pêyâhtik (giving something great thought; to walk softly):

Reading Bilingual nêhiyaw-English Poetry

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how nêhiyaw itwêwina (*Plains Cree words* or *sayings*) serve as anchors of meaning, word bundles, and teachers within the context of bilingual nêhiyaw-English poetry. As a non-Indigenous scholar, I address the questions "What do the nêhiyaw words and phrases embedded in the poetry of Louise Halfe, Gregory Scofield, and Naomi McIlwraith teach readers?" and "Given the context of linguicide and colonial violence in Canada, how might scholars engage with these words and works of literature in a respectful, careful, and thoughtful manner?" My methodology is guided by nêhiyaw laws and teachings, such as miyo-wîcêhtowin (*the law governing good relations*), tâtapahcimok (*the imperative to speak in a humble manner*), and manâcihitok (*the command to be respectful or civil to each other*); guided by these principles, my research includes language learning and mentorship, interviews with the authors, personal reflection, and close reading of the texts.

I have found that the bilingual nature of these poems brings the current struggle to reclaim, relearn, and revitalize Indigenous languages in Canada to the forefront—indeed many of these poems poignantly articulate the enormous weight of these labours. These authors are honouring the language and supporting language learners by using the language in their poetry. At the same time, this dissertation emphasizes that scholars, particularly non-Indigenous scholars, must be careful to discern what *not* to share. My work demonstrates the value of knowing when to remain silent, learning how to listen, and sensing what should remain private—what should remain in the community—and what can be appropriately shared. Finally—at the heart of this work—my findings confirm that the nêhiyaw itwêwina these authors have carefully woven into their poems are indeed profoundly important for understanding the layered meanings of these texts. Not only are there layers of meaning packed into the grammar and morphology of

these words and phrases, but they are also tied to ceremonies, stories, histories, and to other nêhiyaw words and concepts. Without spending time with these words and with nêhiyaw teachers, readers will miss much of the wisdom, beauty, and teachings that these words—and therefore these texts—have to offer.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Angela Van Essen. The research project, of which this thesis is a part, received research ethics approval from the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board, Project Name "Interviews with nêhiyaw Poets," No. Pro00058179, October 27, 2015. I published an earlier draft of parts of Chapter 3 in a short essay entitled "kistêyihtamowin êkwa sâkihitowin: Honour and Love in Gregory Scofield's Poetry," which appears in *Ten Canadian Writers in Context,* 2016. I also published parts of Chapter 4 in an article entitled "Bending, Turning, and Growing: Cree Language, Laws, and Ceremony in Louise B. Halfe/Sky Dancer's *The Crooked Good,*" which appears in *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, vol 30 (Spring 2018) 71-93. The copyrights for all aspects of Cree traditional knowledge, including oral narratives and language, remain with Cree peoples.

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This work would not have been possible without the support and guidance of so many. Thank you, Dan, for supporting me and encouraging me on every step of this long journey. Thank you for listening to me carry on about nêhiyaw grammar, for holding space for my struggles, and for working hard to support our family. Thank you, David, for bringing so much joy into our lives and for teaching us how to love. Thank you to my parents for steadfast support, including countless hours of childcare. Thank you to my siblings, Carolyn and Steve, and to all of my extended family—the Van Essens, the Stoltes, the Van Belles, and all of the Anemas.

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I am deeply grateful to all of the nêhiyawêwin teachers and storytellers I have had the privilege of learning from in classes in Edmonton, Enoch, and Winnipeg, including Louis Bird, Kenneth Paupanekis, Tomson Highway, Neal McLeod, and Jerry Saddleback. I am particularly indebted to Dorothy Thunder and Reuben Quinn for teaching me so much. kinanâskomitinâwâw.

Thank you to each of the authors who took the time to meet with me for conversational interviews, and for sharing your words, stories, and wisdom with the world through your poetry. Louise, Gregory, and Naomi—each one of you has taught me so much, and I am grateful for all you have shown me, and for all you have shared.

Thank you to all of the amazing students I have met over the years, particularly the group of social work students who took English 100 with me at Maskwacîs Cultural College. Thank you for asking difficult questions, for taking risks in your writing, and for allowing me to learn from you. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to read nêhiyaw literature in nêhiyânâhk—in Plains Cree territory.

Special thanks to my supervisor, Keavy Martin, for guiding me along the way over the past eight years. Thank you for reading my work with care, for your challenging and insightful feedback, and for allowing me to ask difficult questions. Thank you to Christine Stewart and Dwayne Donald for challenging me to do this work in a good way.

Thank you finally to the Creator. May I continue to follow your guidance, to learn how to live in this world, and to honour all of my relations.

hay hay, kinanâskomitinâwâw kahkiyaw.

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Introduction: Approaching nêhiyaw-English Poetry in the Context of Ongoing Linguicide

A Note on Orthography

When writing in nêhiyawêwin (*the Plains Cree language*), I do not capitalize any letters. Not using capital letters is a convention of SRO—Standard Roman Orthography, as outlined in *How to Spell it in Cree (The Standard Roman Orthography)*—that has been developed by Plains Cree educators (including Freda Ahenakew, Jean Okimâsis, Ida McLeod, and Arok Wolvengrey, among others) and adopted by authors (including the authors featured in this dissertation), and I follow in their footsteps. There are many reasons for not using capital letters when writing in nêhiyawêwin. For example, in a Facebook discussion, Wolvengrey asserts that "Elders have spoken in favor of the lack of capitalization since it can imply hierarchicalization while its lack implies egalitarianism." In *How to Spell it in Cree*, he also reminds language learners that "the English conventions of capitalization are neither universal nor essential" (5). In the Facebook discussion, he suggests that refusing to follow the English language's rules for capitalization when writing in Cree decolonizes the language. I also do not italicize Cree words (unless I am directly quoting a source that does), and I make this choice for similar reasons. Although many bilingual Cree texts (including *The Crooked Good* and *kiyâm*) italicize Cree words, Gregory Scofield and Neal McLeod (and others) are moving away from this. In his Cree literature class, Neal McLeod[1] told me not to italicize the Cree words in my writing—on a poetic level, he suggested that by not italicizing these words, you force the reader to experience how these words interact with the words around them. In a similar vein, nêhiyaw Métis and Caribbean scholar

[1] Please note that I am concerned about the fact that Neal McLeod was charged with (and pleaded guilty to) assault against his former fiancée, Tasha Beeds. I am also aware of the controversy that followed regarding the *kisiskâciwan* anthology. For more on how I am navigating this complex situation, readers may choose to read the Un-chapter (or Afterword) that follows the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

Tasha Beeds explains, "it is my position that nêhiyawêwin must be placed beside English in an equal position. I am using English as a means of discourse; however, I am placing nêhiyaw language within this text as a theoretical and living space—a space where words carry spiritual power and a space that I call home" (138). In our interview, Gregory Scofield explained how his bilingual work

> went from originally the phonetics of the word and glossary, to the words being italicized, to a translation at the bottom of the page, to now where the word is not italicized—it is completely embedded into the English text of the poem—and there is an italicized translation on the right hand of the page so the reader has access to that translation, or more so that concept…. So lots of us are looking at that Roman Orthography as a way in which to present the language, and what I'm very happy about is that the language no longer feels like it's being othered—it's being embedded—and it's forcing the English speaker—the English reader—to not just skip across that word. They have to read it. They have to engage with that word. (Interview)

For Scofield, this is the best way he's been able to approach some of the tangled issues surrounding orthography, translation, and glossing (Interview). In my own experience as a writer, I once had an editor tell me that "conventionally we italicize words and phrases in foreign languages." Māori scholar and poet Alice Te Punga Somerville draws attention to this "publishing convention of italicizing words from other languages" in her poem, "Kupu rere kē." where she considers how italicization seems to sanction readerly ignorance:

> *Every potential reader is reassured*
> *that although obviously you're expected to understand the rest of the text,*
> *it's fine to consult a dictionary or native speaker for help with the italics.*

She goes on to suggest that by not italicizing foreign words (and at this point in the poem I interpret "foreign words" to refer to *English* words), authors and publishers create spaces where these words appear to belong—pages where they no longer seem "out of place":

> *When the foreign words are camouflaged in plain type*
> *you can forget how they came to be there, out of place, in the first place.*

She closes her poem by ironically following the publisher's advice by including one non-italicized Māori word, to remind readers which language is Indigenous, and which language is foreign:

> *I have been thinking about this advice and I have decided to follow it.*
>
> *Now all of my readers will be able to remember which words truly belong in* Aotearoa *and which do not.*

Following Scofield's and Te Punga Somerville's examples, I signal that I see *English* as a foreign language on Turtle Island generally, and in Plains Cree territory in Canada more specifically (especially in relation to nêhiyaw literature) by refusing to italicize nêhiyaw itwêwina (*Cree words*, or more literally, *Cree sayings*) in my own writing.[2] Indeed, to emphasize the relatively recent history of English in this land that is now called Canada, and to draw attention to the gap in meaning between the two languages, I choose to italicize the bracketed English translation.[3] Finally, there are slight differences in Standard Roman Orthography among

[2] Not everyone will agree with this choice. In personal communication, Wolvengrey tells me,

> I am of course in complete agreement about capitalization, but I disagree with Neal on the point of italicization. I understand his arguments, but I simply disagree: it is not "marking it as a foreign language" so much as it adheres to "the use of italicization to mark words in languages other than the main language of the article." As you are writing in English, all words in any language other than English get italicized. The reasons for this are, in my opinion, the exact opposite of what Neal argues. While italicization does indeed set the words apart, this is deliberate in order to highlight the very different spelling standard that is in play here. The Italicization says: "this is NOT English and don't you dare bloody treat it as such." For this reason, if someone insists on spelling *nêhiyaw* as "Nehiyaw", that I will not italicize since it is adhering to English standards (with its capital N—and , I would add, the failure to mark the long ê). If, on the other hand, one wishes to honour the Cree spelling system inside an English text, italicization marks this. The opposite is true in a Cree text: Cree is in normal print and English gets italicized with all its standards ... unless people Cree-ize the word and then write it as such. It is, I suppose, as Neal believes, a way to set the languages apart, but this is a good thing contrary to his view. I have no interest in treating Cree on an equal footing with English. Cree is far superior. (Personal communication April 12, 2017. Cited with permission).

[3] hay hay (*thanks*) to Brittany Johnson for bringing this idea up in conversation. Note that other authors have made this choice too—see Scofield's recent poetry as well as Winona Stevenson's article "Calling Badger and the Symbols of the Spirit Language: The Cree Origins of the Syllabic System" for examples of

Plains Cree writers: some use macrons over long vowels (ā, ē, ī, ō), while others use a circumflex (ê, â, î, ô): they are equivalent. Additionally, some writers mark the long *e* while others do not; however, readers will notice that Louise Halfe and Naomi McIlwraith consistently mark their *e*'s as long. I will follow their lead in this dissertation and use circumflexes on my long vowels and mark the long *e*'s.

At times in this dissertation I also use ᐊᑕᐯᐦᑲᓇᐦ[4] (atakipeyihkanah; *spirit markers* or *syllabics*). I am indebted to Dorothy Thunder, Jerry Saddleback, and especially Reuben Quinn for teaching me how to read and write in ᐊᑕᐯᐦᑲᓇᐦ, and for sharing some of the oral stories and teachings that go along with them. Some Elders say that some things can be written in ᐊᑕᐯᐦᑲᓇᐦ, but not in Roman Orthography—they suggest that this writing system is more sacred, and that it offers protection to sacred words and teachings, which may be lost when written in Roman Orthography. As a non-Indigenous scholar and language learner, I struggle to understand and explain this properly:[5] in short, as Winona Stevenson makes clear to her readers,

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authors who have decided to italicize the English translations of nêhiyaw itwêwina. Already in 2006 Deanna Reder noted how several Cree scholars "have begun keeping Cree words in regular font and italicizing the English translation" ("Understanding Cree Protocol in the Shifting Passages of 'Old Keyam'" 63).

[4] This is the way Reuben Quinn (a Cree language teacher and ceremonial lodge keeper from onihcikiskwapiwinihk, Saddle Lake) spells and teaches this word; it is not in Wolvengrey's dictionary, nor could I locate it in the *alperta ohci kehtehayak nehiyaw otwestamakewasinahikan* or in the Watkins-Faries dictionary (those first two sources do include a diminutive form of the word: *cahkipehikan*). I mention this because I had at one point spelled it ᐊᐦᑕᐦᑭᐯᐦᐃᑲᓇ because I had been taught that the nêhiyaw itwêwin for "soul" or "spirit" was spelled ahcahk (see Wolvengrey's entry), so I applied my knowledge of this spelling, along with the diminutive form, to the way I remembered Reuben saying the word. However, upon review of my work, Reuben pointed out this discrepancy, and I have chosen to use his spelling.

[5] There are oral stories that explain why many consider writing in spirit markers (or syllabics) more sacred, but those stories are not for me to tell. I have heard Jerry Saddleback, Carl Quinn, Reuben Quinn, and Neal McLeod tell versions of the mistanaskowêw narrative, and there are a few published versions (see footnote 6).

mistanaskowêw[6] “died and returned to life with the gift of writing from the Spirit World” (“Calling Badger” 20).[7] This assertion is at odds with written non-Indigenous accounts. Stevenson explains: “[t]he origins of the Cree syllabary has long been credited to the ingenuity of the Rev. James Evans of the Wesleyan Methodist church” (19). She goes on to argue that the colonial tendency to “ignore or disbelieve” (24) Indigenous oral accounts is the main reason this “great Canadian myth has endured for over 160 years virtually unchallenged” (20). Working with the archived 1934 field notes of David Mandelbaum’s interviews with nêhiyaw leader Fine Day, researcher Adolf Hungry Wolf recounts:

> [w]hen Badger Call was given the characters he was told, “They will change the writing and will believe that the writing belongs to them, but only those who know Cree will be able to read it.” So it is that no one can read the syllabic writing unless he knows Cree, and so the writing does not belong to the whites. (58)

I have chosen to write some things in ᐊᑕᑭᐯᓯᐦᑲᓇᐦ for several reasons. First, I wish to signal that this writing system, and the language it holds, belongs to nêhiyawak, and not to môniyâwak (*white people*). The presence of ᐊᑕᑭᐯᓯᐦᑲᓇᐦ in this dissertation can remind readers of the historical and ongoing tensions between European written history and nêhiyaw oral history, and of early and more current colonial desires to claim ownership of Indigenous knowledge. At the same time, ᐊᑕᑭᐯᓯᐦᑲᓇᐦ remind readers that these are spirit markers, and that the language is

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[6] Sometimes this name is translated as “Calling Badger.” See Hungry Wolf/Fine Day and Stevenson’s work for examples of published versions. Note that this oral story, like many nêhiyaw narratives, has nested, or layered versions. The versions that have been made available in print are short introductory versions.

[7] In his class, Neal McLeod suggested that syllabics are kâ-miyikowisiyâhk—“what the Powers, including the Great Spirit and all of the ancestral spirits, grandfathers and grandmothers, have supplied” for us (*Cree Narrative* 45). Although McLeod writes about kâ-miyikowisiyâhk in the context of Treaty in *Cree Narrative Memory*, the connection he made in class, between nêhiyawêwin êkwa nêhiyawasinahikê (*Cree writing* or *syllabics*—Neal’s term) is interesting, not only because it is rooted in oral history, but also because this phrase, kâ-miyikowisiyâhk, for me, brings to mind nêhiyawak connections to the land *and* to language, and how both are understood as gifts from the Creator.

deeply connected to sacred stories, teachings, and beings. Therefore, if I was taught specific nêhiyaw itwêwina using this writing system, and if they seem to fit in the realm of sacred laws or teachings, I have chosen to keep those words written in that way. Yet even as I write this, I remember Louise Halfe and Reuben Quinn reminding me that everything is sacred—so perhaps all of the nêhiyaw itwêwina should be written in syllabics! However, I realize that ᐊᑕᑭᐯᓯᐦᑲᓇᐦ may not be accessible to all readers. It is my intention to use them in a way that might honour the words, the sounds, and the teachers who share them.

pêyâhtik

pêyâhtik: quietly, softly, slowly, carefully[8]. Métis poet Gregory Scofield glosses this word by suggesting it means "to give something great thought, to walk softly" (*Love Medicine* 74). In his poem "Old Time Medicine, 2" he writes,

> aya kayâs,
> things were done thoughtfully
> like a word, pêyahtihk
> said with great care
> so as not to offend
> the listener (73)[9]

His words here point to an approach to work, to writing, and to speaking that has important implications for scholars of Indigenous literatures as we discuss, analyze, write about, and teach these poems, stories, novels, plays and other forms of narrative. Yet this word—its directions and teachings—may be at odds with traditional western approaches to research. As Mohawk scholar Dawn Hill explains (in an interview with Kathleen Absolon), "I have been raised to be humble and respectful. Academia urges me to be 'critical' and, therefore, disrespectful" (quoted in *Kaandossiwin* 112). In a similar vein, Lorraine Mayer talks about how "living in the philosophical world of dominating abstraction made it difficult for me to articulate Swampy Cree philosophy in the way I thought would be appropriate and respectful" ("Negotiating a Different Terrain" 102). nêhiyaw-Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach takes an in-depth look at the

[8] These are the translations that Wolvengrey's dictionary offers.

[9] Scofield's spelling of the word here is not standard, but is closer to the way the word is spelled in *alperta ohci kehtehayak nehiyaw otwestamâkewasinahikan / Alberta Elder's Cree Dictionary* where it is spelled peyahtik. As noted, when writers write Cree in Roman Orthography, some mark the *e* as long, while others do not. Some suggest that because all *e's* are long in Cree, none should be marked. Others argue that all *e*'s should be marked as long. You can see this difference at play when you compare the spelling of Cree words in the *AECD* to those of Wolvengrey's. The *h* before the *k* in Scofield's spelling strikes me as unusual but may reflect a more Northern or Métis accent.

tensions between Indigenous epistemologies and Western approaches to knowledge and how these underpin scholarly approaches to research. She writes,

> The deeper that I submerge myself into tribal knowledge systems, the more I resist Western ways of knowing as a given for *all* academic research, even though I know that this demands a long swim against a strong current…. My concern is not about organizing knowledge, for Cree society is quite adept at this, but rather it is the worldview, the epistemological underpinnings of this organization with which I grapple. (55)

As settler scholar Keavy Martin emphasizes, "The moments when elders' instructions or community-based practices are at odds with academic norms must be attended to with care, lest we replicate the dismissive practices of the past (and miss something important)" ("The Rhetoric of Silence" 154). Along with these scholars who struggle to articulate Indigenous research practices within western academic contexts,[10] as well as the scholars who are seeking to understand and exercise responsible, respectful, and reciprocal research practices in mainstream academic North American institutions,[11] I wonder, what does it mean for a literary critic to write and to do research with great care? Anishinaabe artist and scholar Jill Carter raises a similar question, challenging researchers to ask: "Do we regard our own work as a sacred trust? Do we handle each story with which we engage gently, as we would a vessel that contains the life and

[10] See also Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony* and Gregory Younging's *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples* for more on Indigenous research practices. As Deanna Reder (co-editor of *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures*) makes clear, the implications of Indigenous research practices on Indigenous literary scholarship are potentially drastic and far-reaching, "completely changing how we train students, conduct our research, and choose research topics" ("Introduction: Position" 16).

[11] For more on this, see the critical work included in *Learn, Teach, Challenge: Approaching Indigenous Literatures,* particularly the entries featured in the section entitled "Deliberating Indigenous Literary Approaches" where, as Natalie Knight explains, scholars approach crucial questions such as "What is the relationship between an ethics of reading and writing and a politics of engaging with community? How do we, as Indigenous or non-Indigenous scholars, "'present ourselves' to our communities as whole persons" (Womack, *Red on Red* 20) within the economic, political, social, and spiritual realities of contemporary settler colonialism? How is our art and criticism accountable, and to whom? And what are some methodologies that do justice to living relationships, history, *and* the future?" (222).

essence of a people?" (555). Natalie Knight sees similar questions raised in both Leanne Simpson's and Kimberly Blaeser's work:

> "Aanjigone," [a concept Simpson introduces] expresses the need to take care and to exercise caution when making judgements, passing criticism, and deciding to change. Aanjigone supports individuals and groups to consider all the effects of a decision, from the most local to the more distant, and to consider ways of "offering criticism" of work or an idea that creates something new rather than setting out to undercut someone's words or actions that have already taken place. Remembering Blaeser's suggestion, in "Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Centre," that Indigenous literary criticism does not need to empty out a text and display its guts and flaws, Simpson's retelling of the Nishnaabeg concept of "Aanjigone" might speak towards Blaeser's desire for "emerging critical language[s that] need not or should not have to base [their] existence or integrity on an oppositional relationship (Armstrong 235). ("Introduction: Deliberating Indigenous Literary Approaches" 227)

In this context I wonder, how can this word, pêyâhtik, teach us something about Indigenous literary studies? The *alperta ohci kehtehayak nehiyaw otwestamâkewasinahikan / Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary* suggests that pêyâhtik can be understood in English as meaning "carefully; with caution, very gently, very slowly; to be cautious." In a similar vein, Métis poet Rita Bouvier writes about papîyâhtak[12] in her 2004 poetry collection, suggesting that it means "to act in a thoughtful way, / a respectful way, / a joyful way, / a balanced way" (8). My aim in this dissertation is to bring all of these nuances connected to pêyâhtik to bear on my approach to reading bilingual nêhiyaw-English literature.

pêyâhtik came to me as an anchoring word for this dissertation in conversation with Gregory Scofield: after I recorded a conversational interview with him, he reminded me again of this word, *pêyâhtik*, and its importance and its potential to teach scholars of Indigenous literatures. We had ended our interview by discussing his poem "The Dissertation" and

[12] Her spelling reflects a more northern Plains Cree or Métis accent, where the *e* becomes a long *î.* In addition, the pa- is a reduplicative, which adds additional meaning to the word so that it becomes a habitual or continuous action, in this case the practice of behaving in this manner.

pondering what that poem might teach scholars of Indigenous literatures. In the interview I asked him what advice he would give to scholars, particularly us non-Indigenous folks who want to be more accountable or ethical in working with Indigenous literatures. He suggested:

> Approaching Indigenous works is not like approaching Emily Dickenson, it's not like approaching the classics, it's not like approaching Shakespeare. Yes there are traumas, yes there are all of these other things but because so much Indigenous literature is autobiographical, and because it is so rooted in community, whether it is a fictional community or not, the one common thread that is running through a lot of those narratives is trauma. So I think scholars, especially scholars that are looking at Indigenous works, have a responsibility. They have an ethical and a moral responsibility to approach those works and to approach those artists from a respectful and honouring place.

Carter explains it this way: "While our contemporary settler-allies may not be responsible for the dis-ease itself, they are responsible for understanding where it comes from and how it is manifested. And they are responsible for the choices they make, the words they utter, and the behaviours they enact once they have that knowledge" (559). Part of writing from a place of care, caution, deep thought, and great gentleness—part of heeding the warning or the advice that pêyâhtik offers—means being mindful of the lived experiences and ongoing trauma that threads through the Indigenous literature we study. This word, *pêyâhtik*, is in fact deeply connected to trauma: nêhiyawêwin teacher Reuben Quinn suggests that pêyâhtik is connected to pêyâhtikiyiniwak, a nation of people whose name can be translated as "the easy going people."[13] He suggests that this nation, whose name today has been shortened and Anglicized and is now known as the Beothuk, was linguistically and culturally connected to Cree[14] people.[15] [16] Since

[13] Cree language class, March 31, 2014

[14] I generally avoid using the term "Cree" because, as Reuben Quinn has pointed out, this word comes from the French newcomers, and their perception of the people they met. Where appropriate, I aim to use the term "nêhiyaw" (singular) or nêhiyawak (plural) to refer to Plains Cree people and concepts. Note that the term nêhiyaw is specific to Plains Cree, and would be inappropriate when referring to, for example, Omushkegowak (Swampy Cree). "Cree" is a broad term, and because it includes speakers of all dialects, I occasionally use this term when appropriate. Additionally, many scholars, authors, and

little is known about the Beothuk[17] (prior to European contact) this word, *pêyâhtikiyiniwak*, points to a history, a language, a body of narratives, and a web of kinship relations that have been largely killed off, and human lives and connections to the land that have been severed.[18] The various glosses and translations of the word *pêyâhtik* are linked to the pêyâhtikiyiniwak and their experience of physical, linguistic, and historical violence.[19] Bundled together, the word

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teachers use the term "Cree" so I will also use the word when quoting their ideas, and when it fits in the discussion of their work.

[15] Indeed, if I look closely at the word *Beothuk*, I can see how it might be linked to pêyâhtik, and to the closely related form of the word, pêyâhtak, which Wolvengrey's dictionary translates as "quietly, slowly; s/he takes it easy." Since there is no "B" in the Standard Roman Orthography of Cree, and the pê (ᐯ) sound is neither the plosive /p/ nor the voiceless bilabial /b/ but a sound that is distinct to Cree (Reuben Quinn suggests that when speakers make this Cree sound, the lips are more tense than they would be when making a similar English sound), the word *Beothuk,* if transliterated into SRO, would look very much like the word pêyâhtak, especially if the "th" is pronounced as a 't', in keeping with the way some people pronounce the word today.

[16] For years linguists have debated whether or not the Beothuk language is related to or part of the Algonkian language family. See John Hewson's article "Beothuk and Algonkian: Evidence Old and New" for a succinct overview of this debate. Since so little is known about this language (there are no speakers, and the documents that gloss lists of words [approximately 200-400 words] are dubious and sometimes contradictory) it may be impossible to tell. The existence of this nêhiyaw word, *pêyâhtikiyiniwak,* suggests to me that, at the very least, the Plains Cree people had some sort of relationship with and knowledge of these people. The word, and Reuben's teaching of it, implies both a linguistic and blood kinship.

[17] J. Edward Chamberlin warns against looking at this history through a simple lens of erasure and loss, suggesting a more nuanced approach that recognizes

> the later interactions between the Beothuk and Mi'kmaq and Innu traders and travelers—both friendly and not so friendly, as has been the way of peoples forever—[and that these] would have strained and strengthened Beothuk culture in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, ways that are contested by those dedicated to the purity of race or ethnicity but offer a new way of understanding Beothuk history and of recuperating the heritage of Beothuk people. ("Coda: The Recovery of Indigenous Identity" 359)

[18] If you wish to read about some of the oral accounts of violence that remain in human oral history, see John Harries's chapter "A Beothuk skeleton (not) in a glass case: rumours of bones and the remembrance of an exterminated people in Newfoundland – the emotive immateriality of human remains" in *Human remains in society: Curation and exhibition in the aftermath of genocide and mass-violence.*

[19] An earlier draft included the word *extinction*; however it has come to my attention that this is not an accurate term. In a 2013 National Post article, Chief Mi'sel Joe of the Miawpukek First Nation told the reporter that "Mi'kmaq oral history hold that as white incomers tightened their control of the Atlantic island, the Beothuk fled to the mainland and integrated with neighbouring groups." In a recently published interview, he goes on to say that the idea of the Beothuk extinction is the "biggest myth" that

pêyâhtik takes on connotations that at once point to a moral imperative to be careful and to walk softly, and at the same time starkly remind us of a horrific example of genocide, where relations were not imbued with care, gentleness, or caution.

Linguicide

While many Canadians might feel regret, guilt, or fascination with the idea of an "extinct" people and a "lost" language,[20] it is more difficult to confront the fact that Canada has committed linguistic genocide against every other Indigenous nation in Canada, and their *present* attitudes and policies towards those Indigenous languages that persist[21] is a continuation of this process of linguistic genocide. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, a linguist who has advocated for Indigenous language rights for over fifty years, identifies linguistic genocide as the process of "killing a language without killing the speakers" (*Linguistic Genocide in Education* 312). In Canada, this process began with the implementation of the Indian residential school system.[22] As

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has "ever been played in Newfoundand, and [it] is still being played" ("Beothuk and Mi'kmaq: An Interview with Chief Mi'sel Joe" 124).

[20] In his research with Newfoundland residents who, as children, had visited local museums that displayed Beothuk artifacts and human remains, Harries found that most interviewees recalled feeling fascination—feelings of guilt were reported to be felt later, as adults (238).

[21] Along with the Beothuk language, linguist Lyle Campbell says "many [Indigenous North American languages] have become extinct since European contact; many more are currently obsolescent and will certainly cease to be spoken in the near future" (4). The 2011 Candadian census reported that there were 83,475 mother-tongue speakers of Cree languages (this number includes all five main dialects). Although some might argue that this number indicates (relative) language health, I would argue that all of the remaining Indigenous languages in Canada, including Cree dialects, are threatened. As Cree language activist Lorena Fontaine points out, "Unless we do something in this generation—the generation of my daughter—the languages will die" ("Undoing Linguicide: The legal right to the survival of Indigenous languages").

[22] At first these schools did not always directly attack Indigenous languages: as Louis Bird (and other historians) point out, in the beginning many early church-run institutions tried to convert Indigenous people through their own languages. For example students at Ste Anne's residential school in Fort Albany, Ontario, initially "learned to read and write in Cree syllabics using catechism books prepared by Roman Catholic Oblate missionaries" (Fulford and Bird 293). However, Dakota scholar Waziyatawin Angela Wilson maintains, "By assuming control over the written language, missionaries were able to

McLeod explains, a central manifestation of the process of spiritual exile for Indigenous people in Canada was "the residential school system, which was established as a way of 'educating' and assimilating Indigenous people….Children were taken from their homes and communities. Instead of being taught by their old people, they were taught in an alien environment that attempted to strip them of their dignity. The process amounted to cultural genocide" (*Cree Narrative* 58). The TRC's final report explains that cultural genocide

> is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group. States that engage in cultural genocide set out to destroy the political and social institutions of the targeted group. Land is seized, and populations are forcibly transferred and their movement is restricted. Languages are banned. Spiritual leaders are persecuted, spiritual practices are forbidden, and objects of spiritual value are confiscated and destroyed. And, most significantly to the issue at hand, families are disrupted to prevent the transmission of cultural values and identity from one generation to the next.
>
> In its dealing with Aboriginal people, Canada did all these things. ("What We Have Learned" 5)

Cree poet Rosanna Deerchild depicts the violence of this process starkly in her poem, "the trapline":

> indians drink cheap sherry
> lysol mouthwash
> slur stories about loss
> in residential school
> a priest a nun dug out
> all their beautiful
> with finger penis tongue
> left nothing but black and blue
> broken bones broken
> cree dene ojibwe (18)

In her chapter "Double Consciousness and Nehiyawak (Cree) Perspectives: Reclaiming Indigenous Women's Knowledge," nêhiyaw-Métis scholar Shalene Jobin emphasizes that "[a]n essential element in this strategy [of assimilation] was the erasure of language" (42). She goes on

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appropriate Dakota words and assign new meanings, which served to linguistically internalize for Dakota people the missionaries' racist and ethnocentric attitudes" (53).

to say that the "goal was to produce subjects so thoroughly alienated from their original language and society that the society would eventually cease to exist" (43). In these schools, children were routinely punished for speaking their languages. Indigenous language rights advocate Lorena Fontaine recounts how her grandfather "was punished every time he spoke Cree. He said that the person administering the strap would say, 'Thou shalt not speak Cree' with each strap. Normally he was strapped at least 21 times followed by 21 statements of, 'Thou shalt not speak Cree'" ("Re-conceptualizing" 312). Referring to the brutality of American federal government and church-run boarding schools, Waziyatawin Angela Wilson declares, "It was with extreme violence that our languages were silenced" (53-54).

