

# **Literature Review and Analysis of Public Attitudes Towards Indigenous Women in Alberta**

Final Report

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

Narratives shape the way we view the world and ourselves within it, as well as our understanding of others. According to philosopher Sarah E. Worth: “[t]he way we tell stories, how we understand the stories that others tell us, the way we use stories to recall memory, and the role that storytelling and story-creation play in developing a theory of personal identity are all integral to the way we order and make sense of our experience in the world” (2004; Sec. 2, Para 1). Meanwhile, narrative researchers Clandinin and Connelly state that narrative can be seen as a way of understanding experience: “[p]eople live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones ... [s]tories lived and told educate the self and others” (2000; p. xxvi). According to these perspectives, narratives are constructions that we actively create and that simultaneously act to construct our worldview. As such, narratives serve a powerful purpose: we create them to communicate our experiences, and they in turn become the lens through which we see the world.

Given the power of narrative to organize information about the world around us and provide a specific lens for our worldview, it becomes useful to critically analyze the narratives that shape our collective perspectives. In this report, the authors turn to the narratives that shape our perspectives about a particular group of people: Indigenous women in Alberta. Many narratives currently exist regarding Indigenous people in this province and the rest of the country. In order to find them, one need look no further than existing literature in the form of statistics, reports, and news stories related to this group of people.

Statistically speaking, Indigenous people in Canada are disproportionately over-represented in nearly all risk groups associated with social and economic problems (Chansonneuve, 2005), which includes “homelessness, poverty, addictions, violence, chronic illness and diseases that include tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS and diabetes” (p. 5). According to the 2006 Canadian Census, First Nations (FN) people make up 2.2% of the population. This Census describes Canada’s FN people as young (i.e., the median age of FN people is 25 compared to a non-FN median age of 40), and compared to the non-FN population, those who self-identify as FN tend to be less educated, more frequently unemployed, and earn substantially less money (Gionet, 2009). Nearly 1/3 of Canadian Indigenous people have a disability, and the diabetes rate in FN, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) communities is among the highest in the world (Chansonneuve, 2005). These negative health and economic outcomes occur alongside some of the lowest standards of living in the country, as one Statistics Canada author put it: “the best-off First Nations communities compare only with the worst-off areas of non-Aboriginal Canada”

(Armstrong, 1999, p. 17).

These statistical associations play a powerful role in shaping our collective understanding about Indigenous people in this country. However, the narratives that can be constructed from this information do not tell the only story. In an effort to identify some of the prevailing narratives about Indigenous women in Alberta, the authors have engaged in a critical review and analysis of existing literature about this population. The purpose of this is to identify existing popular narratives in the literature on Aboriginal women in Alberta and determine what alternative narratives may be proposed to shift existing public perceptions about them. For the purposes of this review, we have defined the literature to include print publications of a scholarly nature, news and magazine articles, and books that are searchable through public and commonly used academic databases. Though we believe that the portrayal of Indigenous women and related themes or issues in non-print media (i.e., films, television, music, etc.) may shed additional light on the prevalent narratives about this group of people, we have concluded that a non-print media review is beyond the scope of the current review and may be appropriate for future consideration.

In order to engage in a literature review to determine what popular narratives may exist in print media about Indigenous women, a definition of narrative is necessary. S.E. Worth defines narratives as “representations of at least two events, with a unified subject and a retrievable temporal order, that generally have an explanatory gap that needs to be filled in by the reader” (2008, p. 47). As such, a narrative may consist of information such as a young woman going to work in the

sex industry one night and the same woman being found murdered a week later. As readers, we are left to interpret the reason for her murder due to the explanatory gap that exists, which may become fertile ground for unfair and stereotypical perceptions to emerge (i.e., that the woman put herself in harm's way due to her high-risk lifestyle).

The narratives that exist in the literature and the perceptions that emerge from them may be considered a construction of the truth about Indigenous women. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) define a "grand narrative" as a story scripted by some authority – such as a scholarly expert, the media, or the apparent consensus of a majority of people – that becomes "so pervasive, so taken for granted, as the only valid story" (p. xxv) that it becomes a socially constructed truth. However, these grand narratives may only tell one side of the story, and as such may not be accurate. For this reason, our critical analysis of the literature will not only look for what is told in the literature about Indigenous women in Alberta, but also what remains hidden.

