

KASAYAK THE WISE ONES

A COLLECTION OF STORIES

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ABSTRACT

In Cree there are two translations for “Elder.” There is *kachayak* that refers to “old people,” and there is also *kasayak* that means, “the wise ones.” This collection of stories stems from numerous interviews conducted with a selection of Saskatchewan’s First Nations Elders, the Wise Ones. Those interviews, completed over the span of a year, were done without format or agenda and in this way more so resembled conversations than formal interviews. Those conversations were recorded in accordance to traditional beliefs and the transcriptions of those conversations were then used to construct a series of stories, each with their own Elder, voice and lesson. The Elders I worked with on this project, like all Knowledge Keepers, are absolutely invaluable. Their stories are not only vital to the continuation of Indigenous traditions as a whole, but stand as testament to the inherent wisdom in culture.

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And to my family, my Kokum, Isabelle - the soul of this project, and all of the Elders who participated, *kinana'skomitina'wa'w*. Without your stories and wisdom, this project, and I, never would have been.

DEDICATION

For Frank and Isabelle and everyone who has a family of the heart.

ARTIST STATEMENT

“Kasayak: The Wise Ones” is a collection of personal narratives recounted to me by Saskatchewan First Nations Elders. Specifically, the collection consists of eight narratives which are the experiences of the following Elders: Peter Nippi of Yellow Quill First Nation, Isabelle Impey and Elsie Sanderson of Cumberland House, James Burns from James Smith Reserve and Delores Genaille of Lebret, Saskatchewan. These Elders shared their stories with me with the understanding that this project was the intended outcome. However even with that, the process was not formal or forced. Given that the Elders are extended family members and/or close friends of those, I did not envision hearing their stories as “interviews” – rather conversations that occurred mostly in kitchens and living rooms, drinking tea and laughing.

In 2004, while working as a lawyer for the Ministry of Social Services, Lori Sandstrom, my mother and Isabelle Impey, her mother-in-law, created a process now called Opikinawasowin. Opikinawasowin, which loosely translates to “the raising up of the children,” is a concept that relates to the indigenous tradition of keeping children at the centre, surrounded by grandparents, parents, elders, siblings all the way to the outside community.

Opikinawasowin, or Opiks for short, is a process that relies on the traditional teachings and practices of Indigenous culture. An Opik can be called either by the Ministry of Social Services or by the family whose children are in care of the Ministry, when they cannot reach an agreement. When an Opik is called, the Elders

Council selects four to five appropriate elders who will read the case file and history of the family and then meet with the family and the Ministry every day for five days or as long as necessary. The Council meets with everyone involved, including the children and at the end of the week, the circle is closed and the Elders provide recommendations to the court as to what should be done for the family.

In this process, the Elders do not believe in being tape recorded, but as the courts need a recording of the proceedings, an Elders' Helper is hired and required to take notes during the Opik. Since this process began, Isabelle, my step-grandmother or Kokum, has asked me and my sisters to be those Elders' Helpers. We do not read the case files or know the Ministry's history with the family, but we sit in on the process everyday and type verbatim what is said. We then sit with the Elders afterward and record their thoughts and advice for the family and compose the final recommendations that are presented to the judge in court.

As you can imagine, being a part of this process for over ten years has taught me many things. I have been a silent witness to so many stories of tragedy, struggle, oppression, loss, love, gratitude, laughter, and so much healing. It is in this process that I first was able to participate in oral tradition – although I perhaps didn't recognize it at the time. It was through my work with Opiks that I was first able to spend an extended amount of time with the Elders and hear their stories.

As Julie Cruikshank explains in her essay, "The Social Life of Texts," quite often when an indigenous person is discussing their life or life history, they tell a story – a legend or narrative that we might not associate as having to do directly

with their life. Cruikshank, who worked exclusively with indigenous elders from the Yukon territory, says that: "...it was only later when I came to see how they [the elders] were using these narratives as reference points to talk *about* their life experiences, that I was able to appreciate the complexity of what they were doing," (Murray and Rice 100).

It took me some time to realize that this kind of narration or storytelling is what was happening in Opiks. The Elders would often engage in long stories that seemed almost unrelated to the topic at hand. A family member would mention their struggles and an Elder would tell them the story of their grandfather who turned into an eagle. Someone would explain their difficulties with their baby's temperament, and an Elder would explain how she learned to bead.

