

nipê wânîn: askîy-iyinîsiwin acâhkowin

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By

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Cree Translation By Gladys Wapass-Greyeyes

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ABSTRACT

This creative thesis is written in nêhiyawêwin (Cree) and English. It explores the skill of storytelling in Cree culture and examines how that can be done through poetry. The collection of poems is a story about the experiences and beliefs of an Indigenous woman, mother, student, teacher, daughter. This thesis is broken into three thematic sections: “acâhk” (spirit), “niya” (me), and “askiy” (land). Each section contains a series of poems that delves into the teachings shared by elders, parents, and grandparents. Three themes are braided into each poem – relationality, nêhiyaw worldview, and personal experience.

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For Kane and Emberlee, Mom, Dad, Sarain, Jolon, Alanis, Damien,
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kinanâskomitin

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

In his book *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times*,

Neal McLeod states:

The connection Indigenous people have to land is housed in language. Through our stories and words, we hold the echo of generational experience, and the engagement with land and territory. nêhiyawêwin, Cree language – perhaps more poetically rendered as “the process of making Cree sound” – grounds us, and binds us with other living beings, and marks these relationships. (6)

While working on an educational writing project several years ago, I began to understand what this statement meant in its entirety. For one thing, language is a locator for groups of nêhiyawâk people. I am able to locate myself in my writing through the use of a dialect of nêhiyawêwin, specifically the ‘y’ dialect common to the Western Plains nêhiyawâk. Treaty Six Territory, where I originate, is a huge expanse of land that encompasses nêhiyawâk territory through what are now central Alberta, Saskatchewan, and a fraction of Manitoba, in Canada. The use of nêhiyawêwin in my writing locates me within a group, a territory, and recognizes a regional history, all through the use of specific linguistic variations of nêhiyawêwin.

As a poet, it is necessary for me to explore the different uses that language can have in my writing. As a nêhiyaw woman it has become increasingly more important to me to use the nêhiyawêwin language as a medium for writing. As Kateri Damm argues in her article “Colonialism, Identity, and Defining Indigenous Literature,”

In Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, successive colonizing governments have used language and the power of words backed by military fire-power to subjugate and control the Indigenous

peoples of the land. Language has been used not only to control what we do but how we are defined. (11)

Language has been used as a tool to define Indigenous people all over the world through colonial policies. For me, because of the colonial history of Canada, as an act of reclaiming and defining my identity as a nêhiyaw woman and writer, it is vital that I use my Indigenous language. It is my way of saying, “this is who I am.”

Poetry allowed me to focus on the language I used in my writing. It allowed me to explore nêhiyawêwin and the challenges of learning to write and translate my poetry. Language, especially Indigenous language, is important to understand the culture of people. For Indigenous peoples there have been many efforts to wipe out our language, and to disconnect us from our culture.

I am a member of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation in Treaty Six Territory. While I was growing up, my grandfather was a fluent nêhiyawêwin speaker and some of my earliest memories are of him and me having conversations in nêhiyawêwin. His children attended Residential School and learned English, and now rarely speak nêhiyawêwin. After my grandfather passed away the language was not used in my home and I missed the sound. I retained some of the language in elementary school through Cree classes that taught us names of objects, numbers, and basic conversational nêhiyawêwin.

I began writing this collection of poems with the intention of translating them all into nêhiyawêwin. My experience with nêhiyawêwin literature began when I was introduced to the writing of the late Dr. Freda Ahenakew. Her children’s books

and academic-focused writing were of great influence to this project. She is also from Muskeg Lake Cree Nation and I had the opportunity to have her as my teacher at Cree Camps held annually throughout my youth.

In later years I read poetry by Louise Halfe and Gregory Scofield with Indigenous words mixed with English. Shelley Stigter describes this process as code-switching in her article “The Dialectics and Dialogics of Code-Switching in the Poetry of Gregory Scofield and Louise Halfe.” She states that by using the two languages interchangeably “[t]hrough their poetry, Scofield and Halfe relate the stories, experiences, and culture of living within ‘two worlds’” (49). Rather than using code-switching and relating to living in two worlds, I chose to do a poem completely in nêhiyawêwin, more like the children’s books that Dr. Ahenakew had written.

I had an elementary understanding of nêhiyawêwin that allowed me to use English that I knew would translate nicely in nêhiyawêwin. I understood the circular structure of the nêhiyawêwin language, and considered the English I had heard first-language nêhiyawêwin speakers use when talking to me in English. The repetition and lyrical quality of the poems comes from trying to replicate the speech of an elder who is translating nêhiyawêwin thought into English for the benefit of teaching a young person, such as myself, who doesn’t speak fluent nêhiyawêwin.