From our current position in the early twenty-first century, we can now clearly see that "[t]hrough much of the twentieth century, misguided monological policies contributed to the diminished use, serious endangerment and even complete loss of many Indigenous languages" (Wolvengrey, "Forward" vii). Today, particularly in the wake of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, we might think that Canada is no longer interested in implementing linguicide. As Maliseet scholar and language rights advocate Andrea Bear Nicholas points out in her article, "Linguicide, the Killing of Languages, and the Case for Immersion Education," "It is assumed that linguicide died with the closure of the last residential school in 1996," but, "it continues as a covert policy into the present" (139). This covert policy includes the fact that most publicly funded educational institutions function in and teach one of the two dominant languages in Canada (English or French). As Nicholas explains,

> though Indigenous children are no longer openly punished for speaking their languages, it is the power of the dominant linguistic groups over Indigenous linguistic groups that continues to fuel linguicide by imposing a dominant language (English or French) on Indigenous children as the medium of instruction and by providing no option for education in the medium of the mother tongue. ("Linguicide" 139)

Elsewhere Nicholas asserts that "Canada, in fact, is seriously, and even criminally, lacking in the will both to promote and to fund [mother tongue medium (MTM) education] programmes, in spite of the growing and overwhelming evidence of the benefits of bilingualism and MTM education" ("Reversing Language Shift" 224). Fontaine reminds readers that "although Canada developed constitutional agreements to protect and recognize other cultures and languages, the same treatment was not provided to Aboriginal peoples" ("Re-conceptualizing" 310).[23] There are very few immersion programs in Canada for Indigenous students to learn their ancestral language. English dominates and is supported by education systems across Turtle Island. As Anishinaabe author Louise Erdrich puts it, "English…is the language stuffed into my mother's ancestors' mouths. English is the reason she didn't speak her native language and the reason I can barely limp along in mine. English is an all-devouring language that has moved across North America like the fabulous plagues of locusts that darkened the sky and devoured even the handles of rakes and hoes" ("Two Languages in Mind" 56). Like locusts devouring everything before them, English saturates the media: television, radio, the internet, social media, film, and literature leave little space for Indigenous languages.

[23] In 2009 Nicholas pointed out that "[t]he only positive minority linguistic rights recognized in Canada are the rights of the French minority. In that case, over $260 million is allocated annually to the maintenance of French schools, with nearly $10 million alone going to one province that has fewer than 2000 French people. Meanwhile, less than $4 million is allocated annually to nearly a million Aboriginal people representing more than 60 languages in Canada" ("Reversing Language Shift 224). I understand that since 2009, the amount of money allocated to Indigenous languages has increased, but still lags behind the support offered to French language programs. Furthermore, as Nicholas also notes, the "separation of funding for First Nations languages and funding for First Nations schools at the national level" creates another barrier to Indigenous language survival—she adds that "this policy appears to reflect the old linguicidal ideology, which held that schools had a particular duty to eradicate indigenous languages by teaching in the medium of the dominant language, while communities were to be the only locus for indigenous languages to be used, at least until the schools could accomplish their linguistic goals" (225).

As a result of these historical and ongoing attacks on Indigenous languages in Canada (and elsewhere), English is the first language for the majority of Indigenous people today, including nêhiyawak and often the only one they are fluent in. Marilyn Dumont articulates this experience of being at once connected to and severed from her mother tongue in the poem, "that tongued belonging":

> the nerve of Cree remains
> in mouths that have tasted a foreign alphabet too long
> …
> so that, now, when we're among Cree speakers
> who ask if we speak our language
> and we respond in the negative
> we are regarded
> as if we are illegitimate children
> in a single language hostel
> …
> it will always exist
> on our cold side
> an ache
> like a phantom limb (1-2)

nêhiyaw artist Audrey Dreaver similarly explores and articulates some of the challenging and painful aspects of being disconnected from her mother tongue in her exhibition of paintings and prints entitled "NO. I do not speak Cree." She talks candidly about how her parents decided not to teach their children Cree in order to protect them from violence at school (and more generally in mainstream society). At the same time, her artwork illustrates how this decision has resulted in generations of children who are unable to speak their language (Dreaver, "Show & Tell"). As she makes clear in her talk, her experience is not hers alone—language loss has affected countless Indigenous individuals, families, and communities in Canada (Dreaver, "NO. I Do Not Speak Cree").[24] It is in this context of linguicide and language loss (articulated by Indigenous poets,

[24] Dreaver also talks about how her work speaks to non-Indigenous folks who have also experienced language loss in their immigration experience. She is careful to point out that while language loss is

artist, and scholars) that I find the bilingual[25] literature of Cree and Métis authors writing in Canada today so astonishing, important, powerful, resurgent, and inspiring. These creative writers draw our attention to language shift (the shift away from Indigenous languages toward dominant languages) and point to the possibility of a reversal of these language shift trends. These authors are reclaiming their ancestral tongues and asserting the languages' power, beauty, and complexity. I can think of no other group of writers more worthy of attention today, as the threat of language death (or, perhaps more accurately, language murder[26]) looms near. Yet—as these poets make clear—nêhiyawêwin has survived (and continues to survive) because nêhiyawak have survived.[27]

Indigenous Language Rights and Language Resurgence

Fontaine asserts that legally, in Canada, Indigenous people "have the right to use and develop these languages in institutions that we create," and I see the work of contemporary bilingual Cree-English authors playing an important role in the assertion of this right ("Undoing

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painful and in some ways similar between Indigenous folks and non-Indigenous immigrants to Canada, immigrants, if they lose their language, have the hope of returning to that place where their language is spoken, while Indigenous people, because their languages come from this land, do not. As a child of Dutch immigrants, I have felt the pain of language loss—of being cut off from my mother tongue. However, I think it is also important to note that for many Dutch immigrant families, their choice to adopt English was not forced (or at least not overtly or violently) and was made along with the decision to leave Holland.

[25] I find the term *bilingual* is unsatisfactory, but I have not yet found a term or phrase that captures the way these authors weave nehiyawewin words, phrases, images, and ideas into their work. Indeed, not all authors who use nêhiyawêwin in this way are fully bilingual. For example, Naomi McIlwraith has spoken publicly about the pain she feels at not being fully fluent in nêhiyawêwin. Yet the focus of this dissertation is on the nêhiyaw words and phrases in these sorts of works, and "bilingual" seems to be the closest term I can come up with to get that the multi-lingual nature of their work.

[26] Language rights activists, such as Skutnaab-Kangas, point out that languages do not passively "die away" but rather they are deliberately killed off. In a similar vein, Nicholas asserts, "Indigenous languages are not being 'lost.' They are being systematically ripped from Indigenous Peoples through submersion education" ("Linguicide" 143).

[27] Dakota language advocate Waziyatawin Angela Wilson asserts, "The fact that we have any language speakers left at all is a testament to the fierce resistance offered by our ancestors to maintain our languages even under seemingly impossible conditions" (61).

Linguicide"). As Tomson Highway recently wrote: "The only way [Indigenous languages in Canada] are going to survive is if their speakers not only continue to speak it but write in it, sing in it, publish in it, educate their youth in it. And speak it on a daily basis" ("A Note on Dialect" *Paasteewitoon Kaapooskaysing Tageespichit* xi). Indeed, narratives are particularly vital to language health, as they add depth to the meaning and texture of words, and give important context and nuance for language learners. As Basil Johnston explains,

> They may not have known it but they were learning about the vitality of words as words took on different shades of meaning in different contexts or lost some meaning in still another context. The children may not have known it, but words take on new dimensions only in conjunction and by union with other words. A word may indeed have its own meaning, gender, habitat, mood, voice, sound, and exist alone, but it is only in relation with other words that it can acquire greater sense and impart sense to other words. This, then, is what children and youth and all of us learn about language in the course of a story. ("How Do We Learn a Language? What Do We Learn?" 39)

Current nêhiyaw-âkayâsîmowin (Cree-English language) literature is doing this important work—adding depth, meaning, and nuance to nêhiyaw itwêwina. These authors are contributing to language resurgence.

In *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back,* Leanne Simpson talks about how Indigenous languages are pivotal to Indigenous resurgence. In contrast to the narrow framework of reconciliation that she sees at play in Canada's TRC, she asserts:

> For reconciliation to be meaningful to Indigenous Peoples and for it to be a decolonizing force, it must be interpreted broadly. To me, reconciliation must be grounded in cultural generation and political resurgence. *It must support Indigenous nations in regenerating our languages*, our oral cultures, our traditions of governance and everything else residential schools attacked and attempted to obliterate. (22, emphasis added)

A couple of years after the National Truth and Reconciliation event was held in Edmonton (March 23-30, 2014), I asked Reuben Quinn how he might express the concept of reconciliation in his language. He talked about how, after this event, he and his people still didn't have land,

and how his language is still damaged—so many words have been forgotten, and there are so very few children and young people who can speak nêhiyaw. He suggested that for him, reconciliation would be mîno-astâ: *setting things right*. Returning the land and the language to a state of health and vitality (October 26, 2016). In a similar vein, Dylan Robinson and Keavy Martin share this memory with their readers:

> At the 2013 Quebec National Event hosted by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) on Indian residential schools, a Kanien'kehá:ka audience member summed up neatly the problem with the national project of reconciliation: "If you come and break the windows to my house," he said, "you're going to have to fix those windows before I'll entertain your apology." This statement begs the question of whether any of the actions that have been undertaken in the name of reconciliation—such as the 2008 federal apology, or any of the elements of the 2007 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement (IRSSA)—have "fixed the windows" broken not only by the Indian residential school system, but also by the longer and still-ongoing process of colonization. As Maria Campbell states with reference to a commemoration ceremony held at Batoche, "there's a plaque, but the people still have no land." (*Arts of Engagement* 1)

I see the work of Louise Halfe, Gregory Scofield, and Naomi McIlwraith (and others, particularly the new wave of nêhiyaw language learners and creative writers who are beginning to write and publish bilingual nêhiyaw-âkayâsîmowin literature) as contributing to nêhiyawêwin regeneration and Indigenous resurgence across Turtle Island. At the same time, their work reminds readers that the work of reconciliation—of setting things right—remains unfinished, if not impossible.

êhayamihcikêyân: Paying Attention to nêhiyaw itwêwina

My approach in this dissertation was initially inspired by Basil Johnson's 1989 article, "Is That All There Is? Tribal Literature," where he drew attention to "eminent scholars, none of whom spoke or attempted to learn the language of any of the Indian nations about which they were writing" (5). He added, "Modern scholars, because they are not required by their

universities to learn, are no more proficient in a Native language than were their predecessors" (5). In a similar vein, in 2006 Robert Bringhurst pointed out:

> Few people, I think, earn a university degree in any branch of European Studies or Asian Studies without acquiring some rudimentary knowledge of a European or Asian language. Students of African Studies are also routinely expected to learn an African language. But how many universities ask even their doctoral students in American Studies or in Canadian Studies to learn an indigenous North American language? Not one. ("The Polyhistorical Mind" 29)

Two years later, in 2008 (the year I enrolled in NS 152—Introductory Cree at the University of Alberta), J. Edward Chamberlin reminded his audience (and readers) that

> …there *is* a rich treasury of Aboriginal languages still spoken here, many as different from each other as Chinese is from German, and all of them—like languages everywhere—changing with everyday speech even as they are held fast in established ceremonies. There are about a dozen families of Aboriginal languages in Canada—linguists continue to argue over classification—and over fifty distinct languages within those families. Some of these are endangered, but many of them are still widely spoken, and *all* of them have a heritage of story and song, occasionally preserved in the Indigenous equivalent of medieval Latin or classical Arabic.
>
> Why then is it so rare for these Aboriginal languages and their forms of imaginative expression to find a place in comparative literature? Where are the literatures, oral and written, of the Native peoples of North America. They *are* here, I know, and some of us are working with them. But it is surely remarkable how *few* of us are doing so, especially when we are—and, believe me, *we are*—in Aboriginal territory as I speak. ("The Corn People" 70)

These comments caught my attention, particularly Johnston's assertion that "[w]ithout the benefit of knowing the language of the Indian nation that they are investigating, scholars can never get into their minds the heart and soul and spirit of a culture and understand the Native's perceptions" and that "language and literature are inseparable, though they are too often taught as separate entities. They belong together" ("Is That All There Is?" 5, 6). Tomson Highway reinforced my resolve to learn about Cree literature through the language when he told the class that "Cree literature doesn't really work unless it comes from inside the Cree language," and that "Cree should be Canada's Latin—forget Greek and Latin—replace it with Cree!" (Class Lecture,

May 17, 2011). Louise Halfe makes a similar point, though perhaps more subtly: she first published *Blue Marrow* without a glossary, hoping that the untranslated words would inspire keen non-Cree readers to research and dialogue with nêhiyawak in order to read and understand the text. In correspondence with Jenny Kerber, Halfe explains:

> I was deliberate in omitting a glossary from *Blue Marrow* the first time it was published because I wanted to encourage the non-native reader to research and dialogue with the aboriginal person on the street/or in university/community. The point was as an aboriginal reader I have to do like-wise when it comes to French/Latin, etc. I am expected to research it/ask/or skip a phrase or word and make sense of it somehow. (qtd. in Kerber 130)

I wanted to be a non-Indigenous researcher who took Indigenous languages seriously. I wanted to honour and live up to the challenge of language learning that these authors and scholars put forward.

Much has changed since then, not only in the field of the study of Indigenous literatures, but also in my own critical awareness of the history of linguicide, Indigenous language rights, and my own positionality as a non-Indigenous language learner and scholar of nêhiyaw literature. My supervisor encouraged me to take on an Indigenous Literary Nationalist approach, suggesting that this might be a fitting methodology for my intended research project.The movement's foundational scholars, such as Robert Warrior, call for critics to see Indigenous studies as growing out of a longer intellectual history, and they argue that Indigenous literatures should be read in their particular historical and tribal contexts. I was particularly drawn to Indigenous Literary Nationalist scholars who explored the ethics of doing this work. For example, I find Daniel Heath Justice's sense that ethical Native literary criticism "is about relationships, about attending to the cultural, historical, political, and intellectual contexts from which indigenous texts emerge" particularly compelling (165). However, although Indigenous

Literary Nationalism (ILN) is, as Niigaan Sinclair explains, "a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional set of theories which posits that Indigenous literatures articulate, continue, and expand the cultural, political, and historical legacies of the Indigenous nation(s) they emerge from," I was concerned with the sparsity of literary scholarly engagement with Indigenous languages in general, and with nêhiyawêwin more specifically (18). There was of course Neal McLeod's seminal work, *Cree Narrative Memory,* which foregrounds nêhiyawêwin and its relationship to nêhiyaw history and nêhiyawak lived experience and relationship to the land. In his 2014 essay, McLeod underscores the importance of Indigenous languages in current scholarship: "As contemporary Indigenous scholars, we need to ground our discourse in cultural-specific metaphors and ground ourselves in the *languages of the ancient pathways of Indigenous thinking*" ("Cree Poetic Discourse" 90, emphasis added). In class, he playfully challenged us (in a Yoda-like fashion) to learn nêhiyawêwin: "you either do it or you don't. There is no try. Just learn the language—don't just talk about it or write about it" (Aug 8, 2014). Later he reminded us that for people who study an Indigenous literature, it is important to know words and concepts that emerge from the nation (and along with scholars like Bringhurst he noted that a scholar couldn't be considered "an expert in French literature without knowing French"). Later that day he even suggested that scholars were contributing to the erasure of Indigenous memory by not learning an Indigenous language (Aug 12, 2014).

At this point in my research journey (roughly around 2014), some scholars, such as Mareike Neuhaus, were taking a closer look at nêhiyawêwin and some of the knowledge encoded in the grammar of the words. Additionally, scholars such as Shelly Stigter and Jennifer Andrews were theorizing about the practice of code-switching and the bilingual nature of Louise Halfe's and Gregory Scofield's poetry. However, I was eager to find ILN thinkers who were

grappling with the challenges of language learning, language revitalization, and how Indigenous languages are foundational to the study of Indigenous literatures. I noted how, in 1981, Simon Ortiz published "Towards a National Indian Literature: Cultural Authenticity in Nationalism," an article that would become foundational to ILN. In it, he argues that "it is entirely possible for a people to retain and maintain their lives through the use of any language" and that Indigenous people have been resisting colonization through their use of colonizers' languages for years (*AILN* 257). However, in his forward to *American Indian Literary Nationalism,* he contends that "the more we use English in speaking and writing, the more we are losing our Indigenous languages" (xi). His words here resonate with Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's thinking on the relationship between mother tongue language use in literature and education and the work of decolonization. In his book, *Decolonizing the Mind,* Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o[28] wonders, "How did we, as African Writers, come to be so feeble towards the claims of our languages on us and so aggressive in our claims on other languages, particularly the languages of our colonization?" (9). He goes on to challenge his readers, pointedly asking: by "continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level continuing that neo-colonial slavish and cringing spirit? What is the difference between a politician who says Africa cannot do without imperialism and the writer who says Africa cannot do without European languages?" (26). While the earlier work of ILN theorists occasionally takes up issues and challenges concerning Indigenous languages,[29] my work, along with that of other scholars committed to

[28] Thank you to my friend, Perpetuah Muthui (a Kikuyu and fluent speaker of her, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's, tribal language) for explaining to me that *Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o* is a tribal name, complete as it is. As such, it does not have a first, given, or last name, so there is no way of shortening it. She advised me to write his full name as it is when citing his work.

[29] See, for example, Jace Weaver's foundational work, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community,* where he takes up the issue of language, and the way English was, and continues to be, a colonizing force. He too draws on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's work and applies his emphasis on mother tongue languages to two stories of Indigenous characters who turn their

understanding Indigenous literatures in the context of Indigenous languages,[30] seeks to help fill in this gap. My research is steadfastly focused on nêhiyawêwin. By grounding my work in the language, I aim to take up Kimberly Blaeser's call for a literary theory that exists within and arises from the literature itself ("Native Literature: Seeking a Critical Centre" 236). More specifically, my work seeks to understand and apply an approach to nêhiyaw-âkayâsîmowin literature that exists within and arises from the language—nêhiyawêwin—itself.

Although my work helps fill a gap in the field of Indigenous literary criticism by paying close attention to the nêhiyaw itwêwina embedded in the work of current nêhiyaw-âkayâsîmowin poetry, my research draws on many thinkers and artists who came before me—people who have unflaggingly emphasized the power, beauty, and particular wisdom that Indigenous languages carry. As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o emphasizes:

> Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (16)

By devoting time and energy to learning nêhiyawêwin, my intention is to begin to understand the specific wisdom and worldview that is carried in the language, and how authors who write nêhiyaw-âkayâsîmowin poetry are drawing on this intricate web of knowledge in their work. Much of the specificity of a language's relationship to the world is shaped by the land; Okanagan

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backs on the English language (160-161). Although this suggests a radical model for Indigenous authors and scholars, Weaver does not go in depth into how the use of Indigenous languages in literature might have a potentially healing effect, or how it might, in a concrete way, demonstrate a commitment to the authors' communities and a way to write "to and for Native peoples" (161).

[30] Scholars such as Margaret Noori, Leanne Simpson, and Heid E Erdrich are doing some of this important work in their scholarship on Anishinaabemowin and Anishinaabe literature.

scholar Jeannette Armstrong made this point most eloquently and profoundly in her 1998 article, "Land Speaking." Here she writes:

> All indigenous peoples' languages are generated by a precise geography and arise from it. Over time and many generations of their people, it is their distinctive interaction with a precise geography which forms the way indigenous language is shaped and subsequently how the world is viewed, approached, and expressed verbally by its speakers. (178-179)

Louise Erdrich articulates a similar sentiment when she says "Ojibwemowin…evolved to the present here in North America. The intelligence of this language is adapted as no other to the philosophy bound up in northern lands, lakes, rivers, forests, arid plains; to the animals and their particular habits; to the shades of meaning in the very placement of stones" ("Two Languages" 57). This is one reason, as Kovach makes clear, why Indigenous scholars contextualize their tribal affiliation: "We do this," she explains, "because our knowledges are bound to place" (37). In seeking to articulate what a nêhiyaw methodology looks like, she adds, "I understand Plains Cree culture as being a non-fragmented, holistic approach to the world. Segregating values from ceremony or segregating either from place or language is done at one's own peril" (47).

This emphasis on place has political ramifications for scholars, including non-Indigenous scholars who work with Indigenous literatures and who live and work on Indigenous lands. In his article, "Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?" Anishinaabe scholar Scott Richard Lyons reminds educators and scholars that teaching and studying Indigenous literature is always political, and that this work should ideally "focus on local and community levels in hopes of lending support to the work already being done there" (465). He goes on to point out that "every university and school exists in a place, on a land, with a history and a community of struggles: every place has its peoples" (465). Since I live and work in amiskwacîwâskahikan (*Edmonton*), a place with a long history as a gathering place for many

Indigenous nations, and a place where a variety of Indigenous languages are spoken,[31] I see it as my responsibility as a non-Indigenous teacher and literary scholar to learn about this place, its Indigenous history, its Indigenous peoples, and the struggles they face. In focusing chiefly on Cree scholarship, language, and intellectual traditions, I seek to prioritize knowledge that is not only local to the place that I call home—but also where these texts are grounded.

As a non-Indigenous language learner, my relationship to nêhiyawêwin will always be different than my relationship with my first language, or to my mother tongue. As I will discuss later, there are risks involved in my learning nêhiyawêwin. At the same time, it is within the context of language resurgence that I choose to read and learn from nêhiyaw-âkayâsîmowin literature, paying particular attention to the nêhiyaw words, phrases, and meanings that flow throughout the lines on the pages. I am interested in what these words have to say, and in what these words can teach readers, because I am certain that nêhiyawêwin êkwa nêhiyawak have much to teach. As Leanne Simpson so eloquently explains:

> Indigenous languages carry rich meanings, theory and philosophies within their structures. Our languages house our teachings and bring the practice of those teachings to life in our daily existence. The process of speaking Nishnaabemowin, then, inherently communicates certain values and philosophies that are important to Nishnaabeg being. Breaking down words into the "little words" they are composed of often reveals a deeper conceptual—yet widely held—meaning. This part of the language and language learning holds a wealth of knowledge and inspiration in terms of Aanji Maajitaawin ["the art of starting over"]. That is because this "learning through the language" provides those who are not fluent with a window through which to experience the complexities and depth of our culture. (*Dancing* 50)

[31] As Shalene Jobin notes, "First Nation languages commonly heard in Edmonton include Cree, Stoney, Chipewyan, Saulteaux, Dene, Beaver, Blackfoot and Sarcee, with Cree being the most common" ("Urban Indigenous Governance Practices" 152). In my effort to strike up conversations in nêhiyawêwin, I have (by mistaking Indigenous people from other nations for nêhiyawak or Métis) met folks who speak Blackfoot, Inuktitut, Lakota, Anishinaabemowin, Woods Cree, as well as a woman who spoke one of the critically endangered languages spoken in the province now known as British Columbia. She told me how there are recordings of her mother speaking her language—housed in an American museum—but that she has no one to talk to in her language.

This dissertation is a text in which I share with you, the reader, how I bring my learning through the language to bear on my reading of nêhiyaw-âkayâsîmowin literature.

Chapter Summaries

The first chapter, "Methodological Choices—Choosing to Take up the Challenge(s)," narrates some of the challenges I took on in this PhD journey and how these choices informed my approach to the research. First, I discuss the importance and the challenge of learning nêhiyawêwin as a living, spoken language (not only as a written language) and my efforts at working towards fluency. Second, I explore some of the tensions surrounding the role of interviews in literary studies, and why I decided to interview the authors as part of my research. Finally, I explore some of the challenges regarding the role of ceremony in research, and how ceremony is deeply connected to issues of belief, boundaries, and nêhiyaw ways of knowing. All of these choices (to strive for fluency, to conduct interviews, and to experience and wrestle with the role of ceremony in research) inform my approach to the texts and influence the structure I have chosen for this dissertation and the rhetoric of my writing. The chapter concludes by explaining how these structural and rhetorical choices are informed by nêhiyaw laws, and how it is my aim to follow their guidance and example.

In the second chapter, "Language Learning, the Risks of Appropriation, and kipihtowêwin[32] in Naomi McIlwraith's *kiyâm*," I explore some of the difficulties surrounding identity, appropriation, and language learning that Naomi McIlwraith struggles to come to terms with as a woman of mixed European and Indigenous ancestry who writes in nêhiyawêwin (*the Plains Cree language*) and âkayâsîmowin (*the English language*). At the same time, I also

[32] As I will later discuss, this word as a noun is translated in Wolvengrey's dictionary as *silence,* but can be more literally understood as the concept of *stop talking.*

consider how these issues relate to me and my work as a non-Indigenous Cree-language learner who has chosen to pay attention to and write about bilingual nêhiyaw-âkayâsîmowin poetry. I also examine the process of language learning, because this is such an important undertaking for both of us. Learning nêhiyawêwin is one of the pivotal themes in this dissertation as a whole, and McIlwraith's work points to some of the challenges that (particularly adult) language learners face while also advocating for Indigenous language rights in Canada and pointing to a vision of Indigenous language health and revitalization. In examining her language learning journey, I also consider some of the fundamental differences between the two languages, such as nêhiyawêwin's structural emphasis on verbs, in contrast to the English language's focus on nouns. Finally, the Cree words themselves point readers towards practices, such as listening and quieting ourselves, that help readers and literary scholars work toward pêyâhtik (acting in a careful, thoughtful, and respectful way).

Chapter three, "Entering into Ceremony: Reading Gregory Scofield's *kipocihkân,*" asks, "How do we enter into the ceremony of reading this work in a good way?" And, "What role do relationships play in this?" This chapter also struggles with the question, first raised in chapter one, of what should be written about and what should be left alone. To think through and follow the protocol laid out by nêhiyaw law, and by Scofield himself, I examine how both the cover image and the title of the collection warn us and teach us how to begin reading his work in a good way. I then approach Scofield's poetry as if he were unfolding a sacred healing bundle, paying attention to how his poems bear witness to all that has been lost through colonization, and also how the poems (and the ceremony of writing them) work to reconnect the speaker with his nêhiyaw ancestors, ceremony, and nêhiyawêwin.

In chapter four, "Walking with Words: Louise Halfe's *The Crooked Good,"* I claim that to understand this book on a deeper level, readers should pay close attention to the nêhiyaw itwêwina that Louise Halfe uses in her poetry because these words are deeply rooted in nêhiyaw laws, histories, sacred stories, and ceremonies. Drawing on the work of other scholars and writers (such as Maria Campbell and Mareike Neuhaus), I see these words functioning as "word bundles,"—an approach that encourages readers not to settle for the surface layer of the words, or for the glossed English translations (provided at the back of the book). I demonstrate this approach through several key nêhiyaw terms, including *iskwêw*, *miskîsikwa*, and *ê-kwêskît*. Finally, I explore how ceremonies and sacred stories are integral to understanding Halfe's narrative, but at the same time, how discussing and researching these things can be risky—considered dangerous by some—and must be done with care and caution. My aim is to understand more deeply how the text teaches readers about life and our journey here—learning to walk a crooked good.

Finally, the Afterword outlines the recent controversy surrounding Neal McLeod, who in 2014 was charged with (and pleaded guilty to) assault against his fiancée, Tasha Beeds. A few years later, several Indigenous authors raised questions about this incident and whether including his work in a forthcoming anthology suggested that his actions were excused and the issue resolved. These questions became particularly urgent as they were raised in the wake of the #MeToo movement as well as the ongoing trauma of Missing and Murdered Aboriginal Women in Canada. In this afterword I include some of the voices that have spoken publicly on the matter and discuss my decision not to include a chapter on his work in this dissertation. By including this afterward I seek to honour many perspectives and voices, but also to make space for silence and for listening.

Chapter 1: Methodological Choices—Choosing to Take up the Challenge(s)

Before we begin, let me tell you a little about my educational journey—about some of the crooked paths I followed, and about some of the methodological choices I made. I share these stories with you now because it might be important for you to know more about who is doing this work, and why. Or perhaps you are on a similar educational journey, and in writing this I hope to remind you that you are not alone. Maybe you will find these little stories helpful in your own journeys. Perhaps you are one of the members of my doctoral committee, and you want to know how your questions and challenges have shaped my work. It could be that you are an examiner and want to know the theoretical approach that underpins my choices—what I have considered the best practices for this study of bilingual nêhiyaw-English literature. However, if you want to skip these personal narratives and go straight to the reading of these beautifully thought-provoking texts, please skip to chapter two. You can always return to this chapter if you wish.

The Crooked Path of Language Learning

I enrolled in NS 152: Introductory Cree while I was still living in Wonju, South Korea. I really had no idea what I was getting into, or where this would lead me, but I had been working as an ESL teacher for two years, and while I was living abroad I thought a lot about home—Edmonton—the city my father, my aunties and uncles, and my Oma and Opa immigrated to in 1953 (and the city where my mother, and many of her siblings, moved to after they moved away from the family farm in Rocky Mountain House). This is the city where most of my relatives live, and it is the city where I grew up feeling a sense of belonging. While I was living in South Korea, I learned what it was like to be a foreigner, and it was this experience that made me begin to think deeply and critically about what it might look like to live more ethically in the place I

call home.[33] Why do I feel so comfortable there—linguistically, culturally, and politically? Sometimes scholars talk about being a guest or visitor on Indigenous land,[34] but my experience as a guest and a foreigner in South Korea made it clear that in Canada, the dominance of English, of Euro-western values, and the colonial structures in place, are there to make people like me—a white person with ancestors and relatives in Europe—at home. Poet Christine Stewart and composer Jacquie Leggatt point out that "[t]he city of Edmonton, the country of Canada, the white settler subject, is built on the blood and land of nations, communities, families, and individuals. White settler culture manages and maintains this history with a particular oblivescence" (Stewart and Leggatt "Notes from the Underbridge" 39). They go on to remind readers that

> Canada and its wealth are built on land and resource theft, on the desecration of original and sacred agreements of sharing, on violations of our treaty obligations. This is what it means to be here: the oppression of Indigenous peoples and their nations through

[33] One thing I learned while working as a registered alien in South Korea was that as a guest in a country one should make an effort to learn the language. And of course this isn't easy: I spent the first few months in Korea thinking that ju-say-o meant "please"…and it does, sort of. In a restaurant you could say kim-chee jus-say-o, and that would be a polite way of ordering kim-chee. For the first year, I lived right next to the fire station in Wonju. So when I took a taxi home from e-mart I would load up my groceries, clamber into the backseat, and say "So-bang-so jus-say-o," which I thought meant "to the fire station, please." I'd been living there for quite some time when I learned that ju-say-o could be more correctly translated as "give me, please." So I had been telling taxi drivers "Give me the fire station, please" for months! But the taxi drivers were always polite, and they never corrected me. I noticed they were more accommodating to foreigners who made an effort to speak Korean than to the ones who arrogantly assumed that if they just SPOKE ENGLISH LOUD ENOUGH, the Korean taxi drivers would understand. As I made plans to move back home, I also made plans (however unwitting they may have been) to enroll in NS 152: Introductory Cree, in an effort to begin learning how to live in better relationship with nêhiyawak in nêhiyânâhk (*Plains Cree territory*).

[34] Of course, scholars do not do so uncritically. As Deanna Reder explains, "I acknowledge that I am a guest in the territory, not to suggest that I was ever invited here, but rather a turn of phrase to recognize that even though I have lived in British Columbia's lower mainland for most of my adult life, this does not give me the same relationship to this land as those whose Nations have been here since time immemorial" ("Introduction: Position" 7). Similarly, Allison Hargreaves suggests that "location is about trying to understand myself as a guest with a specific relation to treaty history, to historical relations of diplomacy, and to conceptions of territory and nation that precede my ancestor's arrival here" ("'The lake is the people and life that comes to it' Location as Critical Practice" 110).

> dispossession, community dislocation, violent administrative systems of abuse, isolation, scientific experimentation, genocide, attempted genocide, and government-approved amnesia—to be here is to be forgetful and forgetting, and to enforce the violence of this forgetfulness on others. (40)

Lee Maracle's observations are in line with Stewart and Leggatt, where Maracle writes, "To be a white Canadian is to be sunk in deep denial" (*My Conversations with Canadians* 27). As a Dutch-Canadian I have inherited this violent forgetfulness and "official denial" through my formal education, and through the stories I was told about Canada and our (by "our" I am referring to Dutch immigrants specifically, and to other non-Indigenous newcomers more generally) place in it. It was not until I was living abroad and trying to learn the local language that I began to reflect on my relationships with Indigenous people, Indigenous histories, and Indigenous languages in the Edmonton area. I trace the beginning of my journey here to my experiences as a teacher there, in South Korea.

