

The Kaska Dene: A Study of Colonialism, Trauma and Healing in Dene Kēyeh

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research contributes to an emerging field of literature examining cultural disjunctures in which traditional and contemporary ways of life and perceptions of cultural knowledge are being disassociated from each other. This study examines the disjuncture associated with the perception of Dene Kēyeh, ‘The Peoples Country’, a region of Kaska Dene traditional territory, as contemporary neoliberal ideologies compete with traditional Dene K’eh philosophies and worldviews. Employing an ethnographic and indigenous framework using participatory observations and in-depth interviews, I explore this disjuncture through my own personal experience as well as the knowledge of other members and stakeholders of Dene Kēyeh. In exploring the causes and effects of this disjuncture, my thesis develops a specific history of colonialism, trauma and healing among the Kaska Dene of Dene Kēyeh. I utilize theories of discourses of power, affective emotion, post memory and postcolonialism to illustrate how the outcome from one example of the oppressive processes of colonialism, Indian Residential Schooling, has contributed to multigenerational trauma and cultural identity loss and contesting landscape perceptions of Dene Kēyeh. The study identifies the affective outcomes of trauma from colonization and its transmission across generations while also exploring indigenous relationships to the land as being essential for the healing of such trauma and the prevention of its future transmission.

Through this investigation of residential schooling in Dene Kēyeh and its impacts on landscape perception, I argue that past and present day experiences of Dene Kēyeh are essential to such intergenerational healing and should be used to reframe the existing dialogue about how we, as a people, should interact with Our Land – Degun.

## **PREFACE**

This research was approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research Ethics Board. Ethics certificate H11-03047. The principal investigator is Dr. Patrick Moore and the co-investigator is Gillian Farnell.

None of the parts of this MA thesis have been previously published.

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Souga Sinla

Mussi Cho

## **DEDICATION**

Jackson Stone Staveley, my Ciyah

Remember who you are, Remember where you come from

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*We are approaching Sheep Creek in the Toad River Valley; an area that is surrounded by towering peaks labeled on the map after men prominent in European history with names such as Mount Aristotle or Mount Churchill. As we quietly hike on past a road sign notably proclaiming that this area is a 'pure wilderness', my Auntie, who needs no map and is a wayfinder, suddenly points "our people are buried there on that hill overlooking the river. There is nothing more powerful than that Gillian. This is Dene Kēyeh: our country. Just like your Uncle George McDonald used to say 'our people are the trees, we are part of this land. We live, grow and die here like a tree. We come back knowing this is where we come from. We are the trees; we are Degun – our land'" (field notes May 21<sup>st</sup> 2012).*

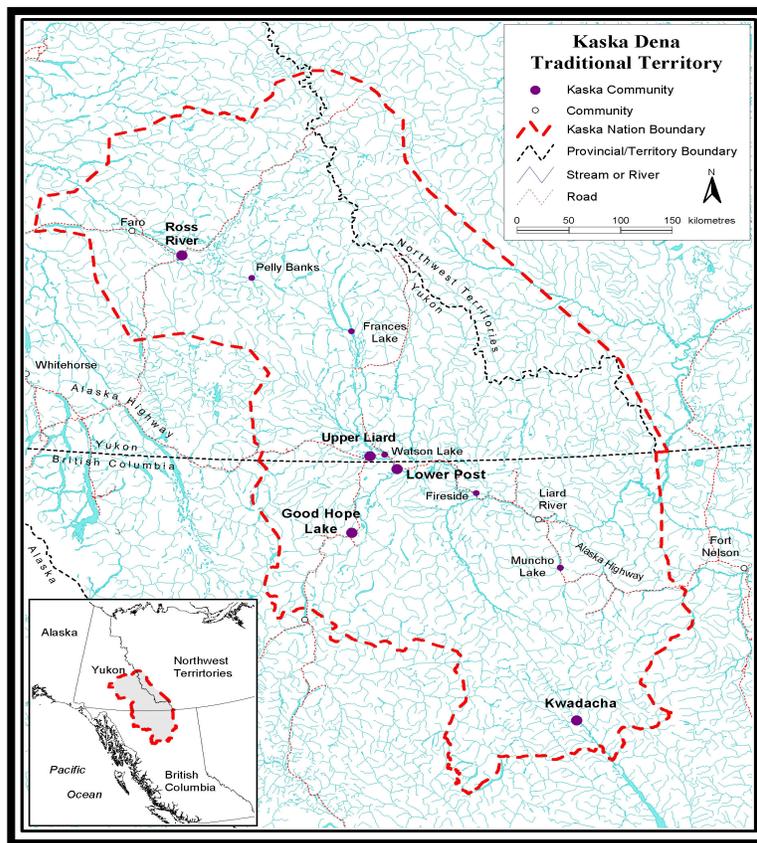
As a Kaska person, I have a deep sense of belonging in Dene Kēyeh, the Kaska First Nations traditional territory. Today, even in a supposedly post-colonial era, Dene Kēyeh is not known as such but is mostly recognized as a provincially managed park landscape encompassing an area of 6.4 million hectares. Within this managed area there are no roads and the region is viewed as the largest remaining parkland within the Rocky Mountains. At various times, this region has been labeled a fur trading territory by early Europeans traders, an uninhabited wilderness by arriving European settlers, a hydro development dream by capitalist policy makers, and the Serengeti of the North by environmentalists. To the people and my family who still dwell there, it is Dene Kēyeh – their homeland. For the Kaska, Dene Kēyeh continues to be experienced as a spiritual, cultural and physical landscape, albeit one from which our views as Kaska Dene have been minimalized and marginalized in a colonized Canada.

The process of colonization hybridized the meaning of this landscape, Dene Kēyeh, to different Kaska generations and created disjunctures that affect the fabric of contemporary Kaska society. Yet, Dene Kēyeh as a cultural and spiritual center for the Kaska people also offers powerful avenues of healing from the trauma of the colonization process. While working with the Kaska Dene, I began to unravel the experiences, tensions and locations that have produced Dene Kēyeh as a contested social field. A profound linkage exists between the trauma experienced by the Kaska Dene as a result of colonialism and the effect on their contemporary relationship to Dene Kēyeh and the Kaska value systems with which it is united. This thesis is intended to identify that linkage, understand the means of transmission by which the traumatic effects of colonialism have and continue to be conveyed, as well as the avenues of healing that are a response to the ongoing trauma and disjunctures in Kaska communities.

The Kaska Dene are an Athabaskan speaking First Nations group residing in Northern British Columbia, the Southeast Yukon and the Southwestern corner of the Northwest Territories (Moore 1999: 313). The Kaska First Nations in British Columbia are the Dease River First Nation at Good Hope Lake, the Daylu Dena Council in Lower Post and the Kwadacha First Nation in Fort Ware, while the Yukon Kaska Dene reside in the communities of Ross River administered by the Ross River Dena Council and Watson Lake under the Liard First Nation. There are approximately 1240 Kaska Dene in the Yukon and approximately 400 Kaska Dene in BC (Statistics Canada 2006), most of them living in the five communities of the Kaska Dene traditional territory. As a community, they are artificially split by colonially drawn boundaries into separate bands and are forced to negotiated separately with two different provincial/territorial authorities both of

whom want ‘land settlements’ so that economic development of ‘their’ respective regions can continue. To date, the Kaska Dene have not signed a land-based treaty in the Yukon or British Columbia. Having so-called ‘unsettled land claims’, these bands have ‘lands set aside’ under the Indian Act. The small amount of land allotted to them by the Crown is contested as there is no comparison between it and the 240,000 square kilometers of land encompassing traditional Kaska territory (Kaska Dena Council 2013).