I chose to write the poems for my thesis in English first, edit them, and later to translate them into nêhiyawêwin with the assistance of an elder. Once the poems were written in English, the next part of the process was to begin translating them to nêhiyawêwin. I grew up listening to nêhiyawêwin; it wasn’t my first spoken

language, but it is the language that connects me to my family and my community.

The process of choosing an elder required that I choose someone from this territory as well, someone who would speak and be able to write with me in the correct dialect. This was important, as I knew from Dr. Ahenakew's writing that "Cree sounds differ quite dramatically from dialect to dialect, and Cree is spoken all the way from Hudson's Bay to the Rockies. Even words and sentences that sound alike may not mean the same thing to all Cree speakers" (2). I decided upon my grandmother, Gladys Wapass-Greyeyes, as she was, in fact, my nêhiyawêwin teacher all through elementary school, and continued to provide me with instruction in language and traditional teachings into my adult life.

The translation process began with a night of storytelling. "Listen. nitôhta." I was told. This is what Gladys had taught me all of my life. It has been the way that I experience words. In Richard Wagamese's article "Work with words" he describes the writing process: "[w]ords are all around us. It follows that stories are all around us too. Because I have ears I hear them. When my eyes are open I can see them. With my heart receptive I can feel them. Staying conscious and connected to the worlds means that stories come to me" (5). This is how I would describe my creative process for this collection of poems and where the poems come from.

I wanted to stay true to each language that was being used in the collection of poems. I asked that the teachings and images be translated into nêhiyawêwin true to fluently spoken nêhiyawêwin. I did not want a literal translation of the English. The translation process became a collaborative effort with nôhkom Gladys. This idea

was influenced by the work of Pablo Neruda. His poetry is translated from Spanish into English in several variations, with each language facing the other on opposite pages. My English poems are translated to a specific dialect of nêhiyawêwin. I have located the nêhiyawêwin to a specific place. It says, "This is where I am from."

A specific example of the difference between English and nêhiyawêwin is in the poem "when I die." There is no word for die in nêhiyawêwin. The title of the poem in nêhiyawêwin translates to English to mean something more like when I go on from this place. By using that title it was an opportunity to use language to place a teaching into the collection of poems.

The major influences for this thesis are the elders who have shared teachings and stories with me. One example of these personal experiences is when Gladys taught me as a child about the interdependence of all creation. She told me old stories and the legends of wesakechak. Also, during my time as a teacher, the late Simon and Alma Kytwayhat spoke about the relationships between man and woman and they touched on the concept of wâhkotowin at the Awasis Conference in Saskatoon, SK in the Spring of 2007. Likewise, Elder Danny Musqua spoke of the concept of wâhkotowin when I attended the Language Keepers Conference in November, 2008. In the fall of 2013, when Gladys and I began the translating process, she reiterated the foundational teachings of wâhkotowin to me.

wâhkotowin is a concept that carries many teachings about humans and relationships. These teachings were given to me through stories. I was taught that these teachings were not meant to be written down, and only to be shared through

the oral art of storytelling. These experiences with elders carry great weight in the theory of my craft as an Indigenous poet. By listening, I have acquired a wealth of knowledge not found in books. This is the custom of Indigenous knowledge sharing. As Marie Battiste writes, “Indigenous knowledge, including its oral modes of transmission, is a vital, integral, and significant process for Indigenous educators and scholars” (xx).

Storytelling is an integral part of nêhiyawâk culture. Stories entertain, but most importantly they are used as a tool for education. I have a teaching background, and I have always been interested in how stories can be used to teach. Lee Maracle describes the use of stories as the traditional form of education and how Indigenous poetics played a role. In her essay “Indigenous Poetry and the Oral” she writes:

because force was never used to maintain internal discipline, choice, cooperation, and individual obligations became sacred. This condition led to the development of poetry and stories whose language refused to direct the listener to answers, but rather stimulated thought in the listener on a given condition, perception, or direction. Personal response to language art was connected to the concepts of choice and tempered by the social value of cooperation. (306)

Thomas King wrote “[t]he truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (153). Gregory Scofield describes “Poems as Healing Bundles” (311) in his essay titled as such in the book *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*. I combined these two ideas in this collection of poetry. In poetry, language is used as a tool to deliver image, emotion, and sound within a narrative. For my thesis project I wanted to tell a story, my story, in my own way. By combining nêhiyawâk storytelling with poetry I found a

narrative and lyrical style of poetry to capture emotion and to create a sense that I was storytelling. I chose poetry as the genre for my project in order to explore the many layers of language and sound both in English and nêhiyawêwin. The combination of storytelling and poetry is common in Indigenous writing. Lee Maracle writes that “[p]oetics is the absence of separation between poetry, story and song; our songs are poems and they are stories; our stories are poems and they are songs and include all the oratorical art of Native peoples” (309).