Eventually I came to understand that the Elders were not explaining their traditions to educate us on their culture; they were discussing their lives, which are indefinitely and irrevocably rooted in what Neal McLeod refers to as "Cree Narrative Memory". McLeod says that "[c]ollective memory is the echo of old stories...it is what puts our singular lives into a larger context...and allows us to reshape our experiences so that we can interpret the world we find ourselves in" (McLeod 6). This is what I was unknowingly witnessing right in front of me in Opiks and recording in my notes. The Elders were relying on their collective history, the "ancient poetic memory of the ancestors" (8) as McLeod says, to help the families situate themselves in their present lives. Similarly, Kimberly Blaeser, a member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, echoes McLeod's sentiments and says that through storytelling we re-affirm our family networks and begin to understand our position in history (Murray and Rice 54).

This is what I witnessed in Opiks and what I was attempting to do for myself as well: situate myself in my family history and my present world or rather, worlds. I felt and still feel, that I have a foot in two worlds: that of my mother and father's, which is second-generation Ukrainian and third-generation Swedish, and that of my step-father's – which is Cree Métis. Through that lens, I witnessed the healing powers of culture and the unavoidable gap between the Ministry of Social Services and the First Nations families they are trying to protect. Despite any best intentions, there always seemed to be a space the Ministry could not permeate that the Elders easily sank into, an understanding and a connection that I can only regard as spiritual. It is from there this project stems – the gap between worlds, between understanding and assuming, between sharing and telling, between a system and a culture.

Acoma writer and activist, Simon Ortiz said in an interview, “A story is not only told, it is listened to” (Ortiz 365). In oral tradition, which is a pillar of Indigenous culture, every story that is told aloud seeks an audience. Without a listener, the story isn't serving its true purpose.

At the 32nd Annual Conference on Editorial Problems at the University of Toronto, it was discussed that even when the same story is told by the same person, the outcome is never exact. The intention of the story can change for the audience, the audience may interpret the story in a different way, the words can be tailored, emotion added – all these things indicate a participatory audience. Even in silence, the listener is participating in the story just by being present.

With this in mind and in order to uphold traditional practices, the Elders and I agreed not to tape-record our conversations. Instead, with the help of my sister, Emma

Smith, they were told to only the two of us and transcribed verbatim on her computer. Emma's familiarity with the Elders on a personal level and her knowledge of First Nations culture was an added benefit to the process. Not only did it put the Elders at ease to see a familiar face, it allowed me to participate in "engaged listening." Confident that Emma would accurately record what was said, I was free to indulge in the emotion of the stories, take notes on body language and tone of voice. I was able to pinpoint when a storyteller's eyes watered or hands clenched. It not only made for more detailed writing later, it allowed me to immediately engage with the stories on a much deeper level than simply hearing them.

Michael Asch explains in his work, *Aboriginal and Treaty Rights in Canada* that listening to a story entails much more than hearing the words:

We need to learn how to listen; or more precisely, to recognize that it doesn't come naturally. Listening is a learned, and a learned, skill. It comes easier to some, Aboriginal as well as non-Aboriginal, but it does *not* come naturally... Few of us would suggest that reading is the same thing as seeing. And yet we routinely operate as though listening were the same thing as hearing. (10-11).

With Emma's help, I was allowed to participate emotionally and physically in the conversations and truly listen to the stories being told in a way similar to what Jo-Anne Archibald describes in her book *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit*:

Patience and trust are essential for preparing to listen to stories. Listening involves more than just using the auditory sense. Listening encompasses visualizing the characters and their actions and letting the emotions surface. Some say we should listen with three ears: two on our head and one in our heart. (8).

An important characteristic of my project that demands explanation is that my project appears (almost entirely) in English. This is for a number of reasons, the first and

simplest being: I do not speak Cree, or Dene or Ojibwe or French and I certainly can't write in them. And I could not possibly have learned each of the Elders' languages with nearly enough proficiency to listen and record their stories accurately.

Equally, not every Elder I interviewed can speak, read and write their language. Some are very proficient in all three, some are masters of only two of those attributes, and some are only speakers of their native tongue. However, all the Elders I spoke with are masters of the English language. Regretfully, this language was learned not by choice, but by circumstance however it (thankfully) allows non-Indigenous speakers (like myself) to hear their stories. Each of the Elders I spoke with chose to converse in English and had anyone chosen to speak entirely in his or her language and requested a translator as we often do in Opiks, I would have happily met that request.

The other reason my project appears in English is a matter of accessibility. One of the things I noticed in Opik (and that the Elders shared with me as well) is the loss of language and culture in our young people. There is a lot of good being done to reestablish Indigenous culture and language into society today, however there is no doubt that as a whole, we have suffered a tremendous loss. Many native Cree speakers have lost their language over the years and many more still have never had it. It is partly to this end my project is speaking. If I hope to share these stories, these "narrative memories" with the future of our world, I need to make it accessible to them.

