

Leisure as a Context for Justice: Experiences of Ceremony for Aboriginal Women in Prison

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the leisure experiences of Aboriginal women in a Canadian federal prison as they engaged in traditional ceremony. Conceptualized as leisure, these ceremonies were examined in the context of justice by exploring the women's resistance to oppression and loss of identity rooted in colonization. The findings of the study suggest that through ceremony, Aboriginal women's identities and understanding of being Aboriginal evolved from pain and shame to pride and connection with cultural values and traditions. Through cultural ceremonies, the women experienced liberation from a colonized Aboriginal identity. In this process of liberation, women resisted and refocused the dominant conceptualization of justice based on white ideologies of crime and punishment, to encompass Aboriginal forms of justice, as manifest in the collective maintenance of harmony and balance.

KEYWORDS: *Aboriginal women, ceremony, colonization, justice, leisure, prison, social control, resistance*

Leisure researchers are increasingly encouraged to question invisible assumptions that have shaped our current understanding and facilitation of leisure (Shaw, 2000). Researchers have limited understandings of leisure and perhaps it is time to allow oth-

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ers to define leisure within the context of their experiences (Allison, Schneider & Valentine, 2000). According to Henderson (1998), "if we want to understand the meanings of leisure in society, then we must do our best to acknowledge that social, cultural, and historical differences do exist among people whom we research" (p. 160).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the leisure experiences of Aboriginal women in a Canadian federal prison as they engaged in traditional ceremony. Conceptualized as leisure, these ceremonies were examined in the context of justice by exploring the women's resistance to oppression and loss of identity rooted in colonization. Through ceremony, their identities and understanding of being Aboriginal evolved. The study predominantly focused on, though was not limited to, traditional cultural ceremonies such as the annual Pow Wow and Sweat Lodge ceremonies held in the prison.

The epistemological roots of this research are grounded in critical race theory (CRT) which questions the effect of white supremacy over people of racial minority (Parker & Lynn, 2002). This research is, therefore, concerned with making visible the injustices of race and racism that are embedded within society. Particularly relevant here is that CRT has been criticized by researchers, such as Lawrence and Dua (2005), for its exclusion of Aboriginal considerations, notably the colonized experiences of the past and present. Colonization refers to discursive or political suppression of heterogeneity (Mohanty, 2003). Accordingly, colonization, in the experiences of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, was directed towards the elimination of their race and cultures (Haig-Brown, 1998). Placing Aboriginal children in residential schools, the Sixties Scoop², legislation banning the coordination and participation of cultural traditions, and other decrees legislated by Canada's Indian Act are all a part of the systemic structure that contributed to the genocide of Aboriginal communities (Haig-Brown; Smith, 2005; Spears, 2006). In the 21st Century, Aboriginal peoples continue to be marginalized and oppressed by the systemic structures that represent and reinforce western ideologies. As explained by Spears, "within the framework of institutionalized racism and colonization, members of the dominant group are able to misuse their powers, which they have done in so many ways and for some many years, that it becomes normal for them" (p. 82). Lawrence and Dua contend that ongoing colonization shapes the way in which notions of race and racism are conceptualized. They further point out that CRT research "fail[s] to raise let alone explore the ways in which [Aboriginal] identities have been articulated through colonization" (p. 128).

With this criticism of CRT in mind, this study recognized that the experiences of marginalization for Aboriginal women were linked to systemic discrimination and attitudes based on racial and cultural prejudice. The study also recognized that the low socio-economic status and history of substance abuse and violence across generations of Aboriginal peoples were rooted in over 500 years of oppression and control.

In this paper, we begin by providing an introduction to Aboriginal women and their presence within Canada's federal corrections system. We consider how leisure

² The Sixties Scoop is a term used to describe how thousands of Aboriginal children were sent to White middle-class couples in Canada and the United States (Fournier & Crey, 1997). Compared to the one percent of Aboriginal children comprising all legal wards in 1959, by the end of the 1960's, 30% to 40% of all children in care were Aboriginal.

contributed to the disintegration of Aboriginal cultures. At the same time, we acknowledge the potential to resist dominant structures and ideologies through ceremony; and in this study, ceremony is conceptualized as leisure. Following the presentation of the study's findings, we posit that ceremony as leisure can play a role in the advancement of Aboriginal justice, which is manifest in harmony and balance.

