

## Chapter One

# Preparing to Search

Boozhoo G-chi'manidoo...  
Minogiizhigokwe n'dizhnikas...  
Waabshishii n'dodem...  
Niizhoo midewiwin  
Anishinaabekwe n'dow  
Kakatush Ziibiing Flying Post n'doonjiba  
(Minogiizhigokwe)

Indigenous re-search is often guided by the knowledge found within. Aboriginal epistemology (the ways of knowing our reality) honours our inner being as the place where Spirit lives, our dreams reside and our heart beats. Indigenous peoples have processes in place to tap into this inner space and to make the unknown — known (Ermine 1995). This is a key Indigenous methodological principle (Rigney 1999). Indigenous re-search methodology has been a process for me, whereby I make the invisible — visible. Colonization has attempted to make our realities invisible and has tried to turn us into the disappearing race. Alongside other Indigenous re-searchers, I contest the notion that we are a vanquished race or remnants of the past. This re-search and my work as a community helper have further convinced me that our role and responsibility rests in sustaining a valid, visible and thriving existence for our peoples in the present and future. We exist and we are here. Our knowledge is valid, real and concrete. I do not make comparisons with eurowestern methods of searching. There is no need to. There are many pathways to knowledge. My hope is that this book will contribute to establishing the visibility and knowledge of Indigenous methodologies in search for knowledge in the academy and elsewhere.

*Kaandossiwini, How We Come to Know* results from a search for Indigenous methodologies by graduate Indigenous re-searchers in the academy. It describes the diverse and varied ways and experiences of Indigenous academic re-searchers employing their worldviews. Actively engaging Indigenous worldviews in methodology has also been called Indigenist re-search (Rigney 1999; Smith 2005). This is a search for Indigenous ways of coming to know in the academy, and the harvest of this search is wholistically presented as a petal flower with roots (worldview), centre flower (self), leaves (journey), stem (analytical backbone) and petals (methods). Petal flowers are as varied as Indigenous re-search methodologies; thus the type of flower is undefined.

Soon after beginning this project I realized that the re-searchers' experiences were as important as the methodologies they used and that the two were interdependent. Thus, I also explore the environmental context that influences Indigenous searchers' ability or inability to employ Indigenous ways of searching.

This book is a result of a search into eleven selected theses by Indigenous graduate re-searchers in adult education, social work, Indigenous studies and sociology; conversations with Indigenous re-searchers in the academy; and a learning circle of Indigenous re-searchers. It is not exhaustive by any means but rather provides a general sense of Indigenous re-search methodologies used by graduate Indigenous re-searchers. Graduate theses provided a ready source of information about the context of Indigenous re-search projects in terms of the use of Indigenous re-search methodologies and student experiences of Indigenous re-search in the academy. Their successful completion evidences an acceptance within the academy and establishes precedence of the application and legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge and methodologies.

### Locating My Self in My Search

I begin by locating my self because positionality, storying and re-storing ourselves come first (Absolon and Willett 2005; Graveline 2004; Lather 1991; Sinclair 2003; Weber-Pillwax 2001; Wilson 2003). Where I come from you are either White or Métis or Native. People know who I am. I am one of the daughters of Jennie (nee Cryer) and David Absolon. When my mother married my father, she became dismembered and lost her Indian status. Earlier, from the ages of six to thirteen, she also became dismembered from her family and community when she was forced to attend Chapleau St. John's Anglican Residential School. My maternal grandparents were Lizzie (nee Pigeon) and Shannon Cryer from Shawmere Lake, Ontario — they were both Anishinaabe and are now in the Spirit world. Our ancestors lived and travelled up and down the Groundhog and Nat Rivers in Northern Ontario. My paternal grandparents were Kathleen (nee Woodcock) and Jack Absolon, and they had always lived in England. They too are in the Spirit world. My dad came to Canada at age twenty-one and met my mother at a dance in Winnipeg. They have been married for fifty-four years now. My blend is of both the Anishinaabe and english nations, and I belong to Flying Post First Nation. Flying Post First Nation has a land base on the Groundhog and Nat Rivers. I belong to the Three Fires Society Midewiwin Lodge. I am of the Marten Clan and also a close relation to the Bear Clan people.

I grew up at Cranberry Lake, Ontario, which is a Canadian National Railway (CNR) signal posting. Cranberry Lake is located between Sudbury and Parry Sound. The passing trains used to make our living room lamps shake.