Cruikshank faced a similar dilemma in her quest to record Tlingit stories and says of the Elders' decision to use English:

My initial concern was...about the inevitable loss in style and form that occurs when narratives learned in an Indigenous language are recorded and transcribed in English. However...it is still the case that all Yukon Aboriginal children begin school with English as a first language. These women wanted to produce booklets that their

grandchildren could read. Their own childhood instruction came either from observation or oral instruction, but they recognized that children now learn by reading. (Murray and Rice 99.)

I know from my work in Opiks that the Elders have an innate understanding of how best to reach their intended audience. Whether it is through a choice in story or a choice in language, they use the gifts available to them to connect. They often use their own languages to convey their message but when appropriate they will use English, especially when talking to children.

I have to admit that I do think there is a disadvantage to writing these stories in English rather than their intended language. I can only imagine the scope of context and meaning that is lost in translation. Even the word, *Opikinawasowin* barely translates to English. It's much more of a concept and a belief or understanding than it is a term. That being said, I think it is important to mention that in no way did any of the Elders make me feel I was at a disadvantage for not knowing their language nor did they allow my deficiency detract from their stories. They were clearly eager to share their stories and their knowledge and I am endlessly grateful that they were able to bridge the gap in language that I was unable to cross.

I definitely had an advantage being able to speak with Elders who were first hand translators. They essentially did the work of translating themselves, which allowed their stories to remain authentically theirs. As Cruikshank says, "when narrators are in effect their own translators and retain a decisive role in the editing process, even stories narrated and recorded in English continue to be embodied" (99). The Elders are not necessarily translating these stories exactly (which would be impossible) but rather reimagining them and re-expressing them in their own words.

Given my own non-Indigenous identity, this project presented several challenges and important ethical considerations. One key challenge involves what scholars have identified as the problematic nature of transforming oral discourse into written text. According to Robert Silberman, “There is something paradoxical about the attempt to keep alive mythical, oral values through literary means” (57). And although I take some issue with his use of the term ‘mythical’ in this context, I fully understand what he’s speaking to. Kenneth Lincoln frames this as a question: “How can the translator carry Native American oral traditions – hundreds of Indigenous literatures permeated with religion, mythology, ritual, morality and heuristics, national history, social entertainment, economic skills and magic formulas, healing rites, codes of warfare and hunting and planting and food – gathering, visions and dreams, love incantations, death chants, lullabies, and prayers – into printed words in books for modern audiences?” (57-58).

The answer is simply – she cannot. There is no replacement for oral tradition, no adequate way to fully encapsulate all that comes with it, there is only sympathetic but subpar attempts at the next best thing.

As Blaeser explains in her essay “Writing voices speaking,” translation itself, particularly as it has been practiced in relation to Indigenous literatures, has come to represent a process of domination. It has tended to be the privileging of one language and culture over another (54). I was aware of the systemic bias that unjustly prioritizes the written word over oral tradition when I began this project. Throughout history, cultures have been unfairly defined and valued by the intellectual level of their written texts. This is not a perspective I agree with nor is it a belief I wish to perpetuate.

Renee Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod state in their introduction to *Aboriginal Oral*

Traditions: Theory, Practice, Ethics:

Orality is not the byproduct of an illiterate society that formerly lacked a better alternative for documenting its past. Rather, it constitutes a chosen method of communication that, even today, best represents the spiritual and social values of the Indigenous nations in the country. (4).

I firmly believe that the traditional mode of storytelling in Indigenous cultures is the preferred and most important mode; however I rely heavily on the fact that these Elders chose to speak to me in English and I have a deep desire to use the tools I have to share their stories. I share the belief that words not made public cannot serve to combat misunderstandings and ignorance in the general population. I also appreciate that indigenous writers and speakers have learned as Gerald Vizenor puts it, “to tear free from its restricting authority another language – English and ...make that language accessible to an Indian discourse” (Murray and Rice 58). With this project I only sought to give the Elders I spoke with another format, another platform to reach their people as well as those in nonindigenous circles, and to help preserve their important experiences for future generations.

Greg Sarris says in *Keeping Slug Women Alive*, “in oral discourse the context of orality covers the personal territory of those involved in the exchange, and because the territory is so wide, extending throughout two or more personal, and often cultural, worlds, no one party has access to the whole of the exchange. One party may write a story, but one party’s story is no more the whole story than a cup of water is the river.” (Murray and Rice xi).