Literature Review

Overview of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples

The risks implicit in a life lived on the margins, due in large part to the colonial system of oppression, **have and continue to devastate Aboriginal communities** (Lawrence, 2003; Lawrence & Dua, 2005). Canada would place 48th out of 174 countries if the country were judged solely on the economic and social well-being of Aboriginal peoples; a significant drop from its usual top ten ranking on the UN's human development index (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation News, 2005; Stavenhagen, 2005). The average income of Aboriginal families is about half the national average (Menzies, 1999). Aboriginal peoples rate lower than the general Canadian population on all educational attainment indicators, which include secondary school completion rates, postsecondary education admissions and completion of university degrees (Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, 2005). As reported by Stavenhagen,

Poverty, infant mortality, unemployment, morbidity, suicide, criminal detention, children on welfare, women victims of abuse, child prostitution, are all much higher among Aboriginal people than any other sector of Canadian society, whereas educational attainment, health standards, housing conditions, family income, access to economic opportunity and social services are generally lower. (p. 2)

Aboriginal women are positioned even further on the fringes of Canada's social structure. Located at the lowest income levels of the Canadian population, the most recent Canadian census states that "the median income of Aboriginal women was \$12,300, about \$5,000 less than the figure for non-Aboriginal women who had a median income of about \$17,300" (Statistics Canada, 2006, p. 199). Amnesty International (2004) highlights the pervasiveness of violence against Canada's Aboriginal women that has long been neglected. Indeed, "Aboriginal women are five times more likely to experience a violent death than any other Canadian women" (Stavenhagen, 2005, p. 15). In a comparison between the needs of Aboriginal and Caucasian woman offenders, 87% of Aboriginal women are reported to have needs related to substance abuse, compared to 37% of Caucasian women (Dell & Boe, 2000). It has been argued that, in part, this dependency on drugs and alcohol by parents is a result of trying to mask the grief of losing their children to residential schools and the Sixties Scoop. Children, in turn, used alcohol to cover up their traumatic experiences (Faith, 2006; Fournier & Crey, 1997). According to Lawrence (2004), "some individuals come from families so disintegrated by alcohol and cycles of abuse that Nativeness has become too associated with pain and shame" (p. xv-xvi).

Canada's Federal Correctional System for Women

The ratio of Aboriginal peoples in federal prisons is almost seven times more than it is in the Canadian population (Correctional Service of Canada [CSC], 2008). In 2001, when Aboriginal women comprised only 3.5% of Canadian women, 23% of federally sentenced women were Aboriginal (Sinclair & Boe, 2002). In the following five years, the presence of Aboriginal women in Canada's federal correctional facilities rose to 31% (CSC, 2006). This over-representation of Aboriginal women who exist on the margins of Canadian society is most likely explained by the structural inequities, biases and processes of the law (Dickson-Gilmour & La Prairie, 2005; Proulx, 2003).

Incarceration for federally sentenced women in Canada has undergone some significant changes over the past two decades. Prior to the year 2000, the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario was the only federal prison for women in Canada. This prison was built in 1934 and over the next century numerous government reports called for its closure due to the inferior conditions of the building and the geographic dislocation experienced by the majority of the women imprisoned in Kingston (Boritch, 2001). In 1981, the Human Rights Commission of Canada concluded that women in federal prisons were discriminated against on the basis of sex. Virtually all programs, facilities and treatment of federally sentenced women were inferior to men (Moffat, 1991).

A growing awareness of problems related to Canada's incarceration system for women led to the publication of *Creating Choices* (Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1990). This report was produced by a Task Force that was made up of a wide variety of community and government groups, such as the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies, CSC, and Aboriginal women. The Task Force emphasized that the system of incarceration at the Prison for Women focused too much on security, women were isolated from their families, the needs of Aboriginal women and other women from ethnic minorities were not being met, and that incarceration was not promoting rehabilitation. Their report essentially recommended a new system of incarceration that fostered the empowerment of federally sentenced women to make meaningful choices in order that they may live with dignity and respect. On July 6, 2000, the Prison for Women closed and a new era of management began. *Creating meaningful choices* became the main thrust of CSC's mandate for women's corrections. To date, six regional facilities have opened across Canada. Included in these regional facilities is a First Nations Healing Lodge in Saskatchewan in an effort to meet the needs of Aboriginal Women. Programs and the physical environment of the Healing Lodge are designed to reflect Aboriginal cultures (CSC, 2007). Program delivery is premised on a holistic approach and includes Aboriginal teachings, ceremonies, contact with elders, and interaction with nature (CSC).

