Research Article

In the Spirit of Dr. Betty Bastien: Conceptualizing Ontological Responsibilities through the lens of Blackfoot Resilience

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This short reflective essay is our tribute to the legacy of Dr. Betty Bastien. We elevate Betty's vision of Blackfoot ontological responsibilities as the foundation for the articulation of a pedagogy of Blackfoot resilience and in doing so, provide enduring reference points for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and educators to shape university teaching and learning in ways that are consistent with Niitsitapiyssinni, Blackfoot way of life. Ultimately, this paper demonstrates how balance in teaching and learning is indeed possible.

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Introductions

Oki. Nistoo Nitaanikoo Tsa'piinaki. Niimook'tootoo Akainai (Greetings. I am Slanted-Eye Woman. I am from the Akainai First Nation). My English name is Gabrielle Weasel Head (aka Lindstrom), and I am from the Fish-eaters Clan. My nation, Akainai (aka Kainai), is part of the Blackfoot Confederacy which is a "long-time" alliance of the Siksikaitsitapi, Blackfoot-speaking nations, consisting of Siksika, Akainai, Piikani and Ampskapi Pikuni.

Oki. Nistoo Nitaanikoo Innakimi (Small Man). My English name is Robert Weasel Head, and I am a 41-year-old Niitsitapi from the Akainai Nation. I aim to forward Indigenous recognition and inclusion in Western society by helping to bridge the gap between Western and Indigenous epistemologies. Throughout my educational journey I have studied a range First Nations social issues ranging from settler colonialism, intergenerational trauma, and the numbered treaties. I aim to use my skills in research to help expose Indigenous realities, while also making Indigenous experiences easily accessible to Western society.

We begin this brief essay through what we consider to be the sacred act of locating and positioning our knowledge in the context of the Blackfoot cultural paradigm for it is the lands, our more-than-human relatives, and the peoples of the Akainai nation which have shaped our identities as Niitsitapi. By purposefully elevating our voices here as both Blackfoot woman and man, sister and brother, we rise beyond the typical format for academic journal articles. We see this as integral in carving out a space for Blackfoot ways of knowing in academia. The reader should note that this article, while undertaken as a collective, is written and informed in accordance with autoethnography (Whitinui, 2013), and the methodological orientation of the original research (Lindstrom, Baptiste & Shade, 2021; Lindstrom, Shade & Baptiste, 2023). As such, from here on in, the reader should also assume that this paper is written from the perspective of the Principal Investigator, Dr. Gabrielle Weasel Head.

Self-location is now a standard act for Indigenous and non-Indigenous critical researchers to locate experiences within a broader socio-cultural landscape that makes transparent the role of culture in shaping identity, values and ways of knowing, being and doing. From a collective perspective, the act of locating one's identity is also about conducting self with transparency because how knowledge is generated and translated within academia is directly related to the cultural experiences of the researcher. Indeed, where I come from for it is these roots that implicitly shape my approach to teaching, research and knowledge translation and mobilization. My roots also influence the importance I place on relationships and the sources of inspiration throughout my life that have helped me to connect to my own knowledge and sense of agency so that I may reciprocate back to those who have left a lasting impression on me.

In keeping with the spirit of inspiration, this short essay is a tribute to the legacy of a dear friend and mentor to many, Sikapinaki, Betty Bastien, of the Piikani Nation. While her recent transition to the realm of the unseen has left a significant void in the communities of the Blackfoot Confederacy, it has motivated me to better understand the nature of what it means to carry my ontological responsibilities forward in life as a Blackfoot person. Her book (2004) is a testament to the spirit of Blackfoot resilience as being grounded in notions of inspiration, hope and

perseverance – notions that transcend Western linearity, conceptions of time and assumptions about existence, knowledge and ethical responsibilities. Betty asserts,

> It is my hope that our ancestors and ancients will have their openly acknowledged place in our ways of being and becoming ... that our educational institutions and social organizations generate the ways of being created by the spiritual connections among all people and that 'which is.' This is the hope and conviction that balance is a possibility. (p. xi)

Ultimately, this essay embodies Betty's hope by infusing Blackfoot spirituality and enduring lifeways into our educational institutes so that we can generate reference points for teaching and learning that demonstrate how balance is indeed possible. This paper serves two primary purposes: 1) to elevate a Blackfoot understanding and mobilization of my ontological responsibilities as articulated in Bastien's seminal work outlining the worldview of Siksikaitsitapi, the Blackfoot-speaking peoples (Bastien, 2004); 2) and, to connect these responsibilities to the findings from a recent Indigenous research project on Blackfoot resilience (Lindstrom, Baptiste & Shade, 2023). I begin this short essay by sharing a story of how Dr. Betty Bastien challenged me to reclaim an authentic way of being by re-discovering what it means to be a Blackfoot person in-relation (Graveline, 1998).