## **Methods**

Our analytic methodology follows a research process similar to Johnson's (2013) qualitative inquiry that blended together elements of discourse and narrative analysis. We began by gathering an eclectic array of source materials that comprise both scholarly literature (i.e., scholarly papers, published studies, etc.) and popular or "grey" literature (i.e., news, reports, books, etc.). This literature was gathered through academic databases and online search engines, and was limited to

publications released since the Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (November, 1996) in order to limit the scope of the review to recent literature. In our efforts to scour the existing literature for relevant material, and given the variety of language used to describe our target topic, we used search terms including but not limited to: “Aboriginal”, “Native”, “First Nation”, “Indigenous”, “Blackfoot”, “Cree”, “Métis”, etc., in combination with the terms “woman/women” and “female/females”, and limited our scope to the province of Alberta.

Our initial search criteria were broad in order to gather literature from a variety of academic databases, representing a diversity of academic disciplines from nursing to law to the social sciences, as well as literature from federal, provincial, regional, and specialty news sources. Our initial list of sources spanned approximately 90 pages of references, and it was this initial source list that we narrowed down into narrative threads, then representative samples within those threads, and finally we developed approximately 45 pages of annotated bibliography entries. Once this process of narrowing down our sources was complete, we developed the interim texts based on our narrative analysis of the gathered materials. Through collaboration between two research assistants and the authors, we were satisfied that the literature we reviewed represented the available literature as a whole.

Upon gathering the materials, we engaged in the next step of the analytic process, which is to develop the interim texts. According to Clandinin and Connelly’s *Narrative Inquiry*, the narrative inquiry process involves reading and re-reading the

source texts in order to develop a nuanced understanding of them, coding the field texts for narrative elements including character, place, context, tone, and gaps in the account, creating interim summary texts that represent the researcher's interpretive movement from field texts to the research text based on the coded field texts and summaries, and finally, writing the research text. Upon completing the in-depth reading and coding of the source texts, we developed interim texts to represent our initial analytical processing of the source materials.

These interpretive narratives, which were based on our reading and analysis of the source materials, were shared between two co-authors and a research assistant as well as an unaffiliated reader who is also an Indigenous woman, to elicit feedback and ensure the verisimilitude and trustworthiness of the texts (Loh, 2013). This feedback was then incorporated into the final research texts, which are included in this final report.

In addition to the research texts, this report provides discussion of our narrative findings in the context of existing literature. Our literature review was limited by considerations of era (post-1996) and place (Alberta), though we did on occasion stray beyond the provincial borders to include literature pertaining to Western Canada and, more rarely, Canada as a whole. Nevertheless, our analysis represents narratives about Indigenous women that are generally limited in time and space, and our discussion allows us to step back from these limitations and consider these narratives in a broader literature context. Finally, we end this report with some brief concluding remarks.

## **A Word on Language**

When speaking about a particular group of people, the use of terminology in reference to this group may be a sensitive issue. This is especially true when the particular group of people in question has a significant history of oppression and disenfranchisement, when language has been used as a tool by powerful oppressors to categorize, exclude, and dehumanize them, and when this group consists of people who are culturally, linguistically, and geographically varied and heterogeneous. It may be impossible to know how to refer to such a group of people when the most appropriate approach would be to respect the terminology each person chooses for him or herself. However, for the purposes of this report, one cannot speak of the common experiences of Canada's Indigenous people without settling on some way to refer to this diverse group as an admittedly simplistic whole. As such, it is necessary to settle on particular language choices to inform this report.

For the purposes of this report, the authors use the term "Indigenous" to refer to people from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) communities, and the term "First Nations" to refer to Canada's original inhabitants who are neither Métis nor Inuit. However, the authors acknowledge that these terms are not universally accepted and may be problematic for some people. The authors also acknowledge that referring to this group of people with one term may be reductionistic. As Kirmayer, Tait, and Simpson note, "Indigenous people in Canada come from very diverse backgrounds, with greater cultural and linguistic differences between some groups than those that distinguish different European cultures" (2009; p. 5). Given

this, it may be as meaningful to discuss the experience of “Indigenous” peoples in Canada as it would be to discuss the experience of “Europeans” as a whole: though there may be common experiences between them, it is important to acknowledge that there are also significant cultural, geographical, and linguistic differences within the grouping. As such, though the authors’ choice to use these terms is functional for the purposes of discussing certain common experiences amongst Indigenous people, the reader is cautioned to avoid interpreting the chosen terminology as referencing a unified, homogenous group of people.