**Figure 1: Dene Keyeh Region**



(Kaska Dene Council 2013)

Until the last 50 years, the Kaska Dene lived as dispersed groups moving across the landscape to fish, trap, hunt and harvest berries according to the season (Johnson 2010b: 95). Similar to other northern Dene, the Kaska still lived in small family groups even after the arrival of the early Hudson Bay traders (Johnson 2010b: 95). With the

building of the Alaska Highway, the traditional daily-lived experience began to change for Kaska communities as they moved into the wage economy and were placed on reserves (Johnson 2010b: 96; Meek 2010: 18). The building of the Alaska Highway in 1943 therefore represented the first significant cultural transformation that changed the way people moved throughout the landscape (Meek 2010: 18; Coates 1991; Cruikshank 1990).

The landscape through which the Kaska Dene journeyed for countless generations is known as Dene Kēyeh which translates as ‘the people’s country’. As described by Catherine McClellan, the Kaska, similar to many Yukon First Nations, spoke of themselves as being ‘part of the land and part of the water’ (1987). The Kaska relationship to Dene Kēyeh is bound to a profoundly personal feeling of belonging to a place as defined through a sense of experience, a phenomenology of locality, which serves to create the ideals and structures of Kaska society. Dene Kēyeh, as a landscape, is therefore intimately intertwined to a system of Kaska ontology, epistemology and values called Dene K’éh. Dene K’éh is not an abstracted system of written European-style philosophy but is rather expressed in traditional oral narratives about Dene Kēyeh which are used as a guiding tool for appropriate cultural behavior. These narratives form the basis of understanding á’í (commonly referred to as taboos) and represent guiding principles which generate notions of appropriate cultural behavior and respect (Meek 2010: 30). Young Kaska Dene are still taught á’í to understand social structures and authoritative roles such as those of their elders. These Kaska narratives about á’í establish the bonds between the Kaska people and features of a landscape that reflect Basso’s identification of a geospatial understanding of the world and their relation to it

(1996: 34). Many Kaska, and particularly elders, continue to live according to this traditional ontology and epistemology despite the continuous social and economic pressure to assimilate into more dominant cultural ideologies (Moore 1999: 281). The Alaska Highway and other effects of colonization have increasingly created generations that are removed from the traditional Kaska practices and skills that were once part of everyday life in Dene Kēyeh. The knowledge and memories of that way of life are centered in a generation of elders. The Kaska elders therefore should be viewed as a generational bridge from a traditional relationship with Dene Kēyeh to a younger generation of Kaska either growing up in their small communities, or in a diaspora to various Canadian towns and cities. Within this context, the landscape of Dene Kēyeh is becoming contested from hegemonic discourses which are creating pressure on the Kaska communities within Dene Kēyeh.

The Kaska Dene have been increasingly disenfranchised from their cultural and physical landscape as a result of these ideological clashes arising from concepts of both ecological governance and also neoliberal ideologies about the need to develop and exploit the resources in our natural environment. Concepts of ecological governance are to be found in various elements of the loosely labeled 'environmental movement' which range from those of the preservationists to those of the conservationists who oppose environmental degradation that is caused by the negative impacts of anthropocentric drivers of capitalist systems (Glaser 2006: 124). Neoliberal ideologies entrenched in the capitalist perspective can be found embodied in notions of resource development such as mining, oil and gas exploration or hydroelectric expansion as well as in its emphasis on consumerism and materialism where the environmental becomes a product to dominate

for our own material well-being (Glaser 2006: 128). Given the limitless appetites of global markets and Eurocentric concepts of property ownership, these forces and their rhetorical arguments exacerbate any existing disconnection the Kaska Dene have between traditional views of the landscape and new interpretations of what the landscape means. As a result, the need for a balance between traditional values towards the land as a source of identity, history and knowledge and the conversion of land to access natural resources has become an urgent discourse for First Nations (Johnson 2010a: 107).

The Kaska Dene of northeastern British Columbia and southeastern Yukon must inevitably become part of this discourse as they are now being confronted by a hegemony created from a period of colonization challenging the Kaska Dene to establish their future relationship to the land within the context of a euro-centric system. First Nation's landscapes (such as Dene Kēyeh) have therefore become value laden and political and have propelled First Nation people in Canada to find their own political visions of the landscape. The meanings and the ideological ownership of these places are thus constantly being re-negotiated. Environmental anthropologists and political ecologists both recognize that in order to understand human-environment relations we must first understand how people internalize, narrate, structure and explain the world in which they live. In order to achieve such understanding, we also need to trace concepts about nature and the environment backwards to their historical roots in order to deconstruct these contemporary claims and discourses about the environment (Robbins 2004: 124).

For the Kaska Dene the historical roots to the emerging disjuncture in their traditional relationship to Dene Kēyeh comes from their experience of colonialism. Colonialism represents a principal force of displacement and shifts the connections of

people to places through the spatial distribution of hierarchical power relations (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 8). The oppression of First Nations people in Canada by colonialism is historically evident and has been researched to a certain degree. This hegemonic culture continues to form the conceptual base by which we manage, use and label our landscapes (Glaser 2006: 122). Contemporary discourses about Dene Kēyeh focus on ‘land rights’ and ‘development strategies’. Yet, Dene K’éh, an ontological and epistemological belief system established through a relationship to Dene Kēyeh, as a way of viewing Dene Kēyeh continues to be embodied in many Kaska Dene elders but remains marginalized and is increasingly perceived as belonging to a disconnected historical past. Postcolonialty further problematizes the relationship of the Kaska Dene between their sense of Dene Kēyeh and that of the prevailing hegemonic culture. While mainstream postcolonialty finally acknowledges the abuse of an entire generation of Kaska Dene, it does not consider any of those colonial effects as being relevant other than as historical factors to be apologized for. Yet for indigenous people, traditional embodied landscapes are under threat of being erased (Gupta and Ferguson 1992: 11). The marginalization of indigenous ontology and epistemology was a significant effect of a colonial Canada. Ironically, a cultural and personal connectedness to the landscape by indigenous peoples is still not highly valued in the hegemonies and superstructure of a supposedly postcolonial Canada.

As anthropologists, we have much to offer about a more reflective understanding of personal connectedness to place, how we constitute place as a people and its meaning in our cultural and spiritual lives. In advocating for the importance of understanding the role of personal connectedness with landscapes, Keith Basso states that the discipline of

anthropology is missing an interest in how people dwell in the landscape and “an understanding of the way in which people constitute their landscapes and connect with them” (1996: 106). As an aboriginal academic and as a Kaska Dene citizen, this thesis attempts to explore the profound personal connection that the Kaska Dene have to ‘Degun’: their land. The thesis identifies the trauma inflicted by colonialism on a generation of elders’ connectedness to Degun and how the transmission of trauma from that Kaska generation to the next generation has taken place. If we can more fully understand that personal connectedness to Dene Kēyeh which is an essential part of Degun then we can understand the need to empower the Kaska people to help determine the future of Dene Kēyeh as an essential part of the required healing for elders and youth alike.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Degun, a Kaska Dene word for ‘our land’ differs from Dene Kēyeh meaning ‘the people’s country’, which refers to Kaska Dene traditional territory as a whole.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

*“I remember your Great Auntie telling me a story one time about 200 or so Cree that came into Kaska Territory for women or war. They came through our family’s country at Muncho Lake and met Old Man Stone your great, great grandfather. He was by the fire cooking beaver fat; he held it over the fire and cooked it with his bare hands. The Cree were amazed and decided they could not fight with a people who were as tough as he was, so they left. To go from that to three generations later where we now have no strength left is truly sad. Our people are now just getting social payouts; they don’t know their language and they are not going out on the land.” (Gūdzīhmā: May 18<sup>th</sup> 2012)<sup>2</sup>*

Prevailing hegemonic discourses often reinforce a notion that colonization of First Nations people is a regrettable behavior of an historical past and that such behaviour no longer exists in Canada. Much is made of government apologies, truth and reconciliation commissions, and educational and economic opportunities being made available to First Nations. However, colonization is not a legacy of the past. The effects of colonization manifest themselves every day for aboriginal people trying to live within euro-western legal, social, spiritual and economic frameworks that continue to marginalize and encroach on First Nations people’s knowledge and beliefs (Bennett and Blackstock 2002: 4). An imbalance of power and influence between First Nations people and the euro-centric hegemony that was initiated by colonial domination continues in Canada. Political, epistemic, racial and cultural hierarchies that were set in place during the colonial era still remain entrenched in power relations and subjectivities today and represent contemporary coloniality (Middleton 2010: 2).