This collection of poems, *nipê wânîn: askiy-iyinîsiwin acâhkowin* (my way back: land knowledge is spiritual) explores spirituality in nêhiyaw worldview, people and personal relationships, and my experience with the land. The collection is broken into three thematic sections: “acâhk” (spirit), “niya” (me), and “askiy” (land). Each section contains a series of poems that delves into the teachings shared with me by elders, parents, and grandparents. The sections have been separated based on the methodology that Margaret Kovach describes:

[w]ithin Indigenous epistemologies, there are two general forms of stories. There are stories that hold mythical elements, such as creation and teaching stories, and there are personal narratives of place, happenings, and experiences as the *kokoms* and *môsoms*... experienced them and passed them along to the next generation through oral tradition. (95)

In nêhiyawâk culture, this concept can be specifically described through the two words *âcimowin* and *âtayôhkêwin*. My father passed down this information to me. While he was teaching an IndArt class in 1974 at the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College Smith Atimoyoo described the difference between *âcimowin* and *âtayôhkêwin*. *âcimowin* is a story, like the news we share daily with our family,

friends, and acquaintances. âtayôhkêwin is a sacred story/legend. âtayôhkêwin can not be told by just anyone. These sacred stories are teaching stories and can only be told at certain times. The storyteller can only tell the story if it has been given to him/her. When I have seen these stories told there are two or three other elders listening and verifying that the story is told properly. Leonard Bloomfield describes âtayôhkêwin in his book *Sacred Stories of the Sweetgrass Cree*:

An âtayôhkêwin or sacred story is a traditional story concerning the time when the world was not yet in its present, definitive state. The actors are often the totem ancestors (I am not sure that this term is appropriate for the Plains Cree) before they took the shape of present-day animals. Or the stories are in the time when wîsahkâtsâhk was on this earth. (6)

Knowing the difference between âcimowin and âtayôhkêwin heavily influenced my decisions about how to break up the poems into sections.

I chose to place the personal narratives about myself – the section titled “niya” – between the teaching poems to show that my story is immersed within the teachings that I have learned. Three themes are braided into each poem – relationality, nêhiyaw worldview, and my experience. I didn’t set out to do this, but as I was writing it became clear to me, through the collection of poetry as a whole, I was telling my story as well as the stories that had been passed down to me. By acknowledging this aspect, it became very important to me to maintain proper protocol for the oral tradition of my culture.

A Native storyteller has a specific protocol to follow. To stay true to the skill of storytelling in my culture, and to balance that with the task of creative writing, it

was important for me to know the protocols for using the traditional teachings in my writing. Thomas King explains the basic protocols for storytelling in his book

The Truth About Stories: Native Narrative:

For Native storytellers, there is generally a proper place and time to tell a story. Some stories can be told any time. Some are only told in the winter when snow is on the ground or during certain ceremonies or at specific moments in a season. Others can only be told by particular individuals or families. (153)

In this collection I have told my story. It is the story that I own. I can tell it any time.

For this portion of the creative process I approached Gladys to ensure that proper protocol had been followed for the teachings that I studied in the poems. The teachings in the collection follow these protocols and can be told any time.

There were a few challenges in writing the poems in this thesis. One challenge I faced was how to write the teachings that I have learned into the poems without breaking protocol. As Neal McLeod explains, “[p]art of the poetic process, in an Indigenous context, is bringing the narrative power of our old stories into the present” (3). The first section of the collection titled “acâhk” and the last section titled “askiy” are where most of the old stories I have heard are braided into the narrative of the poems. I searched for a way to do this by looking at other Indigenous authors. I noticed a common aspect that Richard Wagamese, Louise Erdrich, and Thomas King used in their formula for story is a character that embarks on a personal journey learning cultural teachings by seeking them out. Although these are fiction writers, I thought about how I would adapt that concept to poetry. I decided to steer the personal journey to the reader and place cues in the poems to

guide the reader to wonder about what is behind the story. This is where my teaching background helped.

