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A Reading of Eekwol’s “Apprentice to the Mystery” as an Expression of Cree Youth’s Cultural Role and Responsibility

GAIL A. MACKAY

On a chilly Toronto evening in November 2005, an envelope was opened in a darkened auditorium, and the words spoken reached out across the land to Muskoday First Nation in Saskatchewan.¹ No doubt Lindsay Knight’s family was watching the televised Canadian Aboriginal Music Awards that night and would have felt elated to hear her being honored with the award for Best Rap or Hip Hop Album. The poetry of a young Cree woman reverberated with her contemporary listening audience and connected them to current, historical, and timeless realities.

Knight, who goes by the name Eekwol in her professional work, presented the album *Apprentice to the Mystery*, which can be read as an expression of youth’s role and responsibility in Cree culture. This article lays out an appreciation of her artistic and critical contribution by first establishing an understanding of the social context of Cree youth in Saskatchewan, then highlighting relevant points of Cree history, social structure, and values that orient an interpretation of youth’s role and responsibility. The article turns to close readings of two tracks from the album and interprets the poet’s critical social commentary grounded in Cree and Anishinaabe values and experience.

At the outset of this exploration, some clarification about identifiers and identity should be made. The terms *Aboriginal*, *indigenous*, and *Native*, though nuanced, are used interchangeably in this writing to identify descendants of the original inhabitants of the territory that is now bounded by Canadian borders. These terms as they are used here include people who are status Indians (federally recognized), nonstatus Indians, Métis, and Inuit. The term *Aboriginal*, drawn from the definition of *Aboriginal peoples* in the Canadian Constitution 1982, Section 35 (02), is used in government and academic

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writing. The term *indigenous* calls attention to people's ancestral belonging to the land that transcends colonial history. *Native* is also a term that avoids the restrictions of legal definitions. Of these three, *indigenous* and *Native* are more commonly used by individuals to self-identify and make reference to an "inclusive we." The term *First Nations* is a self-naming term that identifies individuals previously identified as Indians, the sociopolitical collectives previously identified as bands, and their reserved lands.²

The identities of indigenous peoples of the northern plains in Saskatchewan are more complex than can be characterized by single tribal names. This complexity is in part due to the shared cultural kinship patterns of the Cree, *Saulteaux* (a dialect of *Anishinaabe*), *Métis*, *Assiniboine*, *Dakota*, and *Lakota*.³ It is also due to historical, military, political, and, more importantly, social alliances that made it possible for them to understand each other's languages, participate in each other's ceremonies, intermarry, and build multicultural bands.⁴ During the past century, multilingual ability has declined with each generation, and increasingly there is a tendency to narrow the indigenous identity to a single tribal identity.⁵ The risk of permitting this to go unchallenged is to disregard the rich multicultural heritage of mixed bands and to develop tunnel vision when isolating and simplifying an understanding of cultural practices and philosophies.

Muskoday First Nation, like many First Nations in southern Saskatchewan, has a multicultural heritage. "Ancestors of Muskoday First Nation . . . were from St. Peters Reserve, a *Saulteaux* reserve near Selkirk Manitoba," and they traveled in the 1800s to the present location of the reserve prior to signing Treaty Six.⁶ Muskoday First Nation is commonly identified as a Cree First Nation, and its Web site shows that the languages spoken are Cree and English.⁷ *Saulteaux* cultural heritage is harmonious with Cree cultural values, but it is also a living part of people's ceremonial life and teaching.⁸ This topic is explained in more detail in the section on Cree history, social structure, and values of youth.

SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CREE YOUTH IN SASKATCHEWAN

Statistics that describe Aboriginal youth's lives in Saskatchewan show trends of low income and low education attainment, unemployment and poverty, core housing needs, mobility and homelessness, and exploitation and alienation. Youth age range is variously set to be between fifteen and twenty-five years, thirteen and twenty-nine years, and eighteen and twenty-four years by Statistics Canada, national Aboriginal organizations, and federal programs, respectively.⁹ The Canadian Council on Social Development examined the growing poverty rates of Aboriginal children in urban areas and reported in 2003 that 52 percent of all Aboriginal children were poor, and that the Aboriginal population was young. In 2001 one-third of the national Aboriginal population was aged fourteen years or younger.¹⁰ During the last thirty years or more, there has been a significant shift of Aboriginal population from reserves to the cities. Examples are the *Cowessess* First Nation in which 80 percent of band members live off reserve and Muskoday First Nation in which,

of the approximately twelve hundred band members, more than six hundred live off reserve. Mobility patterns are noted in numerous research reports that indicate Aboriginal people change residence at a higher rate than non-Aboriginal people. Norris and Jantzen refer to this urban-rural mobility as "churn" and argue that it is motivated by people moving to maintain family and cultural relationships.¹¹

Statistics from the 1996 and 2001 censuses provide the following statistical snapshot of Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan in the time frame that Eekwol was writing and recording her album. Although the 2006 census indicates some improvements, the trends have remained the same.¹² In Saskatoon, where 9.1 percent of the city population was Aboriginal, 37 percent of that population was between the ages of fifteen and thirty-four years and was likely caring for the 38 percent of the population between the ages of zero and fourteen years. The scope of social and economic disparity is indicated by the 1996 census statistics for Saskatoon:

- 22.5 percent of the poor population in Saskatoon was Aboriginal.
- 64.9 percent of the Aboriginal identity population lived in poverty.
- 51.3 percent of the Aboriginal population earned less than \$10,000.
- 55 percent of Aboriginal youth lived below the low-income cutoff.
- 25.1 percent of the Aboriginal population was unemployed (3.7 times the rate of the non-Aboriginal population).
- 45 percent of Aboriginal youth had jobs.
- 48.1 percent of the adult Aboriginal population had less than grade twelve education.
- 10.8 percent of the Aboriginal population was a lone parent.¹³

Add to this the fact that Aboriginal people have been the victims of violent crimes at a disproportionate rate. In 1997, for example, 42 percent of victims in Prince Albert and Regina were Aboriginal compared to their 10 percent proportion of the population in these Saskatchewan cities.¹⁴ Aboriginal children were disproportionately represented among the sexually exploited children in Saskatchewan.¹⁵ First Nations women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four years were five times more likely than other women of the same age to die as the result of violence.¹⁶ These numbers reckon an implicit contemporary orthodoxy of social and economic marginalization for many Aboriginal youth in Saskatchewan. Not surprisingly the atmosphere is racially charged: Aboriginal youth feel judgment and suspicion directed toward them, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents fear for the safety of their children. Real estate agents steer clients to neighborhoods away from the concentration of Native residents. In news media and social policy reports we can hear the calls from the mainstream middle class for the judicial system to subdue and for the social welfare system to rescue Aboriginal youth. This is reality. The following section describes the historical and social foundation of youth's resistance.

CREE HISTORY, SOCIAL STRUCTURE, AND VALUES OF YOUTH

David Mandelbaum's *The Plains Cree* provides a history of the Plains Cree and situates their origin in the forested area between Lake Superior and Hudson's Bay. His account of the Woodland Cree's western expansion as a consequence of the fur trade is challenged by contemporary historians' and archaeologists' interpretations, but this debate does not concern the discussion here except to note the geographic distribution of strong linguistic similarities of the various dialects of Cree spoken in parkland, plains, and woodlands territories from British Columbia through Alberta and Saskatchewan, through to the woodland territories of Manitoba, Ontario, and Quebec. Likewise, there are strong dialectic similarities between Anishinaabe (a sister language to Cree) and Cree's dialects, which are spoken in Saskatchewan, Montana, North Dakota, Manitoba, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ontario.¹⁷ Mandelbaum states that it is known from fur traders' reports that as early as 1730, Plains Cree hunted buffalo and fought against the Blackfoot for hunting territory, revenge, and prestige. The Plains Cree bands suffered in the 1800s due to smallpox epidemics, the decimation of the buffalo, and the intrusion of the Canadian state. It was in a dire shortage of food that Cree, Saulteaux, and Assiniboine bands signed treaties Four and Six in Saskatchewan in 1874 and 1876.¹⁸

In the pretreaty era, the Plains Cree organized themselves in small mobile bands of people related through kinship ties. The chief's authority relied upon his persuasive oratory and respect given him for his demonstrated virtues of bravery, wisdom, kindness, and generosity. No one was obliged to follow his leadership and could choose to leave the band to join another band at any time. There were social organizations of the Worthy Young Men Society and the Warrior Society. A man's membership in these societies was by invitation, based on recognition of his achievements and abilities to serve the well-being of the band. Membership carried status and responsibilities for protection and provisioning. Following the signing of the treaty, the Plains Cree settled on lands they reserved for themselves. The Indian Act was Canadian federal legislation passed in 1876 that consolidated all previous legislations dealing with Indians and Indian lands. From 1885 to 1920, the Indian Act was routinely amended and increasingly used to control every aspect of Indians' lives. Among the most destructive to Cree society were the amendments that controlled the political leadership of the band and the socialization of children. The Christian churches functioned as colonial agents by administering the residential schools that the Indian Act required Indian children to attend.

Fundamental to the political and social organization of the Cree is the principle of personal autonomy. Under the stresses of colonial oppression this ethic of autonomy was transformed in Cree people's minds to be a vice. Cree leaders perceive this transformation as the undoing of the integrity of Cree communal life. In the biography of John Tootoosis, the authors recount their interviews with the remarkable leader of the Federation of Saskatchewan Indians and report his dismay at some Cree people's acceptance of the categories of "good Indians" and "trouble-makers." In this culturally oppressed

view, "good Indians" were those who were compliant and obedient; "trouble-makers" were those who questioned the authority of Indian agents, laws passed into the Indian Act, and the Canadian government's renegeing on treaty promises.¹⁹ In a similar vein, Reverend Edward Ahenakew, from Atahkakoop First Nation, wrote a condemnation of the harm inflicted by the residential schools in *Voices of the Plains Cree*: "for those who do live, who do survive and who graduate from the school at the age of eighteen, during every day of their training they have acted under orders. Nothing they did was without supervision. . . . They never needed to use their own mind and wills. They came to think that it would be wrong if they went their own way. Now discipline and expediency in life are good, but will and initiative are better."²⁰ This value of autonomy, well documented in Cree and Anishinaabe sources, is integral to the fulfillment of youth's responsibility in their stage of life.