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<sup>2</sup> Gūdzīhmā is not only a close personal informant but she is also a well-known advocate for her people, an educator, a fluent Kaska speaker, and a land-steward to our territory.

For the Kaska Dene, coloniality is present in our contemporary discourses about our land, language and culture as well as in our history. Coloniality has impacted many Kaska generations and continues to place oppressive hegemonic forces on our people. Paulo Freire could indeed be referring to the Kaska Dene when he describes the culture of the silenced as being the culture of the dispossessed whose situation results from economic, social and political domination (1997: 12). In the face of such oppressive colonial forces, subaltern communities have been traumatized through a superstructure of authority that is rooted in coloniality (Turner 1974). However, there is hope that the future can offer a different outcome. Paulo Freire observes that the healing from the trauma of colonial oppression should be understood within the context of an emerging response to the effects of such oppression (1997: 30). The crucial role of such healing is to create a new cohesion among fractured cultural elements and reclaim autonomy and control over both individual and community identity (Kirmayer 2004: 42). This thesis will argue that, for the Kaska Dene, such a healing process is ultimately closely bound to their relationship to the landscape that they know as Dene Kēyeh.

Clifford Geertz states that postcolonial representations of place and culture are best understood by those theories that logically provide the specifics of power relations and the struggle around such power relations (1983: 119). This chapter examines theories of the coloniality of power to explain the way coloniality has operated oppressively in Kaska Dene communities, how coloniality of power has created trauma with harmful social and cultural outcomes, and how that trauma is transmitted to current generations of Kaska and the nature of the healing process that is emerging in response to colonialism and its ongoing residual presence.

## 2.1 The Coloniality of Power

The concept of the coloniality of power was developed by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano who uses the term to account for “the entangled and mutually constitutive relations between the international division of labor, the global racial/ethnic hierarchy, and the hegemonic Eurocentric epistemologies in the modern/colonial world-system” (Grosfoguel and Cervantes-Rodríguez 2002: 205). An understanding of coloniality of power allows us to recognize how the “colonized were subjected not simply to a rapacious exploitation of all their resources but also to a hegemony of euro-centric knowledge systems” (Alcoff 2007: 82). Walter Mignolo identifies the effect of such euro-centric epistemologies on identity and sense of place, as being “among its most damaging, far-reaching, and least understood” (Alcoff 2007: 80). These all too powerful epistemologies are part of colonialist discourses which are imposed from a position of power and a division of knowledge that places subaltern subjects on the subordinate side of the colonial difference (Grosfoguel and Cervantes-Rodríguez 2002: 209).

To understand how coloniality of power was and is produced, neo-Marxian scholars draw upon systems theory and concepts of development and underdevelopment to emphasize the global unequal distribution of resources as part of a global political economy of domination and subjugation (Middleton 2010:17). These scholars point to epistemologies, formed from the prevailing ideologies of the ruling class, as prime determinants in establishing hegemonic worldviews that helped develop capitalist, racist and overall colonial perceptions of the world. Marxist theory also offers insight into the mechanism by which ideologies are transferred into epistemologies that in turn create racial hierarchies and hegemonic systems that become oppressive. Such theory

emphasizes that social structures act as agents in determining a person's consciousness, or sense of personal and social identity and such social structures include concepts of classes (Marx and Engels 1994 [1846]: 125). The ruling class creates and benefits from the legal, institutional and political superstructures of the society (Marx and Engels 1994 [1846]: 125). In effect, the ideas of the ruling class control both the material and intellectual forces of society (Marx and Engels 1994 [1846]: 64).

In the context of the Kaska Dene's encounters with coloniality of power, the European colonialists established themselves as a ruling class and quickly founded the superstructures that then reinforced their ideologies. In such situations, Sahlins identifies that subaltern groups are inevitably destined to lose their cultural coherence as well as the pristine innocence of their indigenous knowledge systems (2005: 45). The final conditions for the oppression of the Kaska Dene were created when the incoming European ruling class also established its discourse of class differences in the form of racial differences. Race rather than social class is the key axis for understanding the oppression in the First Nation context (Grosfoguel and Cervantes-Rodríguez 2002: 204). Mignolo states "race was in the colonies and before the industrial revolution, what social class became after the industrial revolution in Europe" (2007: 479). Ramón Grosfoguel identifies such racism as being epistemic in its "systematic, institutionalized devaluation of knowledge and ways of knowing of the oppressed" (2007: 213). Oppression through the coloniality of power operating from the mutually reinforcing dyad of a racial hierarchical system and the dominance of the European discourses over epistemologies is particularly evident for the Kaska Dene. Eduardo Duran describes such colonization of First Nations individuals and communities as a set of dehumanizing policies focused on a

psychological process of internalization (2006: 16). Colonial oppression should therefore be understood as a process operating on self-identity that breaks down a person's connection to landscape, belief systems and ways of being.

## **2.2 Colonialism and the Processes of Oppression**

Michel Foucault's discursive production of power provides a framework for studying the oppressive force applied by coloniality of power. Foucault describes a 'bio-political' mechanism of social power which utilizes segregation and social hierarchies to create societal relations based on domination by a hegemonic system (1990:140-141). Foucault also identifies and further articulates the disciplinary figures used in bio-politics such as schools, governments, and military institutions as well as the regulatory controls which are directed towards the health and wealth of the people (1990: 93).

One of the principal forms of bio-political regulatory control over First Nations by the Canadian government is embodied in the Indian Act which identifies power relationships that then also became a struggle over place (Harvey 1989: 237-238). The Indian Act of 1869 was inherited from an imperial regime and then transformed into contemporary federal policies of control that eliminated self-governing power of First Nations peoples in all of Canada (Milloy 2008: 3). The next Indian Act of 1876 created a power relationship in which all First Nations people would lose effective control of almost every aspect of their communities including land holding, education, resources and financial management (Milloy 2008: 8). In just one egregious example, Sections 113 to 122 of the Indian Act legally removed the rights of Aboriginal parents to their children, giving the Federal government total control over aboriginal children's lives (Chansonneuve 2005: 43). These mechanisms of bio-political power were an

indispensable element of colonialism in subjugating First Nations people in Canada. Designed by a euro-centric hegemony and under the guise of being a governmental responsibility to safeguard and better Canada's indigenous people, educational policies were developed to control an entire generation of aboriginal children so as to absorb future aboriginal populations into mainstream society (Chansonneuve 2005: 34). The combination of such colonial discourses along with their superstructures resulted in the destruction of alternative ways of knowing and living that obliterated collective identities and memories in order to impose a new order (Tuhiwai-Smith 2008: 69).

### **2.3 Trauma as an Affective Outcome**

The human relationship to landscape is an elemental one. Lefebvre states that it is “by the means of the body that space is perceived, lived and produced” (Lefebvre 1991: 162). However, we do not experience physical space in a solitary capacity but rather as a shared lived experience with others that then becomes acculturated. Further, as humans, we are capable of transmitting that experience through memory and emotion to others including across generations. As a core phenomenological element of human experience, emotion enriches and makes our daily lives and our most significant moments meaningful (Tarlow 2012: 180). Places are affective and sticky with emotion, fixing important memories to place, which can sometimes be transmitted over multiple generations (Tarlow 2012: 174). As affective responses, the mind and body are therefore filled with social meaning and are historically situated (Lock 1993: 141). These elements of memory, emotion and shared lived experience are vulnerable to disruption and disjuncture.