While it is recognized that with the introduction of *Creating Choices* Canada's correctional system for women became more supportive of Aboriginal peoples than had previously been the case, the need for further changes persists. For many Aboriginal peoples, such as the Ojibwa, there is no translation for the word "justice" (Monture-Angus, 1995). Rather, *justice* is a process that starts from childhood where children are taught respect and honesty. According to Baskin (2006), justice is a collective responsibility which allows for reparation that restores harmony to the community. When a crime has been committed, responsibility is placed on the offender to compensate the person(s) harmed, and to maintain balance and harmony in the community. Thus, the

concept of incarceration in fact relieves the offender of any restitution as they are removed from their community. While women's federal corrections continues to evolve, perhaps one day, as noted by Arbour (1996), the distinctive features of Aboriginal justice can be used as a positive force for change.

Leisure is "one area of social life, among others, in which individual or group power is not only acquired, maintained and reinforced, but also potentially reduced or lost" (Shaw, 2001, p. 186). Recognizing that leisure can simultaneously be both negative (reproductive) and positive (re-creative), the following sections examine leisure as a potential site for social control, as well as a context for resistance.

Leisure as Social Control

Leisure can be understood as a form of social control, by reproducing dominant social ideologies and contributing to the systematic production of individuals whose behaviour and general being are deemed as socially acceptable (Floyd, 1998; Fox, 2000, 2007; Shaw, 2000). The following section discusses how historical and contemporary leisure practices are a part of the colonizing structures of Canada.

In 1884, when Native ceremonies such as the Pow Wow and Potlaches were banned, the Canadian government prohibited the cultural expression of Aboriginal peoples and crushed their mechanisms of social order (Backhouse, 1999; Tollefson, 1995). At a glance, ceremonies such as Pow Wows may be simply viewed as an historical practice and artistic performance. However, Pow Wows are an important social practice that enables participants to engage as active agents of cultural creation and express meaning in social action (Valaskakis, 2005). Pow Wows are held for commercial trade, the exchange of songs and dances, and discussions around medicines and spiritual theories (Cole, 1993).

Leisure practices have continued to oppress Aboriginal cultures by reinforcing practices that served to reinforce and reproduce dominant society (Henhawk, 1993). For instance, in the 1980s, Henhawk identified leadership workshops, hockey, and golf as examples of recreation programs offered in Ontario First Nations communities. Notably, these activities were representative of the dominant white culture rather than the traditional sports and recreational activities of Aboriginal peoples, such as leg wrestling and lacrosse. She argues that the type of activities offered was constrained by stringent and culturally inappropriate funding criteria of the federal government. This narrow perspective has persisted in contemporary recreation administration and programming.

Similarly, Fox (2000, 2007) highlights that research in the field of leisure is generally positioned within existing Euro-North American structures and patterns of leisure (e.g., freedom, individual perspectives and behaviour). This kind of research often produces results that maintain this dominant ideology. At the same time, leisure has also been documented as a beneficial form of human development, particularly in the form of resistance for marginalized groups (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Shaw, 1994, 2001). A review of literature on the concept of leisure as resistance follows.

Leisure as Resistance

Resistance can be understood as a personal or collective struggle against institutionalized power (Shaw, 1994). According to Shaw (2001), "leisure as resistance im-

plies that leisure behaviours, settings and interactions can challenge the way in which power is exercised, thus making leisure a form of political practice” (p. 187). Leisure has been explored by several researchers as a forum for resistance and collective action for marginalized groups such as racial minorities and women (Freysinger & Flannery, 1992; Glover & Bates, 2006; Green, 1998; Wearing, 1990). In a study by Glover and Bates, African Americans fostered a sense of racial identity through the development of a community baseball league. The *First String* baseball league provided exposure to African American heritage, acting as a site for the collective development and maintenance of a common culture.

Leisure has also been examined as a site for resistance against dominant gendered ideologies for women (Wearing, 1990). As suggested in Green’s (1988) study, leisure experiences for women can be a source of empowerment and resistance to traditional stereotypes, ultimately contributing to the (re)construction of identity. According to Henderson (1996), over the past decade there has been increasing recognition for the numerous meanings of leisure for women, as opposed to the universal women’s leisure experience. Women’s experiences of leisure can be empowering and victimizing, it can also be considered a context for conformity and resistance to social roles (i.e., nurturer and caregiver) and dominant ideologies (Henderson).