What is an Indigenous Epistemology?

In May 2016, I nervously sat down in front of my committee for the oral candidacy exam which would determine whether my research proposal was good enough to carry out for my doctoral program. At the time, everything about Indigenous research methodologies was relatively new for me for I had only been immersed in a sustained exploration of an Indigenous research paradigm (Wilson, 2008) since 2014, which was when I began my journey toward completing a doctorate in educational research with a specialization in Adult Learning. I have written elsewhere about my journey in academia – a journey that continues (Lindstrom, 2020). Betty supported my research by acting as the external examiner. I presented my proposal to the committee and confidently answered their questions. Then, it was Betty's turn to ask me a question. I remember her voice over the conference call, so gentle and clear, as she asked, "What is an Indigenous epistemology?" I drew a blank. For all the research and writing I had done to articulate an Indigenous epistemology, I was unable to come up with an answer to Betty's query. Rather than let me squirm in silence, she asked me to take another look at the presentation I had prepared and describe what I saw. So, I looked at the last slide which was an image of my parents, my daughters and myself and answered, these are relationships that are important in my life. Betty then explained how an Indigenous epistemology is a relational one and that it was reflected in my research. I have since come to experience how knowledge is sourced from our direct participation in sacred and secular relationships, cultivated from multiple wellsprings of embodied knowing that are both physical and spiritual in nature, of both the seen and unseen realms of existence. Hawaiian scholar Manu Aluli Meyer (2003) advances the notion that epistemology is less about knowledge and more about spirituality and that an Indigenous epistemology brings possibility to the fore because knowing and being are the embodiment of experienced knowledge – how we action our knowledge through participation in relationships is the source of continuous transformation.

Betty's question ignited a flame of self-awareness within me and enabled me to create a deeper connection to the sources of my knowledge – my relationships – on a level that I was unable to get to through Western academic methodologies of inquiry. In other words, it wasn't enough for me to simply read and write about an Indigenous epistemology. I needed to be challenged so that I might begin to bring light to the embodied knowledge that is encoded within my DNA and carries the wisdom of my ancestors.

Conceptualizing Ontological Responsibilities, Transformation and Indigenous Innovation

Although I successfully passed my candidacy exam, Betty's style of inquiry, direct and rooted in foundational knowledge, has become a reference point for my research and growth as both an academic, as a Blackfoot woman and member of Niitsitapi, the 'real people'. It has also led me to deeper self-learning and inquiry. This essay is concerned with both being – the nature of existence – and responsibility – how we create our reality based on fundamental ontological assumptions. As such, I have come to explore my own ontological responsibilities and how these may be reference points for continuous transformation.

Betty asserts that a principal motivating factor in writing her book (Bastien, 2004), "is the articulation of the ontological responsibilities of Siksikaitsitapi identity so that they can have impact within the current educational system" (p. 2). The impacts of Betty's legacy have reverberated

throughout my life's journey and have provided the impetus for the deliberate infusion of Blackfoot lifeways, Niitsitapiyssinni, into my classroom pedagogy, scholarly research endeavors and academic relationships. At its most fundamental distillation, ontology is concerned with the nature of existence, ways of being and reality. According to Blackstock, Bamblett and Black (2020), an Indigenous ontology is premised in a state of existence wherein the ontological assumptions surrounding time and space reinforce a "humble view of the self as it recognizes the ancestors that have come before and situates the individual as an ancestor to those who will follow … First Nations relationships and obligations extend to all life, land, and matter," (p. 104587). Furthermore, existence is thus situated in a complex network of interconnected, cosmic, and relational alliances which, according to Blackstock, et al, (2020) are the foundation for which Indigenous creation stories begin.