For the Kaska Dene elders, Dene Kēyeh is historically culturalized and imbued with emotion. Their memories of Dene Kēyeh as a place are based on lived experience within the landscape of Dene Kēyeh. It was a trauma from colonization events that impacted the Kaska Dene people's affects, emotions and their 'habitus' which inevitably caused a disjuncture in their relationship to Dene Kēyeh. Contemporary discourses, as seen in government apologies, now acknowledge that this trauma was transformative for the Kaska Dene elders while the concept of 'loss' has also become an essential feature of the discourse about colonization and the aboriginal experience (Kirsch 2001: 167). However, less acknowledged is the colonial debris from the various forms of disjunctures of the environment and culture that remain today in the physical and emotional experiences of children whose grandparents and parents were exposed to such direct trauma. Deborah Chansonneuve argues that the urgent health and social problems of many aboriginal people in Canada today are directly related to multiple generations of children who were abused in residential schools and disconnected from their families and communities (2005: 40). Chansonneuve also views residential schools as the primary source that taught aboriginal children to feel shame in their heritage, language, customs and spiritual traditions (2005: 40).

In her work with post-holocaust memory studies, Marianne Hirsch discusses how memories of traumatic events can be transmitted to those who were not actually there to live that event (2008: 106). Memory plays a central role in the transmission of trauma since "individuals are part of social groups with shared belief systems that frame memories and shape them into narratives" (Hirsch 2008: 110). Hirsch identifies the mechanism for the transmission of such traumatic experience collectively felt across

generations as being ‘post-memory’. Post-memories are memories passed down to a subsequent generation as “powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nonetheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 2008: 103). Such memories are powerfully intertwined with emotions and are best described as ‘emotional memories’. The affective capacity of emotional memories is a way of re-describing historical interactions between people and the resultant impacts of such interactions (Beasley-Murray 2010: 127-131). Historical trauma is therefore best understood as a cluster of traumatic events in which collective memories are a mechanism that transmits the trauma from generation to generation as well as being shared emotionally across generations in the form of many different social disorders such as a sense of helplessness (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 2004: 65). These intergenerational echoes of colonial trauma can also be felt through the complicated social devastation within many aboriginal communities which Sara Mohammed describes as “self destructive behaviors, mental illness and emotional disorders, suicide, conflicts with the law, violence, internalized racism, poverty and under-education” (2010: 1). The current generation of youth and young adults among the Kaska Dene is experiencing what Hirsch describes as a transfer of knowledge involving language and landscape from elders who are a “generation of survivors passing into history” (2008: 104). For decades, elders kept the disruptive effects of their deeply personal wounds to themselves and only recently feel permission to talk about them as a community. First Nations people are now looking inwards within their own communities to find resources to relieve the trauma and help heal traumatized spirits (Episkenew 2009: 11).

## **2.4 Healing in a Postcolonial Context**

One of the main pillars of self-determination for First Nations people today is healing and wellness. Healing for the Kaska Dene should be understood as a distinct form of holistic health that differs from western models. Healing of trauma produced by colonial systems must incorporate traditional, holistic and community driven therapies unlike western medicine models (Mohammed 2010: 2). Members of minority groups have very little input into the social systems that govern them which reflects their lack of opportunity, access and participation which in turn affects their health status (Loustaunau and Sobo 1997: 29). They discover that without freedom from this oppressive structure, they cannot exist authentically and even healthily (Freire 1997: 30). Poka Laenui proposes a distinct healing model of post colonialism which occurs in five stages: rediscovery, recovery of indigenous history and culture; mourning; dreaming; commitment and action (Mohammed 2010: 2). Laeuni's healing model begins with an understanding (a rediscovery) of the historical context that stresses the important role played by colonial institutions and the resultant transmission of intergenerational trauma. For First Nations people, the act of seeking to reclaim autonomy and control over their nations and communities is also understood as a form of healing both for individual and collective wounds traced back to the violence of colonization (Kirmayer 2004: 41). Therefore, such community-led healing as a holistic health model facilitates the process of decolonizing through reclamation of culture.

### CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

*Where are the Kaska Dene?*

*Dusty skies; another gas truck rolls by.*

*From Gold rush trails to World War roadways, this town is now silent.*

*Signposts marking the center of this highway rest stop.*

*Where are the Dene who call this their home?*

*Sitting outside the band office gossiping about what never will happen;*

*Walking down the long road to where they were told to go live 2 miles from town;*

*Praying in the Catholic Church;*

*Their children learning French and German in school.*

*But. If I look hard enough. I can see.*

*An Elder teaching her nephew how to set traps in the forest;*

*Kids excitedly collecting cans for their grandpa to get gas money to take them out to the bush;*

*If I listen enough. I can hear.*

*Laughing coming from the community hall where women have gathered to make bannock;*

*“ Dénht’ā? Kolā Entie?” (How are you, are you good?)*

At an elder’s meeting in 2009 on traditional ecological knowledge attended by various environmentalists, lawyers and academic researchers, an elder suddenly stood up and quietly expressed her frustration about how research was being conducted in her community by simply stating that “the Kaska people are being studied to death”. The ensuing discussion revealed a gap in expectations between researchers and the community they researched. An industry of research and vested interests has been built from indigenous knowledge without directly addressing, or at best ignoring, community concerns, issues and ambitions.

Growing up, I was immersed in Dene K'éh. This 'way of being', intimately linked to my experience of Dene Kēyeh, defines and permeates my identity and relationships with others. I have also attempted to understand Dene K'éh by exploring my heritage through the academic understanding that anthropology can partially provide. Born into a politically charged First Nations family, I was raised with intimate knowledge of the Dene Keyeh region even though I did not grow up in the Kaska communities. Raised in Whitehorse, Yukon I frequently visited the town my mother grew up in, Watson Lake, and made personal connections to many of the Kaska citizens in this region based on my family background. As a Kaska anthropologist who straddles two cultures, I feel compelled to speak both for and from my experience when attempting to understand the contemporary effects and healing of the trauma created by colonial processes.

Lila Abu-Lughod coins the term 'halfie anthropologist' to describe a "bicultural individual who can move between worlds and identities, disrupting traditional anthropological boundaries between self and other" (1993: 41). Abu-Lughod also contends that culture really exists in embodied experience where the experiences and knowledge of a 'halfie' anthropologists, can also help write against the grain of western hegemonic discourse (1993: 41). Joseph Raelin further argues that to effectively deconstruct such dominant hegemonic discourses, an emancipatory discourse analysis is required to expose and alter unjust power relations (2008: 520). To expose unjust power relations, methodologies in postcolonial research must therefore create spaces for narratives of emancipation (Venn 2006: 1). This thesis reflects emancipatory ethnography as my overarching method.

Ethnography as a method has a well substantiated and researched approach. The objective of western ethnography is to “describe the lives of people other than ourselves, with accuracy and sensitivity honed by detailed observations and prolonged first-hand experience” (Ingold 2011: 229). To effectively conduct ethnography, researchers must perform fieldwork where there is a repetitive act of immersing and then removing oneself from the setting. These repeated observations with varying levels of participation provide the means by which ethnography “makes the strange familiar and the familiar strange” (Caines 2010: 432). The assumed power embedded in a so-called objective researcher lays claim to their authority as the legitimate “teller of literal truths” about indigenous knowledge and heritage (Battiste and Henderson 2000: 32). This epistemological hegemony of knowledge dominated the ethnographic field until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century when ethnographic genres of postmodern, feminist, post-colonial and deconstructionist ideologies confronted these traditional views (Caines 2010: 432). Indigenous anthropologists have also raised concerns about the interpretations of non-indigenous academic researchers who write about their culture (Given 2008: 467).

To address such power inequalities, postmodern ethnographies have emphasized the need to articulate multiple realities and alternative worldviews while incorporating an awareness of how as individuals we can occupy a multiplicity of positions (Sikes 2006: 350). These multiplicities of positions also come in the form of an ethnographer’s positionality in their research which is formed by reflexivity that influences their research questions (Hopkins 2007: 387). When making representations of culture, the ethnographer’s self-awareness of his or her perspective, political alliance, and cultural influence is a significant responsibility (Mutman 2006: 159). My method, therefore, also

included an essential component of self-examination and awareness of my own positionalities. As an indigenous fieldworker who can cross academic and communities based boundaries, I committed to trying to be aware of this power asymmetry. My positionality was always of great concern to me and I therefore dealt with a number of insider problems including lack of privacy, self-silencing, issues of representation and vulnerabilities of engagement.

