ideas have been internalized is through the stress on the male lines for tracing Cree genealogies. I find this to be ironic because of the profound influence that Cree women had on the development of the Cree-speaking community: both before and after the establishment of Reserves.

The move to essentialize Band narratives often excludes women and often their children, who acquired their status through "Bill C31" which eliminated the parents' gender as a criteria for Indian status. Thus, while Band X might allow women and their children to have membership, their citizenship will be limited because they cannot vote.

Typically, as mentioned, only male ancestors are used to determine membership lists. This is ironic due to the fact that many of the quintessential Cree chiefs throughout history acquired the Cree language from their Cree mothers (e.g. Pihtokahânapiwiyin, Payipwât, Mistahi Maskwa), not their Saulteaux or Assiniboine fathers. Also, what is often forgotten is that Band structures, as previously noted, were highly fluid and people would move from Band to Band quite often. Thus, the attempt to create an "ideal" Band list is a dance with shadows, an attempt to lasso Wisakecahk, because we will never come to the "real thing." Instead of attempting to build positive consensus on Reserves, instead of trying to encourage a wide-scale development of Indigenous consciousness, many leaders choose to try to essentialize nationhood and genealogies in an attempt to secure their own discursive position.

I would like to give an actual example of this, but I will refer to the Band only as "Band X." Band X has a membership code which restricts who can vote in the Band elections. While the Band voting list does not differentiate on the basis of residency, the list does differentiate on the basis of names. Only "traditional names" can give a person voting rights. These names include many Scottish and French names as well as Anglicized Cree names. Also, there is a handful of Cree names, none of which are spelled very well by more or less standard orthography.

### **Borderland Discourse: Narrative Irony, Trickster Hermeneutics and Bakhtin's Dialogics**

Cree culture consists of several influences and has changed through time. The notion of Cree culture that I am advocating here is open-ended and multi-layered. I use the paradigm of narrative to characterize this process; Cree narrative memory is an ongoing conversation with a constant play between the present, past and the future. Participants in this conversation have spoken many languages and have had a variety of ways of seeing the world.

One of the characteristics of the multi-layered nature of Cree culture is the existence of ambiguous genealogies. I call this unsettled state of cultural discourse *narrative irony* (borrowing the term from Richard Rorty). Accord-

ing to Rorty, narrative irony is a constant reshaping of a culture's narrative horizons. Rorty writes:

She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered (Rorty, 1992:73).

Narrative irony entails a cross-fertilization of interpretative horizons, the meshing of narratives, and keeps a culture a living and dynamic process. Thus, to apply the notion of narrative irony to Cree culture, many people who spoke Cree encountered other vocabularies. Indeed, many people who came to Cree-speaking culture from the "outside", such as Nakanasa and Wícihkos, in turn altered the discourses from the inside.

Narrative irony entails the belief that the world can always be re-described. Cree story-tellers embraced the philosophy of narrative irony through their stories about Wísakêcâhk (Trickster). People were aware of the different ways that stories could be interpreted. Narrative irony means that no interpretation can ever exhaust any narrative: there are always new ways of looking at stories, and each person who participates in the ongoing collective discourse add layers of meanings and points to new interpretative possibilities. Narrative irony involves a constant play between the individual and the collective interpretative nexus in which they find themselves.

As an ironist, one is aware of the contingency of their culture; ironists realize that things have not always been as they are today. Also, ironists are aware that things could change in the future. Through time, new discursive possibilities emerge through a dialogue with other narratives. A great deal of contemporary Cree narrative memory has emerged out of beliefs and interactions with neighboring groups such as the Saulteaux, Dene and Assiniboine, and of course today, English speaking-cultures. While an ironist acknowledges that the tradition can change, they also acknowledge that their culture gives them a vocabulary through which they can explain their existence. Indeed, one could think of culture as the "core" narrative with which one begins, but which is also extended to other narratives and narrative possibilities through time.

Gerald Vizenor's *trickster hermeneutics* (Vizenor, 1994) amplifies Rorty's notion of *narrative irony*. Vizenor writes:

The Trickster is chance, a comic holotrope in a postmodern language that uncovers the distinctions and ironies between narrative voices (1989:192).

Velie continues:

Quoting Bakhtin, Vizenor describes the comic holotrope as 'dialogism,' meaning that trickster can only be understood as a part of the whole, the collection of 'utterances' in oral traditions... (Velie, 1989:131).

Vizenor's citation of Bakhtin is interesting; Bakhtin espoused a notion of dialogic knowing through time. I believe that this is another important aspect of my conception of narrative irony and trickster hermeneutics in the context of my conception of narrative irony and trickster hermeneutics in the context of Cree culture. Through a diachronic conversation, *nêhiyâwiwin* (Creeness) emerges through *nêhiyawêwin* (Cree language: e.g. speaking).

Through his analysis of the late medieval French writer Rabelais, Bakhtin characterizes the medieval carnival as an event/process of transformation similar to Rorty's notion of irony and Vizenor's notion of trickster's hermeneutics. Nicholas Cronk describes the function of the carnival in the work of Bakhtin: "The language of carnival, no less than the phenomenon of carnival itself, is thus a subversive force, one which through laughter liberates us from the restrictions of the prevailing order" (Cronk, 1986:6). He adds: "By creating a world turned inside out... the carnival undermines prevailing hierarchies, both social and poetic" (Cronk, 1986:4).

The notion of borderlands has been implied throughout my discussion. Borders and the passing through of borderlands, and indeed the experience of dwelling in borderlands, is indeed narrative irony and trickster hermeneutics. Also, the notion of border figures prominently in the work of Bakhtin. Maria Shevtsova notes: "The border is his recurrent metaphor for the intersection between different spheres through which the identity of each is defined. Precise identity, then, has its source in the relation between entities" (Shevtsova, 1992:749).