### **Research Texts**

In this section, we present the research texts that are the narrative representations of our analysis of the existing literature on Indigenous women in Alberta. Our analysis resulted in a number of narrative threads that generally broke down into two categories: stories that are told by others about Indigenous women, and stories that Indigenous women tell about themselves. The following narratives, which are presented in quantitative order such that the first narrative encompassed the greater number of stories we reviewed, represent these two different perspectives about Indigenous women. These narratives are written so as to represent the voice, tone, plot, and other narrative characteristics of the literature upon which they are based, and are written from the perspective and in the voice of the corresponding sources. As such, we recommend reading these narratives with this in mind and avoid interpreting them as representing the voice of the authors.

Following the presentation of the research texts is a discussion on these diverse perspectives.

### **The Narrative of Indigenous Women as Told by Others**

Indigenous women in Alberta are vulnerable to violence and discrimination<sup>1</sup>. They face myriad challenges, such as domestic violence, sexualized violence, murder, homelessness, addiction, and poverty<sup>2</sup>. They are victimized at home and victimized on the street. They are prone to discrimination through the law<sup>3</sup>, legislation<sup>4</sup>, and political actors<sup>5</sup>. For this reason, they need a lot of help from others, such as Indigenous men, non-Indigenous people, and every level of government, to fix the problems they are facing, as they are too vulnerable and marginalized within our society to do it on their own.

To complicate the issue, Indigenous women occupy dangerous places. They live on the streets<sup>6</sup> and in shelters<sup>7</sup>, and live on reserves where violence is rampant<sup>8</sup>. Their environments are marred by violence, addiction, mental health problems, poverty, and criminal behaviour. They seem unable to escape the cycle of poverty and addiction that keeps them trapped in substandard living conditions, and that leaves them continuously prone to victimization.

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<sup>1</sup> FNWCES (2015)

<sup>2</sup> NWAC (2010)

<sup>3</sup> Hutchison (1999)

<sup>4</sup> Iseke & Desmoulins (2011)

<sup>5</sup> Broadcast News (2006)

<sup>6</sup> Bohn (2003)

<sup>7</sup> ACWS (2013)

<sup>8</sup> Armstrong (2011)

Despite needing help from others to address their ongoing issues, Indigenous women have few allies. Local police and RCMP forces do not respond sufficiently to cases of missing girls and women and do not adequately investigate murders<sup>9</sup>. Women are raped by law enforcement in their reserve communities and convicted 30 years later<sup>10</sup>. Law enforcement fatally shoots them in their homes<sup>11</sup> instead of protecting and serving them, though it seems as though some of those problems could have been avoided if the victims were more compliant. In turn, the justice system protects the law enforcement officials, clearing them of criminal behaviour<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, the justice system is not as forgiving for Indigenous women themselves. When facing their own criminal trials, Indigenous women are punished severely for their crimes<sup>13</sup>. They are not supported by their governments<sup>14</sup>, and they are not supported by their own Bands<sup>15</sup>, leaving them to fend for themselves.

Luckily, Indigenous women are activists who advocate for themselves and their communities. They advocate for gender equality in land settlements<sup>16</sup>, turn public sentiment against the exploitation of natural resources<sup>17</sup>, launch national inquiries<sup>18</sup>, and receive historic apologies for past wrongs<sup>19</sup>. They have taken their

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<sup>9</sup> Cuthand (2002); Harding (2005)

<sup>10</sup> Prince George Citizen (2000)

<sup>11</sup> Melting Tallow (1998)

<sup>12</sup> Curren (1998)

<sup>13</sup> Goyette (1998)

<sup>14</sup> Benzie & Brennan (2013)

<sup>15</sup> Thorne (2007)

<sup>16</sup> Archibald & Crnkovich (1999)

<sup>17</sup> Denker (2016)

<sup>18</sup> NWAC (2014)

<sup>19</sup> Cardston Temple City Star (2015); Arrowsmith (2008)

fighters to Band and Council<sup>20</sup>, provincial legislative grounds, the federal government<sup>21</sup>, and international audiences such as Amnesty International<sup>22</sup> and the United Nations<sup>23</sup>. Even though they have a lot of issues to fight against and could use all the help they can get, they are pretty active and successful about fighting for themselves.