Blackstock, et al. (2020) highlight the distinctions between a First Nations and Western ontology and in doing so, illuminate the complexities of Indigenous philosophy, views on reality, stances on time and space and the fundamental purpose of life – to live in humble ways in order to take our rightful place as ancestor within a multi-dimensional web of relational alliances. An Indigenous ontology is about sustainability, process, reverence for the unseen, abundance and the continuity of our cultural lifeways. We exist because of our relationships (Bastien, 2016). We exist within a web of sacred alliances with the seen and unseen. That the universe is kind, compassionate and the giver of gifts are core ontological assumptions within a Blackfoot worldview. Thus, ontological responsibilities are those actionable accountabilities that maintain cultural continuity; responsibilities that embody a meaning of life that is:

> rooted in the experiences grounded in the sacred relationships of alliances. The understanding of what it means to be a human being is premised on the connections with the sacred and the development of transformational experiences. In essence, the identity of the people and the theory of human development is based on a framework of moral and ethical relationships. (Bastien, 2004, p. 84)

Ontological responsibilities are connected to the sacred, to our experiences with our sacred alliances the outcomes of which are continuous transformation and growth. Indigenous education is premised on ongoing transformative education through lifelong learning. There is a significant difference between transformative learning from a Western perspective and transformational learning within an Indigenous paradigm. Developed by Mezirow (1978) and employed within an adult learning context, transformative learning is a Western-based theory that has been used to conceptualize how adults make meaning of experience through a process of critical self-reflection which may offer profound shifts in understanding, thus leading to new insights and interpretations of the world around us (Taylor, 2008). Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978) holds that personal transformation is grounded in critical self-reflection within which learners arrive at changes in their understandings of the self, re-evaluation of their belief systems, and transformations in their behaviors. In terms of Indigenous pedagogy, transformational learning is not confined to adult learning alone but is an epistemological wellspring wherein the purpose of learning is continued lifelong growth and development (Ermine, 1995) which can be understood as a process of transformation. For Niitsitapi, Betty (Bastien, 2016) posits that, "Siksikaitsitapi epistemology creates a way of being, a way of relating to the world that embodies the kinship-relationship system … In this way, knowing becomes a part of the knower …transformation is achieved by changing the relationship between knower and known" (pp. 18-19). Transformation occurs through the direct experiences gained in participating in relational alliances which are sacred as experienced through their aliveness sourced with energy and consciousness, these relationships are also holistic and are not seen as separate from Niitsitapi (Bastien, 2004; Littlebear, 2000). The knowledge and pedagogies that emerge through the participation within these relationships comprise Indigenous knowledge systems (Bastien, 2004, 2016; Battiste, 2013; Ermine, 1995; Littlebear, 2000). As the reader will note, this understanding of transformational learning, the role of knowledge, and the centrality of relationships is very different in comparison to transformative learning from a Western perspective. Indeed, transformative learning is often used to refer to transformational educational approaches that are aimed at addressing the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.

With these cultural concepts in mind, I have come to understand my ontological responsibilities in the context of cultural continuity. I have a responsibility to ensure that Niitsitapiyssinni, the Blackfoot way of life, is carried forward and embodied through my relationship to self, to my own sources of knowledge, to my human and more-than-human relatives and to the lands and waters that sustain us all. My responsibilities are shaped by my identity as a Blackfoot woman which is sustained by being responsive to the constant flux of life. According to Blackfoot scholar Leroy Littlebear (2000), Indigenous values flow from being – existing – with constant flux, which is an ontological concept that situates existence as consisting of energy. Littlebear furthers that within Indigenous philosophy,

All things are animate, imbued with spirit, and inconstant motion. In this realm of energy and spirit, interrelationships between all entities are of paramount importance space is a more important referent than time ... The idea of all things being in constant motion or flux leads to a holistic and cyclical view of the world. If everything is constantly moving and changing, then one has to look at the whole to begin to see patterns ... Constant motion, as manifested in cyclical or repetitive patterns, emphasizes process as opposed to product. (n. p.)