As a foreigner in South Korea, I experienced first-hand how language learning can be at once terribly uncomfortable and (often at the same time) exhilarating. I enrolled in the University of Alberta's Introductory Cree class because I thought it might teach me how to live more ethically, or at least more neighbourly, in Treaty 6 territory. I thought it might teach me how to be a better reader of Indigenous literatures. This course was the beginning of a long journey for me, although I did not know it at the time. In Dorothy Thunder's classes, I got a taste of the beautiful intricacies of nêhiyawêwin. At the same time, Bert Almon, my creative writing teacher, lent me his copy of Louise Halfe's *The Crooked Good.* Métis poet Naomi McIlwraith was my NS 152 lab instructor. I began to see that there was an exciting literary movement underway, and my efforts to learn nêhiyawêwin became intertwined with my new interest in the work of these bilingual nêhiyaw-âkayâsîmowin poets. After two years of nêhiyawêwin study with Dorothy Thunder (two eight-month, six credit courses), I started a PhD in English with a proposal to look

more closely at this kind of literature. During my first year as a PhD student, I took NS 352: Advanced Cree with Dorothy. That year was book-ended with courses at the University of Manitoba's annual Cree Summer Institute. There I took linguistics (Structure of the Cree Language), Native studies (Swampy Cree, or the "N-dialect"), as well as two literature courses: the first (in 2010) taught by Omushkego storyteller Louis Bird; the second (in 2011) taught by Cree musician and author Tomson Highway. I would later return to the University of Manitoba to take Cree literature courses with Louise Halfe (in 2013) and Neal McLeod (in 2014).

As any adult language learner knows, language learning is difficult, time consuming, and not always straightforward. After completing NS 352, I became pregnant with my first child, I was teaching introductory English courses at the University of Alberta, and I was desperately applying for SSHRC funding so that I could continue my degree. I had limited opportunities to study, practice, and continue learning Cree. While on maternity leave, I had less time and fewer opportunities to study. By the time I reached the candidacy stage of my program, I had had restricted nêhiyawêwin practice for nearly two years. During my candidacy exam, one of my examiners reminded me that fluency cannot be gained in a classroom setting, and that the only way to gain fluency in a language is through immersion. Although I knew this examiner was correct in asserting that immersion is the best way to learn a language, I felt frustrated because I had no idea how I could immerse myself in a community of nêhiyawêwin speakers as an outsider (a môniyâskwêw), especially with a family and a young child to take care of at home. I later found out that finding and becoming a part of a fluent Cree-speaking community is a challenge that many, if not most Cree language learners face, including nêhiyawak: there are so many

barriers to learning a threatened Indigenous language that is spoken in a colonized land.[35] Suffice it to say, at the time of my candidacy exam, my skills in nêhiyawêwin were not balanced, and were rather linguistic, with an emphasis on grammar and translation. And I was far from fluent. For example, I could write a grammatically correct sentence in nêhiyawêwin, with all of the appropriate demonstrative pronouns, and the verb perfectly conjugated and in agreement with the actors and the objects. I could read a sentence and tell you if the verb was a benefactive, or part of a relative clause, or if the sentence was written in the conjunct mode, the independent mode, or the subjunctive mode. I could analyze the grammar of a sentence or the morphology of a word in ways that many fluent speakers cannot. But I could not speak these sentences, or even many of these words, in a spontaneous conversation. As my friend and nêhiyawêwin teacher Reuben Quinn sometimes teases, I could speak linguistics, but I couldn't speak nêhiyaw. Much of the vocabulary I had memorized were held in my mind as written words, perfectly spelled (in Standard Roman Orthography), but muffled, sometimes silent. I did not always know how to speak these words correctly, let alone fluently. They were stumbling blocks in my mouth. I had difficulty hearing them, and a hard time remembering them.

And so I made a choice. I had one year left of my two-year SSHRC funding, and I wasn't sure I wanted to finish this degree. I decided to spend this year, this time (this funding) doing my very best to become as fluent as I was possibly able. I made this decision in the fall, months after

[35] As Lorena Fontaine explains, one of these barriers is the shame and devaluation of the language that many fluent speakers carry: "That generation still has a very thick barrier to speak the language to their children and grandchildren, and a lot of it is due to the fact that they were told that Aboriginal languages no longer mattered, that it was something that they should be ashamed of, and a lot of Aboriginal people from that generation associate speaking the language with being physically punished. And when that happens to you as a child, it's engrained in you; so my mother's generation has a very immense barrier that I don't know if any of them will overcome or can overcome" ("Undoing Linguicide").

my candidacy exam. I started out by reading over my textbooks from classes at the University of Alberta and my notes from Neal McLeod's course on Cree literature (where he had taught us at least ten nêhiyaw itwêwina each day), and I began praying. I prayed because I had no idea what I was doing. I didn't know how to transfer these words from the pages of textbooks and dictionaries to my heart, my tongue, or the part of my mind that holds speech like water, able to flow, to express, to carry thoughts and feelings and images. I didn't know how to open my ears and mind so that I could understand the meaning of spoken Cree. I began to research language acquisition. I tried to recall what practices had seemed to work best for my students in South Korea. I began to make flashcards with audio files on them, which I studied every day. I took more language courses at The Centre for Race and Culture with Reuben Quinn, and I volunteered at The Mustard Seed, hoping to find opportunities to practice speaking Cree with some of the folks I met there. I listened to Cree language songs or YouTube videos if I could find them. I tried to share what I was learning with my son. I watched the same DVD in Cree (the only one I could find in the Edmonton Public Library system) over and over again. I worked through Cree language books with audio CDs. I listened to and read the book of Ruth in Cree, and the book of Mark. I participated in drop-in Cree conversation groups. Near the end of that year I had the honour of teaching a literature course (English 100) at Maskwacîs Cultural College, where I tried to bring in as much nêhiyawêwin as I was able, and to learn from the students and people I met in that community. About a year after that I would have the honour of working more closely with Reuben at the Centre for Race and Culture's nêhiyawêwin master-apprentice program. I took Dorothy's Cree immersion course with CILLDI in the summer of 2016, and the following summer I volunteered as her assistant teaching the same course. Over these years I drove to Enoch for Jerry Saddleback's Tuesday evening nêhiyawêwin classes, and I

struck up nêhiyaw conversations with strangers on the LRT, learned how to play simple games in nêhiyawêwin, and met up with friends and other language learners to practice. I wish I could tell you that now I am fluent. I am not. However, I have come a long way from where I was at the end of my candidacy exam. I continue to learn and practice new words and phrases every day, and I continue to make an effort to practice speaking with and listening to more fluent speakers. I look back on these years, and now I am grateful that this examiner put that challenge before me, because if I had been simply applauded for my hard work in those university courses, I never would have taken up the challenge of learning nêhiyawêwin the way I have over the past four years. Now, when I read bilingual nêhiyaw-English literature, those nêhiyaw words begin to sound. I am becoming a different reader, and my relationship with these words is shifting and growing.

kîhokawak (Visit Them): Relationships between Authors and Scholars

Dwayne Donald, one of my PhD committee members, is a Papaschase scholar who works in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. At my candidacy exam, he challenged me to conduct interviews as part of my research. At the time, I did not want to do interviews. I had never interviewed anyone before, and in my mind this was not the kind of research we do in the field of literary scholarship. I am not sure exactly why I held this belief—perhaps it was because throughout my years of education in Canadian academic institutions, I had been influenced by a variety of literary theorists and approaches to literature, including New Criticism, which argues that authorial intent is irrelevant to understanding a text. (This is sometimes termed The Intentional Fallacy: W. K Wimsatt, in his essay entitled "The Intentional Fallacy," argues "that the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art" [3]). I had a deeply held, although not always conscious,

belief that the (most rigorous and esteemed) work we do as readers of literature is always done in relationship with the words on the page and should not be marred or muddied by interviewing the author. Margaret Atwood, whose work significantly influenced me as an undergraduate student majoring in English, once wrote:

> The writer communicates with the page. The reader also communicates with the page. The writer and the reader communicate only through the page. This is one of the syllogisms of writing as such. Pay no attention to the facsimiles of the writer that appear on talk shows, in newspaper interviews, and the like—they ought not to have anything to do with what goes on between you, the reader, and the page you are reading. (Atwood *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* 125)

Of course Atwood is drawing on T. S. Eliot's ideas here (I see the title of her book as a direct reference to Eliot's discussion of the relationship between the poet and the dead poets in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*) where he argues that "honest criticism and sensitive appreciation are directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry" (407) and "to divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim" (410). Atwood's assertion here comes from a long line of thinking that threads throughout the history of Western approaches to literature, and can perhaps be traced back to Plato, who argued that poets "are not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains" (15). Plato's arguments for why poets are not to be trusted (that they are inspired and possessed when they compose poetry, and are not able to rationally explain or claim responsibility for their work) creates (or points to) a fissure or gap between poets and their work. Thus, in my education, there is a strong tradition that sees the work of readers and literary critics as something that involves close reading and attention to the literature—the words on the page—and not something that takes place between the *people* who compose and critique these words on the page (the author and the reader).[36] I still value close and

[36] Wimsatt disparages the idea of approaching the author in order to gain insight on a poem, comparing this approach to placing a bet, where the critic takes "advantage of the fact that Eliot is still alive, and in

careful reading of poetry (and other genres), but in the context of my work with nêhiyaw poetry, I have come to realize that the relationships I am entering into are as important as (and have indeed profoundly shaped and influenced) my reading of the texts. This is also consistent with the priorities of Indigenous literary criticism; as Gregory Younging makes clear in his guidebook *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*, an important element of doing this work appropriately is to collaborate with Indigenous peoples, since "[c]ollaboration ensures that works do not speak *for* Indigenous Peoples. It ensures that works *are* Indigenous Peoples *speaking*" (31). Drawing on the work of Shawn Wilson, Katrina Srigley and Autumn Varley suggest, "At the very heart of Indigenous approaches to knowledge sits the idea of relationships, and the high value placed on relationship building in order to share knowledge" (53-4).

I initially resisted the idea of conducting interviews not only because of my penchant for close reading, but also because the theory, ethics, and methodology behind interviews were unknown to me. I associated the practice of conducting interviews with the extractive and violent history of research done by non-Indigenous researchers in/on Indigenous communities and people. (I thought particularly of social science fields such as anthropology and ethnology, fields that I was untrained in, but that I wanted instinctively to distance myself and my work from, because of what I perceived as a legacy of unbalanced relationships, of research done on Indigenous people, that did not benefit or give back to the people they worked with). I was keenly aware of Linda Tuhiwai Smith's horrifying sketches of research done by anthropologists

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the spirit of a man who would settle a bet, the critic writes to Eliot and asks what he meant, or if he had Donne in mind. We shall not here weigh the probabilities—whether Eliot would answer that he meant nothing at all, had nothing at all in mind—a sufficiently good answer to such a question—or in an unguarded moment might furnish a clear and, within its limit, irrefutable answer. Our point is that such an answer to such inquiry would not be a critical inquiry. Critical inquires are not settled by consulting the oracle" (18).

on Indigenous peoples, and the assertion that "many indigenous writers would nominate anthropology as representative of all that is truly bad about research" (*Decolonizing Methodologies* 11).[37] I did not want my research to resemble the work of anthropologists. At the same time, the challenge of conducting interviews terrified me, because I felt inadequately prepared to carry out these conversations without, to paraphrase Smith's description of cautionary tales involving Western researchers, breaking protocols, negating values, failing small tests, and ignoring key people (*Decolonizing* 3). I had read about non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous researchers, such as Bernard Perley,[38] who struggled to connect with the people and the community they were researching, and I wondered how an outsider, such as myself, could possibly succeed in connecting in a good way, if "insiders" such as Perley could not.

Also, if I am honest, I admit that I was afraid to interview these authors because, when I imagined myself as the interviewer of an author or poet whom I admired, it seemed to be a potentially uncomfortable (indeed distressing) position to be in. I was afraid that these authors might not like me, or that they may not respond generously to my questions and my attempt to connect with them in a good way. This fear of encountering an author whom I admired on the page, but who might not respond to students in a kind or generous fashion is related to the fact that in my late twenties I took a graduate-level creative writing course with the much lauded and respected poet laureate, Derek Walcott. In the class he was shockingly cantankerous, dismissive,

[37] Smith's sentiments are not unique and can be noted in the work of other Indigenous scholars, such as Gerald Vizenor, who claims that "Anthropologists, in particular, were not the best listeners or interpreters of tribal imagination, liberation, or literatures" ("The Ruins of Representation" 145).
[38] Perley poignantly narrates his uncomfortable experiences as an Indigenous anthropologist observing Maliseet language classes in his book *Defying Maliseet Language Death: Emergent Vitalities of Language, Culture, and Identity in Eastern Canada* (24-5).

and curmudgeonly towards us, his students, and the poetry we wrote in his class.[39] Part of my resistance to interviewing these authors came out of such observations and experiences. I wanted to love these works of art without risking the possibility that these authors might respond to my questions with sly evasiveness, with a mean spirit, or with arrogant disdain—of course none responded in these ways, but these were my fears. I did not want to have my feelings hurt, or my admiration of these authors diminished. Looking back, I might say that I was afraid to risk entering into a different relationship with these authors, one that moved beyond the distant or isolated relationship between the reader and the text.

After grappling with this challenge for over a year, I decided that sitting down and talking to these authors about their work was an opportunity for me to nurture or establish human relationships, that having conversations with them might be a way for me to honour them and their expertise, and, most importantly, that visiting them in person might teach me things I would not be able to learn from the words on the page. During my candidacy exam, Dwayne had asked me to think about the idea that "reading is not research." His words seemed surprising and strange to me (especially after spending a year *reading* in preparation for that exam) but I have come to realize that there is profound truth (and also critique) in the idea that scholars cannot learn everything they need to learn from books. As Dwayne later explained to me, "miyo

[39] I later found out that he accepted the three-year position at the University of Alberta only after he had dropped out of a race for the position of professor of poetry at Oxford University in the wake of former students' claims of sexual harassment. Looking back, I wonder if this underlying and unresolved issue of sexual harassment allegations was one of the reasons he treated us, his students at the University of Alberta that year, with such contempt.

wicihitowin [getting along well with others],[40] miyo wahkohtowin [good relations], sakihitowin [love] are difficult to generate with a book" (personal communication).

Dwayne's suggestion to conduct interviews is in keeping with Indigenous approaches to scholarship—approaches that western academic institutions (and scholars) are not always aware of, particularly in the field of literary studies.[41] As Younging's 2018 guidebook explains, responsible scholarship in the field of Indigenous literature involves establishing and cultivating good relationships. He says, "finding your way through requires thought, care, attention, and dialogue. It requires working with people. It requires the engagement and inclusion needed for a new conversation between Indigenous Peoples and settler society" (30). He goes on to emphasize that collaboration is a necessary component of culturally appropriate research practices, stating: "The key to working in a culturally appropriate way is to collaborate with Indigenous Peoples at the centre of a work. . . . Collaboration is crucial in achieving authentic content, and in demonstrating respect for the complexity and individual nature of Indigenous Peoples" (31). In a similar vein, Cree scholar Michael Hart (in an interview with Kathleen Absolon) emphasizes the importance of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships, a lesson he talks about in the context of his own experience with interviewing and learning from Elders:

[40] Harold Cardinal and Walter Hildebrandt point out that "'*Miyo-wîcêhtowin*' is a Cree word meaning 'having or possessing good relations.' It is a concept that arises from one of the core doctrines or values of the Cree Nation. The term outlines the nature of the relationships that Cree peoples are required to establish. It asks, directs, admonishes, or requires Cree peoples as individuals and as a nation to conduct themselves in a manner such that they create positive or good relations in all relationships, be it individually or collectively with other peoples. *'Miyo-wîcêhtowin'* as a concept and as a term originates in the laws and relationships that their nation has with the Creator" (14).

[41] Although I cite Younging's recent (2018) guidebook, Indigenous calls for collaboration and consultation are not new—see for example Lenore Keeshig Tobias's assertion that "the most important thing for a non-Native writer to do when they write about Native Issues is to have respect—respect means research and talking to the people" (qtd. in Margery Fee's "The Trickster Moment, Cultural Appropriation, and the Liberal Imagination" 196).

> One of the most important [elements] is relationship…. And I initially thought, "Well, maybe I could consider talking with them," not interviewing, but talking with them, listening mostly. But then I thought I didn't have a strong enough relationship with them. And that's very different than a western point of view, which would say, "Well, you need to break out of that relationship and not let it interfere as much as you can." Whereas whenever I pay attention to Elders and whenever I see learning going on, that's very significant. There's an emphasis on that kind of relationship between people. (*Kaandossiwin* 66)

nikiyokawâw (I visit her)

In the fall of 2015, I began to make arrangements with Louise Halfe to meet with her at her home just outside of Saskatoon for a conversational interview. I had already met Louise when I took her course on Cree women's literature at the University of Manitoba, and I knew from my experience with her in that classroom that she was a deeply compassionate, wise, and generous person. Still, I remember being nervous and worried as I prepared for the interview. I carefully packed the tobacco, the sweetgrass, and the small gifts I planned to give to Louise. I made sure I had two copies of the consent form, as well as copies of the information letter and interview questions (which I had also sent to Louise weeks earlier, so that she would not be surprised or unprepared for any of them).

When I met with Louise, I made sure to offer her the tobacco first, and to work through the university's ethics requirements second. (I was grateful to Dorothy for helping me make that choice. Dorothy told me that she always offered tobacco first when she did interviews for her graduate work in linguistics, and did the university's paperwork after.) I wonder if we were both nervous, or only me—it had been over a year since we had seen each other, and we had corresponded only a little since that Cree Summer Institute course. Despite my nerves, the interview went very well. She answered all of my questions carefully and thoughtfully. After I turned the recorder on my phone off, she gave me a tour of her beautiful round straw-bale home.

I remember being delighted to see some of the artwork that appears in her books hanging on her walls. We talked about so many things. When I have finished this dissertation, I think that I will treasure this interview, this visit with Louise, most of all. She taught me things that I will carry with me for years to come. This interview reinforced what Dwayne asserted: that some things, like sâkihitowin êkwa miyo-wîcêhtowin, are difficult to create and nurture with words on the page. Louise Halfe explained it this way: "Sometimes it's better to have a good, heart to heart talk, and I appreciate the formality [of offering tobacco and gifts] because that's honouring the person who is carrying that particular knowledge. But if it happens that you're meeting somebody and you have a heart to heart talk—that counts a million times" (Personal Interview).

I am now so grateful to Dwayne for pressing me to conduct interviews. kinanâskomitin, Dwayne.

Ceremony

The final challenge coming out of my candidacy exam that I want to talk about here is the challenge Dwayne presented when he suggested that I consider attending some Cree ceremonies, and, in a related vein, that I shift away from Indigenous Literary Nationalism, with its focus on human-made laws and its human-centred approach to literature (wrapped up in loaded terms such as *nationalism* and *sovereignty*) and turn towards the Creator's laws. He challenged me to think about what my project would look like if I shifted my focus away from what he saw as human-made laws and concepts, and instead attempted to hang my research on those laws and nêhiyaw legal systems that are not limited to human relationships but take into account a whole web of relationships.

At that moment during my candidacy exam, I was not at all sure how I would take up Dwayne's challenges, or how this would shape my research journey. I remember one examiner

enthusiastically suggested I attend a pow-wow. But I understood this challenge as something deeper than a cursory attendance of a "cultural event." (I say "cultural event" not to diminish the long history or spiritual significance of pow-wows, but to suggest that these layers and meanings are not accessible to first-time attendees—unless they are mentored by someone who might teach them these things. These layers of meaning are particularly opaque to non-Indigenous outsiders, like me, who have not grown up with that culture.) On the one hand, I recalled Indigenous scholars, such as Leanne Simpson, asserting that within a deeply grounded Indigenous framework, "Theory is collectivized through the telling of our stories and the performance of our ceremonies" (*Dancing* 43), but I was not sure how a non-Indigenous scholar, such as myself, could—or should—"access this vast body of knowledge" (*Dancing* 42). For me, the suggestion to attend Cree ceremony was in some ways the biggest challenge of all, because I knew instinctively that it would be wrong to attend ceremonies simply as a researcher, or as a scholar interested in writing about Cree literature.

I recall that I felt confused and uncertain about this challenge. I took to heart Dwayne's suggestion that "reading is not research" (or that you cannot learn everything you need to know from reading books), but I was also quite sure that "ceremony is not research" (I recalled Tuhiwai Smith's assertion that research "is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" [1]). And yet, when I returned to books on Indigenous methodologies, such as Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony*, I began to see what they were saying about the importance of relationship building and experiential knowledge reflected in Dwayne's suggestions. Suddenly Wilson's inclusion of Heather Harris's Coyote story, the one where Coyote takes Native studies courses at a university and discovers that the white folks teaching

the courses learned everything they know from reading books written by other white folks, took on more meaning for me in the context of my own work:

> When I asked this guy what Indian told him the stuff he was saying, he said none—he read it in a book. . . . The next day I went to my Indians of North America class. . . . I asked the teacher, 'Are we going to visit all the Indians?' He said No. So I asked him, 'How are we going to learn about Indians then?' and he said, just like the other guy, from a book written by a white guy. . . . I went to my next class—Indian Religions . . . I sat down and I asked her, 'Are we going to the sweatlodge?' 'No.' 'Sundance?' 'No.' 'Yuwipi?' 'No.' 'Then how are we going to learn—no wait, I know—from a book (quoted in *Research is Ceremony*18)

Despite Coyote's critique of Euro-Western methodologies,[42] the idea of attending Ceremony still felt strange and out of place in this secular academic institution. Indeed, in the weeks and months that followed I felt resentful that such a challenge was put before me in an exam setting. I did not want to attend Cree ceremonies, because I did not want to be some kind of academic-spiritual tourist. I did not want to take on the role of the bumbling outsider scribbling down notes about sacred things that cannot be understood by mere observation. I did not want to enter into ceremonies uninvited, or enter spaces where I was not welcome. This challenge troubled me more than any other.

In trying to understand how to approach this challenge, I turned to Elder Sarah Whitecalf's teachings about mônîyâsak (white people) being on the one hand welcomed and encouraged to learn nêhiyawêwin and Cree ways, to take them seriously and to support nêhiyawak; on the other hand, she makes it very clear that some things, such as the Sundance, are sacred, and are not meant for mônîyâsak ("Teaching Cree Language and Cree Culture to Whites"). For example, Whitecalf praises H.C. Wolfart for his useful support and his desire to promote Cree culture and understand how it works. She states, "êkosi isi, tâpiskôc awa ôte

[42] I appreciate Shawn Wilson's definition of methodology as "how we go about gaining more knowledge about reality" (13).

kiwîcêwâkaninaw [that is how it is with this one here, our partner], îh, mitoni kimiyo-âpacihânaw [look! we make good use of him], kwayask ê-wîtapimâyahk [we sit with him properly], êwako ana ê-tâpwêwakêyihtahk tâpwê nêhiyaw-kîkway [that one truly believes in the Cree way], mitoni e-nôhte-sôhkêpitahk [he really wants to strengthen it], ê-nôhtê-kiskêyihtahk tânisi ê-ispayiniyik ôma kinêhiyâwiwininaw [he wants to understand how our Cree ways work].[43] I am particularly interested in Whitecalf's emphasis on Wolfart's usefulness and belief (I will return to the idea of belief later), along with his honest desire to learn, because it points to a research methodology that addresses many of Tuhiwai Smith's concerns about inquisitive and acquisitive non-Indigenous researchers. Whitecalf's words here point to the importance of non-Indigenous researchers doing scholarly work alongside, or in partnership with, Indigenous people. Whitecalf also suggests that non-Indigenous scholarship on Indigenous languages or cultures is good when it is *useful* to the community. However, Whitecalf also makes it clear that some things, particularly some sacred ceremonies, are off limits to non-Indigenous researchers. For example, Whitecalf goes on to say, "kîkwây piko," nika-itwân, "namôya pakitinikâtêw, ["the only thing is," I will say, "that is not permitted"] tâpiskôc ôma kiyawâw kâ-osk-âyiwiyêk, [and the same goes for you young people] namôya ta-kiskinohamâkêyêk, [you are not to teach it] ('nipâkwêsimowikamik' cî kâ-itwêhk, kinisitohtênâwâw kîkwây anima? [the Thirst Lodge, you understand?])—namôya êkotowahk tita-kakwêcihkêmoyêk ômatowahk [you are not to ask about that kind, in this way], êkwa ômatowihk kiskinohamâkawiyêko êwako ani anima nipâkwêsimowin anima [and when you are taught about the Thirst Dance ceremony in this

[43] Note that these are my rough translations, although Dorothy Thunder graciously checked them for accuracy. Whitecalf's words are translated on the facing page this way: "just as is the case, for example, with our partner over there [H. C. Wolfart] , look, he is very useful to us, we work well with him, that one truly has a positive view of the Cree way, he very much wants to promote our Cree culture and wants to understand how it works" (53).

place[44]], nipâkwêsimowikamik, tânisi ê-isi-pimipayik [the Thirst Dance lodge and how it works,], namôya pakitinikâtêw, môniyâs êkwa ta-nitawi-âsowi-kiskinohamâht êwako anima [it is not permitted for that to be taught in turn to a white person], kikiskêyihtênâwâw [you people know that]" (52, 54).[45] What I take from Whitecalf's teachings is that, to draw on a phrase that Dorothy has shared with me in conversation about sacred things (such as the Thirst Lodge or the Northern Lights), "you leave some things alone."

Yet Whitecalf adds that it is all right for non-Indigenous people to learn about some of the other Cree ceremonies, and that those things may be taught in a university or school setting so that understanding, respect, and support can be fostered (54-55). Indeed, not all Elders and knowledge keepers would agree with Whitecalf's assertion that the Thirst Dance is off limits for non-Indigenous people,[46] and that it should not be taught or talked about in classrooms, but I have chosen, at this time in my life, not to attend or participate in this particular ceremony, and to be very careful in how I approach it in my writing.

Dwayne's challenge for me to participate in Cree ceremony began a long (and on-going) journey of personal spiritual struggle and growth. In grappling with some of the spiritual questions I faced, I sought out guidance and wisdom from both nêhiyaw and non-Indigenous mentors. At this point, I have chosen to keep much of these struggles and experiences private—to keep them out of the public realm that this dissertation will eventually enter in to—because

[44] they were gathered in a university classroom

[45] Again, these are my rough translations. I include them here to help readers who may not be fluent in nehiyawewin, but who are interested in learning along with me. The English translation in the book reads as follows: "—only one thing," I will say, "is not allowed, and for you, too, for instance, you young people, it is forbidden to teach about it (what is called the Sundance-Lodge, you know what that is?)—you are not to ask about that one in this manner, and when you are being taught about the Sundance in a place like this [in a classroom], about how the Sundance-Lodge works, it is not allowed for that to be passed on and taught in turn to a White-Man, you all know that" (53).

[46] Reuben Quinn, for example, does not agree that this ceremony should be off-limits to non-Indigenous people.

they are dear to my heart, because I am a guest when I participate in nêhiyaw ceremonies, and because I know so very little. However, I am compelled to briefly address the concept of spiritual belief here, because it raises important questions that are often ignored or avoided in secular academic institutions,[47] and because these questions are particularly important to pay attention to if we are committed to taking up the call of Indigenous literary nationalist scholars to read Indigenous texts within the cultural contexts they come out of.

Do Spiritual Beliefs and Practices Matter?

In *"tawâw niwâhkômâkanak"* which is part of the front matter in Sylvia McAdam's book, *Nationhood Interrupted: Revitalizing* nêhiyaw *Legal Systems,* Elder Allan Joe Felix suggests readers smudge and pray before they read. He writes

> Prayers and smudge always must lead the way when a person is seeking and learning knowledge. For each one of you who are about to read this book, what you are doing is seeking knowledge. The knowledge shared here is of a spiritual nature, this is why you must enter this knowledge-seeking with smudge and prayer. When a person seeks knowledge, the knowledge moves, shapes, and changes their thoughts and their spirit. This is especially true for knowledge that is spiritually based. (17)

When I discussed this book in a small group of fellow researchers and instructors at the University of Alberta, these directions came up in our conversation. I was surprised by how many of my colleagues had either not read these directions at all (skipping the front matter entirely and beginning their reading of the book in the first chapter) or had read these directions but had chosen not to pause with any sort of prayer or reflection. I was disturbed by how quickly one of my fellow researchers dismissed these directions, and how easily this same researcher employed the word *respect* in deciding not to engage in prayer as part of their reading practice.

[47] As Shahjahan, Wagner, and Wane point out, "spirituality is not an easy topic to raise within higher education. But it is an important one" ("Rekindling the Sacred: Toward a Decolonizing Pedagogy in Higher Education"70).

What made this person's position even more troubling was how easily the issues of land and decolonization became abstract and symbolic for them. McAdam's words regarding these issues are far from abstract. See for example the fourth chapter, entitled "The Promised Land," where she tells us,

> A *nêhiyaw* Elder stated, "the land is supposed to grow with the people." According to oral history, a 10-mile or 25-mile belt was to be around every reserve to accommodate for the generations to come, each of whom would take up their one square mile….This understanding of farm family lots to practice their treaty term and promise of agricultural assistance would be consistent with their concerns that the generations to come would be provided for and would be sustained through a new life. In fact, this is "the promised land" for all treaty descendants. The treaty itself can be described as a "living will" and this would be considered a treaty inheritance. (70-71)

This researcher's choice not to engage with the spiritual directions in the opening pages of the book, coupled with their facile leap to understanding decolonization as something that can be understood or taken up in abstract or symbolic terms, prompted me to seriously consider if there was a connection between belief or spiritual practice and concrete engagement with Indigenous knowledge and political struggles.[48] I soon realized that this could become the topic of an entirely different dissertation, one that I was not equipped or willing to write. In the context of this dissertation, however, I wondered: "What do we risk when we choose not to believe, or we choose not to engage on a spiritual level?" For me, this group discussion (coupled with Dwayne's challenge to participate in ceremony) raises the question, Does belief or spiritual practice matter? How (or should) we include spirituality, prayer, or ceremony in our reading and research practices? And how might our spiritual choices, practices, and beliefs impact how we do research, how we understand the words of Indigenous people, and how we struggle with very

[48] Chamberlin gestures toward similar questions when he critiques academic habits of running away from the experience of art "with all its indeterminacies and incompletenesses, its surprises and strangenesses, and its anxieties of spiritual influence—into our relentlessly secular theoretical garrisons" ("'The corn people"71)

real issues concerning land, decolonization, and Indigenous rights in Canada? As I will discuss in the following chapter, drawing on the work of Dwayne Donald, I understand that the denial of relationships is a fundamental element of colonization. In my initial exploration (as I said, these questions could be the bases for an entirely different research project) of the role of spirituality in research, I have come to believe that to deny the spiritual is also to deny relationships: with the Creator, and also—on a spiritual level—with each other as fellow human beings and the non-human beings with whom we share (or should share) the land.

Researcher Brené Brown[49] defines spirituality in a way that resonates deeply with many nêhiyaw teachings I have heard. Brown writes, "Spirituality is recognizing and celebrating that we are all inextricably connected to each other by a power greater than all of us, and that our connection to that power and to one another is grounded in love and compassion. Practicing spirituality brings a sense of perspective, meaning, and purpose to our lives" (*Braving the Wilderness* 49). Given this definition of spirituality, what does it mean for researchers to deny, ignore, or hold spirituality at arm's length? In a similar vein, what do we risk if we refuse to believe the spiritual beliefs of others?

In her book, *Do Glaciers Listen: Local Knowledge, Colonial Encounters, & Social Imagination,* Julie Cruikshank recounts:

> The women I knew portrayed glaciers as conscious and responsive to humans. Glaciers, they insisted, are wilful, sometimes capricious, easily excited by human intemperance but equally placated by quick-witted human responses. Glaciers engage all the senses. I was informed, for instance, of firm taboos against "cooking with grease" near glaciers, which are offended by such smells. (8)

[49] I understand that Brown's status as an author of bestselling self-help books (and recent appearance on Netflix) may make some readers suspect of including this reference to her work. However, she is also a research professor at the University of Houston, and her definition—which I find apt and useful for this discussion—comes directly from her academic research.