The Plains Cree and Anishinaabe have strong parallels in history, territory, language, and culture. Archaeologists collected, during the 1960s and 1970s, a large volume of Blackduck pottery, a Late Woodland ware (ca. 0-AD 1600), in the vicinity of Muskoday Reserve.²¹ This discovery supports the understanding that Cree and Anishinaabe people have had a long history of sharing territory. In more recent history, Plains Cree and Saulteaux bands together signed Treaty Four and Treaty Six with the Crown. Tanner recorded the ways that Plains Cree and Ojibway shared material culture, such as the horse, fishing, maple and box-elder sugar, and ceremonies, such as the Sun Dance and the Midewewin, at the beginning of the nineteenth century.²² Saskatchewan First Nations such as Cowessess, Gordon, Muskowekwan, Pasqua, Piapot, Poundmaker, Sakimay, Saulteaux, and Whitebear were known as mixed bands because there were sufficient numbers of Cree and Saulteaux families constituting the community.²³ Consequently, intermarriages occurred, which facilitated further cultural sharing and blending. The languages are mutually intelligible, though fluent speakers say that it takes two or three days of immersion to be able to converse with each other.

Linguistic similarities between Cree and Anishinaabe correspond to a shared philosophy of life. An example to illustrate this is in the Plains Cree word *mino-pimatisiwin* and the Anishinaabe word *bimaadiziwin* to refer to the idea of "the good life." Michael Hart, a social worker at Fisher River Cree First Nation in Manitoba, uses the concept of *mino-pimatisiwin* as a model for helping Aboriginal people in his practice. He defines the term as meaning a life of personal healing, learning, and growth: the good life.²⁴ The ethic of personal autonomy and the principle of *mino-pimatisiwin* provide insight into cultural understanding of youth's role and responsibility. Lawrence Gross explains the philosophical significance of the concept *bimaadiziwin* in Anishinaabe philosophy.

The teaching of *bimaadiziwin* operates at many levels. On a simple day-to-day basis, it suggests such actions as rising with the sun and retiring with the same. Further, *bimaadiziwin* governs human relations as well, stressing the type of conduct appropriate between individuals, and the manner in which social life is to be conducted. *Bimaadiziwin* also

covers the relationship with the broader environment. So, for example, it teaches the necessity of respecting all life, from the smallest insects on up. *Bimaadiziwin*, however, does not exist as a definitive body of law. Instead it is left up to the individual to develop wherever it can be found. This makes the term quite complex, and it can serve as a religious blessing, moral teaching, value system, and life goal.²⁵

The idea of personal autonomy being foundational to a person's finding their identity and purpose in life is reinforced by the guidance Cree elders give parents about parenting.

The *Kisewatotatowin Aboriginal Parenting Handbook* was produced under the guidance of Northern Plains Cree elders in Saskatoon. The term *Kisewatotatowin* means, "having and giving great love, caring, generosity, patience, trust and respect to your child, your family, your community, your nation and the universe."²⁶ The handbook describes the stages of adolescence and adulthood. Adolescents are called *Okayak*, the young people, and undergo training in order to learn the necessary survival skills and competencies needed to fulfill their role as adult men and women. The parenting handbook counsels parents on how to cope with the physical, intellectual, and emotional changes teenagers undergo in this stage. Included in the advice is the direction to involve the whole family in decisions and to allow the youth to make mistakes in action, reaction, and judgment during this time of experiment and newfound freedom. Adolescence is the time when the youth should be working with an elder and helping with ceremonies. The man's role is to protect and the woman's role is to bring warmth and protection to the home.

The Northern Plains Cree philosophy of guiding an adolescent's growth is harmonious with the traditional Anishinaabe teachings about the cycle of life. Basil Johnston explains that in the stages of life, which is a journey over four hills, "the second hill is that of youth. It is a time in life when the young begin to bloom in spirit and flourish in physical power and stature. What is striking is that youth encompasses many ages. There are those very young, hardly out of infancy: there are those who are much older. But no one proceeds to the next stage until he has received a vision. Until that time, a man or woman remains a youth."²⁷ Johnston explains that in times past, a girl's passage to womanhood occurred at about twelve years of age with the onset of menarche. He provides insight that goes beyond Mandelbaum's interpretation of women's defiling nature, but Johnston also is male and so does not carry women's teachings. He notes that a girl may have a vision bestowed upon her, or she may choose to seek a vision. Her community and family supported her determination. Johnston's explanation of the significant experience of youth is an important foundation to understanding youth's role and responsibility during this stage of life. The relevance of this Anishinaabe cultural information to Eekwol's youth rhetoric is strengthened by the reality of cultural blending that is occurring in cities, which reveals that Aboriginal people are adapting and using what is useful to the survival of an indigenous way of relating to the world. An example of this is Mohawk, Cree, and Anishinaabe women in Toronto who prepare their daughters and nieces

for womanhood by holding a yearlong puberty ritual that is drawn from the Anishinaabe berry fast ritual.²⁸

Johnston's monograph expands on the ideas of autonomy as central to a youth's self-actualization. The quotation conveys the depth and subtlety of the experience:

from the moment a youth begins to understand, his training and preparation begins and continues until the vision comes to him. Between the ages of twelve and fourteen he ought to begin to seek his vision. Because no one knows when the state of readiness of body and spirit is attained, the teaching and preparation continues. In some cases the state of fitness comes readily and early, in other instances, much later in life. But the teaching and instruction end only at the vision.

For youth, the struggle in the moral order consists of the preparation, seeking, and attainment of the vision. What makes the search difficult is that the vision is not to be sought outside of oneself; nor is it to be found outside of one's being. Rather it must be sought within one's inner substance and found therein. . . . Since it will be found within a person's inner self, the search must be conducted alone, without the assistance or guidance of others. There are no signs to mark the trail; there are no trails set by others to encourage the seeker.²⁹

Johnston explains that in this stage between childhood and adulthood, the youth is autonomous in awareness, exploration, interpretation, and fulfillment of his purpose revealed to him in vision.