Seeking Culturally Congruous Leisure

Leisure for Aboriginal peoples may be considered more than a participatory activity for enjoyment, relaxation, and relief from boredom. As suggested by Malloy, Nilson and Yoshioka (1993), recreation as an atomistic, individualistic or separate activity has little meaning for those whose experiences are rooted in Aboriginal cultures. Rather, they argue that recreation and leisure for Aboriginal peoples is intertwined with the social, political, cultural, and physical aspects of their lives. For example, Aboriginal peoples view many forms of work as a continuation of leisure (Cole, 1993). As it was previously mentioned, Pow Wows, which encompass song and dance, also act as a political forum where social order is maintained (Backhouse, 1999; Tollefson, 1995). Aboriginal peoples have also used competition in sports as an alternative to tribal conflict (Henhawk, 1993). Thus, leisure for Aboriginal peoples may be perceived more as a context for community expression and well-being (Iwasaki, 2008; Iwasaki, Mackay, Mactavish, Ristock & Bartlett, 2006), as opposed to a separate free-time activity for individual development. Indeed, as Cole (1993) states:

Traditional Aboriginal concepts of leisure/recreation have been replaced by more contemporary ideas which leave traditional ideologies to be viewed as secondary in importance or ignored altogether. Disregard for traditional activities contributes to further deterioration of culturally supportive activities which have historically welded First Nation communities together. (p. 103-104)

More recently, a few studies have emphasized that leisure practices experienced within the Aboriginal cultural context have contributed to the social and cultural well-being of Aboriginal peoples (Iwasaki, 2008; Iwasaki, Bartlett, & O’Neil, 2005; Iwasaki, MacKay, Mactavish, Ristock & Bartlett, 2006; Lashua & Fox, 2006). In a study with marginalized individuals, which included Aboriginal peoples with diabetes, spiritually and culturally relevant leisure activities were recognized as providing opportunities

for creating highly valued social, spiritual and cultural meanings, such as “feeling normal” and “being stronger” (Iwasaki et al., 2006). Recognizing the cultural context of a leisure experience is important because culture plays a prominent role in facilitating the meaning-making process (Iwasaki). Meaning-making is defined by Iwasaki as “the processes of gaining something important or valuable in life” (p. 232).

The above discussions suggest that leisure can be used as a social sphere for reproducing oppressive structures of social control *and* re-creating oppressive structures through resistance. In accordance with CRT, the study recognizes that there are multiple axes of domination that are either reproduced or resisted within a leisure context (i.e., race, gender, culture, class, and gender) (Parker & Lynn, 2002). The study assumes that the women’s experiences of colonization and living life on the margins impact their meaning-making processes of Aboriginal ceremonies (the leisure context) in prison. In this study, ceremonies were examined as a vehicle that fostered justice as the women strove to resist the oppression and loss of identity inherent in colonization.

Study Context

The focus of this analysis was on Aboriginal women’s experiences of cultural ceremonies in a Canadian federal penitentiary. The ceremonies were organized by a group of women in the prison called the Native Sisterhood (also referred to as the Sisterhood). As stated in their Constitution, the Sisterhood is a cultural group that helps maintain a distinct Aboriginal identity and exercise the women’s rights to practice Aboriginal cultures and traditions (Native Sisterhood, 2003). All members of the Sisterhood are women who are currently imprisoned for a federal offence and have received a prison sentence of two years or more. Membership consists of full members (women who are registered status-Indian, Inuit and Métis) and honorary members (women who may or may not have Aboriginal ancestry) (Native Sisterhood). There were several Aboriginal nations represented by the women in the Sisterhood and in this study. Such nations included Ojibwa, Cree, Mi’kmaq, Mohawk, and Inuvik.

Ceremony within the prison included the Sweat Lodge. The Sweat Lodge occurred approximately once a month and was facilitated by two community volunteers. This ceremony was described by one of the Sweat facilitators as a return to the mother’s womb; a resting place and a safe place to find healing. The physical environment at the Sweat in the prison was complete darkness, cramped quarters, and a heat so intense that it burned the skin. During the ceremony, water was poured on the Grandfathers (hot rocks) and the steam that rose ran through the nose and deep into the lungs. Every emotion was felt in the Lodge— from gut-wrenching sobs, to songs of courage, and lullabies of peace. The physical pain in the Sweat facilitated the release of emotional pain and ultimately relief. Participation in the Sweat was open to all inmates in the prison; however, the majority of participants were members of the Sisterhood.

As previously mentioned, CRT draws important relationships between race and other axes of domination such as gender and class (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Recognizing that the experience of being researched can be another space that has the potential to affirm hierarchical structures of power and control, in an effort to create more balanced power relations between the researcher and those researched, this study incorporated both action research and creative analytic practice (CAP) with the Aboriginal women in the prison and their supporters (i.e., Native elder and Native liaison). A dis-

discussion of how action research and CAP helped create more balanced relationships is presented in the following section.