Part of Cruikshank's work raises questions similar to mine, and in the context of her experiences with the Yukon Elders who shared their stories and knowledge with her, I wonder—does it matter whether we see, understand, and relate to glaciers as animate and sentient? What do we risk if we are quick to dismiss beliefs and spiritual practices that are unfamiliar to us, or that contrast or conflict with our own? As Neal McLeod points out, "Even among historians sympathetic to Cree narratives, there is still a bias against Cree spirituality" (*Cree Narrative* 18). Is there a link between this bias (or a secular position of suspicion or disbelief) and the legacy of unbalanced relationships between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous researchers? Indeed, Kovach suggests that bridging the epistemic gap between Western and Indigenous worldviews "calls for the non-Indigenous scholar to adjourn disbelief" (29). In his article "The gift in the animal: The ontology of hunting and human-animal sociality" anthropologist Paul Nadasdy similarly explores these questions in the context of northern Cree and Athabascan hunters' concept of hunting as a form of reciprocity, where animals are understood as "conscious actors capable of engaging in social relations with humans" (29). Nadasdy notes that very few Euro-American scholars are willing to accept the possibility that animals are "spiritually powerful beings who can think, talk, and interact with humans in all of the ways northern hunters claim they do" (34). Instead, most scholars are quick to understand these beliefs and experiences as cultural constructs, which implies that "they are purely symbolic or metaphorical, rather than real" (26). He shares a story from his personal experience, of seeing a rabbit caught in one of his snares, who managed to snap the wire and run away but then walked half a mile from the trapline to his door five days later. He says,

> I could not help but feel—and continue to this day to feel—that the rabbit came looking for me, that it quite literally gave itself to me. And, in fact, it is only if one accepts the premise that humans and animals are actually (rather than metaphorically) engaged in an ongoing process of reciprocal exchange that the story makes any sense at all. (36)

Nadasdy concludes that "there is something disingenuous about calls for the recognition of indigenous knowledge that emanate from a field whose own ontological assumptions deny the ontological (vs. social) validity of the worldview within which that knowledge is rooted" (37). Not only is this disingenuous, but Nadasdy also suggests that it "has both contributed to the marginalization of aboriginal peoples and forecloses important avenues of inquiry" (25).[50] While I do not agree with the "radical empirical method" or the call for "radical participation" – an anthropological practice in which researchers immerse themselves in a culture, including sacred practices such as "dreaming and consulting diviners" as "a mode of experimentation" (36), I do believe that ceremony, sacred practices, and our relationships with non-human beings matter, and that it *does* matter whether we believe in these things (as real, powerful, and not merely metaphorical) or not. In their article "Rekindling the Sacred: Toward a Decolonizing Pedagogy in Higher Education," Shahjahan, Wagner, and Wane argue that making space for human spiritual practices and ways of knowing in academic research can work to counter intellectual arrogance and foster humility—keys to decolonizing learning (67). They suggest that "spirituality is fundamentally about uncertainty" (68). As I struggled with Dwayne's challenge to participate in ceremony, I began to seriously consider what I might miss if I approached these questions with only my mind, only my books, or only my paper and computer screen. After deep prayer and struggle, I decided to take up a standing invitation to participate in a Sweatlodge ceremony and to allow this experience, and any that followed, to teach me what I needed to know.

[50] In a similar vein, Helen Fox asserts that North American research "is still based on a powerful, but at the same time, extremely narrow conception of thinking and communicating that has made possible all sorts of scientific explorations and ideas and inventions. But imagine its potential to understand and value and dignify all of human experience if it were only aware of the cultural assumptions, the rigid rules of logic, *the dismissal of the spiritual*, and the fear of the unfamiliar, the unacknowledged uses of power that limit its imagination…" (64, emphasis added).

pâstâhowin

This challenge (to participate in nêhiyaw ceremony) led to more challenges in this dissertation journey. Mainly, the challenge I faced (and continue to struggle with) is how to write about this literature in a way that respects the boundaries of the sacred (what can be written about, and what should remain private) but also honours the nêhiyaw context these stories and poems are so deeply grounded in. These questions, according to some nêhiyawak, are matters of life and death.

pâstâhowin is a word I first learned from Louis Bird in 2010. He described it as a sin against nature, something against nature's rules. Sometimes he said it was to pass a forbidden point. For example, in the Story of the Rolling Head, he told us that the mother committed pâstâhowin when she took a secret lover, and neglected her children.[51] He said these things (pâstâhowina) will catch up with you. These things are severely punished by nature. That is what Louis Bird said.

Neal McLeod writes about this word in the context of Treaty making (and breaking) where he explains "If one did break a promise, then that person would be affected by *pâstâhowin*—essentially, a deed that will eventually come back to you: what you put in the world

[51] It is interesting to note how Sylvia McAdam's discussion of pâstâhowin complements Louis Bird's connection between pâstâhowin and miyo-ohpikinâwasowin (*the concept of good child-rearing*), where she teaches her listeners:

> So, when the Creator gave the laws to the people, he told them, there was two very significant laws that were given to the people . . . imagine that the laws are around you in a circle every day, around you. And when you break a law, you step over it . . . and pâstâhowin is that kind of idea where you're breaking a law. pâstâhowin is the breaking of a Creator's law against another human being. This is the human law. And after you've stepped over that law, you've broken it. And when you break it, it needs to be identified, what law it is that you have broken. If you've broken the law of child-rearing, it needs to be identified, what part of child-rearing it is that you have broken. Have you failed to teach your children the language? Have you failed to teach your children the laws? Have you failed to raise your children? These are the laws of ohpikinâwasowin. ohpikinâwasowin was given to the Cree people, and with that ohpikinâwasowin are all of these teachings. ("Breaking the Laws," my transcription).

with one hand, you will eventually get back with the other. The consequences of the act will fall back on the person" (*Cree Narrative* 28). Reuben Quinn suggests that pâstâhowin means "to shatter the future." This meaning fits with McLeod's discussion of the word in the context of êmâyahkamikahk (*where it went wrong; the Northwest Resistance of 1885*) and the difficult years that followed. He writes about how this word, in this context, "referred to how the changes brought about by Europeans caused various animals and spirits to retreat into the earth" and that these times culminated in nêhiyawak experiences of spatial and spiritual exile (57).

As I will discuss below, pâstâhowin is a powerful and frightening word—and it seems to apply to scholars and researchers in particular ways. pâstâhowin is a concept I keep in mind in my work, as I seek to see and respect the boundaries I should not step over.

Relationships and Responsibility

In his Cree class, Jerry Saddleback talked about how anyone can join in the Cree community: black, white, whatever.[52] Everyone is welcomed like a brother. So I have come to understand that in his class, even though I am white, I am something like an honorary family member who has the privilege of learning some of the sacred stories and teachings and nêhiyaw itwêwina that he shares.[53] In a similar vein, Warren Cariou suggests in his article "Who is the Text in this Class?" that Louis Bird became "an honorary *mosôm* to all of us in the group" (469).

[52] It is important to note that the decision to join a community is not made by the guest/foreigner/stranger. This choice to welcome learners as kin is made by the teacher and the community (not the student).

[53] Note that this relationship is not the same as a "settler adoption fantasy" as outlined in Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's *Decolonization is not a metaphor.* For one thing, as already noted, the teacher and the community "make decisions about who is considered a member" and this honorary membership does not grant the learner innocence "against the backdrop of national guilt" (14). Indeed, in my experience, this sort of relationship remains (to borrow Tuck and Yang's words) "uneasy, reserved, and unsettled . . . [it] neither reconciles present grievances nor forecloses future conflict" (3). Instead, this honorary kinship is a continual reminder that I am working in nehiyânâhk, in Cree territory, and that I need to follow Cree laws and protocols, and that this honorary kinship comes with responsibilities and risk.

These two communities, led by Jerry Saddleback and Louis Bird, established something that I understand to be based on Cree concepts of kinship. Their way of relating calls to mind the word kiciwamanawak, which is how Cree lawyer, educator, and author Harold Johnson addresses his readers in his book *Two Families: Treaties and Government.* Reuben teaches that kiciwamanawak is a nêhiyaw kinship term used by males only. It is a term used by a man to refer to his parallel male cousin (his father's brother's son, or his mother's sister's son). However, in Cree culture, parallel cousins are considered to be very close kin, and in fact, the terms you would use for your own siblings would be the same terms you would use for your parallel cousins. So this term, kiciwamanawak, also suggests a brother-to-brother relationship. In his book, Johnson uses kiciwamanawak in the second person inclusive form, which means he is speaking on behalf of all his people to all of us non-Indigenous Canadians. Johnson tells his readers that through Treaty 6 the Cree people adopted us into their families, so that is why he uses this kinship term to address the reader throughout his entire book. He explains it this way:

> When your ancestors came to this territory, *Kiciwamanawak*, our law applied. When your ancestors asked to share this territory, it was in accordance with our law that my ancestors entered into an agreement with them. It was by the law of the Creator that they had the authority to enter treaty.
>
> The Creator gave us several ceremonies through which we experience, learn, and practice the law of the Creator. One of these ceremonies is for adoption. While your law is divided into several areas—tort, property, criminal, contract, taxation—our law is primarily concerned with the maintenance of harmonious relations. Despite its seeming simplicity, the complexity of the Creator's law makes it impossible for a human being to learn all of it in a lifetime. The best we can hope to achieve is a single drop in the river of understanding.
>
> It was in accordance with the law of adoption that my family took your ancestors as relatives. We solemnized the adoption with a sacred pipe. The promises that my ancestors made are forever, because they were made under the Creator's law. This adoption ceremony is what we refer to when we talk about the treaty. (27)

Sometimes I stop and wonder at the profound love and generosity that seems to be at the heart of this concept of adoption and kinship between non-Indigenous people and nêhiyawak. And to me,

because this ceremony was made in accordance with the Creator's law, and also because it involves the Creator (and the ways both Europeans and nêhiyawak relate to this being) this promise is powerful. It is sacred, and it must be honoured. I know it has been broken and dishonoured in so many ways, and it seems hopeless to try to mend these relationships, this promise. Yet if I do not try, I know that I am also breaking this promise. So I ask myself, how can this love and generosity be reciprocal? How can I take up the responsibility of applying this adoptive kinship and the Creator's laws to my work as a non-Indigenous scholar of nêhiyaw literature?

In his class, Jerry Saddleback talked about how this kinship between non-Indigenous learners and the communities who adopt them comes with responsibilities and expectations—responsibilities and expectations that, in my mind, are deeply at odds with western notions of research and writing. Indeed, Tuhiwai Smith "identifies research as a significant site of struggle between the interests and ways of knowing of the West and the interests and ways of resisting of . . . indigenous peoples" (2). My impulse, as a non-Indigenous scholar trained for years in Canadian academic institutions, has been to collect, to write down, to analyse, and to publish what I learn. In many ways, my training has taught me to be "an inquisitive and acquisitive" researcher (Smith 3). How then, can non-Indigenous researchers, such as me, begin to decolonize their work, their writing, and their scholarship? The way Jerry explains it, particularly in the context of ceremony and sacred story, the kinship relationship established in his classroom—between the learner and the teacher—means that what is shared is like something shared within a family. He says that we must keep it in the family. Both Jerry Saddleback and Louis Bird told their students that we as learners are welcome to learn these stories, to work hard at memorizing them, and that if we do that, we are welcome to share them orally, with friends and family. Jerry

in particular emphasized that these stories are shared that way, heart to heart. He told a terrifying story to illustrate what can happen when someone steps over this line—what could happen if these things are written down and published by non-Indigenous researchers without the consent of their teachers. (Indeed, in his story the researcher went on to publish his book despite the explicit pleas of the Elders and Ceremony Leaders not to.) I will not re-tell that story or the words he taught us that day here, but I will refer to another story that bears some resemblance to Jerry's story. This is a story Nez Perce/Tejana scholar Inés Hernández-Ávila discusses in her 1996 article "Mediations of the Spirit: Native American Religious Traditions and the Ethics of Representation." There she discusses the case of Maria Sabina, a Mazatec Elder and healer who worked with sacred mushrooms, and the ways her powers were diminished once researchers began to document and record her healing ceremonies:

> Wasson [an anthropologist] facilitated a Folkways recording of her [Maria Sabina] in ceremony, wrote about her in articles and books, documented her work on her patients, and had photographs taken of her in trance. Maria Sabina quite honestly admits in her narrative that once she began to divulge her ways to the investigators, she began to feel her powers weaken…"[Sabina claims] the saint children [Sabina's term for the sacred mushrooms] lost their purity. They lost their force; the foreigners spoiled them. From now on they won't be any good. There's no remedy for it. Before Wasson, I felt that the saint children elevated me. I don't feel like that anymore. The force has diminished. If Cayetano hadn't brought the foreigners ... the saint children would have kept their power." (339)

Maria Sabina's story and Jerry Saddleback's warning point out that researching and writing about the sacred is dangerous territory; these choices can have very severe consequences (for the spiritual practices, the practitioners, and the researchers). Yet in my dissertation journey, and in walking with these texts by Louise Halfe, Gregory Scofield, and Naomi McIlwraith, I have come to the conclusion that the sacred needs space in this dissertation. It should not be ignored, dismissed, or undervalued. However, talk of the sacred must also include or make space for

practices, experiences, stories, and even words that should remain unwritten. As Hernández-Ávila explains:

> I could describe how the lodge is built, and according to what tradition; how many rocks are used and what kind, and how they are heated; how the ceremony is structured; what kind of songs are sung, if any; how the prayers are said and in what language; what the order of speakers is and why; what each one of them says, and so on. But even if I were to write a disclaimer in such an essay, warning people not to imitate this Native American "woman-centered ritual," and even though in the world of academia I might feel I had not done anything improper in describing it, I know that in the Native American community, among the elders, I could not say the same thing. Because I am certain that just as there would be readers who would be truly respectful of the information, there are those who would feel that my description of details gave them permission to appropriate. Worse than that, I would have betrayed the confidence of the women in the sweat lodge circle that I described, because my intention within the circle of ceremony would have been not to pray, but to record and tell. (332-3)

I have learned (through experience, by reading, and under the tutelage of teachers) that some things should only be shared in close relationships, relationships underpinned by nêhiyaw notions of wâhkôhtowin êkwa tapâhkotowin (*kinship and adoption*). There are some things that can be shared in story, in ceremony, in songs. But many of those gifts do not have a place in this dissertation, or in western academia—they are not mine to share with you here, even if I carry them with me in my mind and in my heart.

Where are the lines I should not step over?

One thing that makes my work with these nêhiyaw texts challenging is that I sometimes have a hard time seeing the lines that I know I should not step over. This is in part because I was raised and trained to think, indeed to believe, that we can write down anything we want to—that things like knowledge and stories and words *should* be shared. As David Garneau argues, "The colonial attitude, including its academic branch, is characterized by a drive to see, to traverse, to know, to translate (to make equivalent), to own, and to exploit. It is based on the belief that everything should be accessible, is ultimately comprehensible, and a potential commodity or resource, or at

least something that can be recorded or otherwise saved" (32). In an effort to honour nêhiyawak in my work, I have learned that I must examine these assumptions, must notice and evaluate my acquisitive impulses.

But my efforts to pay attention to these lines that should not be crossed is also challenging because these lines seem to vary from community to community and because some Cree writers and teachers seem to see the lines differently. For example, Louis Bird told sacred stories to us day after day in the middle of a sweltering summer. There was no smudge lit before the class began, no prayers offered (at least not any prayers that we students witnessed or were a part of). Reuben Quinn won't even say wîsahkêcâhk's name in the summer without lighting a cigarette, and letting it burn. He will not tell those stories in the summer. Jerry Saddleback has smudge burning during every class. Many of the students I taught at maskwacîs were horrified to read the Rolling Head story in *The Crooked Good,* but when Louise Halfe and I talked about this, she asserted that her writing was an act of reclaiming. She also said she doesn't have any problem with the written word—because it has already been written. She talked about how anthropologists and archeologists have been writing these things down for years, so why should they have the right? She said, "It's high time we take the right to do our own written word" (Personal Interview). So there seem to be different perspectives, different positions on what is allowed and what is not. The more time I spend in Jerry's class, the more often I attend ceremony and learn nêhiyawêwin in conversation, the more I wonder, how do you write when you don't know your reader? Can writing (and even further, can publishing) be shared heart to heart? Is writing down and sharing what you learn letting it go outside the family? Would that be stepping over a line—pâstâhowin? And so I try to play it safe by talking about ceremony, stories, and the sacred in the context of, and with the support of published texts by nêhiyaw (or other

Indigenous) authors. But even then, I'm not always sure it is safe. I think of my students reading *The Crooked Good.* How do you write when you cannot control what season it might be when someone reads what you've written? How do you know where the lines are drawn, and how do you make sure your writing is not an act of pâstâhowin?

Rhetoric and Form

These questions inform the final major methodological choice I have made in this dissertation. It is, rather, a choice of form and rhetoric that is influenced both by my education in academia and by nêhiyaw law, teachings, and examples. This choice, or these choices, responds to nêhiyaw teachings, the examples of other Indigenous scholars, and the ideas embedded in both. Yet they are also anchored in my own philosophy of writing, which has been shaped by years of experience and study as both a creative writer and an academic scholar.

When I speak of rhetoric, I am drawing on writing studies and composition scholar Elizabeth Sargent's definition of rhetoric as

> "the art of effective expression"—with "effective" meaning not persuasive for shady reasons, but persuasive because writers have managed to discover and express what they truly think and feel, what they most want and need to say, and because they've also managed to articulate good reasons for their claims and to put those reasons into an order, a shape, that matches their own deep sense of what's most important in their argument. (Sargent and Paraskevas, "A Letter" 3)

As you may have already noticed, my writing style (particularly in my discussion of the texts) is non-linear, personal, and not particularly interested in aggressive persuasion or argument. These are fundamental aspects of Cree (and other Indigenous peoples, such as the Anishinaabe) rhetoric and philosophy. As McLeod explains,

> Knowledge within this paradigm of knowing comes from what you have seen and what you have internalized. Noel Dyck writes that my grandfather "began telling his listeners

> that since he had only a grade three education he could only speak about things that had happened to him, things that he knew about." …A fundamental aspect of this approach is open-endedness. My grandfather "never said what the points of his stories were; he forced the listeners to discover this for themselves." Consequently, people make up their own minds about what they think about something; they have to decide what they believe to be true and the listener is given a chance to internalize the stories. (*Cree Narrative* 13)

This emphasis on personal experience and open-endedness points to a rhetorical stance that is different from many Western academic approaches. As Leanne Simpson explains, "I was taught that individual Nishnaabe had the responsibility of interpreting the teachings for themselves within a broader shared collective set of values that placed great importance on self-actualization, the suspension of judgement, fluidity, emergence, careful deliberation and an embodied respect for diversity" (*Dancing* 20). This stands in stark contrast to many academic forms of rhetoric, where the goal is to "win an argument." In an earlier essay, "Circling Stories: Cree Discourse and Narrative Ways of Knowing" I began to pay attention to these differences, and my earlier experiences, reflections, and observations illustrate how my writing and rhetoric have been shaped by teachers and scholars who also explore and enact what I now understand as a nêhiyaw approach to teaching, knowledge-sharing, learning, and writing. The following was published in 2014, although this section in particular warrants revisiting given my goal of establishing mutual thinking and respect, rather than aggressive persuasion or argumentation:

> Despite the awkward silence that afternoon [in Louis Bird's storytelling class], I found it intriguing that no one intervened or tried to correct anyone. This silence reminded me of the way Dorothy Thunder, my Cree language professor at the University of Alberta, handles disagreement or error in her classroom. There, whenever we answer a question incorrectly, she remains silent. She waits for someone to say the right answer. When she hears it she smiles: "kwayask!" she says. "Good job." At first, I felt disoriented by her approach. I *wanted* to be corrected if I made a mistake. But over time I grew to appreciate her nonassertive method, for, as James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson explains, [Indigenous] teachers and leaders "seek to persuade through example but not to command" (270). Instead of debating or arguing, Cree teachers are more interested in meeting their audiences and students where they are; they want to establish mutual thinking. Eugene Gendlin analyses the intricacy of mutual understanding and suggests that this complex process is foundational for dialogue and meaning-making ("Reply to Wallulis," qtd. in

> Sargent 176). But Cree discourse assumes more than intellectual mutual thinking: there is an ethical element to a Cree understanding of this concept. As Walter Lightning explains, "it is assumed that there will be effort to think mutually with the Elder. The assumption is that active attention, humility of the hearer, and respect for the Elder, will put one in the frame of mind where the minds can meet" (62).
>
> This primary Cree assumption stands in stark contrast to many forms of academic discourse and Western rhetoric. In the weeks prior to Louis Bird's seminar, I took a Linguistics course entitled "The Structure of the Cree Language." There we spent one day looking at different genres in Cree, and for part of that class we also talked about rhetoric. The professor, Jeffery Muehlbauer, contrasted traditional western Aristotelian rhetoric, where the goal is to persuade, with Cree rhetoric. He suggested that the usual goal in Cree rhetoric is not an aggressive persuasion, but rather an establishment of mutual understanding and knowledge (Muehlbauer, August 6, 2010 lecture). Indeed, as Youngblood Henderson explains, knowledge is gained in traditional Algonquian cultures through "intimate and endless listening to stories and dialogue with elders and parents. . . . each thematic repetition or spiral add[s] a little. This can be contrasted with the step-by-step, linear progression of an Aristotelian argument" (266). (published in *Writing on the Edge* 25.1, 46-47)

In a similar vein (though drawing on her research on silence in Inuit culture and narratives), Keavy Martin calls into question this practice "of trying to change other people's minds" ("The Rhetoric of Silence" 155):

> This, for me, is the most radical and most significant idea: that it may not always be possible to make people think otherwise. While in no way do I dismiss the possibility of language to make change, both activists and teachers know, on some level, that shifting another person's thinking through lecturing requires not only great rhetorical skill but also extraordinary luck, and it is successful only once in a while. Perhaps, if we question and even abandon this practice of arguing—of imposing aggressively (and often futilely) on another person's isuma—other means of interacting, of persuading, and of creating spaces for others to learn may become visible. While perhaps more subtle, these methods may well be more effective. (ibid)

In an effort to put into practice some of these other "means of interacting, of persuading, and of creating spaces for others to learn," I have chosen not to write this dissertation in a typical western-academic style; by this I am thinking specifically of the typical thesis/support form that

composition theorists, such as Paul Heilker,[54] have critiqued as a genre steeped in masculine, authoritarian, and coercive modes of argumentation which serve to maintain existing hierarchies.[55] Instead, my aim is to write in a way that makes room for you, the reader, "to walk inside" these poems and to come to your own interpretations—to connect your own knowledge and experiences with what these poets are saying as well as to what I have written here. This is in keeping with nêhiyaw approaches to narrative. As Kovach explains, poets and skilled orators are "able to imbue energy through word choice, and allow listeners to walk inside the story to find their own teachings. The interpretation and the teachings taken become the listener's task. With the listener's involvement, the insight gained from the story is a highly particular and relevant form of knowledge exchange" (60). I am not performing a totalizing reading of these texts—instead it is my hope that others will take up the work I have begun here and that in the future we will see more scholars approaching nêhiyaw literature through nêhiyawêwin. At the same time, these rhetorical choices aim to respect and make room for the positions and perspectives of many readers: as Deanna Reder makes clear in her article "Understanding Cree Protocol in the Shifting Passages of 'Old Keyam,'" Cree culture places a high value on respect between people, and this is reflected rhetorically by accommodating and making room for multiple perspectives (56). I

[54] Many composition theorists made similar critiques and inquiries in the years following the publication of Heilker's book—see for instance Peter Elbow's *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing* or the works featured in *ALT Dis: Alternative Discourses and the Academy* (edited by Christopher Schroeder, Helen Fox, and Patricia Bizzell).

[55] I am not the first scholar to experience and struggle with the oftentimes conflicting demands of western academic ways of writing and researching and those of Indigenous, and, more specifically, nêhiyaw ways of thinking, behaving, researching, and writing. This struggle is clearly explored and addressed by Indigenous scholars, for example in the work of Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony,* Lorraine Mayer's article "Negotiating a Different Terrain: Geographical and Educational Cross-Border Difficulties" and Kathleen Absolon's *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know.*

have attempted to put this value into practice by making space for (sometimes conflicting) positions (for example, whether scholars should italicize nêhiyaw itwêwina, or not).

In addition, I have chosen to write in a style that (I hope) is accessible to a wide range of readers (not only to readers who hold advanced post-secondary degrees). In doing so I follow the example set by Kovach, who says of her writing "Efforts were made to keep the language of this research as accessible as possible, so that it is not mystifying but rather useful to a range of individuals who comprise the Indigenous community" (52). This choice is also in keeping with the nêhiyaw law that commands us to speak from a humble place: ᑖᑕᐸᐦᒋᒧᐠ (tâtapahcimok).

<u>What Are You Trying to Lift?</u>

But before I talk about how my writing seeks to follow nêhiyaw laws, such as ᑖᑕᐸᐦᒋᒧᐠ, I want to pause and speak to the deeper question of *why.* Dwayne Donald once told me a story about his Elder, Bob Cardinal, who asked him, "What are you trying to lift?" as a way of getting him to think about why he was doing the work he was doing. In a conversation we had after my candidacy exam, Dwayne passed this question on to me. It felt heavy, that question. What am I trying to lift? When I reflected on this question, I realized I was trying to lift a boulder of despair: I was trying to lift the weight of colonization, and the years of violence, destruction, and genocide that have devastated this land and its people for the past 300+ years. I wanted to lift that boulder of despair, or at least strain against it, with all the strength I could muster, in an effort to find hope.

Of course that boulder still remains. Later, I realized this is not something I can lift on my own. I cannot lift it within the pages of this dissertation. The lifting will take many people, many people walking painful steps together, and many years. But in realizing this, I have come to see

more clearly what I can lift, what I am able to challenge, and what I am able to change. I am able to lift, with care and civility[56], the nêhiyaw itwêwina (Plains Cree words) these authors have so lovingly and thoughtfully placed in their poetry, their songs, and their stories. I can lift these words up, and allow them to teach me, to guide me, to challenge me, and to delight me. I can lift these words up and I can share them with others. In lifting these words, I lift these stories, these songs, and these poems for others to see, and for others to learn from. I do this because I believe, deeply and passionately, that nêhiyawêwin has so much to teach all of us. This is a language worth learning. These words are worth following. These words are teachers that we need to heed.

This is what I do: I pay attention to nêhiyaw itwêwina; I listen carefully to these words, and I follow them. In learning to speak nêhiyawêwin, in spending time with language teachers, and by bringing this knowledge to bear on my reading of nêhiyaw-English literature, I am beginning to understand and appreciate some of the rich meanings held in these words. These words have so much to teach us. These words hold medicines that are needed for Indigenous resurgence, and these words point to some of the deep wisdom nêhiyaw culture holds. Wisdom that may help us all learn, or remember, how to live here in a good way. These words have something to say, and I see it as my responsibility to listen to them, to reflect on them, and, for the purposes of this dissertation, to write about what I am learning in the process.

In allowing these words to guide me in my reading of bilingual nêhiyaw-English literature, I am giving up some control, because I am allowing the words and the language to guide my reading of the texts, rather than forcing the words and my interpretations into a narrow preconceived argument. You will therefore notice that my discussion of these texts aims to be

[56] I chose the word "civility" because this is the English word Reuben Quinn often turns to when trying to translate manâcihitok. I will discuss this nêhiyaw law in more depth in chapter three.

distinctly non-linear and non-coercive. By this I mean to draw on Simpson's discussion of meaning as "derived from the presence of both the storyteller and the listeners" (*Dancing* 104). In her words, "Storytelling is an emergent practice, and meaning for each individual listener will necessarily be different" (ibid). My reading of these texts is not the only possible reading. I have made these rhetorical choices purposefully, to honour the nêhiyaw itwêwina, and to honour you, the reader, in your own journey and relationship to the texts and language. I once heard Elder Charles Wood say, "We think it's quite sad when one person makes the decision for the collective" (Amiskwaciy History Series Talk). Harold Johnston explains this concept more deeply, and in the context of story, this way:

> To the storyteller and the tribe, the story tells itself. It is for the child and each individual to seek that morsel of understanding, and to draw his own inferences and start fashioning his being and his world. And in letting the listener interpret his stories in his own way and according to the scope of his intellect, the storyteller and the Elders of the tribe trusted in the commonsense of the child to draw interpretations that were both reasonable and sensible. (38)

In this dissertation, I am sharing the morsels of understanding I have gathered by reading these texts, learning nêhiyawêwin, and interviewing authors; I am not interested in controlling these texts or these nêhiyaw itwêwina. I am not interested in making interpretive claims that decide or dictate what you, as readers, should think or feel. This approach is also directed by the literature itself; as Lee Maracle explains, for Indigenous literature today,

> the artistic expression in both the written and oral arts retains its non-hierarchical and non-coercive character . . . . Further, because force was never used to maintain internal discipline, choice, co-operation, 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. ("Indigenous Poetry and the Oral" 305-306)

So take what you will from what I have gathered. Maybe these morsels will help you on your own journey, and as you create your own stories.

In this vein of giving up control, in some ways I am also giving up the esteemed label of expert. I do this in part because I am a language learner, and because I am a cultural outsider. I don't see this as a weakness, however; instead my position allows me to be honest and forthright with the process; with the very verb-based nature of this work: I am learning, I am struggling, I am visiting, I am listening, and I am speaking. I am writing. I am joining communities of Indigenous literature scholars, and of Indigenous language advocates. I am connecting with Cree language teachers and learners, visiting with Cree and Métis authors, and learning from them. I spend time with the language and these people because it gives me great joy, and it is in this vein of joy that I write this dissertation so that I can share with others what these narratives, these words, and these teachers have taught me; so that others can learn and journey more deeply with these texts, and allow them to nourish their minds, hearts, bodies, and souls in their own way.

However, in acknowledging that I have found joy in learning nêhiyawêwin, I also want to recognize and remember that my relationship to the language is that of an honorary family member at best, and this relationship is not easy or settled. When I first began learning nêhiyawêwin it was as a complete stranger to Cree people and an outsider to Cree communities, and my relationship to the language will always be, in many ways, that of a foreigner or a stranger. As relationships and fluency grow I have taken on the role of guest, neighbour, and friend. Over the years I have come to accept that my relationship with nêhiyawêwin êkwa nêhiyawak will not always be easy. Nor should it be, because it is not my language, and it never will be.[57]

Trying to Follow Cree Laws in Writing and Research

[57] I return to and explore some of these tensions in the next chapter, and I aim to keep these risks in mind along my research journey.

One of the laws embedded in the star chart Reuben Quinn taught me is ᑖᑕᐸᐦᒋᒧᐠ (tâtapahcimok). This law commands all of us to speak, to pray, and to converse in a humble way. It is related to the word ᑕᐸᐦᑌᔨᒥᓱᐃᐧᐣ (tapahtêyimisowin) which is translated into English as "humility." But this word, ᑖᑕᐸᐦᒋᒧᐠ, has the reduplicative ᑖ at the beginning, so to me this suggests an ongoing practice, something you try to practice continually, or a habit one tries to cultivate. Interestingly, this word includes a diminutive (the ᒋ instead of the ᑎ in the morpheme ᑕᐸᐦᒋ). Therefore I see the concept or law of speaking humbly in the very grammatical structure of the word: as the meaning of the law comes near to the act of speaking (the ᒧ [mo] has to do with the mouth, or with speaking) the word becomes diminutive, it becomes lowly, or small; humble. When Reuben Quinn was speaking about this law, he referred to a mouse; he had us think about how a mouse runs along low to the ground and does not seem to grasp at loftier ways of being.[58] When I hear this law, ᑖᑕᐸᐦᒋᒧᐠ I think of speaking in a lowly fashion, like a mouse, running along close to the ground. "Don't get too abstract!" I think she is showing me. "Stay grounded. Stay centred. Don't try to speak for others. Don't assume you know more than anyone else"—that is what I imagine âpakosîs teaching me. Finally, the ᐠ (k) ending means that this is an imperative, or a command, said to more than one person. Reuben teaches that because it is a law (and because it has a plural imperative ending) it is assumed to apply to each and every one of us, to all human beings. Over the years I have come to believe that this law should also be applied to writing, particularly writing about nêhiyaw literature, and

[58] The mouse, I recall, was chosen last when ana nâpêsis was looking for someone to help him chew through his snare that had caught the sun. You can hear or read a Cree-language version of this âtayohkêwin in "nâpêsis êkwa âpakosîs âcimowinis," a picture book (illustrated by George Littlechild) accompanied by an audio CD (narrated by a fluent nêhiyawêwin speaker) published by the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre.

perhaps especially to mônîyâwak (non-Indigenous people) who choose to engage with these narratives. This law teaches us that we should not strive to speak as one who is higher than any other, but rather that we should speak from a lowly place, from a grounded perspective. It teaches us to use our voice in a humble way.

And so I seek to carry these two words: pêyâhtik êkwa ᑖᑕᐸᐦᒋᒧᐠ as guides as I journey through these texts. Perhaps these ones will guide you too, on your journeys, through your readings, and in your relationships.

ahâw! Let’s begin.

suddenly I could hear
that to understand Cree
is to listen to Cree,
repeatedly.

ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin
ka-kî-nâh-nêhiyawi-nitohtamân
kâh-kîhtwâm

"kâh-kîhtwâm – Again and Again"

Chapter Two – Language Learning, Risks of Appropriation, and kipihtowêwin in Naomi McIlwraith's *kiyâm*

Naomi McIlwraith is a local poet who published her debut poetry collection, *kîyam,* in 2012. She was born and raised here in amiskwacîwâskahikanihk (*Beaver Hills House,* commonly known as *Edmonton*) with mixed Cree, Ojibwe, Scottish, English, Norwegian, and French ancestry. Her poetry shifts between nêhiyawêwin (*the Plains Cree language*) êkwa âkayâsîmowin (*and the English language*) and in so doing, she honours the beauty and complexity of both languages. At the same time, her work explores important questions about language, identity, and the challenge of living and writing in a colonized land—particularly as a woman of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry.

This chapter aims to emphasize nêhiyawêwin, language learning, and some of the fundamental differences between the two languages through a careful reading of some of the poems in *kiyâm*. At the same time, I also discuss the concept of appropriation and how this connects to some of the tensions surrounding mixed ancestry and identity in McIlwraith's work. I spend time on this issue not only because McIlwraith explores the nuances of these tensions in her work, but also because I am a non-Indigenous language learner and literary scholar. I delve into this issue in an effort to put into practice pêyâhtik (acting in a careful, thoughtful, and respectful way) by thinking carefully about my own positionality and relationships (to my research, the language, the authors, and nêhiyawak). As Deanna Reder suggests, "While in standard literary analysis discussion of one's position is rarely identified and discussed" it is "a necessity in Indigenous Studies, a corrective for the fixation on Aboriginal identity that is already examined keenly, regularly discussed, legislated, regulated, questioned, dismissed,

debated, and defended" ("Introduction: Position" 8).[59] It is my intention to approach these issues carefully, listening attentively to Indigenous writers and doing my best to follow nêhiyaw laws and protocol. This chapter follows a path—through McIlwraith's poetry—that traces how one poet, who has been cut off from her "second mother tongue," (6) struggles to learn nêhiyawêwin in a colonized land, cut off from a community of fluent Cree speakers. At the same time, this chapter traces the poet's journey towards self-acceptance and self-understanding. This is a slow journey—it takes place over many years—but it is grounded in the land, in familial relationships, and most profoundly in the language. This chapter's meandering path begins in linguistic territory by tracing some of the challenges of learning nêhiyawêwin in a land that used to ring richly with the sounds of many Indigenous languages (but is now dominated by English). This will bring us to a clearing where we see how McIlwraith struggles—and eventually comes to make peace with—her family history, the complexities of her identity, the accusation of appropriation, and her efforts to learn nêhiyawêwin. *kiyâm* holds in tension the legacy of colonization—including the nuances of appropriation—with the hard-won lessons she has learned by sitting kipihtowêwinihk (in silence) and practicing kiyâm.

wîcipimohtêtân. Let's walk together.

Language Learning

When Naomi McIlwraith and I met for our conversational interview, she brought along a little hand-made book, which she brought out and shared with me when I asked about her Cree language learning journey. She explained that learning nêhiyawêwin was a journey punctuated with many stops and starts, but that this book—which turned out to be a little Cree-English

[59] Reder points out that "Notably, questions about identity are always focused on the Aboriginal person and whether his or her identity claims are valid legally, culturally, or genetically. (Are you an Aboriginal person if you do not register for a Status card or Métis membership? If you live an urban life-style? If you have mixed Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal ancestry? Etc.)" (8).

dictionary she had crafted, with the help of her father, when she was eleven years old—represented the beginning of her written Cree language learning efforts.[60] As she explained to me at the beginning of our conversation, her father was a môniyâw (*a white man* or *non-Indigenous person* or *Canadian*), but he spoke nêhiyawêwin because he grew up in a Cree-speaking community.[61] When she showed me the dictionary they had made together, she told me, "My Father spoke Cree, so they say ê-kî-pakaskît—he spoke Cree so brilliantly, it's very metaphoric, it's like bright colours, but he didn't write in it.…So my dad and I, I took him around the house, and I just had him say the word for *window*, or say the word for *floor*, or *apple* or all the things; and I had him repeat them, and I wrote them phonetically" (Personal Interview, September 7, 2018).

McIlwraith told me that regrettably, after she and her father created that little dictionary, she did not continue to focus on learning nêhiyawêwin. In fact, for the most part, her language learning journey began in earnest later in life, as an adult, and much of her efforts at learning took place in adult Cree language classrooms. Perhaps for these reasons, she initially learned to conjugate, to analyze, and to translate with more skill and finesse than she learned to speak or listen.[62] McIlwraith points to this backwards approach to language learning in the first poem featured in the collection, "The Road to Writer's Block (A Poem to Myself)" when she ironically directs herself to

> Try reading and writing your second
> mother tongue before listening and speaking.
> Forget that poetry and Cree were spoken before written. Forget

[60] I could see by the way she handled this little green book that this was something precious to her, and her words emphasized this: "And in looking at it…I can see in my handwriting, …I remember the physical labour—this had to be as perfect as I could make it."

[61] I will explore some of the complexities of McIlwraith's ancestry and relationship with the language towards the end of the chapter.

[62] As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I experienced something similar as an adult Cree-language learner.

this as you might your toothbrush, aspirins, or first-aid kit.
Forget not your Cree dictionaries,
because for all your literacy your aural
memory will be poor when you see the words
in print, twenty-five or even fifty times. (6)

In these lines we see the tensions among literacy, fluency, and memory: Naomi's words here remind us that there is a profound difference between knowing a word by heart, knowing how to speak and comprehend oral speech, and being able to look a word up in a dictionary to read its translated meaning, or being able to read a language but not speak it fluently. Again, she directs herself

When you write that word –
cahkipêhikanak,[63]
doubt your tongue and consult your grammar
guide yet again just to make sure
you got the plural suffix right. Now quit
doubting yourself because your tongue remembers. (10)

Perhaps the differences between these two states of being (one who pedantically knows about a language, but cannot speak it or understand oral speech, compared to one who knows how to speak and understand spoken language) have to do with how much time the language learner has spent listening to fluent speakers. As McIlwraith explained, "learning how to think, learning how to think in the other language, I'm not there yet. So it hurts my heart, you know. Just being frustrated, and starting too late, because my Dad had the blessing of learning it as a child, and I didn't, I was a lot older" (Interview).

[63] McIlwraith glosses this word as "diacritical marks in a syllabary; syllabic symbols" (125). However, there are more layers of meaning to this word, and the translation here reminds me of the gap in meaning between a nêhiyaw itwêwin and its English gloss—and the shift in worldview that must occur in order for this gap to be bridged. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, I have learned from nêyiyawêwin language teachers Reuben Quinn and Jerry Saddleback that the word literally means "spirit markers" and these markers are arranged in a particular order, and there are laws and meanings and spirits attached to each one of them.

Fluency—much like miyowîcihitowin (getting along well with others), miyowâhkôhtowin (good relations), and sâkihitowin (love)—is difficult, if not impossible, to generate through book learning, memorizing grammar rules, and looking words up in dictionaries. That being said, I think there is a danger here in being too quick to judge those who are trying to learn the language as adults, often in classrooms that emphasize reading and writing over listening and speaking. Indeed, the fact that Naomi waited until she was "far past puberty" to really devote her energy and attention to learning Cree is one of her biggest regrets ("The Road to Writer's Block" 7). For her, this process was completely disorientating, and she compares learning nêhiyawêwin later in life to being in "an overturned canoe" crashing "through wild rapids" (ibid).

It is important to pause here to note that there is a pervasive myth that adult language learning is extremely difficult, if not impossible. As many language learning manuals will tell you, this commonly held belief is untrue. Linguist and Indigenous California languages advocate Leanne Hinton explains it this way: "Children soak up language quickly and effortlessly; whereas for adults, it seems like a very difficult, long chore. But if you are exposed to a language for four or five years—as a child is exposed to her first language—you will speak it at least as well as a five-year old" (*How to Keep Your Language Alive* 3). She goes on to say that "it is primarily an adult's inhibitions and desire for perfection that makes language learning seem so difficult. My eighteen-month-old grandchild is delighted with herself for being able to name objects and people ('baba' for bottle, 'mawmaw' for Grandmom). If you could learn to delight in small, simple language accomplishments as a toddler does, your path to language learning would seem much easier" (3-4). Irish polyglot Benny Lewis suggests that the idea that adults are at a disadvantage when it comes to language learning "has never held any water or been

demonstrated as true by any serious scientific study. Instead there is only a general trend of adults not learning languages as well as children—but this may be true for reasons totally unrelated to age. Adults struggle with new languages most especially because of a misguided learning approach, their learning environment, or their lack of enthusiasm for the task, all of which can be changed" (17). Finally, Basil Johnston suggests that children learn more quickly than adults do because "their minds are not cluttered up with fears of animates, frigatives, glottal stops, moods, subjunctives, syntax or even pronunciation, but are free to receive new knowledge. They know it takes time" ("What's Your Dialect?" 32). I bring up these ideas to remind myself, and other adult language learners, that we often have unrealistic expectations for language acquisition—namely, that we will gain fluency by attending classes (conducted predominately in the English language) for four to five hours a week (in contrast to the immersive experience we receive as children learning our first language). McIlwraith is aware of these challenges, and again she points to the tension between literacy and fluency when she writes,

> Learn about Cree syllabics:
> Become so literate
> you can teach them and maybe even
> Standard Roman Orthography,
> but don't expect fluency in a classroom. (9)

When McIlwraith compares learning nêhiyawêwin as a second mother-tongue language (and as an adult) to being in an overturned canoe in crashing rapids, she is not only pointing to the challenge of learning a language in a classroom that emphasizes reading and writing over listening and speaking, but also—more significantly—the humility and the perseverance required for language learning. In our conversation McIlwraith explained, "It just rocks your world. It's like going through an overturned canoe in Class 6 rapids on a river because it changes your thinking. You can't become fluent in another language unless you are willing to humble yourself

enough, being like a baby, to learn to think in the other language" (Interview). An essential component of this process, McIlwraith realizes along the way, is the importance of learning to listen, and the humility this requires.

In her poem "*kâh-kîhtwâm* – Again and Again," McIlwraith poignantly illustrates how painful this lesson was for her, because when she was younger, and her Dad was still alive, she didn't take the time to listen to him and learn the language at home:

> *"kinisitohtên cî?"* Dad asked,
> and I didn't*, môya,*
> because I hadn't listened enough,
> hadn't heard the words quite often enough,
> did not, could not, repeat
> what I hadn't heard. (102)

This regret echoes throughout the collection of poems, as we heard it earlier in "*tawâw* – There is Room, Always Room for One More," where she wonders,

> Could there have been more room
> for a Cree conversation,
> for a Cree understanding,
> for a daughter's understanding
> her father's honour
> in the space between, *tâwâyihk,*
> your childhood and your passing. (19)

McIlwraith took her first Cree language class in 2001, when she was 38 years old—and when her father was already beginning to show signs of the terminal illness ALS (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis). Years later, after her father passes, she comes to the realization

> that to understand Cree
> is to listen to Cree,
> repeatedly.
>
> *ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin*
> *ka-kî-nâh-nêhiyawi-nitohtamân*
> *kâh-kîhtwâm.*(102)

Her repeated nêhiyawêwin refrain, "*ka-nisitohtamân nêhiyawêwin / ka-kî-nâh-nêhiyawi-nitohtamân / kâh-kîhtwâm"* draws our attention to the similarities between the nêhiyaw itwêwina nisitohta (*understand it*) and nitohta (*listen to it*). In nêhiyawêwin there is a fine line (both aurally and philosophically) between listening and understanding, and, particularly in the context of the bilingual nature of McIlwraith's work, I find a curious contrast in the link between listening and understanding in nêhiyawêwin and the link between seeing and understanding in English. In English we often say "I see" when we want to express understanding. This is not so in nêhiyawêwin: when I learned the AI[64] verb wâpi[65] I asked Dorothy if one would ever say niwâpin, *I see,* to express understanding in nêhiyawêwin. Dorothy seemed to think this phrase—and my intended meaning—amusing; she assured the class that the word is used in a literal sense to mean the act of seeing, or the ability to see. Sákéj Henderson is quoted as saying of the Mi'kmaq language (which, like nêhiyawêwin, is in the Algonquian language family) "My eyes can see nouns….That's what my eyes are supposed to do, see nouns, and obstacles and tracks and trails. But that's not what the function of the language is. It's not to become another pair of eyes. It's supposed to be speaking to the ear and to the heart…" (quoted by Rupert Ross in *Exploring Aboriginal Justice* 111). Henderson's words here call to mind the story of wîsahkêcâhk—the one where he loses his eyes.[66] It is interesting to notice that it is while

[64] AI stands for "animate intransitive." AI verbs "only involve a single participant, without any action transferred to an object. When a verb does not take an object, it is called **intransitive"** (Wolvengrey *nēhiyawēwin: itwēwina* vol 1 xxxix). And example of an AI verb in English would be *sleep.*

[65] Here in its imperative form wâpi means *see,* not to be confused with the TI (transitive inanimate) verb wâpahta, *see something inanimate* or the TA (transitive animate) verb wâpam, *see something animate.*

[66] I have made the careful decision not to re-tell (or, more accurately, to write down) any âtayôhkewina (*sacred stories*) in this dissertation. In making this choice I follow Leanne Simpson's lead: "It is not ethically appropriate for me to tell these stories here, since these stories are traditionally told by Elders who carry these responsibilities during ceremony or under certain circumstances" (*Dancing* 35). Jo-ann Archibald discusses many of the challenges related to the ethical use of stories and story ownership in her book *Indigenous Storywork: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body, and Spirit*; my choice not to write

wîsahkêcâhk has lost his ability to see that he learns (and through the story then teaches the listener) so much about the trees he stumbles across. He learns from them not by seeing them, but by feeling them, speaking to them, and asking for their help—he comes to learn their medicines through these blind encounters. Thus, this link that the story, the words, and other Algonquian language speakers make, between listening and understanding, may in fact point to a fundamental difference between the two languages, nêhiyawêwin and âkayâsîmowin. McIlwraith's poem emphasizes not only how listening is particularly important for language learners, but also that the two languages (English and Cree) approach and value different modes of communication and understanding.

McIlwraith is not the only one to observe the similarities between the words *nisitohta* (understand it) and *nitohta* (listen to it), and to draw conclusions about the significance of this overlap. For example, on several occasions[67] I have heard nêhiyawêwin teacher and singer-song-writer Carl Quinn talk about Cree laws, and how they are embedded in the star chart. During visits to Reuben Quinn's class Carl repeatedly talked about one law that is particularly important in this discussion: "nistohtamok," (his spelling) which commands each and every one of us to "listen with three ears, to understand." I hear this law, on one level, as a heuristic play on words[68]

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down any of the stories I have heard was also made in light of her work, where she emphasizes the need to "keep the spirit of the story alive" and points out that "The impact of a story from oral performance, aural reception, and visual contact between teller and listener lessens when the story is transferred to the printed page. Some may feel that the life force of the story has disappeared" (147). Finally, I aim to heed Lee Maracle's warnings about writing oral stories down, a choice that often violates Indigenous protocols and intellectual copyright ("Appropriation" 118). That said, you are free to research and read published versions of these stories. An audio-visual nêhiyawêwin version of this particular âtayôhkewin in the *Stories from the Seventh Fire* series called "Wesakechak and the Medicine" may be of particular interest to language learners. The best way to learn about these stories is by hearing them from a Cree Elder, storyteller, or relative.

[67] I took Reuben Quinn's nehiyawewin classes four times, and each semester Carl is invited as a guest speaker to talk about Cree laws and âtayôhkewina that relate to cahkipêhikanak and the star chart.

[68] In nêhiyawêwin, to understand something is nisitohta, and to understand someone is nisitohtaw. The root of these words, nisit-, has to do with recognition, and you can hear or see this root in words such as

that teaches us to remember the importance of listening for understanding, but also, on a deeper level, a reflection of the way understanding and listening are layered. Both Carl and Reuben talked about how this law reminds us that listening should include the heart, (interestingly, they point out that the ear and the heart share a physical resemblance) and that three levels of understanding often come with listening not only with our physical ears and intellectual mind, but there is understanding that occurs when we also learn to listen with our hearts.[69] This teaching is important for language learners to keep in mind—especially those of us who are learning as adults, those of us who are learning in classrooms, and those of us who are learning from books. Indeed, McIlwraith points to this tension between literary skills (such as reading and writing) and fluent conversational skills (listening and speaking) in her poem "*aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-masinahikêcik* – Two Men Writing," where she asks

> *ê-kî-kiskêyihtamêk cî*
> *môy anima ê-nihtâ-nêhiyawêyêk*
> *nêhiyawasinahikêyêko?*
>
> ...
>
> Did you know,
> to understand Cree
> is not merely to write in Cree? (61)

Her nêhiyawêwin stanza can also be understood as saying "If you (merely) write in Cree you are not fluent in Cree." The phrase *nêhiyawasinahikêyêko* is written in the Independent Subjunctive

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nisitawihtaw, *recognize someone by sound,* or nisitawinaw, *recognize someone by sight,* or even nisitospita, *recognize something by taste* (see Wolvengrey's dictionaries for more examples). What is interesting about this law that Carl teaches is that it reflects rapid speech, so that nisitohtaw becomes nis'tohtaw, which sounds exactly like **nisto**htaw, with *nisto* being the nêhiyaw word for the number three. Carl's teachings help us remember the way the word is spoken by fluent speakers, and also what it might mean to understand something from a nêhiyaw perspective.

[69] Trudy Cardinal, drawing on the work of Jo-ann Archibald, connects to a similar teaching, when she writes about dreaming of stories that teach her to listen with more than her ears ("Mosoms and Moccasins" 6). Elsewhere, Archibald shares, "I have often reiterated the teaching that various Elders have said about listening: that we listen with our three ears; two that we hear with and the one in our heart" ("Hands Back, Hands Forward" 14)

Mode: the *yêko* ending indicates a hypothetical situation, which is often translated into English as a subordinate clause using "if" [70]: "if you write in Plains Cree." The phrase *ê-nihtâ-nêhiyawêyêk* can be literally translated as saying "you (plural) are good at,[71]or fluent in speaking Plains Cree." Thus McIlwraith's poetry here points to both her own desire to become a fluent speaker, and the gap she experiences between literary (or linguistic) skills in Cree and fluency in the language. In some ways, her odd position as one who is literate, but not fluent in nêhiyawêwin, was already forming when she was eleven—her Dad, who was fluent, didn't read or write in the language, but as a young girl she worked hard at writing down the words he was teaching her. At that time, she didn't learn those words fluently. Indeed, as an adult she "ruminates on [her] lack of fluency: *namôya nipakaski-nêhiyawân*" (8).

Fluency, Language Learning, and Fundamental Differences Between Languages

At times I also ruminate on my lack of fluency. I acknowledge here that I sometimes find McIlwraith's bilingual poetry difficult to read—in particular I am referring to some of her longer nêhiyawêwin passages. After careful consideration I surmise this difficulty arises for two reasons: one, as I say, I am not fluent in the language, and I am also an aural learner, so I find it difficult to read some of the longer Cree-language passages that include unfamiliar words I have not heard. In seeking out help from and observing more fluent speakers reading her work I have also noticed (and this leads to the second reason that these passages may be difficult) that McIlwraith occasionally uses words even fluent speakers may not be familiar with. For example, when I asked Reuben to help me learn some of the words for various species of birds that

[70] See the University of Alberta's NS 152 Part II textbook for more on this (67).

[71] This concept of being "good at" is indicated by the pre-verb *nihtâ* which Wolvengrey's dictionary suggests can mean "able; good at, competent, practiced, experienced, skillful at, expert at, known as one who does something habitually; well" (vol I p. 132). In discussing the similar preverb *nitaa* in Anishinaabemowin, Scott Richard Lyons explains that "there's an explicitly pedagogical meaning built into *nitaa* as the word signifies being good or skilled at something, knowing how to do it, and doing it frequently. That is, one has to learn how to *nitaa*" ("There's No Translation" 134).

McIlwraith lists in the poem "The Road to Writer's Block," we ended up spending a significant amount of time with these four words: cahcahkiwak, môhkahâsiwak, misi-môhkahâsiwak, and asihkwak (found on page 7 of *kiyâm*). Not only did I learn to say these words fluently, but I also learned that the nêhiyaw name for *bitterns*, môhkahâsiwak, is onomatopoetic rather than being linked to any visual description of this type of water bird; the name phonetically imitates their striking call. Reuben told me his dad would have referred to this bird as môhkamôhk, also because of a particular sound they make[72] (Dec 1, 2016). In many ways, this example echoes the way Sákéj Henderson describes how Mi'kmaq people name trees:

> They are "called" by the sounds that are made as the wind goes through their branches, in the autumn, during a special period just before dusk. In short, they are known and talked about in terms of how they interact with certain aspects of their surroundings—and in terms of how the individual observer perceives them. In a sense, it is a very "interactive" naming, with room for individual creation. (quoted in Ross 116)

This is particularly interesting because I think it echoes what Rupert Ross, Scott Richard Lyons, Robin Wall Kimmerer, and others have pointed out as a fundamental difference between English and many Indigenous languages: a lot of Indigenous languages are verb-based languages while English focuses on nouns. Lyons explains that "Ojibwe is, like most indigenous languages, driven by verbs, thus describing a world of actions more than a world of objects. That is, from the very beginning we can safely assume that Ojibwe senses of culture will conceive of processes more than things" (134). I learned interesting and beautiful nouns in nêhiyawêwin from McIlwraith's poetry: cahcahkiwak, *pelicans;* môhkahâsiwak, *bitterns,* and pîwâkonis, *a snowflake.* But some of these words were not familiar to nêhiyawêwin speakers. When I asked

[72] You can hear some of these sounds online at https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/American_Bittern/sounds where the Cornell Lab of Ornithology tells us "American Bitterns use low-frequency calls, which carry farther than high-pitched sounds. During breeding season they make a bizarre, resonant three-syllable *pump-er-lunk* with a liquid quality; females may respond with a similar but quieter sound" (website).

Reuben about asihkwak, he called his older brother and the two of them talked for several minutes—in nêhiyawêwin—about the word, without coming to a clear understanding of it. McIlwraith tells us that asihkwak are *mergansers*—a word she found in Wolvengrey's dictionary.

McIlwraith is a non-fluent speaker of nêhiyawêwin, and her writing process often involves writing poetry in English, and then, working with dictionaries and grammar-guides, translating her ideas into nêhiyawêwin. When I asked her about her writing process, and whether she consciously chooses the nêhiyaw words, or if they choose her, she said "Up until now I was choosing the words. …I start writing a poem and then I start looking in my dictionaries and grammar guide and I start getting the prefixes and suffixes and conjugating the words properly" (Interview). At other times, she says her use of nêhiyaw words is more organic or spontaneous, as in her poem, "*ê-wîtisânîhitoyâhk asici pîkiskwêwin* – Language Family," which was inspired by the word *kôhkomipaninawak* ("cucumbers") (28). I want to venture to say that two things seem to be going on here, or two forces flowing in opposite directions. This is the image that comes to my mind: yesterday I sat by the river—it was a cold day, with the temperature forecasted to be even colder by the next day. I noticed that the open water in the half-frozen river appeared to be fairly calm along the surface; I could see the trees and the sky reflected on the surface of the water. But pieces of ice were being carried along by the current, and I could see the water moving swiftly to the east. Above the surface of the water I could also see steam or fog—cloud-like wisps flowing swiftly in the opposite direction; the wind was carrying them west. Like the wind moving along the surface of the flowing river, I can occasionally observe two opposing currents at work in McIlwraith's poetry: there is the force of English and an English sensibility at work in her writing (in both languages), but at the same time, her careful

efforts at translating her thoughts into nêhiyawêwin is working to practice and to share a nêhiyaw perspective.

In his article "There's No Translation for It: The Rhetorical Sovereignty of Indigenous Languages," Scott Richard Lyons shares a striking anecdote about the danger of nouns in the context of Indigenous languages. He states,

> What happens in the shift from verb to noun is the objectification of processes, the creation of concepts where once existed actions. It is out of concern over these meaningful differences that some Ojibwe speakers today will caution students of the language against using (or making) too many nounified "win"-words, finding their recent proliferation indicative of an increasing English influence and with it the adoption of a new and different system of thought (136).

Lyons' words prompted me to reflect on some of the nouns McIlwraith uses in her poetry, as well as my own experience as a language learner. Perhaps words like pîwakonis and asihkwak are unfamiliar to fluent speakers because nêhiyawêwin focuses more on verbs, on movement, on process, rather than on naming things (like *snowflakes* and *merganser*s). In speaking of the language of science (and of English) Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer states:

> To name and describe you must first see, and science polishes the gift of seeing. I honour the strength of the language that has become a second tongue to me. But beneath the richness of its vocabulary and its descriptive power, something is missing, the same something that swells around you and in you when you listen to the world. Science can be a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects. The language scientists speak, however precise, is based on a profound error in grammar, an omission, a grave loss in translation from the native languages of these shores. (48-49).

Within this vein of conflicting perspectives at the confluence of languages, I wonder too, sometimes, about the influence of English and European perspectives and assumptions on Cree-language curriculum material and course content. For example, I remember wondering why, in Unit 2 of our NS 152 textbook and course, we learned the names of domesticated farm animals: minôs, *cat;* mostos, *cow;* êkwa kôhkôs, *pig* before we learned môswa, *moose*; amisk, *beaver*; or

mahihkan *wolf.* And why did we learn the name for *orange* (osâwâs) and *banana* (wâkâs) and not the words for *blueberries* (iyinimina) and *chokecherries* (takwahiminâna)? At the same time, I noticed that I sometimes find learning nouns particularly pleasurable. Does this point to the profoundly noun-orientated way my English-speaking mind works? As H. Christoph Wolfart and Janet F. Carroll point out,

> there is a preference in Cree for using *verbal* structures, while in English, structures involving *nouns* are more common. Look at this English sentence,
>
> *In the morning, there will be a meeting.*
>
> and see how many nouns are included: apart from the empty subject *there* we find *morning* and *meeting.* A Cree speaker would say,
>
> *ê-wâpahk, ê-wî-mâmawôpihk.*
>
> instead, using the verb forms *ê-wâpihk* 'when day breaks' and *ê-wî-mâmawôpihk 'one will assemble'.* (47)

Alternatively, I wonder, do I find learning new nouns pleasurable because nouns are easier to learn in nêhiyawêwin, whereas verbs and their conjugation are profoundly complex and difficult to learn? Kimmerer explains, "English is a noun-based language, somehow appropriate to a culture so obsessed with things. Only 30 percent of English words are verbs, but in Potawatomi[73] that proportion is 70 percent" ("Learning the Grammar of Animacy" 53). In his chapter entitled "The Quantum Nature of the Anishinaabe Language," Lawrence Gross[74] states,

> The large number of forms is why people say the verb structure for Anishinaabemowin is extremely complex. In fact, the *Guinness Book of Records* used to have an entry for "Most Complex Language." It stated that, "The following extremes of complexity have been noted: Chippewa, the North American Indian language of Minnesota, has the most verb forms with up to 6,000…" [thus making Anishinaabemowin] one of the most difficult languages in the world. (98)

[73] Potawatomi is an Algonquian language closely related to Ojibwe and Odawa.
[74] Thank you to Mandy Suhr-Sytsma for drawing my attention to this source.

nêhiyawêwin is similarly complex; Linguist Jeffrey Müehlbauer has suggested that Cree, and Algonquian languages in general, have the most verbal morphology on the planet ("Lecture 4: Cree Morphology"). Verbs are powerful and complex in nêhiyawêwin—and can be challenging for language-learners, particularly for those of us whose first language is an analytic language[75] like English (compared to the verb-based polysynthetic structure of Cree).[76] As Demers, McIlwraith, and Thunder explain:

> For those who do not speak Cree, the practice of agglutination can bewilder us. Not only do Cree speakers compound words, they also inflect a multitude of prefixes and suffixes onto words to communicate an abundance of grammatical information, such as subject, verb, object/goal, possession, independent, conjunct, and subjunctive moods, as well as many others. Polysynthesis is another example of how Cree operates very differently from English; just as English follows rules of syntax within the sentence, word order is more fluid in Cree. (454)

This is not to say that McIlwraith makes the mistake of focusing too heavily on nouns; her work features some of the beautiful complexity of nêhiyawêwin verbs, such as the lines *ê-nohtê-âhkami-pîkiskwâtitoyêk, / môy ê-nitawêyihtamêk / ka-kipihtowêyêk.* (you [plural] want to keep on speaking to each other, you don't want to stop talking)[77] (51). Notice that there are no nouns to be found in these lines, because in nêhiyawêwin the actors (you plural in this case) cannot be

[75] An analytic language is one that relies heavily on individual separate words and word order to convey meaning. Linguist Marianne Mithun explains: "Languages which show high numbers of morphemes per word are described as polysynthetic, a term coined by Peter Stephen Duponceau in 1819. Not all North American languages are polysynthetic; some are only mildly synthetic, but there are no truly analytic languages, in which all words would consist of a single morpheme" (38).

[76] Kimmerer humourously and poignantly narrates this challenge in her chapter, "Learning the Language of Animacy" where she writes: "I was feeling that this was just way too hard. The threads in my brain knotted and the harder I tried, the tighter they became. Pages blurred and my eyes settled on a word—a verb, of course: "to be Saturday." *Pfft!* I threw down the book. Since when was *Saturday* a verb? Everyone knows it's a noun. I grabbed the dictionary and flipped more pages and all kinds of things seemed to be verbs: "to be a hill," "to be red," "to be a long sandy stretch of beach," and then my finger rested on *wiikwegamaa*: "to be a bay." "Ridiculous!" I ranted in my head. "There is no reason to make this so complicated. No wonder no one speaks it. A cumbersome language, impossible to learn, and more than that, it's all wrong. A bay is most definitely a person, place, or thing—a noun and not a verb." I was ready to give up" (*Braiding Sweetgrass* 54).

[77] This is my own translation. McIwraith glosses these lines as "you want to speak Cree with each other / you do not want / to stop talking" (137).

separated from the action. As readers we know that "you plural" is doing the *speaking* and the *wanting* because of the animate intransitive –yêk and the transitive inanimate –mêk suffixes, not by any stand-alone noun (as there would be in an analytic language such as English). Gross explains the polysynthetic nature of Anishinaabemowin (although his words can be just as accurately applied to nêhiyawêwin) this way: "[T]he subject, or actor, is embedded in the action. Or, another way to say this is that the actor and the action are one" (110). All of the information (embedded in the preverbs, the second person plural suffixes, and the conjunct mode affix) hinges on the verbs: pîkiskwât (*speak*), nitawêyihta (*want something*), and kipihtowê (*stop talking*).

I find it curious that it was often the nouns I was drawn to as a language learner, and at the same time it was often these very same nouns that my nêhiyawêwin teachers were unfamiliar with. So while McIlwraith's use of unfamiliar nouns may reflect an English-language mindset or influence, at the same time she is bringing words back into use: by using these less common words, she is bringing readers' attention to them, reminding fluent speakers of these words, and teaching them to language learners. Thus her work, although influenced by English, is also working to push against linguicide. As poets often do, she is caring deeply for words. She is caring for them by picking them up from dusty dictionaries or workbooks and bringing them to life in poems.

Why Write Poetry in nêhiyawêwin?

In one of her notes on the poems (found at the back of the book), McIlwraith claims, "I write in Cree and English for these reasons: to search for meaning, to express peace, and to express hope that we can keep this beautiful language—nêhiyawêwin—alive" (122). When I asked her, *Why do you write poetry in nêhiyawêwin?* McIlwraith explained:

> Well, for personal reasons, mostly. It's that blood memory, because it's who I am, because my Dad was such an amazing, awesome, wonderful, humble man who spoke it as good as any other Cree person, and because my grandma said "pahkwêsikan,"[78] because it was in my blood when I was eleven when I was doing this [patting the little handmade English-Cree dictionary she created with the help of her father]. (Interview)

In her answers (both printed and spoken) I sense three main reasons for her decision to learn and write poetry in nêhiyawêwin: to cultivate peaceful relations, to help strengthen the language, and to honour her ancestors. As mentioned early on in this chapter, McIlwraith's ancestry is mixed; indeed, some have questioned her right to write in nêhiyawêwin.[79] The first poem in the collection, "The Road to Writer's Block (A Poem to Myself)" is wry, and immediately forefronts how her relationship with—and her right to write in—nêhiyawêwin is fraught:

> The story must tell of your entitlement:
> your right to write
> poetry in this native tongue. Approach
> this task without foresight,
> as you would a one-way street on a dark night,
> backwards: *naspâci.*
> Entitlement: a provocative word
> when it comes to language and culture,
> a word so easily twisted to mean
> ownership. (5-6)

This poem raises the question, Who can write in nêhiyawêwin? If she were white, would she be appropriating the language? Was her white father appropriating the language by learning it and speaking it? How might a person of mixed ancestry learn, share, and write in a good way?