The potential for continuous transformative growth – lifelong learning – is realized through the embodiment of my ontological responsibilities. I am an innovator, as all Blackfoot people are whether we are conscious of it or not. Seminal Indigenous scholars such as my dear mentor Betty Bastien (2004), Gregory Cajete (1994) and Linda Smith (1999) have advanced that Indigenous knowledge is living knowledge because it is applicable to each new generation. However, each generation must listen, observe and experience the knowledge in order to apply it in ways that are consistent with current day realities. Battiste (2005) asserts that "Indigenous knowledge is a growing field of inquiry, both nationally and internationally, particularly for those interested in educational innovation" (p. 1). Indigenous innovation lies in the creative expressions of cultural continuity embodied through song, storytelling, dance and transcends Western notions of newness (Bastien, 2003, p. 42). Following the pathways of ancestral knowledge resists notions of Eurocentric progress which is often based in economic expansion (Smith, 1999) and resource extraction. Ermine states that, "Aboriginal education has a responsibility to uphold a worldview based on wholeness and to disseminate the benefits to all of humanity" (1995, p. 110). My work is situated within this responsibility.

## Advancing Blackfoot Resilience as an Ontological Responsibility

As a Blackfoot woman and emerging scholar within the expanding field of Indigenous Studies, I have observed the confused, defensive and oftentimes shocked reactions many non-Indigenous students express when exploring content related to colonial ideologies. Previous research conducted in the area of Indigenous and Settler colonial education, along with my classroom experiences, have shown that despite shifts in both the national and international policy landscape, Indigenous post-secondary students continue to experience profound barriers to advancement in higher education. Recent provincial educational policy updates to the Teaching Quality Standards highlight the need for all teachers to be competent in foundational knowledges with regards to Indigenous cultures in Canada in the K-12 context. While these policy movements are embedded with the potential to create a more inclusive pedagogical model that would support Indigenous students, from primary to post-secondary, in achieving educational parity with their non-Indigenous counterparts, current trends point to an enduring pattern of Indigenous students' school-leaving, low-academic achievement and experiences with racial discrimination (Lindstrom, 2018).

A growing body of literature highlights the stories of non-Indigenous educators at all educational levels struggling to meaningfully incorporate Indigenous content into their pedagogy often in attempts to respond to the TRC's (2015) Calls to Action (Aitken & Radford, 2018; Bissell & Korteweg, 2016; Korteweg & Fiddler, 2018). Clearly a profound disconnect exists between intentions and outcomes in the educational policy and programming discourse advanced by Western systems. These discourses are often couched in the idea that more information and content about Indigenous peoples will lead to a more tolerant and accepting hegemony. However, critical Indigenous educators are aware that culturally relevant information alone cannot bridge the conceptual and philosophical divide that separates Indigenous and Settler societies. Part of this disconnect is related to the deficit perspectives held by a vast majority of Canadians which make it difficult to conceptualize Indigenous peoples as anything more than problems to be solved (Greidanus & Johnson, 2016).

I am keenly aware that the ways Indigenous peoples are conceptualized by non-Indigenous members of society have direct bearings on the statistics and anecdotal evidence that are used to not only better understand the higher education attainment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, but also constitutes the bulk of the data that drives funding models and curricular program planning. I am also aware of the inherent difficulties that become apparent when non-Indigenous educators and service providers attempt to apply strength-based models within an Indigenous context. Afterall, it is difficult to imagine the strengths of Indigenous cultures when one has only learned of the perceived inherent deficiencies of these cultures.

To respond to these challenges, I applied for and was awarded a grant in 2019 through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to examine Blackfoot resilience and those intersections where Indigenous ways of knowing meet Western theories on knowledge. Utilizing autoethnography as a research methodology, I interviewed a total of 11 Blackfoot Elders and held two focus groups with 17 Indigenous and non-Indigenous post-secondary students to better understand resilience from a distinct First Nations perspective and how this understanding might