Methods

Action research involves an iterative process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Lewin, 1946; Pedlar, 1995). This process is practical and collaborative (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). With this in mind, Yuen regularly discussed interpretations of her observations and data with members of the Sisterhood. Plans for collecting data were also often discussed on an informal basis with various members of the Sisterhood, the Native elder, and Sweat facilitators. For example, the idea of giving and receiving tobacco as a form of consent was developed in collaboration with a few members of the Sisterhood and one of the Sweat facilitators³. Recognizing the iterative nature of action research, a collective decision was made to form a focus group as the study progressed. Specifically, this decision emerged after the preliminary analysis of data from the interviews suggested that engagement in cultural traditions contributed to the re-creation of identity for Aboriginal women in prison; however, these data did not answer the question of *how* this process occurred. Consequently, a focus group was held to better understand how the women recreated or re-established their identities, and the role of ceremony in this process. Practical components of the focus group, such as the incorporation of a drum song and the way in which data would be recorded (i.e., digital recording and use of a flipchart), were developed with members of the Sisterhood and the co-facilitator, Wanda Whitebird⁴.

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) also suggest that action research is an emancipatory process. They state that this kind of research helps participants “release themselves from the constraints of... unjust and unsatisfying *social structures* that limit their self-development and self-determination (original emphasis, Kemmis and McTaggart, p. 567). The typical approach to informed consent using signed forms was deemed a meaningless procedure for Aboriginal cultures, because they are predominantly based in an oral tradition. Thus, as suggested above, the giving and receiving of tobacco as consent was more culturally relevant and thus more meaningful in terms of their agreement to participate in the study. Focus group questions were developed in collaboration with the co-facilitator, Wanda Whitebird, who is Aboriginal, to ensure that they were congruent with, and respectful of, Aboriginal traditions and cultures. To incorporate the holistic perspective of Aboriginal peoples the women were encouraged to think about their identity—spiritually, emotionally, physically, and intellectually, both in the context of their overall life experiences and their experiences in prison.

As previously mentioned, the focus group culminated in the creation of a drum song which was embedded in Creative Analytic Practice (CAP). According to Rich-

³ Tobacco is believed to be the most powerful of the four sacred plants of Aboriginal people (the other three being sweetgrass, cedar, and sage). It is offered when requesting assistance or information, as it is used to recognize the wisdom others have and to open the pathway for communicating this wisdom. The tobacco offering and acceptance was essentially a representation of Yuen's contract with the women to honour their confidentiality, and their agreement to freely participate in the study, take part in discussions and analysis of data.

⁴ Pseudonyms are used for the women in prison. However, at the request of the Native elder, Norma, Native liaison, Terri, and community volunteers/Sweat facilitators, Wanda and Delores, their real names are used.

ardson (2000), CAP is both creative and analytic. While many studies involving CAP used it as a method of representation (see the 2007 special issue of *Leisure Sciences* on CAP), CAP was used in this study as a method of data collection, analysis, and representation. During the focus group, all participants became collaborators engaged in the CAP process, where data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. Initial focus group conversations were centered around the direction of the song. The women unanimously agreed that they wanted the song to represent their experiences of liberation through ceremony.

Once the overall theme of the song was established, the women began to brainstorm words and phrases they felt represented experiences in ceremony that had, or would lead them to, a sense of liberation. This brainstorming can be understood as data collection. Subsequently, the women collectively decided which words and phrases they wanted to include in their song. This discussion can be understood as the data analysis. The final product, which is the drum song, can be understood as the representation of the women's experiences of liberation through ceremony.

Data Collection

The first phase of data collection involved semi-structured interviews with 19 members of the Sisterhood who were part of a larger study⁵. In addition to the questions asked in the larger study, Aboriginal women were specifically asked about their experiences with the Sisterhood, Sweat Lodges and other ceremonies. At the time of the interviews, Yuen had known some of the women for as long as a year and a half, which helped with establishing a trusting and empathetic relationship.

The interview data, along with Yuen's observations that were recorded in her reflexive journal, were deconstructed and then reconstructed by Yuen into common themes through an open-ended process using the computer software program N-Vivo 7. The themes helped identify common experiences across the women's narratives. This preliminary analysis was used to facilitate discussion in the focus group. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Native elder and the Native liaison, both of whom were on contract with CSC, and with the two volunteer Sweat facilitators. These interviews also helped inform the focus group process as well as the preliminary analysis. In addition to reviewing, reflecting on, and discussing preliminary findings, these four women shared their perspectives regarding their own experiences with Aboriginal cultures and traditions, and their perspectives of the impact of these traditions on Aboriginal women in prison.