As mentioned earlier, McIlwraith's late father, Mowat Edgar McIlwraith (to whom the book is, in part, dedicated, and who was the inspiration for much of her work) was a white man,

[78] pahkwêsikan means *bread* and this word, and this moment, is the subject of a poem that I discuss later in this chapter.

[79] While McIlwraith was a graduate student at the University of Alberta, a formal accusation of appropriation was levelled at ther. McIlwraith was careful not to go into details about the accusation during our recorded interview, and I do not have permission to share what details I know. Readers who are keenly interested may consider contacting McIlwraith directly.

and he spoke nêhiyawêwin fluently. Naomi tells me "nôhtawîpan ê-kî-pakaskît, mâka namôya ê-kî-nêhiyawêt, ê-kî-môniyâwêt, mâka ê-kî-ohci-ayîkisâkahikanihk"—her late father spoke nêhiyawêwin fluently, even though he was not Cree—he was a white man who grew up at Frog Lake. She goes on to say,

> he spoke so beautifully, because he lived at Frog Lake from the age of four until about fourteen or fifteen and he would have spoken nothing but Cree except for when he was with my grandparents—they were itinerant teachers, so they were away a lot, so they left my dad—he was the only white child—they left him in the care of the old ladies in the community. And my dad's playmates were all Cree. So they spoke five-year old Cree, and seven-year old Cree, and adolescent Cree—'cause you know what adolescents do to language—and then he was being raised by the old ladies, so this was like, 1940 to maybe 1950, 'cause he was born in 1936. So those old ladies would have been born maybe around 1900, or earlier? So they would have spoken an older form of Cree. (Interview)

McIlwraith comes to the language as a woman of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry, and her connection to the language is not simple, straightforward, or uncomplicated. These tangled connections are what she tries to make sense of in her poetry. But these tangled connections are also what some people might find unacceptably thin: McIlwraith appears to be a white woman, and her passion for nêhiyawêwin comes out of a complicated history (where ironically it is her non-Indigenous father who spoke the language, while her Métis mother does not). Naomi explains it this way: "When I look in the mirror I see a white woman, but then I look in the mirror and I see my mother, and she's a few shades browner than me, and so there's just so much irony here" (Interview). In many ways, her poetry seeks to find a language to articulate her complicated identity. As Kristina Fagan Bidwell suggests, she is not alone:

> We don't have a full language…for articulating how people can have multiple identities or multiple communities without becoming less of any one thing, without becoming less Indigenous, for instance. It's like we assume that each identity is separate. So, our language is based in fragmentation and dilution: saying that we're half something and half something else. Or we talk about intersecting identities, which again implies that you

> have two separate identities that occasionally cross paths. We need better language. ("Many Communities and the Full Humanity of Indigenous People: A Dialogue" 310).

Although McIlwraith appears to be white—although, as she writes, "Some may wish to call me *môniyâw* / because of the colour of my skin," her roots are more tangled than her outward appearance might suggest (28). She refuses to ignore or diminish any of these roots, and readers note this by the way she seeks to honour both her môniyâw father and her Métis mother, as well as the generations that came before her—on both sides of her family tree.

Mixed Ancestry, Shifting Identity, and Accusations of Appropriation

While McIlwraith was a graduate student working on her MA at the University of Alberta, some people accused her of appropriation for using nêhiyawêwin in her poetry. Although the accusation was later dropped, it impacted her severely. I want to talk about McIlwraith's experience because it injured her profoundly, and because it has taught me how crucial it is to be careful when hearing about (and writing about) these powerful accusations. At the same time, her experience connects to wider discussions concerning appropriation that are important for me to consider in my own research journey.[80]

[80] Her experience also calls to mind the issues surrounding white claims to Indigenous identity. For example, in his forthcoming book, *Distorted Decent: White Claims to Indigenous Identity,* Darryl Leroux explores the rise of French descendant settlers in Canada shifting into a self-identified "Indigenous" identity (often through DNA testing), and the political impact this has on Indigenous communities in Canada (his work focusses on this issue in the province of Quebec). His work brings "to light to how these claims to an 'Indigenous' identity are then used politically to oppose actual, living Indigenous peoples, exposing along the way the shifting politics of whiteness, white settler colonialism, and white supremacy" (U of M P, np). Chris Anderson explores some of the tensions surrounding Eastern Canadian folks who have begun to refer to themselves as Métis in his chapter "Mixed Ancestry or Métis?" that appears in *Indigenous Identity and Resistance: Researching the Diversity of Knowledge.* Although these are really important issues that call for careful scholarship and attention, I do not delve into them in the context of McIlwraith's work because, as I have come to realize, McIlwraith's experience appears to be that of a person (and family) who has become dispossessed by the Indian Act and other colonial policies. In conversation, McIlwraith shared that she traces her ancestry to Red River Métis.

Years ago, when I first read McIlwraith's poetry, I was confused about her identity and her relationship with nêhiyawêwin. For example, in her poem "*ninitâhtâmon kititwêwiniwâwa* – I Borrow Your Words," McIlwraith writes,

> *môya ninôhte-wanitôtên ispîhk nêhiyawascikêyâni*
> *ahpô nêhiyawêyâni. ninitawêyihtên*
> *ka-nisitohtâtakok kinêhiyawîhtwâwiniwâwa*
> *kipîkiskwêwiniwâwa.*
>
> I mean no wrong in writing
> or speaking your language. I mean
> to understand you on your terms,
> in your words. (58)

When I first read this poem I was puzzled by her repeated use of the second person plural possessive form in kipîkiskwêwiniwâwa (*you people's conversations/speeches/language*) and the English language second person (which does not distinguish between singular or plural) "you" when she talks of borrowing *your* words, speaking *your* language, and understanding *you* on *your* terms, in *your* words. As the poem goes on, she wonders "How / could I possibly steal / your music?" (59) and then says

> I give you my word;
> I won't take what's not mine.
> These feathers on my window,
> your words. (59)

In addition to these examples where McIlwraith distances herself from claiming ownership or rights to the language, she also self-identifies as a "*môniyâskwêw*" (a white woman) in "The Road to Writer's Block," where she directs herself to "Tell Cree people why you, / a *môniyâskwêw*, / try to write poetry in Cree and English" (8-9). However, it is important to realize that she distances herself from the language and she self-identifies in this way *after* being

accused of cultural appropriation.[81] She refers to this accusation in her poem "Critical Race Theory at Canadian Tire" saying,

> I think I've had it rough,
> accused of appropriation,
> misrepresentation,
> for writing in Cree
> while wearing white,
> skin that is. (39)

In our conversational interview, Naomi said "being accused of cultural appropriation when I was doing my thesis from which this book came . . . was a major challenge." She went on to say:

> I'm not going to name names because I thought about it a lot over the years, and one thing I think I do understand is the anger—Aboriginal people, for what's happened to the Cree language and history, it isn't just loss of language; it's also loss of family, loss of land, loss of culture—I mean we're getting it back, it's coming back, but those losses are enormous, and the anger is enormous, and I think the accusation was borne of anger, but it was unjustly placed on me. Unjustly directed at me. So I don't hate the people that did it to me, I don't feel angry anymore, in fact I don't know how much anger I felt—I think I just felt more hurt; I was deeply wounded because I was doing this [holding up a copy of *kiyâm*] to reconcile with my own family, and to honour my parents, and that accusation just hurt all of that, and it still hurts, actually. (Interview)

Although Naomi has not always self-identified as a Métis writer, for many years she has described her mother as Métis. In our conversational interview she told me "nikâwiy ê-miyo-âpîhtawikosisâniskwêt: my Mom is a beautiful, awesome, Métis woman." That sentiment echoes the line *êkwa mîna ê-âpîhtawikosisâniskwêt nikâwiy* which is how she describes her mother in "The Road to Writer's Block" (9). I asked her about this shift in the way she self-identifies, and how this relates to her relationship with the language:

Angela Van Essen: I remember you once saying in conversation that you thought that other poets, like Gregory Scofield or Louise Halfe, had more of a right to the language than you do. But then I also heard the story about you visiting Marilyn Dumont's and Keavy Martin's combined class where Marilyn tied that Métis sash around your waist. So I get the sense that this

[81] McIlwraith told me that the accusation occurred in 2006.

has been a journey for you with the language and with your identity, and so I am wondering if you wanted to talk at all about that process of reclaiming the language and Métis identity.

Naomi McIlwraith: Yes, it has changed for me. So I think I have as much right to learn, speak, and write in the language as Gregory Scofield and Louise Halfe. That doesn't sound like a very humble statement, but … it is a part of who I am, and it's different than it is for Louise and Gregory because for Louise it's both sides of her, well for me it's both sides too but different. So, Louise is First Nations, both Mom and Dad spoke Cree, …For Gregory, he's Métis, it was his mom's side, his mom and his Aunty spoke it, so really for me it's turned all around. My father, who was white, spoke it fluently. My mom didn't speak it because of the colonial history that just took it away from us, although my grandma, with *pahkwêsikan*, I don't know if she spoke any Cree.... so yes absolutely, I have a right to do this, and it has really strengthened my awareness of who I am.

Later McIlwraith clarified that she does indeed self-identify as a Métis writer and explained part of that journey:

> Several years ago, Dr. Val Napoleon advised me to lay out all of my cultural heritages: Cree, Ojibwe, Scottish, English, and Norwegian, if Métis didn't sit right with me. Now, with my cousin Corinne's help,[82] we recognize that we do have French in our history: Cree, Ojibwe, Scottish, English, Norwegian, and French….I say this because I think I should clarify that I actually do identify as a Métis writer….Two years ago I applied for my Métis card and it came a year ago. When I tell people that I now have a Métis card, I explain that it is purely symbolic of my life's work and writing. …I am not interested in any financial gain that might accrue from my Métis card; rather, I honour my Métis Mom, my fluent Dad, my strong, tenacious Cree/Ojibwe/Scottish/Norwegian, French Grandma, my loving, gentle Grandpa, and my Grandpa and Grandma McIlwraith who worked much of their lives with Aboriginal people. (follow-up personal communication)

[82] The NS 152 (Introductory Cree) textbook teaches the phrase wîhta etâhkâmoyan ekota kônistaweyimâwak kiwahkomâkanak: *Tell your family ties and you will know all of your relatives.* When McIlwraith put this teaching into practice during her visit to one of the University of Alberta's TYP (Transition Year Program for Aboriginal Students) classes, she and Métis writer Corinne Riedel discovered that they are related. In our interview McIlwraith explained, "Corinne e-mailed me and said that because I had introduced myself and because I had said who my grandmother Meakes was, my mother's mom, Lucabelle Meakes; she knew this name as being the older sister of her grandma Geraldine, my great Aunty Geraldine. Had I not made that introduction Corinne and her sister—they'd still be living in the city, but we wouldn't know each other" (Interview).

McIlwraith's journey with the language is complicated, tied both to a desire to connect with nêhiyawak in a good way and a desire to honour and understand her own familial ties. This becomes evident in her prose poem "*paskwâhk* – On the Prairie:"

> How many of the Plains Cree people spoke Ojibwe—*nahkawêwin*—or Assiniboine—*pwâsîmowin. tânitaho aniki paskwâwiyiniwak kâ-nêhiyâwicik kî-nahkawêwak ahpô cî kî-pwâsîmowak?* How did the big, open prairie—*ôma kâ-paskwâhk*—become so unilingually, monolingually unknowing? *tânêhki êkâ kâ-kî-kiskêyimâcik anihi iyiniwa ôki opîtatowêwak?* And how is it that I've finally come to realize—to hear—how *kâ-kî-kiskêyimâcik*—"they knew them"—sounds so very much like *kâ-kî-kistêyimâcik*—"they held them in high regard"? Wouldn't that have been a better history? If we really know each other then we can really respect each other: *kîspin tâpwê kiskêyimitotahki tâpwê ka-kî-kistêyimitonânaw.* (14)

Earlier in the same poem, McIlwraith also wrestles with the silences and unanswered questions in her own family history. She pictures ôhkoma (*her grandmother*) picking Seneca root and knows that her grandmother knew what it was good for, but she wonders:

> [D]id she know it as Seneca root or as *mînisîhkês?* She was born too late to witness the stamping, steaming, heavy-breathing, massive, mammal-smelling buffalo, but did she know the Cree called them *paskwâwi-mostoswak?* Did she taste *paskwâwi-mostosiwiyâs* growing up there in that boundless plain? If the prairie is called *paskwâw,* a cow *mostos,* and a buffalo *paskâwi-mostos*—prairie cow—which came first, the buffalo, the cow, or the prairie? Does it really matter? *êha!* Yes, because if Grandma didn't know the word for grandma—*nôhkom*—and buffalo—*paskwâwi-mostos*—that's where it started. Or ended. Why do I have to look up Seneca root in the English-Cree dictionary to find *mînisîhkês* and then again on the internet to find out what it's good for? (13)

Part of McIlwraith's language learning journey is an act of reclamation—reclaiming a language that was lost, on her mother's side, through colonization. Her Métis mother does not speak nêhiyawêwin, although she heard her mother say twice that she wished she had learned:

> Mom, *nikâ,* I heard you say twice you wished
> you had learned to speak Cree.
> Is that so, Mom, or have the curious
> stares, restaurant chairs empty
> and unavailable, neighbours
> from afar, bad neighbours,
> ungrateful guests, have

they discouraged you? (36)

The language loss on her mother's side seems to be tied to shame and experiences of racism. In fact, we learn that

> My mother's mother,
> *nôhkom* didn't speak a lot of Cree because
> she was born at a time when
> *kihc-ôkimânâhk*[83] told her she couldn't
> be an Indian. (30).

These lines are important because they point to a history of disenfranchisement that is deeply tied to the making of Canada as a nation. As Bonita Lawrence points out in her article, "Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States," in 1850 "a European settler government, an agency with no legislative authority over Indigenous nations, at this point claimed the authority to define who was or was not a member of an Indigenous nation" (7). Over the next 169 years, women in particular lost their legal status as Aboriginal people through Canadian Settler-Colonial legislation. Although Indigenous women fought back (particularly through the Indian Rights for Indian Women movement)[84] and succeeded in changing some of the sexist aspects of the Indian Act with regards to legal Aboriginal status regulations, McIlwraith's reference to the Canadian government telling ôhkoma that "she couldn't be an Indian" points to a legacy of cultural and linguistic loss. As Lawrence explains,

> Taking into account that for every woman who lost status and had to leave her community, all of her descendants also lost status and for the most part were permanently alienated from Native culture, the scale of cultural genocide caused by gender discrimination becomes massive. …[T]he damage caused, demographically and culturally, by the loss of status of so many Native women for a century prior to 1985, whose grandchildren and great-grandchildren are now no longer recognized—and in many cases no longer identify—as Indian, remain incalculable. (9)

[83] At the back of the book McIlwraith glosses this word as "the government" (131).
[84] For more on this see *Disinherited Generations: Our Struggle to Reclaim Treaty Rights for First Nations Women and their Descendants* by Nellie Carlson and Kathleen Steinhauer.

As a result of colonization, assimilation, intermarriage, and perhaps a desire to "fit in" or "pass" in mainstream society, McIlwraith only heard ôhkoma speak pêyak nêhiyaw itwêwin (*one Plains Cree word)*:

> Christmas 1998. Breakfast table
> arrayed with porridge, bacon,
> chokecherry jam and bread the colour
> of a Saskatchewan wheat field, bread fresh
> and warmhearted as a prairie harvest.
> Grandma thanks God for life and food
> and family, says "Amen," then says
> "*pahkwêsikan*." Dad, her son-in-law,
> sitting kitty-corner to her, the only one
> who understands *pahkwêsikan*,
> passes *nôhkom* the bread. (25)

As mentioned earlier, McIlwraith explained that her language learning journey was punctuated with multiple stops and starts, and that this moment at the breakfast table had a profound impact on her because it immediately raised questions about her family's history and relationship with nêhiyawêwin:

> So another [major moment] was when we were sitting at the table and grandma said, "pahkwêsikan," and my dad picked up the bread and handed it to her—and I thought *What just happened here?! Does grandma actually speak Cree? And she hasn't my whole entire life? How can this be? How could it be that I didn't know this? How is this possible?* I mean, now I know, twenty years later (twenty years at Christmas) about our colonial history, I know now I've learned all of this, right? But her son-in-law, my dad, was the only one that understood. He picked up the bread and handed it to her. It was a major lightbulb moment. (Interview)

<u>Connecting to Ancestors</u>

Although ôhkoma didn't teach McIlwraith to speak nêhiyawêwin, she did teach her the art of carding and spinning wool by hand. And in writing about this process McIlwraith is able to illustrate some of the complexities of her inheritance. The poem closes with the image of their hands, working together on the wool:

> My fingers curl under in an inherited gesture.

> Grandma's brown hands guide my pale hands; we
> make the ends meet. The ball of wool grows larger.
> The unspun wool meets the spun wool. (111)

McIlwraith's language learning journey is, in part, her way of "making ends meet": not exactly in the economical or practical way that the phrase is commonly understood (as in making enough money to get by, of being industrious enough to feed, clothe, and house self and family) but more accurately in an intergenerational way: as her "Grandma's brown hands guide [her] pale hands," McIlwraith meets the end of the line, that place in her ancestral line where the ability to speak Cree ended. But as she begins to learn to speak Cree, "[t]he unspun wool meets the spun wool" in an effortful (with "clumsy, sweaty hands") act of reclamation.

The image of her hands meeting her ancestors' hands is echoed in "Like a Bead on a String," a poem that appears later on in the collection, where she describes this connection

> Like a bead on a string, my great-grandmother
> sits next to her kin just long enough
> for me to reach for her hands.
>
> > *tâpiskôc kâ-tâpisahoht mîkis, nitâniskotâpân*
> > *apîstawêw owâhkômâkana nahiyikohk*
> > *kici-têpinamwak ocihciya.* (115)

It is this long and difficult journey of connecting to her ancestors on her mother's side that McIlwraith shares and illustrates in her poem, "*nikî-pê-pimiskân* – I Came This Way by Canoe." She narrates both a physical journey of paddling in a canoe and enduring sweat, bugs, and aching muscles and a deeply spiritual journey that brings her to Lac du Bonnet, Manitoba, the place where her grandmother's mothers lived:

> There I stood: worn like our trail, weary
> like the grip on my paddle, smeared
> with mud, sweating like the river, straining
> to hear the whispers of my foremothers,
> searching for the footprints of my forefathers. (108)

The poem closes with an articulation of this desire to know who she is, and to know who her ancestors were, first in English, and then in nêhiyawêwin:

> Here I stand: looking, leaning back.
> I breathe,
> live,
> want to know who I am,
> search for who they were.
>
> *ê-na-nîpawiyân ôta: ê-âpasâpahtamân, ê-âsôsimoyân.*
> *niyêhyân,*
> *nipimâtisin,*
> *ê-nôhtê-kiskêyihtamân awîna niya,*
> *ê-nanâtawâpamakik awînipanak wiyawâw.* (109)

I read these closing stanzas and see how the poignancy of her words is both echoed and shifted between the two languages. For example, the phrase "Here I stand," when shifted into nêhiyawêwin, becomes "*ê-na-nîpawiyân ôta."* Here the idea is expressed in the conjunct mode,[85] which suggests a continuing or ongoing action. This ongoing action is emphasized by the fact that the verb carries a reduplicative prefix marker[86] (*na*) so that the phrase might suggest something like "I am always/continually/forever standing here." In this instance, the phrase does not literally suggest that the speaker of the poem is standing there for eternity, but the

[85] According to Clare Cook, a linguist who specializes in Plains Cree, nêhiyawêwin "has two entirely distinct verbal inflectional paradigms: independent and conjunct" (Abstract). At the U of A, I was taught that the independent mode is "used in a sentence to make a declarative statement. This statement has a subject and a verb and is a complete sentence. Example: I work today. nitatoskân anohc" (*Plains Cree Grammar Guide and Glossary* 42). In contrast, I was taught that the conjunct mode "demonstrates a progressive action" and is "denoted by the suffix –ing in English" (*PCGGG* 43). However, the more I study the language, the difference in meaning and the usage of these two inflectional paradigms becomes less simple. Fluent speakers have a hard time explaining the precise difference. Cook recently published a book that explores this question from a linguistic perspective; she argues that "the independent order denotes an indexical clause type with familiar deictic properties, while the conjunct order is an anaphoric clause type whose reference is determined by rules of anaphoric dependence" (Abstract). What I am learning is that not all statements in the conjunct mode should be translated into English using continuous tenses (-ing forms). Cree language teacher and educator Marilyn Shirt is open about the fact that, although she has heard different explanations of the differences between these two modes, none of them satisfy her.

[86] See page 87 of the University of Alberta's *Plains Cree Grammar Guide and Glossary* for more on this.

reduplication does intensify the meaning, reinforcing the impact this moment had on the speaker. Because the English phrase, "Here I stand," is somewhat worn by common use, the nêhiyawêwin stanza becomes a reflection of these words, but the reflection is like a reflection in a river or lake, so that the two are not the same, and the differences point to details, absences, and distinctions in the other. In this example, the nêhiyawêwin reflection points to the ongoing nature of that moment in time, the lasting effects of the narrator's search for her roots, and the ongoing experience of searching for who she is.

Looking at the words reflected in each other is particularly moving in the last line, where the speaker says "[I] search for who they were." Again, the poignancy of the absence of her ancestors is intensified when the line is read in nêhiyawêwin: *ê-nanâtawâpamakik awînipanak wiyawâw* which could be literally translated as "I am looking around (or searching) for them that should be here." Wolvengrey's dictionary suggests that the word awînipan (note that awînipanak is the plural form) is a pronoun that can mean "nobody; gone, be gone, someone not here any more; I wonder what's become of him/her" (15). Reuben taught us this word in one of his classes as an example of a word that is difficult to translate, and this is how he taught us to think about the word and its meaning:

> **Reuben**: Say for instance Angela and Kristen make a date to meet for coffee at Remedy. Kristen is there and is looking around, and there's no Angela. She waits. Kristen waits for ten minutes, fifteen minutes and no Angela. No Angela so she would say *awînipan*. awînipan. So what does that mean in English? So Kristen went to Remedy, and now she's telling Eric ênitawinakiskawak Angela. I went to meet Angela. awînipan. So what does that mean? How would you say that in English? awînipan.
> **Eric**: The dictionary says "where is he or she that should be here."
> **Reuben**: Yeah? awînipan. That's not quite it.
> **Angela**: Is it kind of like standing someone up, or not showing up?
> **Reuben**: Yes! So Kristen could be saying "I went to meet Angela, and there she wasn't." [students laugh]. So that's when you'd use awînipan. (November 5, 2018)[87]

[87] Note that my fellow language-learners' names have been changed.

This word therefore brings connotations of loss and absence when we read it in Naomi's poem: *ê-nanâtawâpamakik awînipanak wiyawâw.* I search for them that are not here anymore. I search for them that are gone.

pêyâhtakêyimowin: A Desire for Peace

McIlwraith is learning nêhiyawêwin and writing poetry in two languages to connect with and honour her complicated heritage. At the same time, she is also writing out of a desire to nourish peace and good relationships between Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples. But what does this mean? As stated earlier in this dissertation, miyo-wîcêhtowin is a nêhiyaw concept meaning "having or possessing good relations" (Cardinal and Hildebrandt 14). But what do good relationships look like, especially given the impossible context of colonization? As Cardinal and Hildebrandt make clear, the teachings and the laws governing First Nations' standards of good relations are complex, deeply rooted in ceremony, and given to the people by the Creator:

> Foremost amongst these laws are those related to human bonds and relationships known as the laws relating to *miyo-wîcêhtowin.* The laws of *miyo-wîcêhtowin* include those laws encircling the bonds of human relationships in the ways in which they are created, nourished, reaffirmed, and recreated as a means of strengthening the unity among First Nations people and of the nation itself.…These teachings constitute the essential elements underlying the First Nations notions of peace, harmony, and good relations, which must be maintained as required by the Creator. The teachings and ceremonies are the means given to First Nations to restore peace and harmony in times of personal and community conflict. These teachings also serve as the foundation upon which new relationships are to be created. (15)

I take from what the Elders have shared with the authors here (and by extension with us, the readers) that learning about and practicing these laws is not simple or intuitive. Moreover, it seems that in order to learn about—and put into practice—these teachings, one must follow the lead of Elders, listen carefully to stories, and engage in prayer. What I mean, in part, is that it is not up to us (by "us" I am thinking specifically of non-Indigenous people) to dictate or decide

what it means to be in right relations. As the history of Canada shows, non-Indigenous people have a tendency to assume that we know what is best—to speak when we should be listening, to decide when we should be consulting, and to act quickly when we should be pausing and reflecting. When I think about what right relationships look like, I think about the laws embedded in the star chart: sâkihitok (*love each other*), wîcihitok (*help each other*), manâcihitok (*be civil or gentle with each other*), tapahtêyimisok (*be humble*), kistêyimitok (*hold each other in high regard*), kitimâkinâtok (*have compassion for each other*) … There are 44 syllabics in the star chart, and each one holds a reminder, a law, an imperative that applies to each and every one of us.

Papaschase Cree scholar Dwayne Donald suggests in his talk, entitled "On What Terms Can We Speak," that Colonialism, the way he sees it, is "an extended process of denying relationship." Keavy Martin understands this to mean "that the process of colonization is characterized by and perhaps dependent on a series of refusals: the persistent refusal to acknowledge connection and also the refusal of the responsibilities that relatedness entails" ("The Hunting and Harvesting of Inuit Literatures" 447). Lee Maracle states, "During the colonization of Canada, both land and knowledge were appropriated" ("Appropriation" 101). I juxtapose these ideas here because I believe, at its heart, appropriation is about denying relationships: denying the relationship between the story and the storyteller (as well as the storyteller's descendants), the language and the people, a culture and its context.

In her discussion of appropriation, Maracle illustrates how non-Indigenous researchers, along with the universities that support them and their work, are often guilty of appropriation because they profit from the separation of Indigenous knowledge from Indigenous people, and end up selling this knowledge back to the grandchildren of the people who originally shared their

knowledge in the good faith that it would be available (free of charge) for their descendants to use. In essence, they are profiting by denying the ongoing relationship between Indigenous people and their knowledge. It is useful to quote Maracle at length here because her discussion clearly lays out, from an Indigenous perspective, how non-Indigenous scholars and institutions profit from the dispossession of Indigenous peoples:

> During the colonization of Canada, both land and knowledge were appropriated—that is, expropriated without permission from their owners. On the one hand, we were separated from our knowledge, and on the other, Europeans were entitled to appropriate the knowledge associated with the use of items they purchased. For instance, Johnny Whiteman purchases squaw vine for his wife's menopausal condition from Lee's gramma. He copyrights the knowledge he acquires. Lee is sent to residential school and cannot access her gramma's knowledge about squaw vine while away because she is separated from her gramma and someone else owns the copyright of the information. Gramma dies while Lee is in school. Johnny Whiteman publishes a book and includes the squaw vine knowledge of Lee's gramma, and on her return from school Lee learns that in order for her to access her gramma's knowledge, she must purchase Johnny Whiteman's book. She is purchasing from the appropriator access to her inheritance…. The white people who took the knowledge told her gramma that Lee could use it if she wanted to. And that was true, as long as she was willing to pay for it. The universities of this country own most of our knowledge, and Indigenous people must buy it back as courses. (101-102)

Appropriation and Language Learning

Upon reading her description of students buying Indigenous knowledge as courses, I started to think back to how I began to learn nêhiyawêwin. It was here, at the University of Alberta, where (I recently calculated) I spent more than $3,000 in tuition over three years to acquire a foundational knowledge of nêhiyawêwin. (This total does not include the money I paid to the University of Manitoba to attend their annual Cree Summer Institute, nor does it include the tuition I paid to attend CILLDI's Cree Immersion for Adult Beginners in 2016. Additionally, because tuition rates increase over time, a student wishing to take the same three six-credit courses today would pay significantly more.) This financial cost, it is important to realize, is not

affordable to all nêhiyawak. University courses such as these are not accessible to everyone. When I was teaching English 100 at Maskwacîs Cultural College, several of the students referred to a prophecy in their community: one day, it was foretold, they would have to pay for their water and their language. Sadly, this prophecy has come to pass; for me, this reality clearly demonstrates the ongoing violence and dispossession that are part of the structure of our society. As Inés Hernández-Ávila starkly puts it:

> It is insulting to hear non-Indians self-righteously proclaim their entitlement to our traditions—whether via New Ageism or because they have had the (class/economic) privilege of studying our languages, histories, and cultures in institutions of higher learning—while the young people in our communities still contend largely with a boarding school type of indoctrination and otherwise poor education that rarely allows them to finish high school. (348-9)

Hernández-Ávila's words raise the question: Is it appropriative for me as a non-Indigenous person to learn nêhiyawêwin, particularly as a university student? Maracle makes it clear that non-Indigenous people learning an Indigenous language is not an example of appropriation: "We are teaching our languages to everyone—that is not appropriation" (101). At the same time, I do think it is important to acknowledge that I was in a privileged position to be able to afford to take those courses, and that the knowledge I gained in those university classrooms may not be accessible to many nêhiyawak today. This is deeply problematic. It is my hope that being upfront about my privilege (and at the same time acknowledging and speaking out against the disparity in quality and accessibility between mainstream and on-reserve education in Canada) undercuts any arrogant notions of my entitlement to the language, or any other aspect of Indigenous cultures. I also see it as my responsibility to bear in mind (and to try to honour and respect) all of the relations connected to nêhiyawêwin and my learning of this language.

Although I attempt to honour and respect the profound connection between nêhiyawak and nêhiyawêwin,[88] I also acknowledge that even if I were to become fluent in nêhiyawêwin, even if I were to be able to speak it brilliantly, I may not be liked or set in right relations with all Cree people. Naomi McIlwraith's father knew this, as she writes:

> A woman once told my father
> it didn't matter how well he spoke Cree,
> she wouldn't like him because
> he was a *môniyâw*. (30)

His experience here reminds me that the wounds of language loss run deep, and that the relationships between nêhiyawak êkwa môniyâsak have been broken and denied for a long time. Learning to speak in someone else's language does not, on its own, set things right.

With this in mind, I want to emphasize that nêhiyawêwin êkwa nêhiyawak belong here, and my learning has begun to teach me some of the histories, stories, and ways of seeing the world that were not included in my elementary, junior high, high school, and university education. McIlwraith gestures toward this line of thinking in her poem, *kakwêcihkêmowin ohci kânata otâcimowina* – A Question for Canadian History, where she asks:

> awa pêyak nêhiyaw
> awîn âna wiya
> kâ-kî-nakiskawât
> Henry Hudsonwa?

[88] The connection between a human being and their mother tongue is potent and profound—I know this not only from reading about it in books, but also through experience. My ancestral language is Dutch, but I do not speak it. Nonetheless, I feel protective and territorial feelings towards this language. To illustrate how I discovered this, let me share with you a little story: When I was working at Yonsei University in Wonju, South Korea, I shared an office with a British instructor and a South African instructor. The British man had spent several years of his childhood growing up in Holland, and he was fluent in the language. I remember the sting, and the flood of anger I felt when these two colleagues would speak to each other in Dutch, and then glance my way to see if I understood what they were saying. I could only ever pick out a few words. One day my British colleague sneered at me, and in his upper-class British accent said "You call yourself Dutch, but you don't even speak the language." I remember wanting to punch him.

This one Cree,
who was he,
that one who met
Henry Hudson? (117)[89]

Her poem here opens up the possibility of a different Canadian history, one where there is a balance between perspectives, languages, and stories. So much of mainstream education is unbalanced—largely including only the names of white "explorers," told from a European perspective, and always in âkayâsîmowin. At the same time, McIlwraith's poem here points to the possibility of a different future—one where questions are asked of Canadian history in both languages, one where we hear the nêhiyaw language first, and where we work together for a fuller understanding of ourselves, our histories, and our relationships to this land and each other.