Today, trains chugging along the tracks send off a sound that is comforting to me. I remember counting the boxcars as they rumbled past our house. We lived so close to the tracks that I felt the earth tremble as the train passed “Here comes a train,” we would yell, and I often raised my arms, tilted at the elbow, with my hand in a fist gesturing for the train conductor to blow the horn. Holy smokes, that horn was loud, yet hearing it evoked a big smile and wave, and I’d run off feeling good that the conductor understood and waved back.



*This photo shows me sitting with my mother, Jennie Absolon (nee Cryer), and my father, David Absolon. Their loving blend makes me who I am today. (Photo by Hilton King)*

Cranberry Lake is in the bush; not in a town or a reserve. I lived among the trees, swamps, lakes, bulrushes, bears, snakes and wildflowers. My socialization was dominated with bush immersion, which, as you will see, plays a central role in who I am and how I search for knowledge.

I went to elementary school in a small town called Britt and then to high school in Parry Sound. Making long bus commutes were our daily reality. There were no Indigenous teachers or curriculum at my schools. My education was filled with racist representations of Indigenous people, and I vividly remember shrinking in my chair while the teacher rambled on about Indian savages and how uncivilized we were. I remember being unfairly treated by teachers, and in grade four was tossed across the classroom (with my desk being tossed too) because a White girl said I stole her book. I wasn’t asked, just tossed across the room. I really disliked going to that school.

When I was small, I asked my mom what type of Indian we were. She said, “We are Ojibwa Indians.” And I asked her if that was good. She said yes and that there were a lot of Ojibwa Indians here and that our nation was a big one. I felt so proud to hear that and to know that I belonged to a strong nation. School never taught me that. The friends that I have are lifelong, people who have known me since elementary school. That is quite a privilege today. Most of my friends were other Anishinaabe girls, and we hung out with one another at school. After-school socializing was not an option for my siblings and me because the bus dropped us off at the highway and we returned to our home at the CNR posting. Our after-school play was to venture into the bush and build forts and tarzan swings and explore. I



*My Cocomish, Elizabeth Cryer (nee Pigeon), and my Shaumish, Shannon Cryer, wanted us to know who we are. They are both in the Spirit World.*

come from a humble place without malls, movie theatres, restaurants and commercial outlets. That solid bush kid who loved the land, lakes and trees is still within me in my very different context today.

I want my words to reflect my way of thinking, being and doing, and it's difficult at times to balance what I think I'm supposed to write with my sense of self, so I get knotted up inside. I began to connect my aching back with my own history and the reasons why this book feels important. Yes, there are bunched up knots in my personal and political history, and I thought about the years of suppression of my cultural identity and traditions. The body ache is connected to other aches that are exposed through this book. I too have felt dismembered from my grandparents, Cocomish and Shaumish, and from the members of my own community. The aches and pains of being dismembered as a people and being severed from our families of origin, as was the case in my family with residential schools and the reservation system, runs deep. I missed having aunts, uncles, grandparents and cousins around me. We were severed from them and their ability to transfer their knowledge to us. I thought about my grandparents, their lives and what they would have wanted us to know. I want my children to know something about being Anishinaabe. I want them to know about their Anishinaabe culture, and I feel that is what my grandparents would have wanted us to pass on.

To remember who we are and where we come from as Anishinaabe is an act of resistance against being dismembered.

Shaumish (my grandfather) walked on the land searching for food. As he walked he talked to the Spirits of the land. He saw the ancestors and acknowledged their presence in his life. He journeyed the rivers and lakes in Northern Ontario, fishing, trapping and hunting. Shaumish was a proud Anishinaabe *nini* (Ojibwa man) who must have felt so angered and disempowered by the forced removal of his children to residential schools. It was my shaumish, in my dreams, who ushered me to the doorway of our traditional lodge. It was he who told me, in a dream, to tune into my own journey with the Spirits. It was my shaumish who showed me the path. He was a strong man, yet his life was disrespected and he was treated like an insignificant stupid Indian. What must he have thought or felt? I don't have the answers; I can only speculate what he must have gone through, and my speculations probably don't do justice to his truth. My *Shaumish* was a very smart man though.