In and through vision a person may see, hear, sense or even feel his first self, his incorporeal substance. By vision he will discover that his nature demands growth in order to attain fullness and power. From the moment of the enlightenment the seeker has a purpose. From the moment of the coming the seeker is obliged to regulate his deeds, according to the vision. In a way a vision is discovery of self and what ought to be. Growth begins.

. . . [W]hile the vision gives an insight into the quality of the inner being, what it is and what it ought to be, it can do no more than give some direction about the course of life. . . .

With the vision, existence becomes living; the youth is no longer young. He has now a freedom, which only he and no other can exercise and fulfill. It is his own. Yet his freedom and independence must be consistent with his communities' laws and codes and with the great laws that govern the world. Through vision a person goes from youth to adulthood.³⁰

Johnston's description in many instances recounts the interaction between adults and youth and between elders and youth. I believe this is a fundamental

aspect of youth's self-realization. Though the adults do not guide or direct youth in their vision or self-discovery, the adults' roles as supporter and model are crucial. Without grounding or leadership, misguided youth adopt the identity of activists and revolutionaries but remain puppet-like in their posturing in camouflage and masks, counting coup by their number of arrests. The adults' leadership and elders' counsel together develop the understanding and skills needed to be a leader.

Cree elders Jim KaNipitehtew, Joe Douquette, and Peter Vandall give further insight into the role of elder in youth's education. In his speeches "Leading Our Children Astray" and "Counseling the Young," Elder Ka-Nipitehtew laments how youth have lost the ability to hear the elders' counsel because television, drugs, and the fast pace of modern life distract them. He says that people need to return to the old teachings because a time of great suffering lies ahead.³¹ Elder Douquette speaks of "Cree Education" and says, "Long ago this land was so clean. As for these Crees of old, they had their own education, they knew it well, they taught their children: they told their children how young people should live, they warned them against everything."³² Elders counseled youth and adults, giving guidance on the laws of the physical world and the codes of behavior guiding human interaction with the physical world and social world.³³ Elders' counsel does not dictate behavior, but rather by sharing the wisdom gained through a long life, it provides a warning that the listener is obliged to contemplate, comprehend, and act upon with his or her free will. Respect is a fundamental cultural attribute. A Cree youth from Cumberland House defined it as "listening to a person even if you don't believe what they are saying."³⁴ The benefit of that understanding is that one learns humility with the development of understanding and maturity. Thus, the balance between obedience and initiative is clear in Cree education of youth, in the guidance of youth seeking their vision, finding their purpose and identity. Eekwol's lyrics exemplify the dynamic of youth being guided by elders' counsel to uphold the great laws and follow the principle of living a good life, acting on a Cree understanding of personhood, and exercising personal autonomy.

EKWOL'S POETRY EXPRESSES CREE YOUTH'S CULTURAL ROLE

Eekwol's song "Too Sick" is a narrative and lyrical representation of the harsh realities of a contemporary orthodoxy depicted by the statistics in the first section. The music video for the song, the ninth cut on the album, was aired on MuchMusic and MTV.³⁵ The phrase *too sick* in hip-hop vernacular translates as *very good* or *very bad* depending on the context. For some audiences, the video may have been the introduction to Eekwol's music. The music industry has slotted her as an Aboriginal female hip-hop emcee, and the subject matter of "Too Sick" appeals to the stereotyped expectations of a mainstream audience. The song begins with an idealized image of a warrior in sunshine; the goal was to raise a family traditionally. Shifts in time and perspective mark the transition and development of the story of love failing to overcome substance abuse and violence against women, murder, incarceration, and parent-child

separation. To the non-Aboriginal audience, it is a grim but marketable contemporary Native story. However, I suggest an alternate reading to examine how Eekwol connects with her young Aboriginal female audience on issues of relationships, self-confidence, and self-preservation, and with her young Aboriginal male audience on the issues of male role loss and cultural preservation.

The shifts in time and perspective are the moments when the story advances but also the moments of critical decisions to be made by the players. The lyrics sung audibly, inviting fans to sing along, begin in the first person, contemplate the tender hope of love, and follow the fall into the hopelessness of intimate violence.

When the sun stood high in my ancestors' eyes
a warrior sat on the earth with a smile
The rays reflected his frame shadowing his profile
I was prepared to share my life with his mind and ability
. . . . The goal's to raise a family traditionally³⁶

Aboriginal youth are familiar with the images of a precontact idealized past. The contracted word *goal's* makes the verb tense ambiguous: it could be past, as in "the goal was," or present, as in "the goal is." The omission of the sound in the contraction serves the meter and poetic device of interfacing past and present. The first line of the following quotation emphatically draws the story into the present and, in the manner of girlfriends' conversational style, divulges personal reflection of events presenting points of entry where the young female listener in a female-gendered style of conversation would take a turn in order to relate a similar experience as a way of affirming the speaker.³⁷

Now in 2004 what remains are the traces of that history
Blind as his compliments
See commitments to me rolled off his tongue
my perfection was the foundation of his words³⁸

Following the confessional style of women's conversation, the following lines express the familiar psychological trait of women trying to save men from past emotional trauma, giving shelter in their love.