Postmodern ethnographic accounts of culture still tend to produce static homogenous representations and ignore the important connections between different groups and the effects of sociocultural change in the way people experience their daily lives (Abu-Lughod 1991: 149). Knowing I was infused with an emotional attachment to the issue I was studying, I also focused on establishing both a collaborative and community based approach to further moderate the risks of my positionalities and also reduce the risk of writing a static homogenous representation. I consciously tried to apply Arturo Escobar's anti-essentialist model so as to find the multiple ways an experience is socially constructed depending on one's social position and how various groups produce social constructs differently over time (1999: 5).

Community-based research is viewed as an alternative research method designed to overcome various forms and degrees of oppression by exposing and altering unjust power relations (Raelin 2008: 520). Sean Markey et al. argue that all research in indigenous northern communities should be grounded upon a commitment to better understand and foster community-based development (2010: 164). In northern Canada many researchers are collaborating with indigenous communities to deconstruct knowledge that is necessary to transform those communities which are on the margins

(Iseke and Brennus 2011). Community-based research is therefore especially well suited for conducting research in indigenous communities because it provides flexibility and sensitivity in areas that are undergoing economic, social, cultural and environmental challenges (Markey et al 2010: 159). Guided by these principles, I followed protocols developed for decolonized approaches in First Nations communities.

Within the framework of this ethnographic approach, I applied two methods of inquiry: narrative analysis and participant observation. I performed a narrative analysis of all the ethnographic semi-structured interviews I pursued during my fieldwork. These investigative narratives are needed for a politically committed and morally engaged ethnography. The Kaska Dene continue to fight for aboriginal title in a hegemonic land-claims negotiation system. Within my community the national issue of resilience and vulnerability of First Nations people is also a significant local issue. I therefore wanted to collect as many narratives as possible from Kaska Dene citizens, land stewards, frequent visitors to Dene Kēyeh, as well as Yukon First Nations youth, to represent a voice that I believed was not being fully heard. From this oral history, I wanted to invoke what Renato Rosaldo describes as telling stories about the “stories people tell about themselves” (1980: 89). Sensitive to issues of my own positionality and risk of interpretation, I tried to capture each of my informants’ voices with authenticity and recognize that each provided a different contextualized narrative. Accordingly, I did not ‘find’ or impose a collective homogenous narrative for the community. Instead, I used narrative analysis to show the particular ways in which the Kaska Dene could best be understood in what Rosaldo describes as a historical and contemporary perspective (1980: 91).

I interviewed ten research participants in depth who discussed their attitudes and beliefs concerning human-environment relationships in their community, impacts of colonialism and residential schools, traditional education strategies for youth, and the importance of cultural identity and indigeneity. The participants were between the ages of 21 and 85. Four were residents of the town of Watson Lake and one was a resident of Ross River. The other five were either part-time (summer) residents of those communities or individuals who have a personal history in those communities. Six participants identified themselves as Kaska Dene. I met with each research participant for an average of one hour in an informal discussion and interview format.

The application of a participant observation methodology was more problematic for me given that my fieldwork was in a community in which my extended family lives and which I had frequently visited as I grew up. Traditional fieldwork protocols of engagement require more of an 'outside researcher' stance. Yet, I felt I was already immersed in my culture and if I attempted to treat myself as an 'outside researcher' then I would be attempting to abstract the information and become an interpreter of knowledge. I acknowledge that continued future work on problem-focused participatory research in working with the community to understand and address problems of mutual concern is needed (Johnston 2010: S235). Nonetheless, there is no such thing as innocent anthropology (Khalili 2011: 72). Instead we should contend for an active and politically committed and morally engaged anthropology (Scheper-Hughes 1995: 415). Barbara Rose Johnston further proposes that, as anthropologist citizens, we should be keenly aware of our obligation and responsibilities to assert individually and collectively our critical insights (2010: S245). This form of participatory action research is designed to

validate and disseminate community based knowledge to challenge social marginalization and structures of oppression that is relevant in societies that are engaging in a process of post-colonial transformation (Lundy and McGovern 2006: 56).

As I participated in and observed the daily lives of the communities I worked with, there was no specific formula for the type of engagement I produced. I became quite literally a cab driver, mediator, teacher, therapist/healer, carpenter, babysitter and even an accountant and financial adviser. To many community members I was able to provide friendship, support and sharing of collective experience. I also collaborated on multiple local research projects, took community meeting minutes, and put together actions plans for a local non-for-profit organization. This close distance between my engagement and the outcomes of my research also gave me as a stronger sense of responsibility and comprehension of the social impacts of doing anthropology (Johnston 2010: S238).

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

*“You know one day all of the good land for camping and living will be gone for development or tourism; we are going to have to pay to be on a lake. Our land values are not the same anymore. ‘Tu Dena’ - (The River Man), told me that we need to all get together and start building cabins; open up the trails so we have a presence on our land. If we are out on the land together the language will come to us naturally; that's where we need to start” (Gūdzīhmā May 18<sup>th</sup> 2012).*

The Kaska Dene feel they have the right to protect their land, their Degun, that is based on a way of thinking that originates well before euro-centric concepts of conservationism or managing ecological footprints. The land to the Kaska Dene is not a commodity but a heritage of the Kaska community – what Brian Ballantyne calls a dwelling place of countless generations (2010: 109). In its relationship to the landscape, each generation represents the collective identity that is present in the creation of the Kaska culture. This culture is present in the embodied perspective or ‘inside landscape’ through which the Kaska Dene hold “a series of named locales, a set of relational places linked by paths, movements and narratives” (Tilley 1994: 34; Johnson 2010b: 99). This human-environment relationship is encapsulated in Dene K’éh: the “People’s Way”. Dene K’éh is not an abstract concept but an epistemology and ontology about the actual place called Dene Kēyeh which corresponds to Clifford Geertz’s notion of such belief systems as a concept of nature, of self and of society (1970). As a perception and a way of life using respect and reverence for the landscape and environment, Dene K’éh is a form of knowledge that clearly derives from and is transmitted by means of a sense of

belonging to Dene Kēyeh. Nadia Lovell describes the importance of such a relationship when she states that “the feeling of belonging to a place is defined through a sense of experience, a phenomenology of locality, which serves to create ideals. It is through belonging to a place that creates collective identities and where through the interaction of these localized individuals culture is created in place” (1998: 1-3).

This type of lived experience leaves an historical mark on a person’s memory and guides their action into the production of places (Gordillo 2004: 6). The production of Dene Kēyeh as a place and its intersection with colonial history has left a lasting imprint on the memories of many Kaska Dene today. Our beliefs and expectations about places are intimately linked to a synthesis of the past and present experiences of our spatial environment (Downs and Stea 1977: 4). This environmental memory and cultural history contributes to the disjuncture from the affective response to contemporary experiences and their frequent disassociation from Dene K’éh philosophies and disconnect from direct experience with Dene Kēyeh.

#### **4.1 Kaska Dene Historical Context**

The synthesis of the past with the present must begin with an understanding of the context of the colonization of the Kaska Dene. The mid 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial regime in North America was characterized by colonial concepts such as frontiers, and expansion of a territorial concept through the exploration, conquering and exploitation of the environment. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, all native affairs were under settler-state control in the guise of colonial discourse about protection, improvement of aboriginal living conditions and eventual assimilation. First Nations people in the North were categorized, classified and reduced to ‘bands’ and placed on limited, delineated reserves

where their title to land became dependent on federal legislation (Knafla and Westra 2010: 6).<sup>3</sup> As the Fur Trade gave way to an industrial economy focusing on concepts of land that supported mining, forestry and hydro-development, a restless formation and reformation of the geographical landscape into a capitalistic spatial framework was occurring that enforced new relationships between the Europeans and First Nations people and further detached First Nations people from their former lands (Harris 2004: 172).