My grandmother, we called her Cocomish, worked hard and only took small breaks in her day. Her cabin was small and I loved her old jam cupboard where she made dumplings and rabbit stew. A trapper's wife works hard to keep wood chopped, the cabin warm and food bubbling on the old cooking stove. Silence was her friend and she would sit looking out her cabin window twiddling her thumbs, seemingly lost in her thoughts. She seemed so calm. Her energy was soothing, but her dark brown eyes reflected a pain that I will never completely comprehend. What must she have felt when her children were removed from her arms and sent to the residential school? My mother told me that she remembers her mother and father standing outside of the residential school gates. My mother was crying. She wanted to go with her parents, but wasn't allowed. Cocomish must have been in such anguish to have to leave her children there. I loved how my Cocomish was and felt safe with her. When my grandparents returned to the Spirit world, in my grief I knew that our loss would never be fully acknowledged or understood. Now, my Cocomish holds me when I feel lonely and uncertain in this world. She comes to me and cuddles me in her arms telling me that I am not alone. In doing so, she gives me love and support to continue on my path even though, at times, it feels too difficult. Both Cocomish and Shaumish have travelled with me during the most difficult journeys I have taken. Their pain is also my pain.

I grew up in the bush, so in a literal sense there were no fences in my world. There were no neighbours' fences or boundaries other than natural ones. My siblings and I wandered where we wanted and did what we wanted. There were no critical or judging gazes watching us. Because even our parents were out of sight most of the time, we grew up without "shoulds"

or “codes of conduct” and without feelings of inferiority, condemnation or ridicule. Trees don’t dictate how you should be; they just let you be. The same goes for the creeks, lakes, rocks and animals. Well, the animals want to be respected, as does all of Creation, and so if you move around Creation in a manner that demonstrates respect for other life forms, you will be okay. I grew up knowing that the Spirits were all around me, and when I walked into the bush, I talked to the Spirits of the trees, plants, creatures and I felt safe. I somehow knew that they would not hurt me and that if harm was coming my way the trees would protect me. Sometimes I would imagine a wolf creeping up on me and the trees would swipe it away and scare it off and I wouldn’t know a thing. I felt safeguarded by the trees and for this I was thankful. It was my immersion with the land that taught me to trust the life that the land had to offer. I knew that our life came from the land and that this was the knowledge that my grandparents and mother had. Ever since I can remember I’ve known that the land has educated and sustained our people. There has never been a time when I have forgotten my or my peoples’ relationship to the land. My family knows that I love being on the land and have always made time for this.

When I need to find ways to balance the demands of contemporary stressors, like work and more complex lifestyles, I return to the land. I love to be where the earth touches my feet, the trees are visible and I can see the water. These do not exist in the hallways of academia. Am I getting lost? I remembered that this book is for my grandparents: Cocomish and Shaumish. Sometimes the reasons we end up doing what we do are simple, yet the journey is infinite, without a beginning or an ending, just phases in between. My maternal grandparents are central to my search. Cocomish and Shaumish had the knowledge, the language, the traditions and the life on the land. They knew about searching for knowledge and knew how to do it. Both were fluent Anishinaabe speakers, and both had survived and lived in balance with the land. They had what many of us are now searching for, and their life was disregarded and torn apart. I wondered why their presence in my life felt so strong. My doctoral research, I realized, was a means to what they really want me to do: to join other Indigenous voices and carry our knowledge forward. Searching for information and knowledge is not new to us. Indigenous knowledge should never have been eradicated, dismissed, omitted, exploited or abused. My grandparents want me to continue to be Anishinaabe *kwe* and to help Anishinaabe people regain their rightful place within humanity. Acknowledging the source of my ache soothes it and I continue.

I know I am here to leave Anishinaabe footprints so others don’t get lost or forget who we are. I also know I am not a novice to searching and learning. All my life I have been searching: for those cultural mirrors, for like-minded

Spirits, for kindness in the world, for a sense of belonging, for acceptance and for knowledge. Oh how thirsty I was to learn about what happened to our people. It was like I was born into a time where the cyclone had hit and the people were still walking around in states of trauma. No one could explain to me what happened. No one could connect the dots between my personal chaos and the political, institutional and cultural attacks against Indigenous peoples in Canada. No one could explain because everyone was reeling from the colonial aftermath. It wasn't until I was in my early twenties that I began to meet other Anishinaabe people who were involved in our cultural ways. It was only then that I slowly started to see what it was that my grandparents would have wanted me to know. It was then that I started to realize the beauty of being Anishinaabe and the richness of our culture. Coupled with my relationship to the land and love for the Creator, being reintroduced to the Anishinaabe teachings and traditions helped me understand the nature of my existence on this earthwalk.