Thirteen women participated in the focus group. Five of these women had been part of the earlier interviews. Almost a year had transpired between the interviews and the focus group. Consequently, some of the women who participated in the interviews had been released, others had been transferred, and some simply did not wish to be part of the focus group.

The final analysis of all the data by the women and Yuen included exchanges of information gathered during the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and the final drum song, which is presented below.

⁵ Pseudonyms are used for the women in prison. However, at the request of the Native elder, Norma, Native liaison, Terri, and community volunteers/Sweat facilitators, Wanda and Delores, their real names are used.

Sisterhood Drum Song

*Yah way ho yah**Way hi ah ho**Deh way o hey hey ho**Wa hey wa ho**Wa hey wa ho**[repeat twice]**The sky above**The land below**We'll keep our Spirits free**Ee yeh ee yeh ay ay hey-e-e-e**And when we sing**Our spirits soar**Like an Eagle above the trees.**Yah way ho yah**Way hi ah ho**Deh way o hey hey ho**Wa hey wa ho**Someday I'm coming home*

Through an iterative process of data collection and analysis of interviews, focus group and the Sisterhood drum song, three major themes were identified: (1) History—“*Our scars are deep*,” (2) Conscientização—“*We'll keep our spirits free*,” and (3) “*Travelling the Red Road*.” “*Our scars are deep*” stems from discussions in the focus group and “*We'll keep our spirits free*” is from the women’s drum song. “*Travelling the Red Road*,” was embedded in one woman’s comment that her ideal path upon release from prison would be to travel the *Red Road*—the Red Road in this context meaning an Aboriginal way of life. This woman’s observation was universally valued by study participants, as reflected in the drum song where women expressed their commitment to *someday coming home*.

In the following paragraphs, each of the three themes is presented in the findings, which we call *gaining knowledge*. Here, the voices of the women, as heard during the semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and drum song, are used to illuminate each theme.

Findings: Gaining Knowledge

History—“Our Scars are Deep”

The first theme represents the women’s acknowledgement of their past and the influence it has on them today. Doris observed that loss of culture and identity were a consequence of Aboriginal peoples being taken away from their family and commu-

ities: “A lot of women don’t know their culture when they come inside [prison], they were never given that insight, they were in foster homes or they’ve been segregated from their communities.” Even in their own homes, parents passed on the belief to their children that their culture was something to be ashamed of. As Joanne recalled of her childhood living off-reserve, she stated: “When I was a little girl, I had a couple friends who danced Pow Wow and I asked my parents if I could do that. My father said that that’s not a good way of life.” Joanne went on to say that she felt that her father’s reaction and the “strict and cold” demeanour of her parents were a consequence of their experiences in residential school. Eventually, Joanne ran away from home to escape her family and the racism she experienced from her classmates at school.

While many of these women escaped the life at home, they continued to move along the margins of society where they endured discrimination and exclusion. As described by Moira, they ultimately became entrenched in a life of crime: “I distrusted most of the white children. They were rude, mean and that’s how I ended up in jail, cuz of my childhood. I started fighting back physically. I was tired of being pushed around.” Reflecting on this common pathway to crime among Aboriginal women, Norma (Native elder) commented that for many of these women, exclusion and marginalization became the norm:

I don’t think people realize this, but when you come off of reserves just what an unfriendly atmosphere the city is. When you rent a room, the person that rents you the room thinks that he has the right to do anything he wants to you. And pretty soon, the only other people wanting you are the other people on the street.

In their struggle to survive, most of these women had limited options, and the options they had were generally choices that continued to foster a life of oppression and domination. At one level, life in prison for Aboriginal women was merely the continuation of their systemic oppression of the past. However, at another level, incarceration also facilitated a gathering of women who shared similar experiences of oppression and offered the potential for the development of solidarity and liberation among these women. This process is further explained in the following theme.

Conscientização—“We’ll keep our Spirits Free”

Conscientização involves a deepening sense of critical awareness of the world (Freire, 2006). This awareness is generated through dialogue with others, a process that can turn meaninglessness into meaningful, oppression into freedom, and control and manipulation into joint responsibility and commitment to one another (Freire). Some women commented that coming to prison gave them the opportunity to learn about their Native background. Kayla pointed to this: “I’ve never followed up on it [Native background], I’ve always wanted to learn more about it and coming here has kind of open me up to it. It’s given me an opportunity to learn about it.”