In the realm of Indigenous literature and aboriginal writers, there is often a pushback against established literary or linguistic structures and a desire to create new ones. Blaesar states, “Native writers find themselves negotiating against the authority of

the very written tradition in which they are engaged: challenging the rules of writing, the privileging of text” (59).

However, for my project I engaged in fairly traditional literary practices while attempting to retain the emotional truth of the interviews, the integrity of the stories being shared with me, and the language used by the Elder. As someone schooled in a colonial education system, my sense of what a story is tends to follow a linear arch. Undertaking this project pushed me toward a new sense of what constitutes a story and expanded my perspective beyond typical, Eurocentric narratives.

I worked closely with the Elders on this project from May 2016 to June 2017 and quickly learned that some stories do not prioritize linearity; they're affected, they loop back and they follow the emotion of the teller. At first, I had to work against my own preconceived ideas and reject my tendency to search for a linear narrative. I found eventually, that it was more productive to simply engage in the story, listen closely and let the narrative find its way to me in whatever form the storyteller chose. With this, the Elders' stories unfolded organically through the agency of the teller, taking shape as our conversations got longer and more in depth. I entered each visit without intention or agenda and without formal questions to ask. I simply told each Elder I was there to learn and open to anything they wished to share.

The intended context I aim to place these stories is specific. I was not told these stories as an indigenous person being told my indigenous family history, so I did not feel I should write them that way. I was not researching Indigenous history and writing an academic paper, so I did not feel I should write the stories that way. I

first heard these stories as a silent, but participatory witness, through the lens of a Swedish-Ukrainian, Saskatchewan girl with a deep love and respect for Indigenous culture so that is how I wanted to write them. I then revisited the Elders as granddaughter, niece, writer, student, woman with the intention of recording the stories, and asked the Elders to tell them again. I was retold some of the same stories and was given some new ones all with the knowledge that these stories would be shared and heard by a much wider audience – and that is how I wanted to write them. I wanted to introduce readers to these wonderful people and their beautiful words.

In aboriginal storytelling, there is an understanding that the listener will have some context for these stories already. Again, referring to “narrative memory,” by the time an Indigenous person can remember a story, they will have already gained enough knowledge and references to understand that story on a much deeper level than simply the words that are given. This is why, in many cases Indigenous legends and stories are shorter, because so much is tacitly understood, less needs to be said. When less is said, the listener is compelled to participate and engage with the story to ‘fill in the blanks’ which is part of oral tradition.

This is a concept I tried to work with in my project. I understood that if my readers were to be non-indigenous people or even Indigenous people from a different group than the storyteller, some context might need to be given. That is where you will see some of my exposition, specifically regarding the history of Saskatchewan’s First Nations people and the Canadian government.

However, I did not try to insert a narrative into the Elder’s story, or come up with a traditional “beginning, middle and end” to their stories, but instead *found* a beginning,

middle and end in *our* story – the story of our interview, of my participation in their storytelling. I could in no way say my story is the full story or that even the Elder’s story is the full story, because as mentioned earlier, a transcription of oral tradition can never tap into everything that tradition holds. All stories are connected to a much larger, on going, lived and living story.

This project was a journey in learning new concepts of story and developing listening skills. As a nonfiction writer, observation is a vital part of research. For this project in particular those observation skills were used toward engaged listening. Listening is a crucial element of indigenous culture and it is through observation that many traditional practices are passed on. “In most aboriginal societies the wisdom of elder generations is highly regarded and elders are assigned major responsibility for teaching the young” (Budd et al. 23). As the student in these situations, empirical knowledge is gained through careful observation. For me, aside from academic and literary sources, the research for this project required careful observation with a focus on engaged listening.

Another key challenge of my project relates to traditional storytelling protocol. While adhering to their cultural beliefs, at times the Elders shared with me stories that could only be told in certain seasons of the year and could only be given to individuals in exchange for a spiritual offering. Some stories also included particular spirits or spirit animals that could not be discussed in detail by the teller. These stipulations meant I was ethically unable to replicate those details in my narratives. However, listening to those stories allowed for greater context in my writing and a deeper understanding of the Elders’ culture. I felt honoured to hear their sacred stories and was happy to uphold tradition and not reproduce them here.

Instead, the stories I chose (and was granted permission) to include are stories of personal experiences. The Elders shared with me details of their childhood, transformative events they experienced, relationships they learned from and lessons they collected throughout their lives. Although I heard origin stories and legends, the Elders and I decided not to include those traditional tales and instead focused on their personal lives and upbringing while still engaging in the traditional practice of storytelling.