Throughout this borderlands discourse, this discourse of liminality, the world is reconstructed and reformed into new configurations. Bakhtin notes:

It is necessary to liberate all these objects and permit them to enter into the free unions that are organic to them, no matter how monstrous these unions might seem from the point of view of ordinary, traditional associations (Bakhtin, 1998:169).

The discourse is unsettled and constantly reshifting, although it is rooted in a collective experience that moves diachronically. To apply Bakhtin to my discussion, there is always "a space between" the present manifestation of conceptions of Cree culture and those that lay in the present and those possible conceptions in the future.

In various Native American cultures, the Trickster was a manifestation of liminal space which Vizenor calls "trickster hermeneutics." In Cree culture, *Wisakêcahk* stories were told to make sense of this experience of liminal space. These narratives served as a didactic teaching guide through

which people made sense of the world around them; through an interplay between their own experience and collective narratives, Nêhiyawêwin was constantly recreated.

Wîsakêcahk also represented the space of borderlands by acting as a link between different layers of reality. Wîsakêcahk bridged the distance between humans and animals and indeed transformed this relationship. Also, Wîsakêcahk provided a narrative link between the present and past and the possibilities of these narratives. My point for stressing this is to note that Crees were quite comfortable with ambiguities and it is perhaps a modern occurrence of cultural re-invention that people are resistant to acknowledging the contingency and irony of Cree narrative memory.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have tried to stress that there are many layers of Cree narrative memory, indeed of Cree culture. I have tried to stress that there are many influences in the construction historically of Cree culture, which was not by any means a monolithic discursive process. Cree culture is an open-ended narrative process, which could be variously described as narrative irony, trickster hermeneutics and Bakhtin's dialogics, which is always changing through time, and which is indeed a function of the play between individual experience and collective modes of representation. This paper attempts to challenge essentialist discourses which purport that Cree culture has never changed through time and has only one path of genealogy. It is perhaps time to open up the debate on "Plains Cree" identity.

## Notes

1. By using the term "imagining" I am not implying that this is a positive or a negative process. Rather I am simply trying to engage in archeology of genealogy.
2. The Americanist Tradition began with the ethnographic work of Franz Boas and was continued by many of his students including Edward Sapir and Paul Radin. The tradition challenged earlier notions of a belief in Culture, but instead stressed the plurality of human experience through a careful study of the linguistic and cultural knowledge of Indigenous peoples in North America.

## References

- Ahenakew, Freda (Editor and Translator)  
1987 *Wâskahikaniwiniw-âcimowina: Stories of the House People. The Cree Texts of Peter Vandall and Joe Duquette.* Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.



Ahenakew, Freda and H.C. Wolfart (Editors and Translators)

- 1998a *ana kâ-pimwêwêhahk okakêskihkêmwina: The Counselling Speeches of Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.
- 1998b *kôhkominawak otâcimowina: Our Grandmothers' Lives, as told in their Own Words*. Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre.
- 1997 *kwayask ê-kîpê-kiskinowâpahthicik: Their Example Showed Me the Way: A Cree Woman's Life Shaped by Two Cultures*, as told by Emma Minde. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.
- 1993 *kinêhiyâwiwininaw nêhiyawêwin: The Cree Language is Our Identity*. The Cree texts of Sarah Whitecalf. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

Albers, Patricia

- 1996 Changing Patterns of Ethnicity in the Northeastern Plains, 1789-1870, in *History, Power and Identity: Ethnogenesis in the Americas 1492-1992*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- 1980 History and Idealism in Plains Indian Ethnography: Review Essay: The Plains Cree by David Mandelbaum. *Reviews in Anthropology* Spring:215-228.

Anderson, Benedict

- 1991 *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso.

Bakhtin, Mikhail

- 1998 *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Cronk, Nicholas

- 1986 Voltaire, Bakhtin, and the Language of Carnival. *French Studies Bulletin: A Quarterly Supplement* 18:4-7.

Dyck, Noel

- 1991 *What is the Indian 'Problem': Tutelage and Resistance in Canadian Indian Administration*. St. John's, Newfoundland: Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Mandelbaum, David

- 1994 *The Plains Cree. An Ethnographic, Historical and Comparative Study*. Regina, Saskatchewan: Canadian Plains Research Centre.
- 1958 *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

McLeod, Neal

- 1998 Coming Home Through Stories. *International Journal of Canadian Studies* Special Issue: *Diaspora and Exile* Fall:51-66.

Milloy, John S.

- 1988 *The Plains Cree: Trade, Diplomacy and War, 1790 to 1870*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

Morris, Alexander

- 1880 *The Treaties of Canada with the Indians of Manitoba and the North-West Territories*. Toronto: Fifth House.

Pettipas, Katherine

- 1994 *"Severing the Ties that Bind": The Repression of Indigenous Religious Ceremonies on the Prairies*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press.

Rorty, Richard

- 1992 *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Shevtsova, Maria

- 1992 Dialogism in the Novel and Bakhtin's Theory of Culture. *New Literary History* 23:747-763.

Sluman, Norma and Jean Goodwill

- 1984 *John Tootosis*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Pemmican Publishing.

Velie, Alan

- 1989 The Trickster Novel, pp. 121-139 in Gerald Vizenor (Editor): *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Vizenor, Gerald

- 1994 *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Wesleyan University Press.
- 1989 Trickster Discourse: Comic Holotropes and Language Games, pp. 187-211 in Gerald Vizenor (Editor): *Narrative Chance: Postmodern Discourse on Native American Indian Literatures*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.