Indeed, prior to incarceration, the majority of Aboriginal women had little to no opportunity to explore their culture. Consequently, many of the women, such as Maria, were gaining access to cultural traditions for the first time: “When I first came I didn’t know nothing about drumming or singing or chanting or sweats or anything. When I experienced it here [in prison] it just made me feel so relaxed and focused.” For Doris, participation in ceremonies was perceived as a crucial component of self-discovery: “It’s

helped me cope. You know, staying away from drugs. And it helps you become a better person, you know, it just helped me anyways, to understand myself and to respect myself." Deb, who was one of the few women in this study who grew up in the Aboriginal tradition, remarked on the critical nature of traditional ceremony to the meaningful development of what it means to be an Aboriginal woman: "If you grew up white and this [CSC] is all you know, then it's fine. But if you didn't grow up that way, and that's taken away, it's like your identity is being taken away with it."

The women emphasized the importance of dialogue and immense value in learning about their culture and heritage. This personal desire to learn coincides with Freire's (2006) contention that the potential for conscientização lies in the people themselves. During the focus group, there was a discussion about a couplet in the drum song. One line was "The sky above, the land below," followed by a line that referred to their spirits being free. Essentially, the women were deciding between the words "We'll keep our spirits free," implying they were the ones responsible for their freedom, or "Will keep our spirits free," implying that nature (i.e., the sky and the land) would keep their spirits free. In the end, they decided the former, "We'll keep our spirits free," was a better representation of the message they wanted to convey—the women themselves would ultimately keep their spirits free.

Experiences of liberation for the women began with the return to cultural ceremonies in prison. Through ceremony, the women were able to explore their Aboriginal heritage and engage in the process of self-discovery. Coinciding with Freire (2006), who states that liberation must be constantly pursued, the women also expressed a desire to continue along the path of the Red Road (an Aboriginal way of life) upon their release. The women's conviction to carry on with the pursuit of Aboriginal ceremonies is discussed in the third theme, *Travelling the Red Road*.

"Travelling the Red Road"

In contrast to the shame of being Aboriginal and the limited knowledge the women had of Aboriginal cultures at the beginning of their incarceration, most of the women stated that they wanted to continue pursuing the Red Road as a result of their newfound discovery of, and connection to, their Aboriginal culture. The women indicated that they wished to travel the Red Road by continuing their participation in ceremonies and traditions upon their release: "The Native community, as long as that's available, it's up to me whether or not I'm gonna make it or break it" (Deb).

Finding support in urban centers is critical because the majority of the women indicated that they did not plan on going to the reserve upon their release. However, in urban centers there is limited support for this pathway of growth and development in the Aboriginal community. As Doris remarked, "A lot of women probably fall out of that [Aboriginal] path because they won't find that [supportive environment]." Maria, who wanted to learn her Native language noted, "I just haven't found the people that can teach me this... I'd have to go to the reserve".

Wanda (Sweat facilitator) reinforced the importance of having Aboriginal resources and supports outside the reserve upon release, stating that women "need to go to a traditional community. They would go someplace where there is a Sweat, where there is a trusting traditional person." Even when there were resources in the community beyond the reserve, women knew little or nothing about them. As Ruth expressed, "I don't have

the access as to where [these traditional communities] are. Like, I know there's a place in Kitchener, but I don't know where. There's a place in Toronto for drumming and Pow Wows and stuff like that, but I don't know where." Terri (Native liaison) explained there are a few resources for support in the community, but access is difficult to navigate because of fear and a sense of being overwhelmed upon release:

We try to hook them up with organizations in whatever area they're going so they can carry on, [but] a lot of the time, when [the women] walk out that door, all of the sudden they're all afraid, so they just don't know which way to go. In here, it's so structured and out there, it's so big.

The desire to follow the Red Road is further challenged by centuries of oppression and the breakdown of healthy and functional Aboriginal communities (Monture-Agnes, 2000). As Dickson-Gilmore and La Prairie (2005) indicate, "interpersonal violence, property crime, family problems, and other forms of social tension, friction, and disorder occur in Aboriginal communities at levels far exceeding the national and regional one" (pp. 111-112). As well, barriers to the Red Road are exacerbated by discrimination against offenders, preventing formerly incarcerated Aboriginal women from finding support in Aboriginal communities. Wanda (Sweat facilitator) explained that this discrimination exists "*because a lot of our own people are still stuck in a place [believing] that these [incarcerated] people don't deserve what's rightfully inherited.*" Thus, even where Aboriginal resources are available, those who have been in prison experience discrimination and exclusion when seeking access to support and resources.

