

“Where Knowledge Resides: Strong Indigenous Women and Experiential Education”

Violet King

I came to Manitoulin Island as a part of MISHI not knowing what to expect. As a person of Mi'kmaq ancestry living away from my territory, I often feel a strong sense of dislocation in my day-to-day life. University and academic settings are no different. MISHI, however, was a different kind of academic setting, drastically different than every other institutional educational experience I have experienced. My days on Manitoulin Island were spent getting to know different parts of the land, gratefully listening to Anishaabeg stories and teachings, experiencing their art, and hearing their histories.



I came to Manitoulin Island and joined MISHI at the very end of my degree from York University. Learning some of my own history and the histories of other nations in an intuitional setting was difficult at times. However, I am grateful to have studied under a few incredible professors who were generous with their time and offered me inspiring examples of academic vigour and personal integrity. So much of academic learning is a solo mission, and much of my learning has taken place between stacks of books and searching online archives and journals. At MISHI, learning was not a solo performance in books, rather, learning was experiential and collective. My first impression was an enduring one. I was affected and inspired by the community-building that was taking place—among both the Indigenous community and my group of fellow students. It resonated deeply with my desire to take part in my own community’s growth and healing.



My undergraduate studies explored the differences between settler reproductive rights movements and feminist or reproductive rights of Indigenous women. Much of this

work has involved reading and studying a very dark part of Canada's history. Coercive sterilization, the 60's scoop, and the Indian Act remain ongoing issues that Indigenous communities struggle against. My research has focused on the ways that my family's lives continue to be affected by laws and regulations that limit how we live. During MISHI, I connected with, and experienced first-hand, the positive outcomes of a community's dedication to uplift itself. When I would reflect on my own life and home community, I saw how much work is needed to heal from colonialism. The Ojibwe Cultural Foundations (OCF) community organizers breathed some hope in to my learning and research. The OCF is a cultural hub. It is a radio station, art gallery, museum, archive, childcare centre, community kitchen, and much more. The OCF, and all the people who make the OCF what it is, inspired me to alter the focus of my work to include ways to build community strength.



Through conversations with my peers and community members I witnessed a need to focus on all of the ways that we as Indigenous peoples have been succeeding and resisting. An abundance of non-Indigenous people are focusing on Indigenous hurt and suffering. What makes us strong is more than simply surviving. Our survival of ongoing colonization reminds me that we are strong, it is one component among many that make us who we are. I appreciate the work of allies, but I need to step up as an Indigenous woman to contribute to healing my community. I find strength in the continual love and community perseverance, which has shaped me. Stories of survival are important and have their place. They are key to understanding the history of colonization and the oppression of Indigenous women's bodies. Yet, they are also key to finding a way forward. After spending time on Manitoulin Island, I felt I was allowed to break away

from institutional ways of knowing, learned in books, focussed on the past, and experienced alone, and I was encouraged by my surrounding to focus on Indigenous futures and find ways to move forward collectively, learning from people and places and by doing.

Working with former Wikwemikong Chief Peggy Pitawanakwat (a fellow MISHI participant) was rare opportunity and she highlighted this way forward for me. Her vision of how to develop our shared project on women leaders made transparent her role as a community leader and educator.



Together a group of us developed ideas for creating a booklet documenting former female chiefs. Promoting the celebration and remembrance of the history of strong Ojibwe women was refreshing and encouraged my desire to amplify Indigenous women's accomplishments. My time at MISHI reminded me of all of my reasons for applying to university and sticking with it through all of the difficulties I experienced. MISHI reminded me that there are multiple versions of Indigenous futures and multiple ways of

developing our futures. Mine will be to encourage women to collectively develop their own power and voice to resist colonial regulation and to embrace the beauty of our shared past of leadership and strength.