I was the one
His past was filled with loneliness and misery
Years of violence and neglect plagued his memory
Drunkenness informed his life
Now we're two broken crutches in a tree of questions
I asked he would confess them

But the story advances quickly in a familiar cycle of abuse from a honeymoon period, to a violent episode, to contrition and denial, and back to a honeymoon period.

He believed and I believed we were above it
 F'k the past
 he was safe with me and I loved it
 but it leaked out a little as the pain came in trickles
 I was caught in the middle of his pride and his riddles
 He couldn't figure out
 Shout him with a shout
 And I tried to understand as he pushed me to get them out
 I was quick to recoup
 I took the falls
 finding nice posters for the holes in the walls

At this point the song moves to the refrain that punctuates a shift in the plot development. The dynamic of the sick relationship is established. What seemed too good has turned too bad, and the contagion of violence is overwhelming. The two responses are to accept victimhood personally by blaming the situation on the loss of culture and to despair in a detached manner and devalue the woman's life to nothing. In the refrain, the woman is moving away from a personal reflection of her experience to seeing it from the perspective of others.

Too sick to stop the cycle hammer this nail into my head
 living in the cost of a culture lost some say
 I'm better off . . .
 dead

Following this transition is a sample of a fiddle tune, which belongs to the music of a previous generation of youth. But it recalls the violence that attended the drinking parties of that generation too. Subtly, the visceral memory of violence is recalled for the Aboriginal listeners. The accompanying video images, framed through a car windshield and seen from the passenger's perspective, include a sequence of a bridge, city lights, and blurred car headlights traveling on a darkened country road and approaching a curve. Without judgment the poet connects the violence of the past to the present in the perspective of one who is not in control of the situation. But she does not totally absolve the new generation or the female victim of their responsibility in bringing forward the dysfunction wrought by alcohol and violence.

The next segment of the song is the one that appears on the video clip used to pitch the video to MTV programmers. It is a succinct episode of the dysfunctional relationships in a cycle of abuse. The lyrics speak specifically to young women. The speaker notes her culpability and being too sick to stop the cycle.

One for the road
 so we dabbled with the drink
 Said he needed to relax
 didn't always want to think

I'll admit I was a part of it
 It made him happy brought us closer
 besides I'm not as pretty or as confident a person when I'm sober
 Plus my connections in the world threatened him
 didn't trust guys, said they're all into the medicine
 but the parties were fulla the types he despises
 saw the negative attention when he looked into my eyes
 I guess I presented it to everyone
 My slutty
 intentions
 and I sure as hell paid for it
 seconds after it was mentioned
 the glass hit my lip
 felt the floor as I slipped
 three or four tried to loosen his grip

At this point the song becomes a cautionary tale. The woman acknowledges the role of alcohol, jealousy, and her part in the dynamic of the relationship. Leading into the refrain flute music accompanies a male voice apologizing, "Oh man, I'm so sorry . . . Promise . . . Promise," and distances the listener from the situation. The emotion is detached in the fade-out of the apology and the repetition of the refrain. The repeated phrasing, however, suggests two readings of the line: "Some say I'm better off . . . dead." When following the lyric "I'm better off" and not anticipating the pause, the listener interprets the line to mean the woman is better off without the man and accepts the suggested possibility that she left the relationship. But the word *dead* follows a silent beat, and it leaves only the conclusion of desperation and murder.

Here, two-thirds of the way through the song, after the femicide, the refrain marks the poet's shift to the male experience. She switches to the second-person pronoun *you*, directs her words to the man, and draws the male listeners into the narrative. Words, not just sounds, are removed to keep the meter and give force to the poetic dual meaning. By using present and past tense in the line, and by alternating between devastating present and idealized dream, the poet fuses the context of the man waking up after a drunken blackout and being told of his crime of murder and the context of a generation of indigenous men struggling to fulfill their traditional male role.

Man, wake up, you're dreaming of the past
 When you ever want or needed a role in the cast
 The winter morning cold clean
 When the hunt's as its best
 You had no arrows
 Took a knife
 And stabbed your girl in the chest
 No family to bring her home to where
 they're already at rest
 Carried on the tradition of alcohol and violence

The city stripped you clean of your culture, selves and dreams
 The pen walls continue to remind you of your girl's screams

Looking to fulfill his male role in society, the man dreamed of the past traditional roles of warrior and hunter. But without the tools, and falling victim to the city and cultural genocide, the man turns his energy to violence against his woman and corrupts the indigenous traditional way of life. This final part of the song presents a picture of a new icon of Indian men as prisoners and a new tradition of alcohol and violence.

The line "no family to bring her home to where they're already at rest" has particular resonance with the Aboriginal audience members who live and die in the city and returns to the reserve to be buried in their home cemetery. The alienation is situated in the places of the city and the penitentiary. Before the song ends with the refrain being repeated three times, the lines spoken to the man in prison describing the consequences may be interpreted as words of warning to young men and women alike.

it was love no doubt, but how you drew it, it burned out
 long ago when you should have
 stopped the cycle from carrying through
 now the son you created saw the things you do and
 will probably pick up where you left off too
 She wanted to save you so bad
 should'a saved herself first
 what could be the best thing you had
 took a turn for the worst
 but don't live off regret,
 she's gone, move on
 but don't forget

"Too Sick" may appeal to the mainstream because it represents a conclusion already drawn, and in that light the song may be read as youthful melodrama. However, considering the common experiences of a large portion of the Aboriginal population, it is a song of warning for victims and a song of affirmation for survivors. It, like "Apprentro," carries a youth's voice of resistance speaking directly to youth, reminding them of their power and responsibility to challenge the status quo.