Discussion

Leisure as Resistance Revisited

Shaw (2000) recommends that leisure be conceptualized as a life component that might affect, alleviate or exacerbate social problems. Ceremony as leisure in prison served as a context where women could understand and resist the marginalizing and oppressive structures related to their colonization. Prior to their incarceration, most women had never had an Aboriginal identity, and if they did they were ashamed of it. Since the beginning of colonization, Aboriginal peoples have experienced a *soul-wound* that continued through generations as they constantly faced pressure to acculturate into settler society (Duran & Duran, 1995). Embedded deep within this wound are patterns of alcoholism, drug abuse, trauma and violence. Ceremony as leisure has the potential to help bring justice and restore harmony and balance for these women.

As the women's drum song lyrics "Our scars are deep" indicate, ceremony helped the women understand their history and resist the shame and embarrassment attached to colonized Aboriginal identities. As argued by Lawrence (2003), "for Native people ... identity is always being negotiated *in relation to* collective identity, and *in the face of* an external, colonizing society" (original emphasis, p. 4). According to Iwasaki et al. (2005), the promotion of Aboriginal cultural identity and pride plays a major role in the healing processes of Aboriginal peoples. Leisure can be used as means for Aboriginal peoples to establish a connection to cultural values and traditions (Iwasaki et al.). The women's experiences of ceremony are a specific example of how leisure can be a context for collective experiences of healing and restoration through ceremony

Canada's justice system is structured upon white ideologies of crime and punishment (Monture, 1989; Wright, 2004) and has arguably contributed to the soul-wound of the Aboriginal women in prison (Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1990). According to Monture, there are always winners and losers in a society where punishment, force and coercion prevail. She further contends that in the case of Aboriginal peoples, as the dispossessed people of the land, they will continue to be the losers. Ceremony offered the women the possibility to resist a white system of justice by moving from a system to punishment to a practice of healing and restoration. Without ceremony, the women's experiences in prison would have consisted only of experiences determined by the prison, which is described by Foucault (1995) as a mechanism that reinforces hierarchies of power and control. Through ceremony, the women were able to refocus the process of justice from retribution to the restoration of harmony and balance.

Ceremony and Aboriginal Justice

The women's experiences of conscientização suggest that the underlying reality of colonialist attitudes and values could be changed by the ceremonial experience itself. As argued by Iwasaki (2008), "researchers should give more explicit and careful attention to the central role of culture in meaning-making through leisure-like pursuits" (p. 245). In this study, ceremony was the leisure pursuit where Aboriginal women were able to create meaning in the form of resistance against practices of colonization. Moreover, the process of creating meaning for these women was experiencing leisure as integrated in various aspects of life, such as collective healing and social justice. This leisure experience represents justice through the collective restoration of Aboriginal identities beyond colonized perspectives. Described by Alfred (2005) as *Wasáse*, ceremony can be a "culturally rooted *social* movement that transforms the whole of society and a *political* action that seeks to remake the entire landscape of power and relationship to reflect truly a liberated post-imperial vision" (original emphasis, p. 27). It is through ceremony that Aboriginal women found freedom to re-create an Aboriginal identity, even within the confines of prison.

The women's experiences of ceremony offered a critical beginning towards the deconstruction of a dominant and racialized conceptualization of justice and the creation of another that resonates with the traditions of many Aboriginal cultures. This process can be understood as *decolonization*, which is described by hooks' (1992) as "a political process to... define ourselves in and beyond the act of resistance to domination, we are always in the process of both remembering the past even as we create new ways to imagine and make the future" (p. 5). Involvement in ceremony provided a sense of ownership and empowerment by informing participants of their roles and responsibilities in working toward more inclusive and accountable communities.

Considered in the context of Aboriginal justice, the practice of ceremony as leisure promises hope for change—for cultivating a more open, supportive, balanced and harmonious society. While this study focused on the impact of ceremony in prison, future research should consider ceremony and other culturally relevant leisure experiences in the larger community, which could be a site of advocacy, activism, and ultimately justice for Aboriginal peoples. If the dominant society were to more fully understand and respect Aboriginal conceptualizations of justice and ceremony, society may be better

able to move from systems of punishment and coercion to restoration and harmony. Aboriginal communities, in turn, would be in a better position to heal from centuries of cultural extermination as they travel the Red Road.

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