This detachment of First Nations people from their land is a disjuncture that is not a mere historical event for which an apology can be issued and then reconciliation applied in an effort to help people ‘move on’. The psychological internalization processes, as described by Eduardo Duran (2006), create distinct transformations in a community’s culture. Existing First Nations relationships and their perceptions of their land were continually denied in what Willems-Braun has characterized as an explicit form of environmental racism delivered through a silent form of colonial violence (1997: 19). This environmental racism is so powerful that it is still manifest in today’s debates about who ‘owns’ the subsurface access rights to mineral deposits or who makes decisions about ecological policies and hunting rights and the ongoing debate between industrial development and conservation. If we are to fully understand how, with all the post-modern scholarship on the effects of colonization that such a situation still arises, then we need to examine the bio-political mechanisms that fuelled this disjuncture and its means of transmission across generations.

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<sup>3</sup> In the Yukon Territory today, the Kaska Dene First Nation has not been subjugated to the reserve system of land classification, as we are not a settled nation under land claims policies.

## 4.2 Residential Schooling and Post Memory

Within the confines of a thesis, it is not possible to discuss all of the significant bio-political mechanisms of colonization that contributed to the disjunctures experienced by the Kaska Dene. However, one of the most significant mechanisms of the Kaska Dene experience was the implementation of residential schooling and this thesis focuses on that event as being illustrative of a much broader array of such colonial processes.

Residential schooling isolated aboriginal children from their culture by placing them into English Euro-Canadian schooling in an attempt to steep them in Christian Eurocentric ideology and behaviors and thus became a means for the internalization of colonial knowledge and ideology (Mohammed 2010; Milloy 2008). The Indian Residential School in Kaska Dene territory was located in Lower Post, British Columbia. For 25 years from 1950-1975, the Oblate Order of the Roman Catholic Church operated the school along the banks of the Liard River until its operation was transferred to the Department of Indian Affairs (Coates 1991: 155, 205). Many Kaska Children from Watson Lake, Ross River and family groups in Northern BC were sent to the Lower Post Indian Residential School during its operational years. Many other children were also sent to the Grouard Indian Residential School in northern Alberta, The Indian Baptist School in Whitehorse and the Chooutla Anglican Residential School in Carcross (field notes July 12<sup>th</sup> 2012). In the Lower Post Residential School, the principal assimilationist tactic by French speaking nuns and Spanish speaking priests was to restrict the children from speaking their first language (Meek 2010: 19).

The trauma experienced by students while attending residential schooling, in particular the prohibitions on the use of their language and the physical disconnection

from the land itself, caused a major loss of embedded knowledge in place names and confusion about the ontological beliefs and socio-cultural guidance which are essential mediums through which to learn Kaska history (Johnson 2010a: 61). Residential schooling, in conjunction with other colonial processes, therefore disrupted the normal transmission of such belief and cultural systems and cultural identity from one generation to the next. Residential schooling and its imbalances of powers also inflicted an individual trauma which broke down elements of personal identity and trust (Aucoin 2008). These traumas continue to be experienced and transmitted across generations by way of post-memories.

In the summer of 2012, I talked to Kaska women from the communities of Watson Lake and Lower Post in the Two Mile Hall as they were discussing a truth and reconciliation event, called “Gathering Around the Fire”, that had taken place at the site of the former Lower Post Residential School, some 37 years after the residential school closed its doors. The Kaska, Tlingit and Tahltan who went to this school had called for this ceremony to wrap up the truth and reconciliation process that was then underway in the Yukon. About 800 people from around the Yukon and British Columbia attended the event as part of an attempt to include a multi-generational healing journey. The site of the school is now a grassy field as the building burned down some years ago. Yet, the site still invokes powerful memories that are still present in the land and I heard many people say ‘there are ghosts everywhere’. The Lower Post Indian Residential School was considered one of the most abusive in the Yukon system and the community in which it was built still suffers the effects of that abuse (Aucoin 2008). The stories about the residential school told at the event are horrific; beatings and public humiliation were not

uncommon. One person who spoke at the event described a needle being put through his tongue when he spoke the only language he knew. So regimented were the lives of these students that some, coming to Lower Post for the first time since they left, were surprised to see that there was a river behind what was once the site of the school (Forsburg, [YN] 15 August 2012).

The attitudes and cultural responses among current Kaska youth reflect this transmitted trauma from a previous generation. While there is a justifiable focus on Indian Residential School survivors who are finally starting to emerge out of the darkness of their experience, their children's and grandchildren's trauma continues as they live with their own very real anger about what they have been put through in their own lives as well as the pain they witness in the survivors (Aucoin 2008). These Kaska youth are experiencing what Tlingit film-maker and story-teller Duane Gastant Aucoin calls his own private Lower Post. For Kaska Dene youth, growing up immersed in the narratives that preceded their birth or their consciousness is to experience what Hirsch describes as "having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation" (2008: 107).

A growing body of literature examines abuse at First Nations' residential schools as a manifestation of colonial violence and its intergenerational effect of further abuse and neglect in aboriginal communities. Such literature in linking to and emphasizing the psychological harm of abuse and wrongdoing tends to medicalize issues that are in fact political and, as such, overshadow the reality of aboriginal resilience in the face of trauma and healing (Blackburn 2012: 292). As a result, when extending the discussion of the effects of colonization to contemporary Kaska youth and children, there is a risk that such

discussion will be perceived as statement of victimhood that can never be remedied. However, such a perception would be an injustice to the process of renewal that I believe is also taking place in the Kaska community. Within the context of healing, Aboriginality should not be seen as a site of injury requiring western style medical intervention but alternatively as a state of being from which restorative measures can occur based upon indigenous traditions and values.

Increasingly, there are signs of changes in our traditional relationships towards colonial management and its superstructures through a restoration of indigenous values. The Kaska are re-learning a sense of identity that was weakened through the coloniality of power through such events as the Gathering Around the Fire, which allowed Kaska to gather on the land to proclaim and identify the worst of past colonial practices. They are re-learning their own history so as to be able to move forward and are sharing their collective experiences that they have historically had on the land. This emergence of the past with its ties to Dene K'éh is essential to the concept of healing. As one elder put it “our songs, our prayers, and our ceremonies are our medicine” (field notes August 30<sup>th</sup> 2012).

The 2012 Gathering Around the Fire event was viewed by the Kaska women I talked to as a political act in which they were given the opportunity by the federal government to take ‘trauma training’ to help their people. These women, who within their communities are already viewed as healers, chose instead to look at this event as a positive setting for them to become reinvigorated and empowered again to help their people in a great time of need. One of the women who attended said “look out because when the women start to pray; there will be a fire, we are a strong people”. Many of the

Kaska women I interviewed believe that we need to focus on community health and education before we worry about economic stability. This type of healing and the re-shaping of identity and cultural connections within the Kaska community are essential for not only profoundly personal reasons but also because there is an urgency that arises due to pressures for economic development within traditional Kaska lands.

### **4.3 Contesting Ideas of Dene Kēyeh**

Tilley states that place is “regarded as a medium for actions, a resource in which actors draw on in their activity and use it for their own purposes, it therefore becomes value laden and political” (1994: 20). Dene Kēyeh has been and still is a value laden and political place. Outside of the Liard First Nations Band Office, I observed a group of protestors who were gathered in response to an internal community conflict over the division between people with rights of power in the chief and council’s office and local people who want their voices to be heard (field notes June 4<sup>th</sup> 2012). As stated by one of the protestors “there is no respect and á’ī isn’t being used in the community” (field notes June 4<sup>th</sup> 2012). Pressures from government and mineral resource companies seeking and promoting economic development are causing political tensions within the Kaska community. Such an economic pressure point about control over land ownership, mineral resources and access should be considered as an extension of colonial thinking. Once again, hegemonic colonial epistemologies, such as concepts of economic development of the land, are set up in opposition to traditional Kaska approaches of understanding their land through a more holistic worldview. Such an extension of the coloniality of power is particularly painful given the history of colonial oppression of the Kaska community and runs the very real risk of further traumatizing and dividing the

community. Many young Kaska Dene still continue to deeply value Dene Kēyeh as it holds important experiences and histories for both themselves and the older Kaska that are rooted in Kaska ontological and epistemological views.