Growing up immersed in the bush was a gift, and because of that strong foundation I resisted being fenced into eurowestern ways of knowing, being and doing. From the land I came to understand and know what freedom really feels like, and now I want to tell my stories in my way, even if it means using my authentically Anishinaabe english voice and grammar. I was raised by an Ojibway/Anishinaabe mother whose first language was Anishinaabemowin and who was forced to learn english. Anishinaabemowin is grammatically different than english. I speak from an Anishinaabe worldview, but in english. That is who I am. I write from a place, in a way that says I am Anishinaabe and I am also english. I now restore myself by re-storying myself into my doctoral journey on how we search for knowledge.

### Decolonizing and Indigenizing My Re-search

My own experiences as an Anishinaabe *kwe* and an Indigenous searcher led me in the creation of this book. Experiences, thoughts and feelings about who I am are a result of cultural, political, social and spiritual effects in my life. I have been socialized in a dominant culture and in Anishinaabe culture and have been thinking about decolonization for many years. Like Indigenous Australian scholar Lester Rigney (1999: 116), my lived experiences enable me to “speak on the basis of these experiences and [they] are powerful instruments by which to measure the equality and social justice of society.” I have always identified as an Anishinaabe person, and my first experiences with racism were because I am visibly Ojibwa, with brown skin, dark eyes and hair. I was treated poorly by teachers in my school and teased by White kids in the schoolyard. These were mainly felt and lived experiences without much reflection, analysis or critique. My Spirit and heart always felt Anishinaabe, but my political and social awakening as an Anishinaabe

person happened when I was about twenty-four years old. I began to be introduced to cultural teachings, gatherings and Aboriginal cultural leaders and critical thinkers. Through my conversations with Aboriginal leaders I began to develop a historical, race, gendered and colonial consciousness about who I was and am as an Aboriginal person. Additionally, the beauty of my culture, its teachings and life philosophies led me on a healing journey out of internalized inferiority.

Like all the re-researchers recognized in this project, the politics of decolonization and indigenizing is a conscious and necessary part of the journey. “You don’t know what you don’t know” is a phrase I find myself repeating over and over. What I mean is that colonization has attempted to eradicate every aspect of who we are. Colonizing knowledge dominates, ignorance prevails, and we internalize how and who the colonizers want us to be. Seeking my own truth meant opening up all aspects of my being to seeing what I missed and acknowledging that “I don’t know what I don’t know.” So I had to deal with my own ignorance about who I am and I had to learn to see what was rendered invisible, which was our whole way of life as Anishinaabek. For me, indigenizing has involved rediscovering and nurturing my Anishinaabe Spirit, healing my Anishinaabe heart, decolonizing my mind and creating a critical action plan in my own life. Decolonization and indigenizing my life includes learning and practising my culture; learning my language; speaking my language; fighting ethnocentrism in education, research and writing; battling institutional racism; and the list goes on. Decolonization and indigenizing is about both knowing and having a critical consciousness about our cultural history.

When I was a graduate student it was important and possible to tackle decolonization in Indigenous re-search methodology. The work of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) inspired me to further study Aboriginal ways of searching and has provided a foundational basis for my work. Decolonizing is arduous work and full of contradictions. At a personal level decolonization means examining the inherent conflicts within myself: I am Anishinaabe and English. I am decolonizing in a colonial education system and am doing so in English, the colonizers’ language. I seek to advance Indigenous knowledge systems in a mainstream education system. Doing a research project on Indigenous re-search methodology is an act of decolonization as I claim my own Aboriginality and Indigenous knowledge. For example, I now see that Indigenous ways of searching were taught to me a long time ago and those teachings occurred in the bush. Indigenous searchers, like myself, experience frustration, anger, oppression and conflict within the academy when attempts to indigenize our research, methodologies and learning are met with antagonism and resistance by the gatekeepers of colonizing forms of knowledge production. Indigenous methodologies are often not perceived as valid forms