be mobilized in a post-secondary classroom. While it is not possible to provide a detailed overview of the results of the study here, broad findings are captured through the following cultural model:
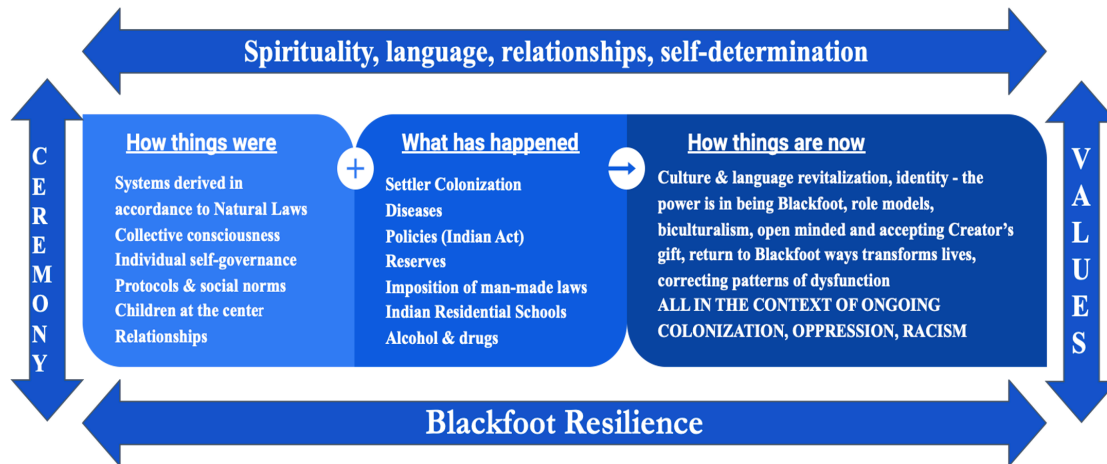
The findings from the Elders' voices are conceptualized within a teleological framework encompassing how life was prior to colonization, what happened during colonization and how life is today for the Blackfoot people. The above framework has been inspired by one of the Elders in the study and is a useful way of understanding the processes of change and the ultimate purpose of life within Blackfoot culture (Lindstrom, 2023).

In exploring resilience from a Blackfoot perspective, my research reclaims what Bastien (2003) describes as the sovereign imagination by conceptually reconstructing an Indigenous reality that is defined by Blackfoot ways of knowing and being. As an Indigenous scholar keen on advancing self-determination through research. One of the challenges I encounter is that research around Indigenous resilience utilizes Eurocentric derived models, concepts and frameworks which are then applied to Indigenous realities (Denham, 2008; Hansen & Antsanen, 2016; Kirmayer, et al., 2011). A critique made by many Indigenous researchers (Absolon, 2011; Battiste, 2005; Kovach, 2010; Porsanger, 2004) is that Eurocentric methodologies, pedagogies and philosophies decontextualize Indigenous lifeways. My research findings around Blackfoot resilience are grounded within a Blackfoot philosophical paradigm and mobilize concepts that are derived from the Blackfoot language and conceptualized as the embodiment of Blackfoot cultural continuity which is a void in current research and a significant distinction from Western resilience models of internal/external protective and/or risk factors that typify the contexts of resiliency discourse. Blackfoot models of resilience (Lindstrom, Baptiste & Shade, 2021; Lindstrom, Shade & Baptiste, 2023), antiracism (Lindstrom, 2023), and parenting and family (Lindstrom & Choate, 2016; Lindstrom, et al., 2016) hold universal truths about the human condition that Eurocentric society can learn and benefit from because the fundamental purpose of Blackfoot existence is found within an ontological responsibility to maintain balance and harmony in relationships (Bastien, 2003, 2004; Littlebear, 2000).

In addition to the research findings, a detailed review of the literature gave way to a distinct view of Blackfoot resilience as being a genealogical connection to the land in conjunction with strong leadership. Moreover, various themes emerged that helped to contextualize a deeper understanding of Indigenous resilience, including the importance of land, culture, relationships, language, leadership, sovereignty, identity, history, and community, as being key themes. My research has illuminated how the impacts of colonization on Indigenous people, namely, intergenerational/historical trauma/oppression created through settler colonialism policies and processes are often the driving factor in attempts to better understand Indigenous notions of resilience. In other words, Indigenous resilience is often conceptualized as a response to colonization as opposed to an ontologically rooted state of existence (Lindstrom, 2023). Indigenous resistance to ongoing settler colonialism through the practice of Indigenous cultural lifeways, worldviews, and cultural transmission are demonstrative of the enduring nature of Indigenous perseverance as Indigenous nations are not homogenous and have differences in how they interpret the world based on ecological location and social structure. Writing about the need to advance Indigenous conceptualizations of resilience in the context of ongoing violence against Indigenous women and girls, de Finney (2017) outlines how Indigenous resilience is bound to sovereignty and self-determination via "unsettling colonial relations of power [which] necessitates action on multiple levels" (p. 17). In advocating for justice and dignity for themselves, their