The concept of chiefs and councils is an imposition of European concepts of governance and practice which replaced indigenous decision-making structures (Nadasdy 2003: 2). One of the outcomes of this imposition of Eurocentric practice has been the emergence of gender bias in contrast to a society that was traditionally matriarchal. In her discussion with me, Estū' Gah indicates the gender-based divisiveness that has been created “when we are talking about the land the men are the ones at the table and when we talk about our culture and language it is the women at the table, this is the way it has always been and there will never be unity and a consensus until we start sitting together” (field notes October 11<sup>th</sup> 2011). Many elders in Kaska Dene communities describe themselves as “saddened by the lines being drawn in the land, splitting the territory up for ecological reserves and development areas. These elders see themselves as caretakers of the land for future generations and feel it unfair to make drastic decisions around land management that others will have to live by. On the other hand, others in the community support the fracturing of land to promote some areas as unique while fostering others for resource extraction” (Nogha Dena June 4<sup>th</sup> 2012/January 19<sup>th</sup> 2014).<sup>4</sup>

The elders are equally concerned that there is the potential for significant inter-generational conflict over Dene Kēyeh as younger generations become more removed from traditional activities within Dene Kēyeh (field notes June 4<sup>th</sup> 2012). Kaska Dene youth are growing up exposed to powerful neoliberal mechanisms tied to a hegemonic

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<sup>4</sup> Nogha Dena has been my life-long friend, a First Nations activist, an environmentalist, and a life-long learner of the Kaska Language and the Dene Kēyeh Landscape.

culture focused on individualization, consumerism and scientific materialism: all of which marginalizes their identity as indigenous people. Because of the pervasiveness of modern media networks and social media, a Kaska youth in the southeast Yukon is no more immune to these cultural forces than a child growing up in one of Canada's major cities. Kaska Dene youth are growing up in a materialist neo-liberal capitalist economy where many principles of Dene K'éh and á'ī do not seem to relate to their daily lives within such an economy. The domination of hegemonic culture in tandem with the reoccurring narrative of an oppressive past often inhibits Kaska youth from accessing the large unspoken and undocumented knowledge of Kaska culture and traditional knowledge held by their elders in their communities (field notes June 8<sup>th</sup> 2012). Given the cumulative effects of the loss of language and their narratives as well as the pervasiveness of hegemonic discourses and their devaluation of traditional Kaska values and relationships with the land, it should come as no surprise that 'traditional ways' are increasingly being challenged by today's youth.

#### **4.4 Dene Kēyeh as an Essential Place of Healing**

Our cultural understandings of past landscapes provide the basis of our collective identity and land rights in the present (Lydon 2008: 654). Many Kaska Dene that I interviewed believe that even though the tradition of "living on the land" is no longer economically viable, such a tradition does ensure the continuity of a language and culture and they seek a way to integrate and revitalize the value of Dene Kēyeh into contemporary life (field notes June 8<sup>th</sup>). The women elders that I talked to believe that without restoring First Nations pedagogy to the younger generations, the language loss and related effects on knowledge retention will cause what Alyce Johnson describes as a

“loss of identity and disassociation from the landscape that no amount of reading can restore” (2010ba: 27). This understanding is frequently articulated as Kaska Dene youth not knowing ‘the bush’ in the same way that their elders do (field notes June 8<sup>th</sup> 2012). In contrast to elders, the current generation of youth, including myself, considers the traditional lifestyle of the bush as being uncertain: as offering a life of poverty in comparison to the benefits of a cash economy (field notes June 8<sup>th</sup>). The cumulative effect is a profound contemporary inter-generational disjuncture in the Kaska relationship to Dene Kēyeh.

Gordillo advises us that “landscape knowledge is an embodied practice that people regularly articulate in their assertion of control over space” (2004: 185). Dene Kēyeh is an essential place for the Kaska to be able to embody practices that will renew, revitalize and contemporize Dene K’éh. Yet, if Dene Keyeh is allowed to become just another place experienced in neoliberal economic terms serving a cash economy then a generation of Kaska may no longer believe that they have a stake in preserving their own culture. Protecting, revitalizing and contemporizing traditional relationships with Dene Kēyeh is therefore essential if the Kaska culture is to thrive in the future. Ingold also states that, a future generation would have to become completely disassociated from their history to lose their culture (Ingold 2000: 147). The trauma of colonial oppression in conjunction with post-memory transmission poses the risk of just such a disassociation within the current or next generation of Kaska youth. It is within this greater context of the essential role of Dene Kēyeh that I understand those Kaska women who say that there is no safe place to heal. Sitting around a fire at a women’s meeting on Frances Lake, a Ross River elder told us that “it has to start from inside the family, we have to be healthy

first and we need to have faith. Start with a mother to be and see what a difference she can make by raising her child with Dene K'éh, á'ī and land based skills. Let them learn through experience" (field notes August 28<sup>th</sup> 2012).

The Kaska Dene are responding to the need to heal their disassociation from Dene Kēyeh, which is one of the most damaging outcomes of the trauma of colonialism.

Kaska Dene elders have encouraged such restorative acts as returning to the land and taking their children and grandchildren with them. For an elder, Dene Kēyeh is still an essential site of resilience that has enabled them to endure missionary social control and exploitation as well as being a physical place of health and healing that counter-acts the hardships experienced as a colonized people. A significant consideration in healing past and current trauma and reducing assimilation into mainstream culture is for the current generation of Kaska Dene youth to become aware of all the alternate Kaska views that inhabit their landscape. Having activities tied to cultural beliefs and identities are of vital importance in establishing such a relationship with the land (Johnson 2010a: 105). The Kaska Dene are achieving these alternate ways of knowing by having increasing opportunities for youth and young adults to go out on the land with elders so as to enhance their connection to Degun. These camps aim to address this historic and contemporary disjuncture with land and traditional culture by having youth and elders learning from each other.

Marion Glaser advocates for the rediscovery of mental and spiritual connectedness with nature in postmodern life and asserts that a deep ecological understanding and relationship can influence our contemporary thinking of landscape (2006: 123). Tilley states that the praxis of a landscape is learned and it is this learning

process that makes a landscape meaningful to an individual (1994: 22-24). Kaska initiatives targeted at cultural belonging are therefore intended to provide participants with indigenous ecological knowledge and a route by which individuals can become future stewards of the land in accordance with long standing traditions of Dene K'éh. These initiatives are intended to reconnect youth with the transmitted knowledge of elders so they can develop their own sense of cultural belonging within the landscape – in effect creating new revitalizing and positive post-memories.

Knowledge of Dene Kēyeh is not just embedded in traditional landscape skills such as hunting but is also reflected in art and other activities of traditional Kaska culture. Gūdzīhmā eloquently describes the many different kinds of existing relationships to Dene Kēyeh when she states “some youth are artists, singers, dancers, drummers, hunters and that might be all the Kaska they know, but at least they are engaging with one aspect of the culture. They are carrying it on, which is important in these times of culture preservation due to the loss of elders and knowledge. It is important for these youth to have some sort of cultural identity otherwise they will not understand that part of them and it will always be lost. Anyone can go shoot a moose in the forest but it's about the knowledge that is lost through place names and our stories that is integral to the language and culture. Culture camps can work and they need to otherwise how can we expose the youth to the land? We also cannot discount the new ways of interacting with the landscape. Your cousins use four wheelers and jet boats to go up the rivers, but at least they are still doing it and hunting for their elders. We need to realize that we will never go back to the traditional ways; there has been integration of some values and not others” (May 18<sup>th</sup> 2012).