Though many Indigenous women live high-risk lifestyles of addiction, violence, and criminality, a handful of them have overcome the obstacles of their station and achieved incredible things. They are beauty pageant winners<sup>24</sup>, celebrities<sup>25</sup>, artists<sup>26</sup>, athletes<sup>27</sup>, and celebrated volunteers<sup>28</sup>. Others have gone on to graduate university and succeed in a profession, which is cause for celebration because the graduation rates are generally so low<sup>29</sup>. Though it is true that many don't take adequate care of their own children<sup>30</sup>, they have demonstrated that they are committed to caring for their communities and take pride in giving back<sup>31</sup>. Though their failure as mothers begins when babies are still in the womb, as evidenced by the epidemic of FASD among Indigenous women<sup>32</sup>, some women step

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<sup>20</sup> Huntley (1999); Globe and Mail (1999)

<sup>21</sup> Barnsley (2001)

<sup>22</sup> Sinnema (2005)

<sup>23</sup> Toronto Star (2004)

<sup>24</sup> Boesveld (2015)

<sup>25</sup> Urban Native (n.d.)

<sup>26</sup> AGA (2016)

<sup>27</sup> Canada NewsWire (2001)

<sup>28</sup> Balfour (2001)

<sup>29</sup> CBC News (2006)

<sup>30</sup> Jobb (2015)

<sup>31</sup> Aboriginal Nurse (2014)

<sup>32</sup> Canadian Press (2013)

up and take care of their communities and their people as foster mothers<sup>33</sup>, advocates<sup>34</sup>, politicians<sup>35</sup>, and health care workers<sup>36</sup>. Though it is an uphill battle for Indigenous women to succeed in the modern Albertan context, a number of Indigenous women are fighting that battle, and some of them are winning it.

### **The Narrative of Indigenous Women as Told by the Women Themselves**

We Indigenous women are resilient people<sup>37</sup>. We have come from so little and have achieved so much<sup>38</sup>. We lean on each other for support<sup>39</sup> and when we band together we can achieve great things<sup>40</sup>. Our communities are close and vibrant<sup>41</sup>, with a rich history<sup>42</sup> and unique culture<sup>43</sup>. We have been on this land since the beginning of time<sup>44</sup>, surviving nearly unendurable hardships such as the genocidal<sup>45</sup> use of residential schools to break us from our culture, spirituality, and family ties, and discriminatory social practices that have driven our children from our homes in waves<sup>46</sup>. Despite losing our land, a land that has been the source of our spirituality, and our systems of governance, our social order, and our families, to

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<sup>33</sup> Gignac (2009)

<sup>34</sup> Jacobs (2008)

<sup>35</sup> Cryderman (2006)

<sup>36</sup> Bourque-Bearskin (2013)

<sup>37</sup> NWAC (2016)

<sup>38</sup> Morin (2016)

<sup>39</sup> Scope (2009)

<sup>40</sup> Benzie & Brennan (2013)

<sup>41</sup> Gladue (2003)

<sup>42</sup> Bly (2002)

<sup>43</sup> Brandon (2013)

<sup>44</sup> Simard (2012)

<sup>45</sup> Pember (2015)

<sup>46</sup> Canadian Press (2011)

colonizers and to the ongoing impact of colonial practices<sup>47</sup>, we have persisted. We have endured every kind of violence, from strangers and from family, from governments and police, and yet we continue on. We are immeasurably strong.

We do not want to dwell in the past. We seek to right past injustices<sup>48</sup>, and to remember our losses<sup>49</sup>, just as any grieving people would. We seek solace in each other and in our cultures and ceremonies in the hope of healing from our pasts<sup>50</sup>. Yet, we also want to move forward. We seek to fight for our civil and treaty rights<sup>51</sup>, and to make things better for future generations. We want to protect our land and our people, and provide role models for our children to look up to<sup>52</sup>. We protect our culture fiercely because it was nearly stolen from us<sup>53</sup>. We protect our families fiercely because they were stolen from us<sup>54</sup>. We fight for our communities and our people because nobody else will.