Eekwol's first lines of "Apprentro," the first track on the album *Apprentice to the Mystery*, are

It's time for you to listen for a minute
 'Cause this is where I share, share bits and pieces of my truth
 What I know and don't know about life.³⁹

The oppositional positioning of the audience in relation to the poet, and the implied oppositional positioning of her truth to theirs, suggests that the audience is comprised of people outside her world, people unfamiliar with

the social context of a young indigenous woman in Saskatchewan. But in the next lines wherein she uses the first-person plural pronoun she aligns herself with the audience:

It's time to think back to remember who we were
Whoever that may be
Take back what we dream and say what we mean

The references are sufficiently vague to be applicable to a range of experiences possibly identified with by a colonized people defeated by subjugation, misunderstood youth railroaded by prejudice and condemnation, or, conceivably, survivors of addiction or abuse. In thirty seconds she deftly catches the ear of her listeners, and by using the tropes of the first-person pronoun and presenting experiences familiar to her audience, she earns the authority to speak from their perspective. She then proceeds in the first person to describe self-reflection, doubt, criticism, and determination with which her audience can sympathize.

But I always feel like obstacles are stopping me
And could it be that I'm tryin' not to see
creating diversions convenient to me
Running away, hurting my people, my family, those most important
to me
Well I can't do that anymore
Because I'm guessing through experience and lessons
And I'm stopping the cycle
And sending the message
And I'm trying everyday I walk this earth
to stay away from what's bad for me

In the final lines of the introduction, accompanied by the music's crescendo, she asserts affirmation of their shared strengths and asserts power in an anthem of liberation.

And the only way I can do that is by
Recognizing the strengths we have
Power in numbers, we got
Power in spirit, I got
Power in music, I got
Power in my voice
Hear it

The unique appeal to the Aboriginal youth audience is in the references that operate as hypertext, that link the listeners to inherited knowledge through associative retrieval.⁴⁰ Aboriginal youth, upon hearing these lines, would recognize that the strengths she alludes to are the cultural strengths of Aboriginal societies. "Power in numbers" relates not only to the current

Aboriginal baby boom but also to the cultural ethic of community support and cooperation. Community gatherings such as round dances, wakes, funerals, feasts, and powwows depend upon a large contingent of impromptu volunteers who work together to feed, care, and provide for everyone in attendance. Accomplishments are usually attributed to the efforts of many. Aboriginal youth would recognize the cultural belief of “power in spirit” that aids human beings in all their endeavors and is present in all living things.⁴¹ Similarly they would recognize the cultural belief in “power in music” as supplication for divine help, and as a means of conjuring and healing. “Power in my voice” refers to the sacred nature of words carried by the life force of breath. These lines affirm youth’s culturally based resistance to the orthodoxy of oppression.

A close reading of “Apprentro” provides examples of a Cree youth seeking vision and purpose. The song changes pace and beat following the introductory call for liberation, “Power in my voice, hear it.” The next lines review the situation of Aboriginal societies in a postmodern world, critique people’s complacency and abandonment of spiritual traditions, and enforce the prophecy of the tenuous opportunity to survive.

Just bound by scraps of a tattered history
 The nnn-nation blind sided and
 shadowed the mystery
 Too many colonized minds falling through the cracks
 And now we’re running out of time⁴²

The use of the word *mystery* so early in the song and on the album is highlighted because it repeats a dominant concept in the album title, *Apprentice to the Mystery*. It alerts the listener of the great significance of this concept to the overall message of the work. The audience is ambiguous because the summary and caution may be interpreted to apply to an individual or a collective. This ambiguity is sustained into the next group of rhymes.

Left lost off track
 Opportunity for sacrifice
 Climb the oppressor’s ladder and
 And disrespect your ancestors’ lives
 It’s gone on for too long
 Question who’s really strong or
 just a pawn, long arm of the government
 raise his magical wand it’s on
 Make it official the pawn who’ll never really belong

The first three lines have potent critical significance when they are referenced to an understanding of the qualities of a Cree leader. Compassion, generosity, sacrifice, and kindness guided ancestors’ decisions to protect the earth for subsequent generations. All this is for naught if the Indian leaders, driven

by greed and ambition, serve the interests of the oppressors. The poet calls upon the audience to expose the imposter for what he is and reveal that he will never really belong because he does not guide his actions by the laws sustained and transmitted by the ancestors. There is a slight pause and the caution to heed the wisdom of the elders is repeated twice with a pause in between stamping the message with emphasis.

We need to maintain the knowledge and wisdom from the elders
before it's all gone
We need to maintain the knowledge and wisdom because it's going
so fast.

Closely following this are her lines describing her own commitment, which is tempered with humility and avoidance of directing others to follow her example.

So what I am doing is
Observing the mystery
Understanding the mystery
Following the mystery
Becoming the mystery
I'm nothing without the mystery
I know nothing about the mystery
A tiny source of the force of this
Universal history

These lines relate to the youth's responsibility of seeking a vision as Johnston describes it. The words *observing*, *understanding*, *following*, and *becoming* are hypertextual references to the Anishinaabe (and, I posit, also the Cree) vision quest to gain knowledge of the incorporeal nature of one's being that is part of a greater "something." To name it restricts it. *Mystery* is the preferred understanding of *manitou*, which in the past has been glossed as *spirit* or *God*. The poet is humble: "I'm nothing without the mystery." She does not interfere in others' quest to know more: "I know nothing about the mystery." She is not a guide. She is only an apprentice to her own mystery. She is "a tiny source of the force of this universal history."