The Kaska integration can also be seen in various outdoor culture programs held where elders focus on sharing their knowledge on drum making, moose skin boat building, tanning and fleshing hides, hunting and survival skills, traditional medicines, Kaska language, storytelling, stick gambling, beading and sewing, ethno-botany and an environmental respect for the natural world (Kaska Dene Council 2004). By offering opportunities for youth to connect or re-connect with elders and learn the culture, stories, traditional knowledge and skills from individuals who actually lived on the land, these youth can then develop their own connection to the landscape. Tilley describes this process as the embodiment of intimate personal experience which no substitute can possibly match (2008: 274). The culture camps in Dene Kēyeh provide just such an experiential learning opportunity in environmental and cultural stewardship. These cultural camps effectively apply Tilley's experienced-based strategies of becoming familiar with the landscape by walking within it, visiting places of significance and approaching places from different directions by following paths so as to develop observations on how people in the past made sense of, lived in and understood their landscapes (Tilley 2008: 274). Without these memories of our elders and re-creating our own memories within Dene Kēyeh, there is a risk that we will lose a part of being indigenous to this landscape. By creating such memories through experiential learning and direct lived experience of Dene Kēyeh, the current generation of Kaska including myself can hope to find a renewal of our culture that balances some of the disconnection created by the rhetorical competing arguments of traditional and neoliberal worldviews.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUDING REMARKS

Gūdzīhmā says, “*The elders need to heal and the youth need to have experiences*”. *Growing up, I was told that we were the river people; we travelled up and down our country by waterways. Using the river we were able to walk everywhere in Dene Kēyeh. Every place in Dene Kēyeh had a Kaska name. Today, an elder will sit on the floor and make dozens of traditional drums talking about the bush while his grandson playing video games will only offer a occasional glance over to him. The river this elder describes to him cannot be understood by the grandson because he has not experienced it. I ask myself, if we as a people are to move forward, how are we to know our history?* (Field Notes May 21<sup>st</sup> 2012)

Today one of the more significant contradictions in the northern landscape is the simultaneous desire for exploitation and preservation. Krista Harper has argued that the ecological environment has now become the master narrative of our societies (2001: 101). Yet, despite the differences in the rhetoric and practices of both extractive capitalism and environmentalism, common to both is that First Nations voices are still being marginalized (Willems-Braun 1997: 25). However, First Nations people, like the Kaska Dene are starting to contest what Bruce Willems-Braun identifies as the buried colonial epistemologies that enframe their land (1997: 25). First Nations groups in Canada need to challenge their buried colonial epistemologies in order to generate an essential healing process that reduces the disassociation from their culture, their indigenous identity, their language and their landscape in which they have always lived. For Dene Kēyeh, the buried colonial epistemologies have been constructed from dominant historical-colonial processes which culminated in traumatizing an entire

generation. The colonial narratives that position Dene Kēyeh as either an unoccupied wilderness or otherwise as a region in need of development should and can be contested. These narratives need to be dismantled and a new conceptual space within political discourses be created where past and present forms of native territoriality can be made visible (Willems-Braun 1997: 18).

The Kaska Dene are at a critical juncture in their lives as a people, as multiple communities and as a culture. To ensure that they can maintain aboriginal title to their land, they are forced to argue for territorial independence through land-claims negotiations. Yet, they also need to have the conceptual and political space to be able to portray what Dene Kēyeh truly means to us as an aboriginal people – as an elder quietly told me Dene Kēyeh is “a land where we live, have survived and created a culture” (field notes August 28<sup>th</sup> 2012). Our experiences of a place, held in our memories and emotions, are made through a collective experience in which our linguistic devices, such as directionals, establish spatial, social and temporal points of view describe our perception of the landscape (Moore 1999: 305). Embedded in language, our narratives associated with that place then act to convey and share that spatial orientation of a place within and across generations. Our perceptions of the environment are strongly connected to our personal narratives and how we choose to engage with the world, which is a reflection of our individual histories and our cultural paths (Tilley 1994: 15). It is this spatial awareness and place, as being a organized world of meaning, that renews and revitalizes Dene K’éh and which is in danger of being lost if we fail to re-establish traditionally based connections to Dene Kēyeh. Language loss, cultural degeneration and social

diffusion will continue to raise concerns about western's society's impositions that denigrate traditional ways of life (Johnson 2010a: 9).

I accept that within a post-colonial Canada, being indigenous and valuing an ideological ownership of one's landscape is inherently political and constantly being re-negotiated. Yet as a Kaska Dene for whom Dene Kēyeh is more than just a 'place', how my land is characterized, represented and labeled in contemporary discourses is essential to my sense of being Kaska and to the future well-being of my people. Through both the thick description that I have acquired through lived experience in Dene Kēyeh and also as a 'halfie' ethnographer, I have come to realize more fully the importance of how spaces and places are made, imagined, contested and enforced. Gupta and Ferguson advise us that changing the ways we think about the relations of culture, power and space opens us to the possibility of change (1992: 18). If there is to be positive change and outcomes, I believe that the Kaska Dene voice is still in much need of embodiment and articulation within contemporary discourse.

I am greatly encouraged that such change is coming to my community by way of healing through experiential learning and direct lived experience. This healing process allows the contemporary Kaska to address some of the disconnection and disjunctures created by the rhetorical competing arguments of traditional and neoliberal worldviews. We cannot take back time and the pain of the past cannot be undone. Yet, we do know that such trauma adopts a powerful means of transmission of its affects across generations through post-memory. A postcolonial recovery and healing must therefore focus specifically on countering the devaluation of indigenous identity, knowledge, and life-ways that came with colonialism and its attendant, the coloniality of power. Well-

intentioned efforts to revive language or traditional relationships to the landscape will fail in the face of the onslaught of contemporary neo-liberal discourses and epistemologies about economic development, material wealth and individualism unless there is a healing process that affirms a Kaska Dene identity. In order to achieve lasting change, the goal of any healing process must be a recovery of awareness, a reawakening to the sense, and a re-owning of one's life experience. For First Nations groups, like the Kaska Dene, seeking to reclaim autonomy and control over their land, culture and communities; restoration comes from healing both the individual and the collective wounds traced back to the violence of colonization (Kirmayer 2004: 41). To recover from these oppressive forces, many Kaska Dene believe that healing through the land is the first step to cultivate action. Gūdz̄hmā told me that revitalizing Kaska culture must take place 'on the land' because it is where Kaska culture is most often expressed. "Kaska society's primary goal is cultural revitalization and renewal, which is a necessary condition, some say precondition, to improved health, political dynamics, wealth generation, social advancement and general well being. The Kaska social and cultural leaders calling for a return to 'the land' know that their individual and societal well being and health relies upon replenishing what colonial policies attempted to eradicate: aboriginal culture" (August 31<sup>st</sup> 2012).

Neoliberal ideologies are spawning global processes and their economic, social and political consequences for indigenous communities like the Kaska Dene require activism in scholarship. Given the colonial history of the Kaska Dene, contemporary postmodern ethnography as a methodology supports the need to make connections between the past and the present and understand the contemporary re-negotiations of how

people dwell within a landscape. I believe that community-based research, such as fully understanding the implications of the colonial abuses of residential school victims, can act as a means to permit previously unheard voices to emerge into the public realm and to help reshape the future.

By connecting with our past strengths and journeys and the affective representations they produce and the cultural interactions happening in the present, we can heal our people and our landscape. My sincerest wish is that a deeper ongoing understanding of the colonial context and the effects of coloniality of power will empower the collective consciousness of our people during our current dispute over aboriginal title in our traditional territory. Such an understanding offers hope that our relationship with each other and with Dene Kēyeh can revitalize our communities.

As aboriginal academics, we are increasingly in a position to present our communities' histories through ethnographies and formal scholarship. Much future work remains to further define indigenous methodologies and decolonized approaches in our research that produce understanding of indigenous epistemologies that will lead not only to better ways of doing research but also leave a lasting benefit to the communities who invite us into their lives. It is my hope that this thesis contributes to the scope and depth of such future work.

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