Using my teaching experience, I remembered that one of the most important skills a teacher needs to develop is how to encourage a student to ask questions. With that in mind, I wrote the poems to guide the reader or listener to have questions at the end, questions that can be answered by an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper. For example, in the poem “my way back” I write that my grandmothers love to dance in the northern sky. There is a teaching in that poem, but to respect the nêhiyawâk oral tradition and follow proper protocol I did not write the old story. I wrote a poem that showed my experience with the original story because that teaching was not to be written. A reader can ask the question, seek out the answer, and be told the old story in the proper time and place, once again leading back to the concept of choice as a form of guiding education.

This collection of poems is a story about the experiences and beliefs of an Indigenous woman, mother, student, teacher, and daughter. All of these are relationships/roles that I have had in my life. Specific themes run through the three sections – moments where people come together, moments where a separation occurs or relationship ends, along with home, affirmation, and identity. It was important for me as a poet to explore a spectrum of relationships from nurturing and empowering to more destructive kinds. The relationship concept of wâhkotowin that I was taught by elders, would translate in English as the concept that we are all related; all creation is interdependent. In this collection I explored

relationships between people, but also my relationship with the land. Some examples of poems where affirming relationships are evident are “wâhkotowin,” “nipê wânîn,” “ipon,” “discovery,” “teacher notes,” “great grandfather.” It was also important to acknowledge the darker aspects of relationships – the negative impact that some relationships have in our lives. Poems on this subject include “behind closed doors,” “don’t call me beautiful,” “the last time,” “my mother’s voice.” Elders have taught me that all relationships, positive and negative, are learning experiences. Writing about these relationships led to another challenge in the writing process.

It was difficult to tell my story without including the relationships that I have been involved in throughout my life. Our lives are connected with other people in many different relationships. Therefore, our stories are also intertwined. I needed to be respectful of the stories to which I did not hold sole ownership. The best way to deal with this difficulty was to ask permission from the people who were included in the poems. I read them the poems, asked if they would allow me to tell that part of my story, and most of them agreed. This is my way of respecting their story.

Finally, I was challenged with how to write the poem so that it was layered. I wanted the poems to be understandable for several different ages. I remembered that when I was a little girl one of the first poets I read was the late Sarain Stump. My father showed me Sarain’s book of poems. Sarain Stump has a poem with a line that says “and there is my people sleeping.” For me, as a young girl the word sleeping meant one thing, and as a woman that same word means so much more. I

wanted to be able to do that in my poems. The poems where I really tried to capture this were the poems I wrote for my children. “nikosis” (my son) has lines that are specific images such as “strength of warrior/is not in his spear/but in his outstretched hand,” and at this point in his youth my son will understand that image as kindness. But later, as a man, when he reads this poem he will understand the many layers of kindness within those images according to nêhiyawâk culture.

Many of the poems in my thesis have been influenced by personal experiences, but literary poets who have also influenced my writing craft include Gregory Scofield, Pablo Neruda, Maya Angelou, Annharte, Sarain Stump, Patrick Lane, and Jeannette Armstrong. For example, Maya Angelou’s poems about her experiences as a woman, such as “Woman Work,” the narrative style of Pablo Neruda, specifically in poems like “The Hero,” and the reflection on a relative in Gregory Scofield’s poem “Mooshom, A Sung Hero.” While poetry is the chosen genre for my project, a core group of fiction writers also influences my writing – Richard Wagamese, Louise Erdrich, and Thomas King. These fiction writers explore relationships, land, and language in ways similar to those poets I admire and respect. An example of this would be in Richard Wagamese’s *Keeper’N Me* where he creates a description of the land as a living being:

The full moon was rising in a big orange ball at the east end of the lake. It was huge. The trees looked like long fingers and I remember thinking that right at that moment the land really was alive, those fingers reaching up and trying to touch the moon. (147)

For me, their writing continues to draw me back due to the lyricism and the musical nature of language used in their descriptions of scene and characters.

Although my primary goal in this exercise was to find myself, my spirit, my voice as a poet, another possible task was to educate an audience. I wanted to develop a nêhiyawêwin language resource that was suitable for language learners – a need that I noticed while developing teacher resources during previous work experience. As I saw that possibility becoming a reality, I see it has become more than that – I must honor my story. My goal for this project has ultimately become three-fold: to tell a woman’s story – my story – to preserve nêhiyawêwin language, and to educate.

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