CONCLUSION

Eekwol's poetry gives us a lasting impression of the performance of a Cree youth identity in a postmodern time. Her songs "Too Sick" and "Apprentro" are read as expressions of Cree youth fulfilling the role and responsibility of people in that stage of life: thinking critically, exercising their autonomy, acting consciously, and serving the well-being of the collective. The analysis of Eekwol's work as the expression of a young adult guided by her vision and the advice and teachings of her elders is based on the works of Johnston and the

counseling texts of Duquette, Vandall, and Ka-Nipitehtew.⁴³ From a cultural foundation that respects youth, Eekwol's poetry presents a constructive and positive perspective and representation of youth.

Eekwol is masterful in connecting her audience to current, historic, and timeless realities. Her word-crafting keeps a beat, makes a memorable rhyme, and builds complexity of meaning. She deftly employs the second-person pronoun, contractions, omission of words and sounds, and colloquial phrasing to use ambiguity as a rhetorical device in order to connect the current with historic realities. Dual meanings engage the listeners to contemplate and comprehend the significance relevant to their own experience. As a means of politicizing youth's constructive resistance, Eekwol's hip-hop storytelling and rhymes reach youth's intellect and passion and challenge youth to act with their free will. Without judgment or condemnation she leads the listeners to reflect on their own responsibility for and contribution to *mino-pimatisiwin*, living a good life.

Her use of hypertextual references to indigenous people's social realities, cultural ethics, and beliefs is subtle enough that the sacred beliefs of the people are respected and protected, and the uninitiated do not feel excluded. The effect is to reach indigenous youth on a wavelength they know is just for them. This is their music. Its message interfaces their present reality with the timeless reality of their cultural teachings. It incites them to feel their power and act to change the way things are. It calls upon them to fulfill their role as indigenous youth.

NOTES

1. This paper is an expanded version of a paper written for Dr. Damián Baca in a graduate course at Michigan State University.

2. Identity is fluid, and the identifier may change to suit the connotation appropriate to the audience, context, or purpose. E.g., in an interview about gender and hip-hop, Eekwol identifies herself as "indigenous," the Aboriginal Peoples Choice Awards identify her as "First Nations" on its Web site, and a writer for *SAY Magazine* identifies her as a "Cree Member of Muskoday First Nation." *Eekwol on Gender*, A Libra Lemons Production, 2008, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VA3uRLZ_1zM (accessed 29 November 2009); Aboriginal People's Choice Awards, 2009, http://www.aboriginal-peopleschoice.com/3200C15_17T1037T16T1036T2T1.dhtml?eid1038=85 (accessed 29 November 2009); "Lindsay Knight, Recording Artist," *SAY Magazine*, <http://www.saymag.com/canada/spokespl/eekwol.html> (accessed 29 November 2009).

3. Dene people are also an indigenous group in Saskatchewan. Their territories are in the Taiga region. Historically there was less cultural exchange with the other indigenous groups named here because they did not have the same degree of economic, political, or social alliances with those groups as those groups had with each other. Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales Fort in Hudson's Bay to the Northern Ocean* (Edmonton, AB: M. G. Hurtig, [1791] 1971).

4. Ethnohistorians have examined the topic of multicultural bands on the north-western plains. Patricia Albers, "Changing Patterns on Ethnicity in the Northeastern Plains," in *History, Power, and Identity: Ethnogenesis in the Americas, 1492-1992*, ed. Jonathon

Hill (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996), 90–188; Neal McLeod, "Plains Cree Identity: Borderlands, Ambiguous Genealogies and Narrative Irony," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 20, no. 2 (2000): 437–54; Regna Darnell, "Rethinking the Concepts of Band and Tribe, Community and Nation: An Accordion Model of Nomadic Native American Social Organization," in *Papers of the Twenty-Ninth Algonquian Conference*, ed. David Pentland (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1998); Theodore Binnema, *Common Contested Ground: A Human and Environmental History of the Northwestern Plains* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Laura Peers, *The Ojibwa of Western Canada, 1780–1870* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1994); John Tanner, *The Falcon: A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000); Laura Peers and Jennifer S. H. Brown, "There Is No End to Relationship among the Indians: Ojibwa Families and Kinship in Historical Perspective," *The History of the Family: An International Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (1999): 529–55; Robert Alexander Innes, "Elder Brother, the Law of the People and Contemporary Kinship Practices of Cowessess First Nation Members: Reconceptualizing Kinship in American Indian Studies Research," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 34, no. 2 (2010): 27–41.

5. McLeod, "Plains Cree Identity."

6. Christian Thompson, "Muskoday First Nation," *The Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan*, 2006, http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/muskoday_first_nation.html (accessed 28 November 2009).

7. Muskoday First Nation, *Official Home Page*, http://www.muskoday.ca/index.php?option=com_content&view=frontpage&Itemid=1 (accessed 29 November 2009).

8. Acknowledging the Cree and Saukteaux heritage of the Muskoday First Nations answers why it is valid to make reference to Saukteaux cultural teachings in order to expand understanding of Cree philosophy of youth's role and responsibility. This is highlighted by the publication of Muskoday First Nation of Saukteaux traditional teachings. Diane Knight, *The Seven Fires Teachings of the Bear Clan as Recounted by Dr. Danny Musqua* (Muskoday First Nation, SK: Many Worlds Publishing, 2002).

9. Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, *Urban Aboriginal Youth: An Action Plan for Change* (Ottawa, ON: Standing Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, 2003).

10. Canadian Council on Social Development, *Aboriginal Children in Poverty in Urban Communities: Social Exclusion and the Growing Racialization of Poverty in Canada* (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Council on Social Development, 2003).

11. Mary Jane Norris and Lorna Jantzen, "Aboriginal Languages in Canada's Urban Areas: Characteristics Considerations and Implications," in *Not Strangers in These Parts*, ed. David Newhouse and Evelyn Peters (Ottawa, ON: Policy Research Initiative, 2003), 179–93.

12. Saskatchewan Trends Monitor, "Sask Trends Provincial Aboriginal Representative Workforce Council June 2," <http://www.sasktrends.ca/publications.html> (accessed 27 November 2009).

13. Statistics Canada, *Aboriginal Peoples Survey* (Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada, 2000).

14. Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, *Police-Reported Aboriginal Crime in Saskatchewan* (Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2000).

15. Department of Justice, *Report and Recommendations in Respect of Legislation, Policy and Practices Concerning Prostitution-Related Activities* (Ottawa, ON: Department of Justice, 1998).

16. Indian and Northern Affairs, *Aboriginal Women: A Demographic, Social and Economic Profile* (Ottawa, ON: Indian and Northern Affairs, 1998).

17. Dialects of Anishinaabe are known by various names in different regions and include *Saulteaux* in Saskatchewan and Manitoba; *Ojibwe* (also spelled *Ojibway* and *Ojibwa*) in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Ontario, and Michigan; *Chippewa* in North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Ontario; and *Pottawatomie* and *Odawa* (variously spelled) in Ontario. See M. Paul Lewis, ed., *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, 16th ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2009), <http://www.ethnologue.com/> (accessed 29 November 2009).

18. David M. Arnot, "The Five Treaties in Saskatchewan: A Historical Overview," *Expressions in Canadian Native Studies* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 2000), 232–64.

19. Norma Sluman and Jean Goodwill, *John Tootoosis: Biography of a Cree Leader* (Ottawa, ON: Golden Dog Press, 1982).

20. Edward Ahenakew, *Voices of the Plains Cree* (Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1995).

21. Doug Frey, Margaret Hanna, and David Hanna Meyer, "The Enigma of Saskatchewan Blackduck: Pottery from the Hanson (FgNi-50) and Honess (FgNi51) Sites," *Midcontinental Journal of Archeology* 24 (1999): 153–76.

22. Helen Hornbeck Tanner, *The Ojibway of Western Canada, 1780–1870* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1994).

23. Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre Heritage Site, "Our Languages," <http://www.sicc.sk.ca/heritage/sils/ourlanguages/sitemap.html> (accessed 14 April 2009).

24. Michael Hart, *Seeking Mino-Pimatisiwin: An Aboriginal Approach to Helping* (Halifax, NS: Fernwood, 2002).

25. Lawrence Gross, "Bimaadiziwin, or the Good Life, as a Unifying Concept of Anishinaabe Religion," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 26, no. 1 (2002): 15–32.

26. Allen Safarik, *Kisewatotatowin Aboriginal Parenting Handbook* (Saskatoon, SK: Health Canada, Health Promotion and Programs Branch, 1997).

27. Basil Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage: The Ceremonies, Rituals, Songs, Dances, Prayers and Legends of the Ojibway* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1998).

28. Kim Anderson, "Honouring the Blood of the People: Berry Fasting in the 21st Century," in *Expression in Canadian Native Studies*, ed. R. Innes, R. Laliberte, P. Setee, and J. Waldrum (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan Extension Division, 2000), 374–94.

29. Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*.

30. Ibid.

31. Freda Ahenakew, *The Counseling Speeches of Jim Ka-Nipitehtew* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1988).

32. Freda Ahenakew, *Stories of the House People, told by Peter Vandall and Joe Duquette* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1987).

33. Johnston, *Ojibway Heritage*.

34. Gail MacKay, *Community Perceptions of a Cree Immersion Program at Cumberland House* (Saskatoon: University of Saskatchewan, 2001).

35. Eekwol, *Too Sick*, director Jim Morrison. Maverick Films. 2004. www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XuYikRUI7g (accessed 29 November 2009).

36. Eekwol, "Too Sick," *Apprentice to the Mystery* (Mils Productions, 2005).

37. Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation* (New York: Ballentine, 1991).

38. This and the next 6 passages are from Eekwol, "Too Sick."

39. This and the next 3 passages are from Eekwol, "Apprentro," *Apprentice to the Mystery*.

40. Haas explains that hypertext is an element of American Indian rhetoric and examines "how American Indian communities have employed wampum belts as hypertextual technologies—as wampum belts have extended human memories of inherited knowledges through interconnected, nonlinear designs and associative storage and retrieval methods." Angela Haas, "Wampum as Hypertext: An American Indian Intellectual Tradition of Multimedia Theory and Practice," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 19, no. 4 (2007): 77.

41. David T. Mandelbaum, *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical and Comparative Study* (Regina, SK: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1979).

42. This and the next 3 passages are from Eekwol, "Apprentro."

43. Ibid.