of knowledge production within western science, and therefore not taken seriously. This needs to change. Additionally, as a community practitioner I have coordinated community-based research projects with several First Nations communities. Although the context of each is different, these research projects began with similar methodologies before developing into processes with their own life. Each community in its distinctness ended up gaining knowledge in different ways. In keeping with Aboriginal principles, worldviews and values, each community's reality was respected and each community's ownership of their research process was honoured. As a community-based researcher, I have witnessed the fear and suspicion Aboriginal people have about research, especially when carried out by academic researchers. Also, I have seen community-based researchers embrace research as a community development tool once they learned about and saw the value of research for themselves. When First Nations create research methods that are in accordance with their own priorities, philosophies and traditions, they are using Indigenous methodologies and research practices. Voyeurism, outsider interpretation, objectification of culture and reductionist analysis become non-issues when the research is owned and controlled by respectful Aboriginal researchers.

I have journeyed with fear, ignorance, suspicion and trepidation about research. I have also journeyed toward developing critical analysis, personal groundedness and courage about re-search. After all, my main goal in my education and re-search is to empower, privilege and elevate Aboriginal knowledge, epistemologies, paradigms, philosophies, practices and methods. We have for too long relied on the outsiders' interpretation of our reality. We have the knowledge and the methodological processes. My aim here is to explore these and articulate how they may be developed and honoured in mainstream academic contexts. My travels in the bush guide this journey.

### Language and Terminology

In this work I use both intellect and heart to understand and cleanse a painful and empowering history and reality. I have journeyed into text written by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal writers, fiction and non-fiction and academic and narrative. In work by Aboriginal authors I have found wisdom, understanding, comfort, solace and healing. I chose to write from a combined and intertwined place that acknowledges all aspects of my Aboriginality today. In my articulations, I sought more colourful ways to make the pages sing those songs that can invoke Spirit and heart into our work. I tried to break the monotony of the written text by using voice, photography, poetry, stories and visual aids. Using narrative, story, prose and slang, I include myself in the terminology and refer to Aboriginal people as "our" or "my" people. I do this to make my allegiances visible and myself accountable for my own writing. I want the reader to know that an Aboriginal woman, an *Anishinaabe*

kwe, is authoring this book and text. I want the reader to see a whole picture. I acknowledge that I am the artist painting myself in the picture. My voice is present and my experiences are not neutral.

My language and terminology warrants clarification. First and foremost I write as an Anishinaabe person. However, the scope of my search goes beyond Anishinaabe to include other Aboriginal nations within Canada. For variety, I use the terms Aboriginal and Indigenous interchangeably. Indigenous is frequently used in a global context but is also nationally applied. “Aboriginal” is the legal term in Canada that includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples. The term that feels most accurate is Anishinaabe, which roughly translates to mean “the people.” I also use the plural Anishinaabek to refer to Aboriginal peoples.

I use the Ojibwa language, Anishinaabemowin, because I am Anishinaabe and this is my mother tongue. Sometimes I conjure up words and use English words in atypical ways. How can I explain this? Sometimes English in its grammatically correct form does not convey or enact my intentions, and I must apply English words in new ways to help the reader view through a different lens. For example, earlier I used the word dismember to evoke an image and meaning of a forced disconnection. And then I used the term remember to evoke memory and reconnection.

The term “research” has a lot of colonial baggage attached to it. In most Indigenous communities, research is a bad word (Smith 1999). It conjures up suspicion and distrust. As an Indigenous knowledge seeker I have struggled with this term. While writing this book I sought to identify or create other terms that reflect Indigenous processes of knowledge seeking and production. I journeyed into my experiences and remembered, for example, that Indigenous peoples search for knowledge, food and medicines. We gather berries, plants and herbs and we hunt moose, deer, geese and ducks. We also trap rabbits, beavers and muskrats. We harvest food and medicines from the forest and earth, and the knowledge of how to do these things has been developed, shared and passed down from generation to generation. Terms that reflect Indigenous ways of collecting and finding out are searching, harvesting, picking, gathering, hunting and trapping. Within this book I commonly use the words search and gather in lieu of research. I now hyphenate re-search, meaning to look again. To search again from our own location and to search again using our own ways as Anishinaabek is Indigenous re-search. It is the process of how we come to know. The focus, topic and questions surrounding the re-search are relative to Indigenous peoples’ realities. The research is by nature related to Indigenous peoples’ contexts: historical, political, legal, economical, geographical, cultural, spiritual, environmental and experiential. Indigenist re-search promotes Indigenous knowledge and methods. As we re-search, we re-write and we re-story ourselves.