We know how we look to outsiders. We know what the statistics say. However, there is so much that is left unsaid, so many of our stories that remain untold. Behind the statistics, there is a great deal of context and history that remains undisclosed<sup>55</sup>. For every statistic about the number of Indigenous children in care,

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<sup>47</sup> Anderson (2000)

<sup>48</sup> Bellefontaine (2015)

<sup>49</sup> Scope (2009)

<sup>50</sup> Lindsay Jackson et al (2015)

<sup>51</sup> Hanes (2007)

<sup>52</sup> Adams (1998)

<sup>53</sup> Nanaimo Daily News (2006)

<sup>54</sup> Curren (1998)

<sup>55</sup> Tait (2009)

there is a hidden context of intergenerational trauma<sup>56</sup> and a lack of support for parents that says at least as much about the failure of the government as it does about the failure of the child's parents. When an Indigenous woman is lauded as the first to achieve a particular achievement, it says at least as much about the discriminatory system she's operating in as it does about her success within it.

We seek reconciliation by telling our stories, seeking witness and understanding from those who hear them. Our stories make us human and real<sup>57</sup>, and remind others that behind the statistics are people who have endured many hardships and still fight on. We are survivors; we leave our families and our familial communities to seek educations and careers in places that are not always welcoming, and then we return and give back whatever we can<sup>58</sup>. There are so few of us who are recognized for the achievements we have had, so we have to recognize them ourselves<sup>59</sup>. For every woman who is internationally acclaimed for her beauty and poise, lies within an activist ready to stand on her media platform to fight for her people<sup>60</sup>.

We are proud of our accomplishments, and we want to recognize each other for them. We are proud of our survivorship, because it is a hard fought battle that has not yet been won. We want to uplift our communities, have our rights protected,

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<sup>56</sup> Roy (2014)

<sup>57</sup> This is Bella's Story (n.d.)

<sup>58</sup> Bell (2011)

<sup>59</sup> Friesen (2001)

<sup>60</sup> Boesveld (2015)

and feel safe in our homes. We fight for what others can enjoy without fighting for it.

We want reconciliation, and we want our stories to stand as truth.

## Discussion

It became apparent fairly early on in the analytic process that very different perspectives about Indigenous women exist in the literature. Given this diversity, we realized that interpreting these various story threads into unified narratives may be difficult to do, and may be an unjust simplification of the available information. Early analyses of the literature revealed story threads that portrayed Indigenous women as victims and criminals, activists and artists, strong and vulnerable, and vocal and silent, among other descriptors. The literature was rife with examples and counterexamples, so we took the analytic approach of splitting the information into narrative threads and contrasting them by highlighting the differences between their tone, narrators, plot lines, and end points. From there, we developed the interim texts, which were then revised into the research texts, as included in the previous section. Throughout this process, a number of points of consideration came to mind that may be meaningful to discuss here.

The story threads that aligned best with the category of stories that are told about Indigenous women tended to differ from the stories that are told by Indigenous women about themselves in important ways. For instance, the stories about Indigenous women tended to focus on Indigenous women as a group or population while stories about themselves were more likely to describe Indigenous women as individuals or as members of specific communities. In addition, the stories told about them by others tended to focus on risk factors and negative outcomes while Indigenous women were more likely to tell stories about themselves that reflected the accomplishments and humanity of particular women.

As such, given the contrast of whole population/negative outcomes versus individuals/positive outcomes, the impression that one gets in reading the literature is that Indigenous women as a whole are a high-risk population prone to victimization, violence, addiction, illness, criminal behaviour, and poverty, but that there are a minority of these women who are exceptions to the rule.

One example of this is how the topic of missing and murdered Indigenous women (MMIW) is portrayed from the two different perspectives. Stories told by others about MMIW tended to be told by journalists, the RCMP, and politicians, and tended to portray the missing and murdered women as addicts and sex trade workers who are exploited by opportunistic strangers, with an unspoken implication being that if the women did not choose to lead such high-risk lifestyles there would be fewer opportunities for strangers to violate and murder them. On the other hand, stories about MMIW by Indigenous women tended to be shared by family members of victims and tended to portray missing and murdered women as family members (i.e., sisters, mothers, etc.), survivors of trauma (i.e., childhood sexual assault, residential schools, etc.), and accomplished women (i.e., graduates, gainfully employed, etc.). If addiction played a role in their lives it was typically portrayed as something that the women had been struggling with or fighting against, demonstrating that they had been actively trying to get away from it. As such, in one narrative's portrayal the women are a faceless group who make poor life choices that leads to their own demise, while in the other they are relatable people who are survivors and fighters who are loved and missed, and the choices that led to their demise were the choices of their murderers.