Because of this decision, I was faced with the challenge of balancing the individual narrative experience on one hand and a larger, cultural truth on the other. Ultimately the individual narrative appears here, a direction I chose to ensure I did not cross cultural boundaries or appropriate traditional tales. It is the belief of both the Elders and myself that a larger, Indigenous cultural truth is still being honoured in this project by the process we participated in. Not only that, but by sharing their life lessons, the Elders are without a doubt engaging in their own cultures and upholding their truths. In this way they are perpetuating their traditions and participating in the history of their people.

There are a number of reasons why I think this project is important. I believe strongly in the written word, I believe in the power of writing and the importance of literature and recording and sharing our world, our thoughts, our souls by any means available to us in the pursuit of knowledge and understanding. I agree with the minds much smarter than mine, who acknowledge the practical necessity of transferring meaning from one context to another for the survival of communities, specifically First Nations communities.

These stories, recorded with all of my deficiencies, aid in the transcendence of oral literature beyond the Elders' immediate lifetime. Two of the Elders I spoke with asked if I would return and record all their stories so they can pass them on before they go.

Unfortunately, in today's society there are not as many opportunities to engage in oral tradition and for these stories to be shared. If my project in anyway helps a story survive, then I would say the risks of sharing are less dangerous than the risks of losing a story forever.

Language is also becoming more and more of a barrier, and English can help keep these stories alive. Admittedly, it is a subpar solution, but a solution nonetheless. I believe that stories need to be conveyed, in all sorts of ways to all sorts of audiences and the written word is just one more way to tell stories and make them a part of a larger social context. Because of its format and use of the English language, my project is stylistically accessible to the general public.

I've heard that authors have two options available to them to get their message across to readers: to make their readers uncomfortable so that they must consciously engage with what they're reading, or make their readers comfortable so that they may enjoy what they're reading and absorb it. I think my project might do both to different readers, but in either case the content of these stories is not secretive or esoteric but meant to be shared and I am happy to provide a vehicle for that.

Nora Marks Dauenhauer and Richard Dauenhauer say of their extensive work with the Tlingit culture that the rewards are spiritual and the motivation may be as well (Murray and Rice 34). I would have to agree with that. Spirituality in all its forms was constantly present while I worked on this project and it's ramifications undeniable.

In July of 2016, at the last full Opik I participated in, the Elders and I were meeting with a family and social services in Melfort, Saskatchewan. On the last day of our circle, Isabelle collapsed. Her heart stopped beating and she slid out of her chair and on to the floor. I immediately called 911 and during what I will forever remember as one of the worst moments of my life, I was instructed to perform CPR and was unable to. Luckily, Elder Robert was there and as a retired RCMP officer, he stepped in and kept Isabelle's heart beating.

Isabelle was air lifted to the Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon where she slipped into a coma. I was asked repeatedly by the doctors how long she had been unconscious, how long had Robert performed CPR, how many minutes went by without oxygen reaching her brain. For the first time in my life, my memory failed me and I could not remember.

One night, while Isabelle was still in a coma at the hospital, she visited me in a dream. When I woke the next morning I was told to take my dream to our Medicine Man and tell him what I had seen. And although we disagreed on what the dream was trying to say, the medicine man never questioned that Isabelle had visited me, he never doubted the validity of my experience and he never made me feel as if I was overstepping. Thankfully, the dream came true and Isabelle returned to us, as healthy and as sharp as ever. To be so accepted and loved by a culture that I do not share by blood is not a testament to me, but a testament to the Elders, their spirituality and their well-earned role as "the wise ones".

The role of the Elders in this entire process cannot be overstated. They are not only the source of this project they are the authority as well. It was vital to the authenticity of my work that the Elders were consistently involved, from the initial

interview, to follow up questions and detail clarification, to reviewing their stories, editing and approving the final version, there was no step in which the associated Elder was not involved and fully aware of how their story was progressing. As Hulan and Eigenbrod explain, “Until interviewees take on a more active role as editors and publishers of their transcribed recollections, they will remain ‘authors and not authorities’ of their own textual production” (12). It was my intention, as much as possible, to ensure the Elders were the authorities of their textual production.

This experience and the difficult navigation it required, fostered my own personal growth both as a nonfiction writer and as a nonindigenous person happily surrounded by indigenous culture and family. As most artists would surely agree, I am a decidedly different person upon completing this project than I was starting it. I am more experienced, more aware, my understanding of culture and writing culturally specific stories has expanded and my drive and commitment to this path, this mode of storytelling has strengthened. And, perhaps, after all of this time spent with the Wise Ones, I am a little wiser too.

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