

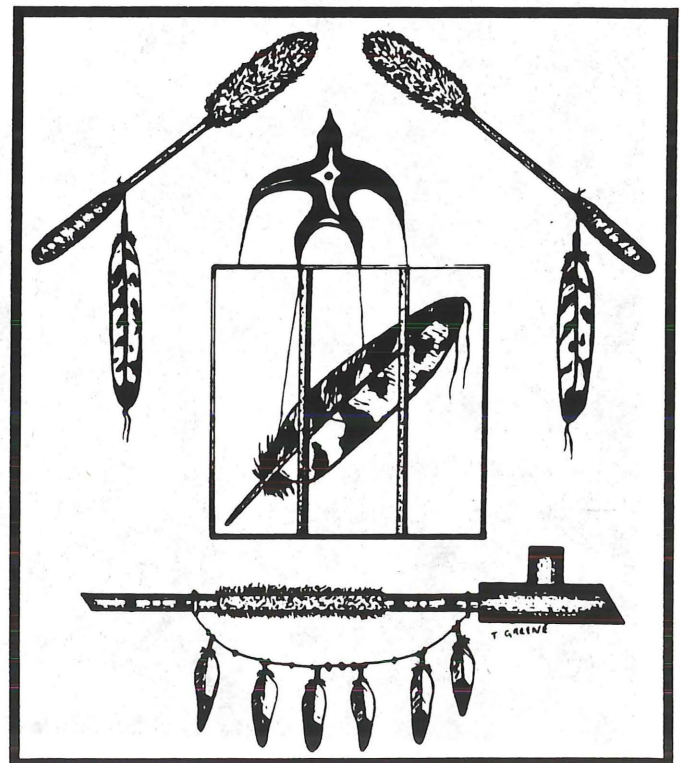
# Entrenched Social Catastrophe

## *Native Women in Prison*

BY FRAN SUGAR

**N**ative people lead the *KKK*ountry in statistical categories such as unemployment, alcoholism, early death rates from infant mortality, violence and criminally-related activities. According to a recent study by Trent University, the Dangerous Offenders Act, Bills C-67 and C-68, Native people in the criminal justice system are more likely to be gated under this bill, and therefore are deemed the most dangerous and most violent offenders in Canada.

Native women face double, triple and quadruple standards when entering the prison system. Number 1 is because we are women, number 2: we are Native, number 3: we are poor, number 4: we do not usually possess the education necessarily equivalent to the status quo.



# Profile

Ms. Cree is eighteen years-old, a single parent with 2 children. She lives in the city of \_\_\_\_\_ where the offence took place. She was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 4 years. Her parents are deceased. She has 2 sisters and 2 brothers. Ms. Cree was a housewife whose sole income was social assistance.

Ms. Cree entered the institution with a grade 4 level of education. She quit school due to problems in her foster home. Ms. Cree has not been involved in an Education upgrading program. She has been offered a job cleaning yet has refused this placement because she feels the school supervisor does not treat her or other Native students properly. As a result she will not work anywhere in the institution.

Ms. Cree was first arrested at age 16 for uttering and forging documents. She was put on one year's probation which she completed successfully. The subject displays no responsibility for her criminal involvement. The subject

clearly has a drug and alcohol problem. Her institutional participation is limited to Native Sisterhood. The writer strongly suggests that Ms. Cree remain a maximum security inmate. The writer is not in support of community release at this time. Day parole denied. Full parole denied. Escorted temporary absence denied for one year. Ms. Cree was involved with a would-be serious incident with a number of her friends on May 1, 19—, when security staff were proceeding to dispel an incident in another part of the building. As a result of Ms. Cree not being able to remain charge-free for any length of time, her cavalier attitude, her activities and friendships with many known drug dealers in the institution, it is the writer's opinion that Ms. Cree meets #2 & #3 criteria under Bill C67-68.

Ms. Cree is a danger to society, to herself and the staff members of the institution. Ms. Cree is being referred under Bill C-67-68. Ms. Cree's sentence expires January, 199—. Next case management review scheduled December, 198—.



This is a fictional profile, but it closely resembles a perceived reality on the part of the bureaucracy who assess the Native woman as she enters prison. Those who assess us come from an opposite life-experience. The average case management person is Caucasian, married, has 1-2 children, a university degree, is from an upper-middle-class background with no comparable experiences to a Native woman.