In addition, stories about Indigenous women as told by others tended to focus on immediate facts and information with little to no discussion about context and history, whereas when Indigenous women tell these stories there is greater focus on these factors. One example of this is the treatment of domestic violence, where stories told by others about the domestic violence that Indigenous women face tended to describe the high rates of domestic violence, the high proportion of Indigenous women who use women's shelters, and the high percentage of solved MMIW cases that were attributed to Indigenous male perpetrators. The underlying implication in the focus on current statistics with little to no discussion of the socio-historical context of domestic violence is that domestic violence is a problem specific to Indigenous people and families, and as such the solution to this problem ought to focus on Indigenous communities, families, and individuals.

On the other hand, stories told by Indigenous women about themselves tended to include contextual information, including the role of socio-political, economic, and historical factors. As such, the historical roles of Indigenous men and women and the relative equality of gender roles within traditional Indigenous societies prior to the arrival of Europeans provides important context to current gender relations. Through the process of colonization, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Euro-Christian gender roles permeated Indigenous societies and irrevocably altered the social order in traditional societies (Anderson, 2012). Between these influences and others, such as the imposition of national policies such as the Indian Act, Indigenous women were stripped of traditional sources of independence and empowerment (i.e., participation in Band politics, marital property, Band membership, etc.), while

men were infused with entitlements that disrupted the traditional balance of power between the genders. This power imbalance worked in concert with other socio-historical factors including overall losses through colonization of independence for all Indigenous peoples, traditional work, resource wealth, spiritual resources, and culture, as well as hazardous living conditions and overcrowding associated with community-wide poverty (Waldram, Herring & Young, 2006), to produce modern domestic situations that are more likely to lead to violence.

In the narrative account of domestic violence that is devoid of contextual information, Indigenous men are portrayed as uncontrolled violent offenders and Indigenous women are victims who, in many instances, choose to put themselves and their children in harm's way by staying with violent men. As such, in this account the solution may be seen as one in which interventions are aimed at reducing violence amongst Indigenous men while Indigenous women are protected from violence through removal from their family and/or community. In the other narrative that does include contextual information, Indigenous men and women are portrayed as being in very difficult domestic situations where violence would be more likely to occur in any family, and as such implied solutions may require larger-scale interventions of a political and economic nature in addition to ensuring the immediate safety of individuals through family-level interventions that do not recreate problematic colonialist relations (i.e., unnecessary or unwanted removal from family/community).

Another difference between the narratives about Indigenous women compared to narratives about themselves was the focus on individual choice and

responsibility that was reflected in the former account. This focus aligns with a liberal perspective of political change wherein strategies for change focus on changing the individuals' choices through smaller-scale individual and community intervention. Meanwhile, the latter account tended to focus on the whole system within which individuals operate, aligning with a radical perspective of political change that implicates larger-scale interventions aimed at changing the entire economic, social, and political system rather than the individuals within it.

One example of this difference in perspectives is apparent in portrayals of the topic of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) amongst Indigenous children. Stories told about Indigenous women tend to focus on their individual choice to drink during pregnancy, thus contributing to high rates of FASD amongst their children, which in turn leads to social, economic, and behavioural problems within their communities (e.g., Canadian Press, 2013). In this way, Indigenous women are individually responsible for making poor choices that lead to significant negative consequences for their entire communities and society as a whole. As such, proposed interventions focus on educating pregnant women on the impacts of drinking during pregnancy and providing support to help them choose sobriety, such as providing access to treatment for alcohol addiction.

On the other hand, stories told by Indigenous women focus less on individual choices and instead levy criticisms against mainstream narratives of FASD as an epidemic problem specific to Indigenous women by pointing to nebulous diagnostic criteria that may contribute to biased diagnoses, uncertain research on the causal link between specific drinking behaviour and incidence of FASD, the general

ignorance of the fact that non-Indigenous women are more likely to drink during pregnancy than Indigenous women, and the significant but unacknowledged impact of socio-economic factors on the expression of FASD symptoms in children (Tait, 2009). Due to these many criticisms, they argue that there may be an over-diagnosis of FASD amongst Indigenous children, and thus the supposed epidemic of FASD amongst Indigenous children may, in fact, represent the social construction of a false crisis. Given this, suggested interventions to address this epidemic take a more radical approach that implicates the system in which FASD occurs rather than individuals (i.e., altering the diagnostic criteria to prevent biased diagnoses, changing national policy and conversation around FASD to more accurately reflect the racial diversity of the women who drink during pregnancy, acknowledging the uncertain research on the specific causes of FASD, and focusing on non-racialized interventions for alcohol abuse and addiction for pregnant women).

