### Walking the land, feeding the fire. Becoming and being knowledgeable among the Tlicho Dene

### Allice Legat, 2007

Based on research undertaken with Tlicho Dene residing in Canada’s Northwest Territories, this thesis explores what it means to be knowledgeable if you say you are from the land. The question came from statements constantly made by Dene during meetings with government and industrial personnel, and in the course of research associated with the telling of events and happenings connected with traditional governance, caribou and place. I take it as given that humans dwell as part of the environment, and show how they form relations with other beings who may or may not have similar perspectives. I show that the Tlicho perspective includes the experience and growth of individuals as well as the stories that constantly weave the past and the present, allowing it to unfold in the future. Constantly reinforced through oral narratives, this perspective provides the listener with the means to embrace their own truth while respecting the personal knowledge of others, to share it and have it validated (or not) by others. As individuals grow they become increasingly knowledgeable, aware that they are part of a constantly changing environment to which one must stay open by listening, experiencing, and observing in preparation to take on tasks that need doing. I consider several occurrences, both within the bounds of settled life and while in the bush, that reveal a process of perpetual discovery and re-discovery that is caught in the tensions between story and experience, between older and younger, past and future, not knowing and knowing, and between leader and follower. These are not so much dichotomies as relational oppositions whose continual renewal is brought about through a practical engagement with all that is of the ‘land’.

In the first chapter, I explore the process by which a story grows into personal truth through experience. I show that becoming knowledgeable is a continual process, as shown by Moise who experiences a story he heard seventy years before. Chapter two explores remembering through the telling and retelling of oral narratives, and explores the past as told through the stories that are ‘just told and heard’ as well as told in context. I argue that temporal eras are sequential with past events residing in the present rather than disconnected and static. The process reinforces a perspective that can be used to guide individuals during tense periods. Chapter three discusses the concepts of ‘beings’ and ‘place’ by focusing on the way Tlicho dwell and establish relations with human persons and other-than-human beings. This is exemplified through a description of the unpredictability of events dependent on harmonious relations occurring within the ebb and flow of seasonality. Chapter four emphasises how ‘knowing’ and ‘using’ are key to both the maintenance of harmonious relations and the result of tension. Four significant examples are discussed in this chapter: feeding the fire, paying the land, travelling the land, and using others. Both chapters five and six focus on the period of time during which Tlicho are establishing relations with ‘whites’, while experiencing events and happenings with them that are remembered and told through oral narratives. These chapters emphasise the manner in which Tlicho personal autonomy is being undermined through government policy and legislation, while it is nevertheless respected by some ‘white’ individuals. Throughout becoming knowledgeable through experience is a priority. Chapter seven focuses on a situation in which Tlicho are strategizing to take action that will provide their descendants with personal autonomy and self-government. I argue that given the importance of following knowledgeable individuals, older generations will not follow younger people until they demonstrate that ‘they know something’. Chapter eight returns to the interplay between story and experience, demonstrating that people who both walk the land and follow the footsteps of their ancestors are respected because while travelling one is becoming more knowledgeable. This is a never-ending process; the gap between listening to stories and experiencing the story is also a time of tension in which one does not yet know.

To conclude, an understanding of becoming and being knowledgeable among the Tlicho Dene takes into account several dynamics. To become and be knowledgeable is a lifelong process that begins with gaining a perspective from oral narratives that originate within the dè. Key elements of the Tlicho perspective include such things as knowing one’s place and the place of others, interacting and maintaining harmonious relationships, and having and sharing knowledge.

The principal conclusions of the thesis are as follows:
• The past is continually pulled through to the present by experiencing occurrences that originated in the past and shared through stories with social descendants. All happenings and events are connected as the points of entry and exit are the same.
• Human individuals are never completely ‘knowing’, rather they are forever becoming knowledgeable through experiencing life.
• There are no empty spaces. All beings have their own place and their own trails within the dè. Their place and their trails give human and other beings their unique knowledge and perspective.
• Becoming knowledgeable is based on actions, relationships, interaction and happenings, creating and re-creating a taskscape. Humans and other beings experience taskscapes along intersecting trails through space and time.