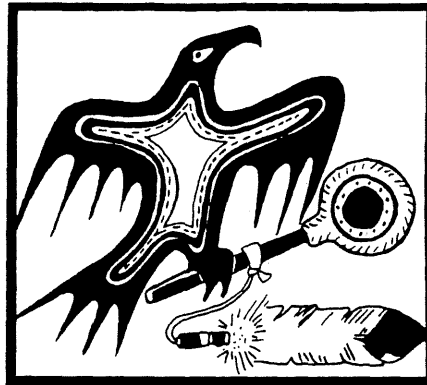
Obviously there are going to be some very profound difficulties that the Native woman will have in making adjustments within the institution and in serving out her sentence. Almost every Sister I have talked to has told me they were raised in foster homes, sent to juvenile detention centres, were victims of sexual abuse, were victims of rape. And finally entering Prison for Women, we have all become victims of bureaucracy because we do not have the right colour of skin, the right kind of education, the right kind of social skills and the right kind of principles to get out of here.

Most often criminal defense lawyers, in conjunction with crown prosecutors and judges, agree that a guilty plea with a lengthy sentence will correct past lifestyles, our way of thinking, and make us into law-abiding "cityzens." It is an absurd, *phucking* joke to think that the criminal *just-us system* with their residential care, treatment, programming, counselling and mental health programs are specifically designed programs to meet the needs of Native women when we have never had an equal footing in the case management strategic planning sessions that take place. The bureaucracy and paper pushing outweighs the importance of listening to what the Native woman says she needs.

Usually the woman in the cage is too busy *surviving* the new rules, new regulations of daily life in la-la land to even consider what the future holds after she is finished her sentence.

When we come to prison, we need to adjust to greater and greater violence in our lives. We adjust to increasingly deadly conditions, and come to accept them as "natural." We adjust to having freedoms stolen away from us, to having fewer and fewer choices, less and less voice in the decisions that affect our lives. We come to believe that making \$4.20 a day and things we can buy with it are the most

important life goals. We have adjusted to deafening silence, because it is now mandatory to wear head-phones. We have adjusted to the deafening noises and screams coming from segregation when our Sister has just been stripped of her clothes and maced in the face. We have adjusted to the deadening entertainment of bingo games that give out prized bags of taco chips and we hear glees of happiness at this score, because some pathetic individual hasn't tasted taco chips since 1979. We have adjusted to the lack of conversation, because some days there is absolutely nothing of significance or meaning to a few cheap words. We have adjusted to dreaming of our futures. We



have adjusted to divorcing ourselves from relationships with our husbands. We keep adapting to new and ever more dangerous conditions and ideas in the name-sake of survival.

We forget how life once was, how blue the sky is, how good food tasted. We forget because the changes are gradual and unannounced. No one can forewarn us of what lies ahead. If we could imagine ourselves taking pleasure in a slave job like cleaning floors over and over again, day after day, year after year and see ourselves as fanatical psychos when our freshly waxed floor gets a scratch on it and ruins our entire day, we would recoil with horror and shame because our minds and values become as twisted and irrational as the ones that impose these conditions upon our lives.

We become so *phucking* numb from the incredible *b/sh* we are exposed to: trying to see a case management officer to get a call to our children is a major, major event. It is no wonder that so many of us cut our throats, lacerate our bodies, hang ourselves. It is no wonder that we need to identify our pain onto our physical bod-

ies, because our whole lives have been filled with incredible pain and traumatizing experiences — psychic pain, physical pain, spiritual pain.

When you ask a Native woman why she was placed in a foster home, she'll likely tell you it was because Children's "Aid" arrested her because her parents didn't send her to school regularly. When you ask a Native woman where she was sexually abused, she'll likely respond it took place in the foster homes. When you ask a Native woman why she killed somebody, she'll tell you she was a battered wife and she lost control of her senses when she was taking another beating. She didn't mean to kill her husband, her lover, her friend, she was just so spun out after each licking she lived through — she just was so spun out.

"I am your typical Native woman and one who has survived the Criminal *Just-us System*. When I think about the time in prisons, I often wonder how I maintained my sanity. I never conformed in my heart or in my mind, but my body danced. I learned how to cope with lies. I believe justice does not exist for Native people. The battle of will is to see through the wall, to see through the screws and their power plays — their bureaucratic games of power and pleasure.

I learned there is a certain degree of hypocrisy in the groups that represent women in prison. The money and efforts that go into "services" is a mere band-aid effort in conspiracy with the criminal *just-us system*. The money and effort would be better directed at commuting the families of the incarcerated women to the prisons. The time that is spent on conducting study upon study is wasted time because statistics stay the same, the pain stays the same, the faces of the women change — but the stories are identical.

I entered Prison for Women as a young, poorly educated, Native woman and... I will soon be released with similar characteristics — but you can add another deficiency — after 7 years — I am now an... **ANGRY**, young, poor, uneducated, Native woman!!!!

Signed In the Blood of My Sisters,  
Ms. Cree XO

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