Finally, another observation that occurred as we analyzed the literature was the difference between what was left out of the two different accounts. In stories told by others about Indigenous women, there was a tendency to focus on victimhood, which is a perspective that tends to minimize the women's strengths such as resilience and survival skills. Meanwhile, the stories the women told about themselves sometimes celebrated the accomplishments of individuals who had achieved certain "firsts", such as women who were the first to become a provincial politician or the first to become a lawyer or win a certain award. This celebration of "firsts" tends to celebrate the achievements of individuals within a system that is biased against them, which is evidenced by the length of time it took to obtain such

achievements. These celebrations, though worthy, may mask the need for a more radical overhaul of a system that tends to discount, exclude, and disenfranchise Indigenous women with only few and historically recent exceptions.

### **Reconciling Different Perspectives**

It is time for reconciliation. Alberta knows this as she sits down for tea with Iskwew<sup>61</sup>, who can feel the apprehension in the meeting. The green leaves of the wild mint steep in the pot of hot water on the table, infusing the air between them with fragrant steam. As the water turns a ruddy green-brown, Alberta reaches for the pot and serves herself and then her companion. The two women look at their tea as they wonder who should speak first.

Iskwew takes a deep breath and in the silence between them decides to speak first, though she knows that so much has already been said. She welcomes Alberta and reminds her why they are meeting today: because they both understand that they need to engage in the important and difficult work of moving forward. Their shared history is full of so many scars and difficult memories, and so many conversations have taken place before without leading to meaningful changes, and yet they both remain hopeful today that something new will take shape. At the very least, they both know that something has to change.

Alberta understands her companion is tired of speaking without being heard. She is attentive as Iskwew speaks, concentrating on her words and the meaning

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<sup>61</sup> Iskwew is the Cree word for “woman” and is used in this narrative for illustrative purposes. The authors acknowledge that the Cree are one of the First Nations people of Alberta and our choice of the language of any other group of First Nations people would have been as meaningful in this vignette.

behind them. She tries to understand her message, tries to look outside the lens through which she has always seen Iskwew and see her the way Iskwew describes herself. From this different perspective, Alberta is surprised how different their shared history looks. She hears Iskwew's stories of hardship and survival, and her vision for a future that is much brighter than the past. She speaks in terms of the land she knows, strength and resilience, families and communities, and a context of social, economic, political, and historical factors that are as tangible in her life as the breath in her lungs. Iskwew speaks of Alberta's need to know her history in order to know who she is now, and it is this message in particular that strikes Alberta. *Of course, she realizes, one cannot know who I am without knowing where I come from and what my life has been.* She begins to see Iskwew in a new light, to see her not just as she appears from Alberta's own limited perspective, but as she really is: this perfectly human woman at the heart of a complex web of relations, rich in culture and history and future potential, strong from survival and necessity, who is ready to walk through a healing path to reconcile the pains of her past and stride into her future.

Alberta thanks Iskwew for sharing, and takes a moment to sip her tea and reflect. After a thoughtful pause, she acknowledges she had not seen Iskwew from her own perspective before, and that she learned something important about her today. Alberta is a much younger woman than Iskwew, and Alberta describes the way she sees the world through the eyes of a young person, with an intrepid forward-thinking sense of adventure borne from early years spent forging a path through harsh conditions. She takes pride in her resourcefulness, independence, and

how well she has succeeded despite her young age. She acknowledges that she never understood why Iskwew couldn't just do as she has done, to make the choice to pull herself up and get to work creating the life she wants for herself. She had wondered why Iskwew kept talking about the past when life is about the future.

Iskwew begins to explain, but Alberta stops her because she wants Iskwew to hear that she knows. Alberta knows now that context sheds light on everything, and that Iskwew's apparent choice to focus on the past was really her insistence that what had happened in the past is still alive in her today. With some discomfort, Alberta even comes to acknowledge that the context around her own life story demonstrates that her successes were not entirely her making. She pauses and looks down, takes a slow breath, then again meets Iskwew's eye before acknowledging that her current wealth came not only from hard work but also from theft and exploitation. It is hard to say this part, and Iskwew understands the courage it takes to say this out loud. Alberta does not want to see herself in that way, and does not want to think that the hard work and difficulties she has endured are meaningless. Iskwew acknowledges what Alberta has done and been through, and reminds her that understanding the full context of her situation does not erase its meaning or negate who she is. Alberta agrees, and notes that it must be possible to acknowledge and understand each other's complex lived truths while still taking pride in who they are and what they have accomplished. Iskwew agrees that this is probably true.