This poem also draws our attention to silence. It makes room for a name that has been forgotten. This is a thread that runs throughout the collection, where McIlwraith makes room for words, stories, and histories that have been forgotten. She speaks to these silences, particularly linguistic silences, in her yearning "to hear / *nêhiyawêwin itwêwina* in the air" (52). Indeed, in the poem that follows "*kakwêcihkêmowin ohci kânata otâcimowina* – A Question for Canadian History," she instructs readers to sit quietly, *kiyâmapi*, and "*ahpô êtikwê kikapêhtên kîkway / kipihtowêwinihk"*: perhaps you will hear something in the silence ("*kiskinohamâkêwin ohci kânata otâcimowina* – An Instruction for Canadian History"118). Notice that her word for silence is *kipihtowêwin* with the locative marker –*ihk* added to the end, so that it can be understood as "in the silence." But we as readers have seen the root of this word earlier on in the collection, as a verb, without the –win nominalizer. Her poem "*aniki nîso nâpêwak kâ-pîkiskwêcik* – Two Men Talking" closes with the lines *môy ê-nitawêyihtamêk / ka-kipihtowêyêk*

[89] Excerpt from McIlwraith, Naomi, "*kakwêcihkêmowin ohci kânata otâcimowina* – A Question for Canadian History," in *kiyâm* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2012), 117 reprinted with permission from the author and the publisher.

(glossed as "you do not want / to stop talking) (51). *kipihtowê* can be translated as an imperative (said to one person) commanding someone to "stop calling" or to "stop talking" (see Wolvengrey's dictionary entry for kipihtowêw). *ahpô êtikwê kikapêhtên kîkway / kipihtowêwinihk* might literally be saying "maybe you will hear something / in the stopping of talk."

Hearing Something in the Stop-Talking

Anishinaabe scholar Lawrence Gross suggests that "Silence . . . is the great void, the great emptiness, out of which all possibilities arise" (*Anishinaabe Ways of Knowing and Being* 55). He talks at length about the importance of silence in Anishinaabe culture, and how even young children "were encouraged to immerse themselves in silence, that is, to spend time alone in the woods, being quiet, taking in the world around them…. However, parents did not simply send their children into the woods to wander undirected. Instead, they were given instructions to maintain silence, pray, meditate on their lives, and observe the world around them (60). This is an important element in nêhiyaw culture too, as Cree Elder Walter Bonaise also recounts the importance of silence in his early education. In his book *Listening to Elders Telling Stories Sitting in a Circle*, Bonaise describes learning to be silent:

> When I was about 3 or 4 years old I used to go and sit with my Grandmother Harriot in the bush for hours and hours. And then I used to pretend to cry but it didn't help! Or I used to try and moan but it didn't help! I had to sit still.
> "Shhhh…you're going to miss a noise!" said my grandmother. "This is where you start learning about who you are." I had to listen to every noise there was.
> When we finished the two hours sitting there, she said, "Some day when you sit with the Mother Earth, you're going to know when that earth moves." That's what she used to say. (35-36)

Kimmerer echoes this emphasis on silence and on listening: "Listening in wild places, we are audience to conversations in a language not our own" (48). This practice of quiet listening reminds me of the word, *kiyâmwâtisiw*, which can be understood as *he or she is quiet*. I first

came across this word in a book by Dr. Anne Anderson, where she writes "kiyāmewosiw iskwesis"[90] and translates the phrase as "the girl is quiet." When I asked Reuben to help me learn to say and understand this word, he emphasized that kiyâmwâtisi was, before colonial times, considered a positive trait among children (attracting undue attention, especially when travelling outside the confines of the community, could be dangerous). He understood kiyâmwâtisiw as meaning "he or she is quiet" or even "he or she is passive." As Bonaise and Gross illustrate, the act of not talking and of practicing quietness are (according to both nêhiyaw and Anishinaabe traditions of education) vital habits to attend to if we are to learn. As Gross later explains, "When maintaining a quiet, attentive attitude, at least three things seem to occur. First, silence helps open one's heart and mind to the world. As we saw above, if one is able to maintain a stance in silence, it is easier for the heart and mind to open up to others around oneself and to start making connections with the world" (73). Part of this habit of maintaining a quiet, attentive attitude involves practicing being in a meditative state. As Bonaise explains elsewhere, "Grandmother was teaching me to meditate and develop my mind to go to a deeper level. At that level you can hear the songs of water and grass and trees" ("Listen to the earth and the music will come" 18). Gross echoes Bonaise when he explains

> The sentence, "The sound of the fire and boiling sap tells its own story," seems simple on the surface, but there is depth of meaning that extends far beyond superficial appearances. This is an entire aspect of the dialogic process that has been overlooked by the literature. This sentence reveals that natural elements, and the members of the natural world by extension, have their own story to tell and so engage in the dialogic process as well…. Perhaps first and foremost is the need for human beings to be able to maintain silence when appropriate. Before one can hear the stories nature has to tell, one has to learn to be quiet, to be comfortable with silence, and to open one's heart and mind to the

[90] Anne Anderson's orthography is not the same as the Standard Roman Orthography used by Wolvengrey and others, but if it were to be written in SRO it might be spelled "kiyâmêwisiw" which Wolvengrey's dictionary translates as "s/he is bashful; s/he is of a quiet, peaceful nature; s/he does not fool around" (70). However, Reuben pronounced the word as "kiyâmwâtisiw iskwesis" which, I surmise, reflects the way folks from Saddle Lake say it (Nov 4, 2016).

wider world. After one can open one's heart and mind, nature begins to open itself up in turn. (62)

This comfort with silence, and this state of being quiet, is tied to the final poem in McIlwraith's collection, and to the collection as a whole, as this state of being is at the heart of the word *kiyâm.*

kiyâm

kiyâm—the title of McIlwraith's collection—is a word that can teach us. It is a word that has taught me, and continues to teach me. It is also a word that has lost some of its deeper meaning in recent years. Naomi writes,

> The dictionary tells me
> it means "think nothing of it," and
> "Let's go then,"
> "Let there be no further delay,"
> and a few other things like that. (119).

In talking about the title of her poetry collection, McIlwraith told me how she met a nêhiyaw (a Cree man) at a conference in Regina, "And I told him I was the author of a book named *kiyâm*, and he says 'Oh, oh yeah, it means *I don't give a shit*.' And I was kind of offended by that because that's not how I mean it at all. He's like, 'It means *whatever* or *who cares,*' but no, that's not how I mean it at all" (Interview). McIlwraith's use of the word connects to an older understanding of the word—a glimpse of this meaning can be seen in its connection to the word *kiyâmwâtisiw*. Reuben Quinn talked about kiyâm in the contexts of nêhiyaw laws, and his understanding of the word has more to do with letting go, trusting in a power beyond our own, and being quiet in that letting go. In one class Rueben talked about how it means "to quiet yourself and let things go…It's kind of a meditative state" (October 3, 2018). He went on to talk about how the word *kiyâm* is related to the word *kiyâmapiw,* which Wolvengrey's dictionary

translates as "s/he is quiet, s/he keeps quiet, s/he sits quietly, s/he sits still" (vol 1 p.70). Reuben explained

> api is in there—to sit. To sit in that state of, I guess, nirvana. A meditative state. kiyâmapi. To let everything go…when you're doing that you're giving all of the worries and cares over to the Supreme Being, or to that first law. When you sit in that state you're giving your cares over to some Ethereal Force and you say, "Whatever's gonna happen, kiyâm."… Where this is most evident is when people go and fast, go and Sundance and martyr themselves—going without food and water—what they're saying is, "To heck with it, whatever happens, happens, and that means anything from you're gonna receive the greatest blessing, or maybe you're even gonna die, but you've accepted whatever—when you're going into that fast, or you're going without food and water—you're accepting whatever is happening as that's the way things are going to be. kiyâm. (October 3, 2018)

Like McIlwraith, Reuben noted that "a lot of our language has taken on a great deal of negativity. Because a lot of people will say kiyâm means "F--- it." But it doesn't. kiyâm means to accept it and you're willing to accept what's still going to happen, and you'll leave it in the heart of that Supreme Being" (ibid).

McIlwraith's poem, "*kiyâm* – Let it Be" moves from the shadow meanings[91] and translations towards this deeper understanding. She tells us

> I remember my Dad saying,
> "kiyâmapik,"
> when we wouldn't settle down
> for the night. He'd
> come running upstairs
> and tell us to "kiyâmapik."
> Which pretty much meant,
> "Go to sleep!" (119)

but the poem closes with the image of Elders praying, and the instruction to kiyâmapi:

> *"kiyâmapi," nipêhtawâw awiyak ê-itwêt,*

[91] By "shadow meanings" I am referring both to the surface, every-day understanding of the word, and its simple English translation—*whatever*, or, *who cares*? The phrase is also inspired by Vizenor's concept of the shadow of translation, where he talks about "The shadow in the name are the memories in the shadow of the bear and the silence in translation. The name is heard and read, and there are traces and *différance* that defer the meaning, but without the stories of the bear and the name the shadow has no memories in the silence of translation" ("The Ruins of Representation" 144).

"mah!"kêhtê-ayak ê-ayamihâcik."

"Shhhh," I hear someone saying,
"Listen. The Elders are praying."

In talking about the words *kiyâm* and *kiyâmapi*, we talked about the layered meanings of these words. McIlwraith explained;

> The meditative part is the Cree, the meditative part is "kiyâmapi, nipêhtawâw awiyak ê-itwêt, mah! kêhtê-ayak ê-ayamihâcik" that's the meditative part of "kiyâm." The Elders are praying. When we pray, we meditate. And so, what I understand kiyâm to be, is it's gonna be okay, no matter how bad it gets. Somehow, things are going to be all right. When I think of kiyâm, I think of hope. (Interview)

Although McIlwraith acknowledges that "some people are hurting / too much to let anything be" (120), she closes with the image of Elders praying, and the invitation (or, more accurately, the imperative) to kiyâmapi. In the vein of language loss—in the impossible context of trying to connect to roots and tongues that have been cut off—McIlwraith closes with the hope that lies at the heart of this nêhiyaw concept. kiyâm invites us to sit quietly. Perhaps this word can teach readers how to follow the laws that are remembered in the star chart. kiyâm brings me back to my intention of approaching these poems carefully, thoughtfully, and gracefully. pêyâhtik.

the mute

who is my tongue, niyakâtôtamân.

kinanâskomitin

the singer

who is my tongue, niyakâtôtamân.

pîmatisiwin nipetamawîna. hâw!

-Gregory Scofield “kipocihkân”

Chapter Three – Entering into Ceremony: Reading Gregory Scofield's *kipocihkân*

Gregory Scofield's 2009 collection, *kipocihkân: Poems New and Selected,* features carefully chosen poems from his previous five books of poetry, as well as a section of new poems. Although this book (as a collection of new and selected works) is not threaded together through narrative like an epic poem or other narrative-based genre, the threads of Scofield's previous works are expertly woven here to create a richly textured cloth with bright threads running along its length, perhaps like a Métis sash. In weaving these poems together in this collection, *kipocihkân* bears witness to Scofield's complex journey of claiming and developing his voice—through connecting with his ancestors, nêhiyawêwin, and through ceremony. But Scofield is not the only weaver at work in this collection. As I will discuss, Scofield's connections to the language, ancestors, and ceremony allowed him to be re-woven into a kinship web. His work is marked by the threads of nôhkom-apihkêsîs (*Grandmother Spider*) who weaves his story into a larger web. While my analysis of Scofield's poetry, particularly "kipocihkân," "Prayer Song for the Returning of Names and Sons," "The Dissertation," and "I'll Teach You Cree" will lead to a discussion of this weaving, in this chapter I will also explore how to approach these poems in a respectful, careful, and sensitive manner. Before we begin taking a close look at these poems, we (particularly us non-Indigenous readers who may be strangers on unfamiliar territory) need to learn about some of the protocol for entering into this ceremony, and we need to prepare ourselves.

Cover Image[92]

[92] If you wish to see the image, you can easily Google it—it's up to you whether or not you want to search for it. Out of respect for those readers who may find the image objectionable, I have decided not to include it here.

Thomas King's 1993 novel *Green Grass, Running Water* has several references to the prohibition against taking photographs at Sun Dance ceremonies. These range from Karen telling her mother that "they don't allow photographs,"[93] to tense stand-offs between, for example, the Michigan tourist who resists the community's request to relinquish film from his camera—and who deceitfully hands over a blank roll, and makes off with the prohibited photographs[94]—to the heated confrontation between Latisha's non-Indigenous ex-husband, George (who tries to surreptitiously take footage of the ceremony through a hidden camera in his briefcase). At one of the more tense moments in the novel, Latisha and the community—along with the four "old Indians" (and Coyote)—confront George:

> "What's in the case?" Lionel said again.
> "Look," said George, picking up the case and retreating one step, "you guys have your beliefs, and I have mine. Nothing wrong with that."
> …
> Eli got to his feet and turned to face George. He held the film canister in his hand.
> "What's this?"
> George was florid, a mottled yellow and orange. "Undeveloped film. Just blank film."
> Eli reached into his pocket and pulled out a ten-dollar bill. "Then this should cover it," he said and he caught the end of the film between his thumb and forefinger and stripped it out of the canister in a great curling arc.
> Eli dropped the exposed film into the case, turned, and walked back to where the dancers were beginning to come out of the main lodge. 385-6

King's novel makes it clear that taking photographs at a Sun Dance ceremony is forbidden. The characters who attempt to do so prove to be belligerent, thieving, and hot-headed.[95] I raise this issue here because photographs of this ceremony (and King's literary representation of their

[93] *Green Grass, Running Water* page 263
[94] See pages 138-143
[95] For a historical (as opposed to fictional) account of a white outsider taking photographs of a Sun Dance ceremony, see William Hanson Boorne's late nineteenth-century account (steeped in a deeply troubling colonial perspective) of his experiences (attempting to, and later succeeding in) photographing this ceremony in his article "With the Savages in the Far West."

taking) are deeply connected to the legacy of the twinned colonial desire to capture (for ocular consumption and profit)[96] and control or out-law (in an attempt to assimilate) Indigenous sacred practices, in particular the Plains Indigenous Sun Dance (which is practiced by the nitsitapi [Blackfoot] and the nêhiyawak [Plains Cree], and other Plains Indigenous nations). As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, Cree Elder Sarah Whitecalf makes it very clear that this ceremony must be treated with the utmost respect; that, in her view, this ceremony is not meant for non-Indigenous people.

I raise this issue because the cover of *kipocihkân* features a photo of an old Sun Dance lodge. In my experience (upon sharing the cover with some of my Cree language teachers, fellow language-learners, and friends), this image elicits a strong response from viewers for whom the Sun Dance is a sacred ceremony they have participated in. It is a provocative and controversial image, one that points to the risk involved in reading Scofield's work—poems that are profoundly spiritual, personal, relational, and deeply ceremonial. In conversation with Scofield, and through experiential learning, I have come to read this image as an invitation to enter into a lodge where ceremony has taken place. But before we enter it, we need to know how to do so with care and reverence. We should know the risks and protocols before we begin.

Years ago, not long after *kipocihkân* was published, I showed an image of this cover in a PowerPoint presentation. One of the nêhiyaw audience members was notably offended by the image, and told me so. This moment had a deep impact on me, and it moved me to think more critically about the relationship between honour, respect, and knowledge. I learned that, despite my desire to honour nêhiyawak êkwa nêhiyawêwin (Cree people and the Cree language), and my

[96] As Chelsea Vowel explains, in Canada "Cultural expressions that can be purchased in the form of goods and services, or entertainment, are acceptable. Cultural expressions that cannot be so easily commodified can be seen as threatening, transgressive, or simply not Canadian" (*Indigenous Writes* 68).

good intention of being respectful, I was completely ignorant about what the image depicted and how it might be seen and understood by nêhiyawak. Years later, when I asked Gregory Scofield if anyone had confronted him about the photograph, he responded that

> various people have various ideas about protocols around ceremony—what can be recorded, what cannot be recorded. I made certain that the Sun Dance lodge that was used on the cover was an old Sun Dance lodge; that was not a lodge that was presently being used, it was an old lodge. So it was basically a skeleton of a former ceremony. According to my teachings I would have never ever used anything from a ceremony that was taking place.

This distinction is important because, as Scofield makes clear, we are not voyeuristically observing a ceremony taking place—particularly a profoundly sacred ceremony to which not everyone may be invited. One of the reasons, I surmise, that taking photographs at a Sun Dance ceremony is prohibited, is because if you are busy taking photos, you are not participating in the ceremony. You are not there to pray or to support the dancers—you are there to see, to observe, to record, and to take. Your intentions seem to be that of a tourist or a researcher, rather than a participant. The cover (whether we are conscious of it or not) asks us to pay attention to our intentions. I recognize this cover as both an invitation and a warning.

Doris Sommer explains in her article "Resistant Texts and Incompetent Readers" that "Some books resist the competent reader, intentionally. By marking off an impassable distance between reader and text, and thereby raising questions of access or welcome, the strategy of these books is to produce a kind of readerly 'incompetence' that more reading will not overcome" (524). When I first read Scofield's book, the image on the cover of *kipocihkân* looked beautiful to me, but I was ignorant of what the image depicted, what it meant, and what it might

be saying to me as a reader. Even though the photo is titled "Sundance Lodge,"[97] and even though I had *read* about this ceremony (in texts such as Mandelbaum's *The Plains Cree* and Ahenakew's *Voices of the Plains Cree*), it was not until I had seen old Sun Dance lodges in person, with Reuben (where he shared some stories, memories, and protocols), and later when I shared this book cover image with Reuben, and still later when I discussed the image with Gregory, that I understood the photo on the cover of the book was functioning as both a powerful warning and an invitation. It is a warning to readers—particularly us non-Indigenous readers—that reading this book is an invitation to ceremony,[98] and thus it requires us to follow protocol, if we are to enter this ceremony respectfully. In the vein of Sommer's discussion of resistant texts, it is not an invitation to conquest, to assimilate, or even to complete understanding. Much like one of the resistant texts that Sommer describes, this book, with its striking cover photograph of a Sun Dance lodge, refuses "to run to meet the reader. The readings [it permits], between stop signs and warning against trespassing, teach a faltering, self-doubting gait too lame for the march of conquest" (530). Of course, here Sommer's words are particularly applicable to non-Indigenous readers. However, for readers who are, for example, nêhiyaw—especially for those of you who have participated in Sun Dance ceremonies, I surmise that this image elicits a far

[97] The photograph is credited to Alan and Terri Wagner, who, according to their website, appear to be a non-Indigenous couple who travel around the world in their leisure time and sell their photographs on the side (see www.trekkerphotoart.com). I attempted to contact them about the image (I had wanted to ask them more about where the photograph was taken, and what their relationship to the community was, and if they had gained permission to take and to sell the photograph) but I did not receive a response. In our conversational interview, Scofield said, to his knowledge, that the "image was a stock photo. So it was a photo that my publisher had to get permission from the people who had the copyright on it in order to use it" (Interview).

[98] Although the cover depicts the site of a former ceremony, as I will discuss later, the act of reading this text is to participate in an active ceremony. I see the cover gesturing towards the act of writing and gathering the poems—and in this way it is the site of a former ceremony (we do not participate in the writing or the gathering of the poems), but this does not mean that reading the poems is to merely visit the site of a former ceremony.

different response, and may indeed "run to meet the reader" with a flood of memories and experiences.

You may wonder: can the image on the cover function as a warning if the reader has no knowledge of what is depicted here, or if the reader has no concept of respect for sacred practices? Indeed, this is one of the tensions of resistant texts that Sommer explores, pointing out that "unfamiliarity with such figures means that readers may fail to notice them…. Readers override restrictions they have never been taught to respect" (530). She argues that "respect demands hearing silence and recognizing refusal without straining to get beyond them" (537). In short, she makes the powerful suggestion that privileged readers (for my purposes here I am thinking particularly of non-Indigenous academic readers) must learn to listen to reluctance (537). This is not an easy or intuitive practice for most academics, for, as Sommer points out,

> how can the books teach us to read effectively if we have been trained as readers to ignore precisely these lessons? … If our training assumes that learning is a progression, that learning is always learning something, how can interpretive reticence make sense? At our most modest we have been assuming, with New Criticism and then more radically with deconstruction, that ambiguity cannot be conquered. But distance from the object of desire? Confessed ignorance of that object? Prohibition against trespassing? We have yet to recognize those purposefully off-putting enticements. (548)

On one level, for those of us who are non-Indigenous readers, the image on the front cover, whether we are familiar with it or not, invites us to relate to the image with humility (to confess our ignorance of what is depicted there, or to respect the sacred ceremony that has taken place) and pay attention to our desires (for knowledge, for understanding, for consumption, or for control). This is the first step in accepting this invitation, and at the same time, heeding the warning this cover evokes.

Can non-Indigenous readers enter this lodge without trespassing? Can we look at this image and see it as an invitation to enter into a ceremony, rather than something to consume (like

a tourist might) or to master and assimilate into our understanding? The cover indicates that, by opening this book, we are entering sacred nêhiyaw territory. Indeed, Gregory Scofield told me that he wanted to have an image of an old Sundance Lodge on the cover of his book because the book itself was a collection of new and selected poems. He explained:

> Because so much of my work is based around ceremony, in collecting those poems from my previous books, I was finding one house, finding one lodge for them. And it very much made sense to me that what I had wanted for the cover of that book was I wanted people to know that they were entering into ceremony.

His words here remind us, as does the cover image itself, that reading this book is akin to stepping foot on sacred nêhiyaw territory; by reading this book we are stepping into a lodge and taking part in a ceremony. I will explore what this means later in this chapter, but first, in an effort to relinquish the desire for control and consumption, it is important for non-Indigenous readers to remember that we are not in charge here. And so, before we enter this space, this ceremony—before we read these poems—it seems to me that the protocol should involve some understanding and application of Cree law to our reading (and writing) practice.

Cree Law and Indigenous Literary Scholarship

In speaking to his non-Indigenous readers, Harold Johnson asserts, "Your family came under our law when you came to this territory. This is simple. You abide by the laws, customs, and traditions of the people in whose territory you reside" (45). Reuben Quinn often tells his students (when discussing differences in protocol) to "respect the lodge that you are visiting" by following their rules and protocols (which may be different from what you are used to, or different from the way things are done elsewhere). It is my aim here to read Scofield's work in a way that abides by the laws and protocols of nêhiyawak, but also, more specifically, by the protocols that Scofield himself seems to set out and adhere to in the lodge that he has titled

kipocihkân. However, although my aim is to approach these poems guided by Cree law and protocols, as I pointed out earlier, Johnson also makes clear that "the complexity of the Creator's law makes it impossible for a human being to learn all of it in a lifetime. The best we can hope to achieve is a single drop in the river of understanding" (27). I acknowledge that my understanding of the Creator's law, and of Cree protocol, is very limited. Learning these things is a life-long journey, and as an outsider I come to this knowledge later in life and without the foundation of an insider's upbringing and experience; the following is my attempt to apply what I have learned thus far to my reading of Scofield's poetry.

ᒫᓈᒋᐦᐃᑐᕽ

Reuben Quinn first taught me about the Cree law that tells us ᒫᓈᒋᐦᐃᑐᕽ (manâcihitok). Like the other laws embedded in the star chart, this verb is in the second person plural imperative (marked by the –k ending), so it is a command, telling us to respect each other—to respect each and every one. This word is closely related to the noun *manâtisowin* which Sylvia McAdam translates as "respect," and which, she tells us, is also considered one of the seven pipe laws ("Pipe Laws"). Walter Lightning translates a related word, "tesimanâcihtâyan," as "to be respectful, to take care of" and glosses this word by saying that it means "respect, to respect something through the care afforded to it" ("Compassionate Mind" 45). Reuben translates manâcihitok as the concept and law of "civility." On one level, he told us, it means "to save each other" or to be civil to each other. He gave this example: if you notice that someone has a blob of food, jam maybe, on their face, you should save them from embarrassment (so you tell them subtly by indicating they have something on their face—you don't announce it). On another level (and on another day, in a different class) he told us that manâcihitok means, in part, leaving

everything the way you found it; it means being civil to all your non-human and human relations. For example, if I am spreading homemade saskatoon jam on nipahkwêsikanim (*my bread*) at break-time during our Cree language class, and there is only a little bit left in the little container I brought along, and if I started to walk over to the garbage can with that little bit of jam left over, Reuben might say "manâcihtâ" (a blunt translation might be "save it"). This verb, manâcihtâ (Wolvengrey's dictionary translates manâcihtâw as "s/he is careful of something, s/he uses something carefully, s/he spares it, s/he treats something with respect") is related to the verb manâtisiw (Wolvengrey's dictionary translates it as "s/he acts discreetly") which is the verb that stands at the heart of the noun manâtisowin (-win is a nominalizer – it makes the verb into an abstract noun). When Reuben taught us about this word, manâtisowin, this Cree law, he told us about a place, not far from Edmonton, that used to be called manitow sâkahikan (God's Lake) which is now known as Lac St. Anne. He told us that his ancestors, before Europeans came, practiced manâtisowin in their relationship to that place: because the place had healing powers, êmanâtisicik, they were saving it for future generations; by following the law of manâtisowin they were being civil towards that place. So he tells us that in those days, no one would camp there, and by doing this they were saving the power for whoever would come after. And he says it was agreed among the various communities and nations that went there that war was not allowed there, for that would be to shatter the future.

To illustrate this teaching, Reuben told us a story. This âtayohkân (or *sacred story*) features wîsahkêcahk and some sâskâtômina (*saskatoon berries*). I will not re-tell the story here, because it was shared orally, and only when snow was on the ground (in addition to the reasons stated earlier in this dissertation). Moreover, although I have heard this story from Reuben three or four times (approximately once a year beginning in 2014), I cannot recite it with perfect

accuracy, the way it was told to me (in both nêhiyawêwin êkwa âkayâsîmowin—both in Cree and in English). However, there is a similar (shorter and with some key differences) story told by Mary Louise Rockthunder, transcribed and translated by Jean Okimāsis and Arok Wolvengrey, published in *wawiyatācimowinisa* *ᐊᐧᐃᐧᔭᑖᒋᒧᐃᐧᓂᓴ* *Funny Little Stories* called "wīsahcēcāhk omikiy mīciw / Wīsahkēcāhk Eats His Scab" (65-72). This story taught us a little bit about Cree protocol for picking berries (as usual, it was through the Elder brother's bad example that listeners learn a little about what not to do), also about being greedy and the importance of not gobbling up everything in sight, and about the importance of taking responsibility for your mistakes. It was a story, he said, for "budding pharmacists." Over the years I have been reflecting on what it also might teach a budding scholar of nêhiyaw literature.

So often in the field of literary scholarship we are expected to perform close (and in many traditions totalizing) readings of the literature we are studying, or to find out everything we can and publish it and put the knowledge "out there" in the world. But when we read, write about, and publish in this way, are we greedily consuming it? Are we approaching the texts (and the contexts they come out of) like wîsahkêcahk approached that saskatoon bush, rushing in and trying to pick every branch clean, eating even the little green ones, and leaving nothing? In this process, might we end up developing indigestion, or grabbing and consuming something (like a butt scab) without realizing it? This âtayôhkêwin prompts the question, how do we read and do scholarly work respectfully, carefully, and discreetly? How might we practice manâtisowin in relationship with these poems, these authors, and the Cree traditions they come out of?

Earlier drafts of this chapter included a discussion of nêhiyaw prayer songs, because Scofield uses one to begin the poem "Prayer Song for the Returning of Names and Sons,"[99] and because I see an important connection between song, ceremony, rhythm, breath, and nêhiyawêwin, particularly in the context of Scofield's poetry. But as I researched,[100] I could not reconcile my gut feelings with the work I was trying to do. Ethnomusicologist Lynn Whidden discloses to her readers that the Cree singers she interviewed "felt that their songs had the potential to change the material word, and that they were essential for physical and mental health. The songs revealed a mode of knowing gained not only from the physical world but also from dreams and narratives, both song and story. . . . The Cree with whom [she] spoke . . . believe, as did their ancestors, that the old songs are powerful and must be treated with respect" (5). I wasn't sure that I would be able to treat sacred songs with respect by writing about them, particularly given my limited knowledge, understanding, and experience of them.

Then I came across an old VHS video tape in the University of Alberta's Rutherford Library: a film by Walter Bonaise that was all in nêhiyawêwin, with English subtitles. I was completely blown away by what he was sharing and teaching in that video. What struck me in particular was his repeated assertion that *you have to sing to something in order to understand it*. In the short film (entitled *Wandering Spirit: Plains Cree Spirituality, Legends, and History as Reflected in their Music*) he talks about how he learned from his parents and other Elders when he was young. He tells his listeners how his father told him that "you must sing to everything you see. You have to understand yourself, and understand why you do what you do. The way

[99] You can hear Scofield perform this poem at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ir6OYgQSIJI which is a video of a reading he did at the Nickle Arts Museum, University of Calgary, March 28, 2009.
[100] I read the work of other scholars, such as the writers featured in the collection *Talking on the Page: Editing Aboriginal Oral Texts* and considered the work of ethnopoetic scholars such as Jerome Rothenberg, Dennis Tedlock, and Dell Hymes.

you understand these things is to sing to their spirit" (translation from the nêhiyawêwin "Woodchopping Song" preamble). He goes on to say that "my father sang to everything that he touched, and over the years, through singing, through following his example, I've come to understand why" (ibid). Near the end of the film he talks about teaching a group of young women to drum and sing. He says "I made them understand how to use their voices as instruments. I taught them about how their voice hits the sky, and returns to Mother Earth, so that the Creator and the spirits will understand them, and will know what it is that they are thinking" ("Morley Song" narration).

When I first heard Bonaise say that you have to sing to something in order to understand it, I marveled at what he was saying. But at the same time, I knew I didn't understand it. I wondered if his words had important implications for me, as a scholar and reader of nêhiyaw poetry. I wondered what it means to sing to something in order to understand it. I wondered how one might sing to a poem. I wondered how his teachings might point to a radically different approach to literature. Instead of spending my time reading in silence, and researching in books in order to understand these poems, should I sing to them? What does this mean, and what might this look like? When I asked Reuben about this, his response was cautious. He carefully suggested that much of Bonaise's teaching is part of, in a manner of speaking, "Immersion Level 4." This was when I considered myself (and I still do) to be in what one might call "Immersion Level 1."

Bonaise explains some of the theory behind Cree song when he talks about the art of chanting in his book *Listening to Elders Telling Stories Sitting in a Circle*:

> Chanting is listening to an animal or anything on Mother Earth, making a sound like it and then putting what you hear into a song.

> Chanting is a huge form of art. Nobody will ever finish doing the research on it. It will be on-going, that's what the Elders used to tell me sixty-five years ago. I used to hear those same stories over and over again.
>
> Chanting is a song. You can use a drum; you can use anything—any instrument that you're comfortable with, that's what you can use. See the instrument, the vibration of that thing, what you're using, is connecting with that song. You are chanting that song to a spirit or to the people at the same time. How do you want the spirits to see you, as you're chanting this song? That's the big thing.
>
> The chanting sound has to come from your whole body. And you have to bring that sound out and "cut" it with your tongue—to be able to rest yourself. You should have Cree—our first language—in order to have the proper sound. You just relax and let the sound come out. You open yourself right up and you have to remember to breathe so your whole body comes out to the people.
>
> …
>
> There's no such thing for learning to stop. Chanting is a continuing education. You're going to be still learning when you reach 80 or 90 years old. You never stop learning until you die. (165-166)

Bonaise's words point to a tradition of art, creation, and philosophy that is largely ignored and unknown by many readers of Scofield's literature. This tradition is so complex it takes lifetimes to understand, and "no one will ever finish doing the research on it" (165). At this point in my dissertation research journey, I realized that this was an area of research that could have profound implications for the study of nêhiyaw poetry—and could indeed become a dissertation project (even a lifetime project) all on its own. It is also an area I have very little experience in or knowledge of.