families, and friends, and communities, Indigenous women and girls create resilient circles of care and justice (de Finney, 2017). Indigenous embodiments of resilience through kinship network models of connection – a spiderweb of connections – transcend Western notions of psycho-social resilience to encompass all humans and all life on earth. These connections necessitate a complex arrangement of obligations and responsibilities which are ontologically oriented. My research further reinforces that the most significant impact about settler colonialism is the effect it has had on Indigenous access and connection to our lands, forced relocation, and the dispossession of land which has compromised many Indigenous lifeways. Land is a central factor in shaping resilience in that spirituality and social formations are tied to specific ecologies and cannot be transported without jeopardizing the entire system (de Finney, 2017). Much of the research surrounding Indigenous resilience focused on Western frameworks of resilience (Burnette, et al., 2019; Burnette, et al., 2018; McKinley, 2022; McKinley & Lily, 2021) and introduce concepts such as historical oppression/trauma (Wojciak, et al., 2022) and transcendence in order to broaden Western definitions to include such categories as families, communities, and ethnicity. However, Indigenous scholars such as Gaudet (2021) and de Finney (2017) argue that an Indigenous understanding of resilience must be advanced as the point of reference to better understand Indigenous realities, both current and historic, as being distinct from psychosocial Western models of resilience. By focusing on the land, I can draw on all connections contained through the land, including connections with our human and more-than-human relations, cultural practices/cultural transmission, language, stories, and identity. The connection to the land also includes adapting to the land, and to all relationships contained within it, this includes contemporary relationships with Euro-settler society and the challenges it brings. I propose a broad view of leadership to include the qualities of what it is to be a strong leader, which includes respect, compassion, a strong sense of spirituality-prayer, honor, and confidence. A'kainai means "Many Leaders," and Blackfoot society has historically had strong leaders who helped guide communities through constant flux. Chief Red Crow secured Kainai, and the entire Blackfoot Nation, an area of land that holds the cultural heart of the Blackfoot, the Belly Buttes, where the annual Sundance is located, and with it, our cultural identity and source of resilience. Our land holds our culture, our culture holds our identity as Sikikaitsiitapi, and our identity shapes our resilience.

When examining settler colonialism from an Indigenous worldview particularly in the context of the ontological principle of constant flux, Indigenous resiliency is the ability to adapt or evolve to the changing nature of energy in motion. This concept of Indigenous adaptability runs parallel to the system of settler colonialism in that Indigenous connections to the land, which holds all cultural processes and spirituality, in conjunction with strong leadership, which is embodied through focus and humility, mean that every attempt by settler colonialism to eliminate Indigenous lifeways will naturally be met with a response consistent with Niitsitapiyssinni. To "withstand" implies that something will end or pass, that it is only temporary and while settler colonialism has neither passed nor has it ended, it is a process that has been relatively recent phenomena if compared to the enduing presence of Niitsitapi on our lands. Indeed, Indigenous resiliency has remained consistent for millennia. We have learned to adapt to an entirely new system of living. Many of us are now university professors, judges, teachers, lawyers, and doctors. Many of us work through our traumas so that we may trailblaze pathways of healing for other Indigenous people – that we may leave a legacy of hope and inspiration for others. Betty Bastien was one of those trailblazers.

Conclusion

Our research illuminates how Blackfoot resilience is inherently connected to our ontological responsibilities. It has also articulated cultural reference points that situate our Blackfoot lifeways as being fundamental to the continuity of Niitsitapiyssinni, Blackfoot way of life. Concluding reflections from my doctoral dissertation (Lindstrom, 2018) capture the spirit of resilience as foregrounding our experiences with trauma remain as true today as they did when I first articulated them:

> The beauty of human experience resides in our ability to learn and make meaning from these experiences not from a privatized space that forces us to suffer alone, but rather, within a holistic network of relations that fosters a recognition of a suffering that is shared, of a strength that is cultivated through dialogue and story-sharing, of a resilience that is fostered in a reciprocal exchange of compassion. (p. 191)

Betty's hope of infusing our education institutes with a more balanced approach to teaching and learning has become our hope as well. Thank you, Betty, for all you have done for our Blackfoot nations! We are resilient.

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Declarations