"So where do we go from here?" Iskwew wonders aloud. Both she and Alberta sink into silence as they contemplate what needs to happen next. Alberta eventually chimes in that they can review their past conversations and develop an

plan to act on the suggestions they have come up with in the past, such as educating each other about their shared history, working as partners on future endeavours, and ensuring that both Alberta and Iskwew can enjoy the kind of independence and resources that only Alberta had enjoyed in the past. Iskwew agrees, and notes the importance of their conversation today, suggesting that including contextual information in all future conversations and engaging in ongoing dialogue will also be key. Alberta thinks this is a good plan.

The women fall silent again as they finish their tea. They both understand that their shared history is long and marred with conflict and misunderstanding, and that their plans will very likely spread far into the future before they can fully realize their goals. The injuries that occurred over such a long time will no doubt take a long time to heal. Nevertheless, both women end their meeting feeling hopeful. They have started their journey down the healing path, and though it may take a long time to traverse they take comfort in knowing they are walking it together.

### **Conclusion**

Narratives shape the way we see and interact with the world. Those narratives may be the stories we tell about ourselves to make sense of our own histories and experiences, and they may be the stories we construct about others. In the course of preparing this report, we have sifted through many stories about Indigenous women and devised interpretive texts to represent two disparate ways of representing them. The majority of the literature that we reviewed was more closely aligned with the first account, the stories that are told by others about Indigenous

women, representing a grand narrative of Indigenous women in Alberta that both shapes our understanding of who they are and also provides the lens through which to see them.

The purpose of this report was to review recent print media to determine what the prevailing narratives say about Indigenous women in this province, and to identify whether there are alternative narratives that may help shift the perspectives that are suggested by the mainstream narratives. In our efforts to do so, we have determined that the grand narrative about Indigenous women, as interpreted from the stories that are told by others about them, only provides one perspective that is greatly limited in scope and depth. In order for meaningful reconciliation to take place between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people of this province, we must not privilege one perspective over the other by continuing to provide disproportionately more information to the public through the perspective of the grand narrative. Instead, in order to begin this process we will need to allow the different sides to inform each other, and this will require us to begin attending to the alternative perspectives that are available to us, the stories that Indigenous women tell about themselves.

To this end, we recommend following a number of strategies that may help shift the balance of information so that alternative narratives are afforded more space in the field of literature. We recommend including relevant historical, social, political, and economic context when presenting information in future reports to ensure that this information is not misattributed to individual, racialized, gendered stereotypes about Indigenous women. Further, we recommend publishing more

information that describes individual Indigenous women in order to provide more humanizing stories about a population that is not often represented in relatable ways. When a group of people is spoken about in generic, homogenous, generalized ways, and there are few examples to enrich this discussion with more intimate portraits of individuals, it is possible to reduce the complex humanness of the subjects to a dehumanized mass.

We recommend providing space in the literature for critiques of narratives that are taken for granted as truth, and for policy to reflect not only mainstream research but also research that provides a critical perspective so as to dampen the overpowering strength of the grand narrative in policy decision-making. Finally, we recommend promoting literature and funding research that focuses on the strengths of Indigenous women, such as their resilience, survivorship, historic and current roles in their communities, and other positive features, and to reframe negative information in a positive context (i.e., reframing discussions of violence to focus less on victimhood and more on survival).

It is our hope that the portrayal of Indigenous women in the literature will become more representative of their truth by presenting a diverse range of information from a diverse range of perspectives. We hope that Indigenous women will have more of a voice in the literature and will have a greater platform from which to speak for themselves, as they are the only ones who can tell their own stories. Finally, we are hopeful that Alberta will listen to those stories and work with the Indigenous women of this province to enact real changes in how Indigenous women are represented and how they relate with others in this province. In so

doing, we believe that all Albertans stand to benefit from the greater understanding and closer partnerships that may result from this mutual action and dialogue.

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