At this point in my learning journey, an in-depth discussion of prayer songs seems to be too much like eating green berries, and by this I mean that those berries are not meant for me.[101] My (limited experience) learning to sing nêhiyaw prayer songs has given me the sense that

[101] I do wonder sometimes how a nêhiyaw scholar or reader who is trained in this tradition, one who knows these songs, might read Scofield's work. If my reference to green berries leaves you feeling alienated or left out, know that my intention here (and elsewhere where I refer to this and other âtayôhkêwina) is to leave some of the learning up to you. If you feel compelled to hear or read these sacred stories, that is your choice, and might be part of your journey.

nikamowina (*songs*)—particularly sacred songs—should not be written about and recorded out of context, without really knowing them deeply and thoroughly. I don't want to eat something I thought was jerky that ended up being something else! Or, like green berries (or too many berries in general) I don't want to greedily consume something that might make me sick. And so, in order to follow manâcihitok, the Cree law that demands respect, civility, and discretion, I will leave these songs alone. I will leave them the way they are. I will leave them for future use. I will not dilute their power by writing about them here, nor will I risk bringing harm to myself or my family by recording or writing directly about them.[102]

The Dissertation

Gregory Scofield's poem "The Dissertation" speaks to the law of manâtisowin in the context of literary scholarship. In this poem, the speaker describes an unhealthy relationship between a scholar and a poet. The speaker here talks about how the author of the dissertation

> … overtook his poetry like a landlord,
> rented him a room in his life
> where she could study his polemic
> or lack thereof.
> At first it was flattering like a hat or shoes,
> a coexistence of sorts.
> A treaty. A shadow.
>
> But then arrived the microscope
> and she set to work, the academic,

[102] Spending time with nêhiyawak has taught me that there are consequences for not approaching things respectfully. There are a lot of frightening stories and anecdotes that illustrate this. For example, Walter Bonaise tells a story about a young man (his cousin) who shot an eagle. After the young man shows the dead eagle to his uncle (offering him a part of it, which he refuses), Bonaise's father says,

> 'You know my son,' he said pointing his finger at me. 'You know my nephew there, the one that shot the eagle. He is not going to live too long because you are not supposed to shoot an eagle. You just watch—maybe less than a year from now, he is going to die.' My dad was very scared.
>
> So I kept track of this young man and I counted the months and the days and all of a sudden he got killed in a car accident—about 4 months after. Eagles are very sacred birds. You don't fool around with an eagle" ("Don't Fool Around With an Eagle" 149-150).

prodding and jotting,
jotting and prodding.

This poem offers a powerful criticism of many traditional academic approaches to literature, including close reading, objective criticism, and critique. Twice in this short one-page poem the speaker tells us that the poet and his work were the academic's "selection," a choice that was made with "No fuss. No dazzle" (125). Yet the speaker also compares her to a stalker (though he says that to call her this outright would be overkill). Thus, the poem sketches a relationship that is on the one hand impersonal and objective (a choice, made by the academic, that involved no fuss) and on the other hand relentlessly invasive, with a close reading done with a microscope, and much jotting and prodding. There seems to be a profound power imbalance here, so that the academic's work becomes something akin to colonialism or invasion, and she ends up overtaking his poetry "like a landlord" and "renting him a room in his life." In his article "Writer-Reader Reciprocity and the Pursuit of Alliance Through Indigenous Poetry," Sam McKegney points out "The divestiture of control here is acted out through the relative positionality of academic 'landlord' to poet-tenant, with the former setting the terms of engagement while constraining the poet's artistry through physical confinement in a life over which he can no longer claim full autonomy" (45-46). There is a clear lack of—what? Civility? Care? Acknowledgement? Respect? Part of the problem seems to be that she does not acknowledge or pay attention to the poet's humanity, his lived experience. In our conversation about this poem, Scofield pointed out that "in academia scholars are taught [that literary scholarship] is about critique, it is about dissection, it is about analysis. It's analyzing, analyzing everything. And you know I think that in that process it's really important for scholars to realize *who* they're analyzing, *who* they're dissecting, and what their story is" (Interview). As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, the idea that scholars *should* pay attention to the author of the text is at odds with

New Criticism (and other approaches, such as Deconstructionism[103]), but these approaches may be particularly inappropriate for reading current Indigenous literatures in Canada. Composition theorist Peter Elbow sensibly suggests:

> When critics developed the idea that we should not put our attention on the actual author as we read, they were trying to improve and sophisticate our reading of imaginative literature. And they gave us a helpful corrective. But it needs to be seen *as* a corrective—a suggestion to help us open up texts so we can see things we might miss if we are always trying to make contact with the person writing. But by the same token, paying attention to the person who writes *also* opens up texts for other things we might miss if we give no attention to the actual writer. ("Speech, Writing and Voice" 146)

This is particularly pertinent in the context of Indigenous literatures, for as Margery Fee suggested in her 2000 editorial, "Reading Aboriginal Lives," "[W]ithout a conversation with living First Nations people about what they think and feel about their writing, their culture and their lives, the likelihood that we will have produced bad interpretation rises, as we make ourselves the experts, and them into the mute subjects of monologic expertise" (7). This work, of paying attention to the person who writes, of learning and getting to know the person behind the poetry, or at the very least learning and getting to know about the legacies of loss and trauma that these writers have come through is, according to Scofield, a significant responsibility for scholars who want to approach Indigenous work in an ethical way (Interview).[104] This is part of what it means to be a "conscious searcher," a term Absolon uses to get at what it means to be an

[103] Here I am thinking of Roland Barthes's essay "La mort de l'auteur" (or "The Death of the Author"), in which he argues that the creator of a text and the writing they create are in essence unrelated: "writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (142). He therefore argues against the practice of incorporating an author's intentions or bibliographical context in the interpretation of a text.

[104] However, I want to clarify that interviewing authors does not mean that the scholar would then, to borrow McKegney's words, "obligatorily endorse everything [the poet] might say" or that the critic, by talking to the author, would then demonstrate their respect through "strict allegiance to the [author's] desires" ("Writer-Reader Reciprocity" (52).

ethical Indigenous researcher (and I see her discussion as offering important guidance for non-Indigenous researchers who are seeking ethical ways of engaging with Indigenous literature). She claims that "conscious searchers are searching topics essential to their own wellness, the goal of living a good life or making the world better for generations to come. All the searchers [she interviewed] were engaged for a cause greater than the production of a graduate dissertation" (71).

Scofield suggests that part of approaching Indigenous literatures in a good way is to approach them like they would approach ceremony. He says,

> Because so many Indigenous works have dealt and are continuing to deal with issues of trauma—so much about residential schools; so much around language loss; so much around child apprehension, addictions, missing and murdered Indigenous women—we're still really in the thick of dealing with the effects of colonization. A lot of our works are really reflective of that, in one way or another. I think it's really important for scholars to approach those works as if they were approaching ceremony. (Interview)

Perhaps what is missing in the dissertation Scofield describes in his poem is the care required when approaching ceremony—the relationships and protocols that lie at the heart of ceremony.

***kipocihkân* as an Invitation to Ceremony**

In our conversation, Scofield made it clear that he wanted the cover image to convey the sense of a previous ceremony, "something that has happened. And that's really what *kipocihkân*, what the book was about. It was about all these previous ceremonies—and the lodge on the front cover was a symbol of all of those previous ceremonies, and allowing people access into that ceremony" (Interview). In a similar vein, Scofield also says that when he writes his poetry collections, he "always begins with a title" (CBC Interview). The title, he explains, becomes "the sacred lodge of where the poems are going to be" (ibid). He goes on to say that "poetry, for me,

and the act of writing, is very much about ceremony. And it's always been about ceremony" (ibid).

kipocihkân, the title, then, is the name Scofield gives to this lodge, this place to house these poems. On the page preceding the table of contents, Scofield includes a translation: "**kipocihkân** (IPC) A slang word for someone who is unable to talk; a mute" (from the *Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary*). When I listen to this word, I hear its relation to the word kipaha! (*close it!*[105]) and other related words that have to do with closing (kipahikâtêw *it is closed* or kipona! *cover it or hold it closed with your hand!*[106]), blocking (kipahikan *an obstruction, dam, weir; cover, lid, stopper, cork*[107]) and imprisonment (kipahow'kamik *–a jail*[108]). The *Alberta Elders' Cree Dictionary* (the source Scofield cites) also includes an entry for a variant of this word: kipoc, which precedes the entry for kipocihkân and is given the very same English translation (see page 45 of this dictionary for these two entries). What is significant then, is Scofield's choice of the second word—and the suffix that it carries. The –hkân suffix often indicates that something is "fake or artificial" (*Introductory Cree Part 2,* 101). You can see this same suffix in words such as pîsimohkân (a clock, but more literally, a fake pîsim, *sun* or *orb*) or awâsisîhkân (*a doll*, but again more literally, an artificial awâsis, or *child*). But I have also heard that this word ending sometimes signals colonization. When Omushkego author and educator (and former politician) Keith Goulet visited the University of Alberta, he talked specifically about this –hkân suffix as something that, in many contexts, signals the effects of colonization. He gave the example of the word okimâhkân which today means "chief" but again, if literally translated,

[105] I first learned this word from Ken Paupanekis in his Swampy Cree course at the U of M in 2011, but have since heard it in many other contexts.
[106] From Wolvengrey's entry in *nēhiyawēwin: itwēwina*
[107] ibid
[108] Dorothy Thunder taught me this word in her Cree immersion course in 2016

means fake okimâw—a fake boss or leader. He explained how this term today refers to someone who has been elected, but that before the Indian Act was implemented, before colonization, leaders were chosen differently. Wolvengrey's dictionary entry supports this understanding, suggesting that okimâhkân means "chief; elected or appointed chief; reserve chief; band council leader; *pretend leader*." (vol 1 p. 151, emphasis added). Other words support this idea, such as words for foods that were introduced and imported by Europeans: mînisihkân (*grapes* or *berries that are not locally grown*—from mînisa, *berries* and the –hkân suffix), mîcimâhpohkân (*canned soup*—literally "fake soup"), or wîyâsihkân (*spam* or *canned meat*).[109] I want to emphasize that kipocihkân, and the "fake" suffix attached to it, carries and points to the legacy of colonization, particularly as the title for this book. In this word I hear the rawness of someone who has been silenced, someone whose tongue has become lodged in the throat like a cork—and yet this stopping of the voice and of the tongue is not natural; there is something forced or artificial about it. So the title of the book and the image on the cover work together to balance each other—one points to a legacy of violence, loss, and pain, and the other points to the process of healing, of coming home through ceremony, and of finding and reclaiming the voice. It is through this ceremony, in this lodge, and through the act of writing that the obstruction is released. Indeed, in a later presentation (which was then published in *Indigenous Poetics in Canada*) Scofield explains that

> the word "kipocihkân," in Cree, is a slang word. It means "to be muted" or "to be silenced." And I suppose that this is the reason why I was drawn to poetry, into the world of storytelling. My sense of kipocihkân—that sense of being muted, and the need and desire to be heard, I guess you could say to make sound—was my inspiration for this particular poem. Perhaps my greatest difficulty in life has been the silence and being silenced. I've never been afraid of the silence because there are a lot of things within that silence, but I've always struggled very much with being silenced, I think, as a lot of

[109] I first learned these words in Dorothy Thunder's NS 152 course. See page 101 in the Introductory Cree Part 2 textbook.

> people have, probably a fair number of my colleagues. That's probably the reason why we write. ("Poems as Healing Bundles" 317-8)

"kipocihkân" as an Opening Ceremony

The collection begins with something that is at once a call to prayer, a prayer, a personal introduction, and a confession. Scofield claims that he doesn't "necessarily consider this a poem. I really don't know what I consider it," he says ("Poems as Healing Bundles" 317). Drawing on nêhiyaw, Jewish, and Christian prayer traditions, this opening piece sets the tone for the collection as a whole. In it, he addresses kisê-manitow, Ado-nai, and Our Heavenly Father. By addressing the Supreme Being in ways that connect to both his mother's side (Cree-Métis) and his father's side (Jewish) he invites us, as well as his ancestors, the Creator, and all the ones who have shaped his life, into ceremony.

What kind of ceremony are we invited to join here, in the reading of this book? In his talk, "Poems as Healing Bundles," Scofield explains, "We are all given bundles, and … there are some bundles that I believe are meant to be untied and opened. There are others that are meant to remain closed. We all carry, within ourselves, sacred bundles" (318). He goes on to explain how sharing personal stories through poetry is like opening a sacred bundle in ceremony. He says,

> People have often asked me how it is that I can talk about such personal things. Of course it is difficult. We are all self-conscious. But when you consider that we all carry our vulnerabilities, it makes it much easier to stand in front of people and speak our truth. When you think about it, we are all able to open those bundles of ourselves, we are able to unwrap them in front of each other in ceremony. We don't need to be in a sacred lodge, and we don't need to have our traditional medicines laid out because this is already happening—for example, like the work that we are doing at this poetics symposium. Each day ceremonies have happened in this very room, ceremonies in which we have opened bundles in front of each other. (319)

Through reading this book, we are invited to take part in a ceremony where a bundle is opened and shared in an intimate setting.

Nestled inside this bundle that Scofield has named "kipocihkân" are two important elements that I want to focus on in this dissertation chapter: the legacy of language loss (and Scofield's process of reconnecting to and reclaiming nêhiyawêwin), and his connection to his ancestors (which, on his mother's side, is deeply tied to reconnecting with nêhiyaw voices). By untying this bundle at the beginning of his book, Scofield also shows us that this process of reclaiming and reconnecting brings with it responsibility, so that he takes responsibility for all of his tongue's qualities until, at last, his tongue is able to sing—this ceremony has freed his voice and tongue.

A Silent Singing Stone: Language Loss and Reclaiming the Mother Tongue

"kipocihkân" begins with the speaker introducing himself:

> niya, I am the boy
> whose tongue at birth, kipahikan
> hungered its blood root

Immediately these opening lines point to the legacy of language loss, and we learn how already at birth, his tongue is a kipahikan, a blockage lodged in his throat. Already at birth his tongue is cut off from nêhiyawêwin, and it hungers that blood root. It is interesting to notice that his tongue does not simply hunger *for* its blood root, but that his tongue—unable to speak nêhiyawêwin—causes that blood root to hunger. The ambiguity here suggests a reciprocal relationship between the boy and his ancestors that might be nourished only through the language.[110]

Because of generations of colonization and dislocation, his family is cut off from their land as well as their language: the poem refers to his câpân, his great-great grandmother Mary

[110] This reciprocity through the language is, as I will later discuss, taken up in the poem "I'll Teach You Cree"

being “made homeless” “the day Riel slipped through the gallows” (12). In the following generations, the family takes on shame in their Cree-Métis identity: his câpânak Johnny êkwa Ida, his great-grandparents, are sketched here as tongues that shamefully “diluted the gene pool” and as “tongues, chased up north, [which] set others to wagging” (12). His mosôm George also takes on this shame, and because of this burden he does not pass on the language to his children. As he relocates again, now moving south (perhaps out of love and the desire to marry the woman who becomes his wife) we are told that he swallows his tongue for her. Thus we can surmise that the speaker’s mother is unable to satiate her son’s hunger for that blood root. And that blood root, hungry for her grandson’s tongue, hungers—because nêhiyawêwin, that tongue, has already been swallowed, chased away, made homeless. kipocihkân has become his inheritance.

But the boy in the opening lines of the poem is able to reconnect and reclaim that tongue through his relationship with his mâmasis Georgie, his little mother (I will explore some of the intricate kinship ties in nêhiyawêwin later—for now, I will mention that mâmasis is a literal translation of the nêhiyawêwin term for someone’s mother’s sister, or *aunty*). It is her tongue that feeds him this language he has been hungering for—through her he learns the language with none of the shame that his ancestors carried, and through nêhiyawêwin he clings to life. The language, shared through stories, told over tea, brings the speaker hope:

> her tongue
> my kipocihkân hope, my tongue
> tasting frog-songs
> she brewed in a teapot,
> maskihkîwâpoy [liquid medicine, *tea*]
> she made medicine, her stories
> no shame, no shame

There is a lot packed into these sparse lines, and I want to return to the image of frog-songs and their connection to language, stories, and ceremony later in this chapter when I talk about “I’ll

Teach You Cree." But for now it is important to witness what Scofield is pulling out of his bundle: Here he is sharing how, as an eight-year-old boy, under the care and guidance of his Aunty Georgina, he began to reconnect to and to learn his mother tongue, nêhiyawêwin.

<u>niyakâtôtamân. I am Responsible.</u>

Through nêhiyawêwin, Scofield is able to re-connect with his ancestors on his mother's side, and to more fully embrace and live out his Métis identity. In "kipocihkân" we see how he uses this language to refer to himself, so that the first word in the poem is "niya." Towards the end of this longer poem we hear "niya" again as he uses nêhiyawêwin to take responsibility for his words, and his tongue—repeating the confessional[111] refrain *niyakâtôtamân*. When I first came across this phrase in this poem (I hadn't heard it before, and it wasn't introduced to me in any of the classes I had taken), I was confused. This phrase is grammatically unlike many sentences in nêhiyawêwin because it uses the personal pronoun "niya" in its full form at the beginning, and then has a transitive inanimate ending for the first person singular in the conjunct mode; with my linguistic training, I would like to put a space between niya and the rest of the word: niya kâtôtamân[112] which I would translate, on a literal level, as "it's *me* that did it." Scofield glosses the phrase as "I am responsible, a plea of guilty." Because I am a language learner, and this phrase was unfamiliar to me, I approached Dorothy Thunder about it, because I wanted to know more about its grammar and how it sounded and in what contexts it might be

[111] Indeed, a nêhiyaw translation of the phrase (originally in Latin) "Me, I did it," which is part of the Catholic confessional prayer said at mass, as recorded in syllabics by Father Émile Grouard in 1883—and later transliterated in SRO by Dorothy Thunder, Naomi McIlwraith, and Patricia Demers—says, "niya ê-itôtamân" (*The Beginning of Print Culture in Athabasca Country* 25). The original syllabics on the 1883 prayer book read as "ᓂᔭ ᐁ ᑐᑕᒪᐣ"—notice that one of the challenges the translators faced was the fact that Grouard did not mark any of the long vowels.

[112] Here I surmise that the phrase kâtôtamân is functioning as a relative clause, with the affix kâ working with the TI Conjunct suffix –mân. So the phrase could be morphologically glossed as niya (1st person pronoun, me) kâ-tôta-mân (1s relative clause with TI verb tôta, *do something*). Together, the first person pronoun and the corresponding relative clause suggest a phrase that literally means *it's me that did it*.

used. I also wanted to know if, on a conceptual level, it was related to the idea of nitipêyimison (*I am in charge of myself*). (The root of this phrase can be heard in "Otipemisiwak"—the title of one of Marilyn Dumont's recent poems, which she glosses as "The free people." Also spelled otipêyimisowak, this is the name many Métis use to refer to themselves). First of all, she assured me that "niyakâtôtamân" is indeed a common phrase, and that is how you will hear it. She told me it is not related to the idea of nitipêyimison (which has to do with controlling, governing, owning, or being in charge of one's self. It can also mean "I am on my own" or "I am free" or "I am independent"—see Wolvengrey's entry for tipêyimisow). Instead she said "niyakâtôtamân" has more to do with the idea that "I am the one who created this mess; it's for me to carry now, it's for me to fix. It's my responsibility." Scofield declares that

> I'm fond of the idea of being a collector, a reporter, a witness, a tattletale—anything other than being an observer of my own life. I realized that the silence that I have been talking about, and the silence that punctuates the piece that I just read, caused me to be the observer of what was happening to me. And I realize that within that, I was trapped within the silence. I was allowing myself to be silenced. ("Poems as Healing Bundles" 318)

Thus Scofield includes the repeated refrain "niyakâtôtamân" as a way to take responsibility for his words, but also to take on a role beyond a mere observer of his life. By claiming responsibility for all of the qualities and manifestations of his tongue (his tongue as ghost, as bitch, as beggar, as glutton, as mute, and, finally, as singer [18-19]) he is not allowing himself to be silenced. This choice, to move beyond the power of kipocihkân, to move beyond the power of being silenced, lies at the heart of the book—and at the heart of the ceremony Scofield invites us into.

Listening to nêhiyaw nôcikwês'sak

The phrase "pîmatisiwin petamawinân" (glossed as *Bring us life*)[113] punctuates "kipocihkân" and thus he uses nêhiyawêwin to call the Ethereal and his ancestors into ceremony—to invite their tongues to prayer (11). As "kipocihkân" demonstrates, this ceremony (to which we are invited, which was signaled to us by the cover image) is not something that is done alone, but involves connecting with other beings, other relatives. Scofield gives a striking example of what this means in his CBC interview "Poetry as Testimony," where he explains how his writing is composed in relationship with spiritual beings, to whom he is accountable and with whom he is engaged in an ongoing relationship. In his discussion of his latest book, *Witness, I Am,* Scofield makes it clear that his relationship with Muskrat Woman is grounded in ceremony, and that this ceremony and this relationship is ongoing. He says "I'm still engaged in ceremony with her. This isn't just a poem that I was able to write or 'transcribe'" (CBC Interview). Along with the invocation of the phrase "pîmatisiwin petamawinân" in "kipocihkân," he describes a similar spiritual relationship with ocâpâna (his great grandparent[s])[114] and his other maternal

[113] Two things in the phrase catch my attention: first, Scofield's spelling of pîmatisiwin differs from the central Plains Cree spelling pimâtisiwin, and suggest a more northern dialect. Thus, even though ocâpânak Johnny êkwa Ida, who were "chased up north," and omosôma, who moved south and swallowed his tongue for his wife, do not pass the language on to okâwiya Dorothy, Scofield's spelling still bears the markers of a northern "Bush Cree" accent. It is difficult to tell if this is evidence of "blood memory" or if his Aunty Georgina also spoke this dialect. I like to think both influences are at work here. The second thing about this phrase that I am drawn to is the elegant grammar at play in nêhiyawêwin. The phrase petamawinân is an imperative form, with the –inân ending telling us that it is a command given to a second person (who could be singular or plural) with a first-person plural as the potential receiver (of the life requested). The elegance lies in what linguists call the "benefactive" form, so that the speaker is not simply demanding that the addressee "bring us life," (peta is the verb meaning "bring it") but that –maw – affix, which is added to the root, changes the verb from a transitive inanimate verb into a transitive animate verb meaning to bring something *for* someone. Thus the first person plural ("we") becomes the benefactor's recipient, or the people who benefit from the action (See pages 84-85 of the *Plains Cree Grammar Guide and Glossary*).

[114] There is a special connection between Great-Grandparents and their Great-Grandchildren in Cree culture, and this is apparent in the language. In nêhiyawêwin, the term nitâniskotâpân can mean "my Great-Grandchild" *or* "my Great-Grandparent." (See the non-possessive form, âniskotâpân, in vol. 1 of Wolvengrey's dictionary). This is an older term, I understand, which has been shortened over the years, and now the common term many Cree people use is the vocative "châpan!" or câpân! (Great-

ancestors in the footnote of the poem "Prayer Song for the Returning of Names and Sons" where he tells his readers:

> My châpanak of five generations past and my mothers of long ago came to find me while I was researching my maternal genealogy. . . . During my research I began to talk to her in a language that caused her bones to shift beneath the earth. I asked her to help me, her little ni-châpanis, to find and sing the proper names, even though the old names are forever lost. The women of my blood, my other châpanak, came to listen. I was grateful to have made this connection, to be part of a ceremony that cannot be recorded. (99)

This glimpse into Gregory Scofield's writing process points to an approach to poetry that is always mindful of relationships, including relationships with ancestors who have passed on, and suggests that the act of writing poetry, for him, is deeply spiritual and profoundly relational.

This poem, "Prayer Song for the Returning of Names and Sons" begins with a Cree prayer song that, as Scofield tells us in a note following the song, Dale Awasis from Thunderchild First Nation taught him. On the page it looks like this:

YA-HEY-YA-HO
YA-HEY-YA-HEY
YA-HEYA
YA-HEY-HEY-YO

HIYA-HEY
HEY-HI-YA-HEY
YA-HEYA
YA-HEY-HEY-YO

HIYA-HEY
YA-HEY-YA-HEYA
YA-HEY-HEY-YO

Grandchild! or Great-Grandparent!) or "nichâpan" (my Great-Grandparent or my Great Grandchild); the diminutive form of this word is "nichâpanis" (my little Great-Grandchild). Gregory Scofield's spelling features a non-standardized Cree spelling of the word, which may be a Michif spelling. It is also easier for non-fluent readers to pronounce, since the Cree sound that corresponds with the letter *c* in the Roman orthography for nehiyawewin is not intuitive for Anglophone readers, and although it is pronounced like a "ch" in some dialects, the sound I hear from Plains Cree speakers from Saddle Lake, Maskwacîs, and Little Pine is difficult to describe. Some (including the University of Alberta's Cree 152 textbook; see page 20) compare it to the "ts" at the end of "cats," but even this comparison, Reuben reminds me, is not entirely accurate.

HEY-HI-YA-HEY
HEY-HI-YA-HO

I heard Scofield perform this poem at the Canadian Literature Centre's Brown Bag lunch reading in December 2010, at the University of Alberta. I mention this because, without hearing this poem performed, it might be difficult for the prayer song at the beginning of the poem to come alive. Yet the song at the beginning is vital, because it reminds us that this poem is a ceremony, and it reminds us that this poem—its creation, its performance, and our experience of it—invites the presence of, and supplicates for the help of, the speaker's relations. This poem involves more than the reader and the page. Its performance involves more than Gregory Scofield and the (currently embodied) human audience members in the room. The song makes it clear that this poem is an invocation, a ceremonial song sung to his ancestors.

Thus, for Gregory Scofield, both nêhiyawêwin and the ceremony of connecting with his ancestors are important aspects of his writing process. Indeed, these are intimately connected, and when I asked him about his use of nêhiyawêwin in his poetry and in his writing process he told me this:

> It's ceremony….when I sit down to write, I'm beginning an active ceremony. The ceremony is very much the act of writing, it's very much like entering a lodge, and I don't always necessarily know who is sitting in that lodge, but a lot of the time there are old Cree speakers sitting in that lodge; I always have a lot of women sitting in my lodges, particularly a lot of nêhiyaw nôcikwês'sak, a lot of Cree old ladies. I always have a lot of Cree old ladies sitting in my lodges. So when I enter that lodge I'm very quiet, and I listen; I think that's where a lot of the Cree comes from. It's from listening, and listening to the voices, listening to those other people in those lodges, nitâniskotâpân'sak, my ancestors. Those are the people that are sitting with me, those are the people that I'm praying to, those are the people that I'm in ceremony with, when I'm writing. So if I'm calling them, and if I'm engaging in them, I want to listen to them and I want to engage with them in a language that they understand. (Interview, April 20, 2017).

Thus, Gregory Scofield speaks and writes in nêhiyawêwin in order to communicate and connect with his ancestors. His approach can be understood as a particularly Cree poetic process—a process that is spiritual, relational, and deeply shaped by nêhiyawêwin and the ideas and worldview embedded in the language. As Neal McLeod explains in *Cree Narrative Memory,* the connection nêhiyawak have with their ancestors is housed in the language: "Through 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).

Language Resurgence in Scofield's Poetry

nêhiyawêwin is a language that Scofield breathes, sings, prays, and laughs in throughout much of his poetry. By weaving nêhiyaw words, phrases, songs, and prayers into his work, he, along with other poets, playwrights, and novelists, is helping to bring the language back to a place of honour, recognition, and respect. Tomson Highway once said that of all the Indigenous languages in Canada, Cree is one of the ones that is most alive, because people write in it (May 16, 2010 lecture). He went on to say that during the Nazi regime, Hitler destroyed the German language; after the Second World War, he said, the language sounded mean. Hitler and the Nazi regime humiliated the language. In a comparable way, Highway said, "our languages were also brought down," like in the word *iskoonigan*,[115] the language was relegated to leftovers. But, he said, "we are healing the language; we are returning it to a place of emotional dignity…we are giving dignity back to our language by speaking it and by writing in it" (ibid).

[115] Wolvengrey's dictionary translates this word as "reserve, reservation; portion; leftover."

Gregory Scofield's use of nêhiyawêwin signals both a personal and a collective resurgence: in *kipocihkân* his use of nêhiyawêwin is part of a personal journey of claiming his voice, his right to speak, and his ancestral language; at the same time, his journey is part of a collective movement within Indigenous communities as they heal, reclaim, and re-learn their languages. In *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back,* Leanne Simpson asserts, "In regenerating our languages, an enormous task in and of itself, we must also ask our Elders and fluent speakers to teach us through the language, using specific words as windows into a deeper, layered understanding. We must listen and take with us those sounds that hold the greatest meaning in our own lives and in our resurgence" (*Dancing* 61). Scofield's writing contributes to the efforts of regenerating nêhiyawêwin, and through the language his poetry has taught me (as a language learner, and with the help of fluent teachers) to see the world, the process of learning to speak nêhiyawêwin, and the practice reading and writing, in deeper, more layered, and firmly grounded ways.

"I'll Teach You Cree"

It is the process of teaching and learning nêhiyawêwin that Scofield explores in his poem, "I'll Teach You Cree." In our conversational interview, Gregory Scofield told me how he learned nêhiyawêwin from his late Aunty Georgina, who "spoke Cree, Michif, and French." As a boy, Scofield spent time with her and she taught him nêhiyawêwin through stories:

> my Aunty, who I think was really quite brilliant in the way in which she taught me Cree and a little bit of Michif, used stories to do this, and oftentimes stories would consist of her telling them both in English and in Cree, so of course I wasn't completely lost. With the introduction of the Cree in the stories, whether that was names of beings, or whether that was names of characters, I was growing accustomed to those sounds, and I was learning those sounds. And, oftentimes, my Aunty would make me repeat them. (Interview April 20, 2017)

Elsewhere Scofield explained that the process of reconnecting with nêhiyawêwin and with nêhiyaw stories, under the guidance of his late Aunty Georgina, allowed him to become rewoven into a kinship web that—through the effects of colonization—he had been cut off from:

> As a little boy, who had no connection to his history or culture, his language or stories, his homelands and to the bones of his ancestors buried there, I was given an incredible and life-altering gift. My late Aunty Georgina. Through her I was brought home. I was brought back to my history, my culture, my language, my stories and the lands that held the bones of my ancestors. Through her I (re) learned the sounds of Cree, nêhiyawêwin; I (re) learned the stories, âcimowina, that (re) connected me to the land, askiy, my land. I (re) learned the ceremony of nôhkom-apihkêsîs, Grandmother Spider and how she connects us to the web of life. I (re) gained what had been taken from my mother, my grandfather. This became my inheritance and the thread that connected me back to nôhkom's web, back to our beginnings. Back to our teachings, and ultimately back to our hearts, mitêhwînan. As a little boy, new to the world, I had no connection to my history or culture. I had no connection to my language or stories. I had no connection to my homelands or to the bones of my ancestors buried there. I was dangling from nôhkom's web, close to falling into the hole of Colonial history. I was given a gift. My late Aunty Georgina. She took my hand, nicihciy, and she weaved me back into nôhkom's web. She secured me back to the place of my beginnings. These things, these connections cannot be (re) stolen. They cannot be (re) reduplicated. They cannot be taken. Ever again. (May 14, 2017 Facebook Post, quoted with permission)

Here Scofield connects language learning to the process of being woven back into kinship relationships. Scofield's words here add layers of meaning to the imagery in "I'll Teach You Cree," particularly to the images of the spider and the web. In the first stanza, the imagery suggests that each little word the student learns to catch in his mouth-web is in turn a little weaver in itself. Scofield writes, "your mouth will be the web / catching apihkêsis words" (141). It is important to notice that the language learner is not catching ôcêw words (*housefly* words) to be simply consumed by ayîkis (*frog*) or even the one whose mouth is the web. Instead, the speaker says "your mouth will be the web / catching *apihkêsis* words (my emphasis). apihkêsis is glossed as spider, but I might translate it as "little weaver" since the verb to weave is apihkê; the –sis at the end is a diminutive, so the word for spider, literally translated, is "little weaver." In fact, I first learned the words apihkêw and ayapihkêw as terms for spiders from Reuben Quinn,

and he calls these beings "little weavers" in English. Here the verb, conjugated in the third person singular (he or she weaves), is indistinguishable from the creature, the one who weaves. You could say "apihkêw" and, depending on the context, you could be saying "she is weaving" or "he is knitting" or even "he has braided hair." Therefore, the nêhiyaw word for spider is tied up with the acts of weaving, knitting, and braiding. The spider is the one who embodies this verb. In light of the layers of meaning this word carries, I would suggest that the apihkêsis words are profoundly creative (as they are directly connected to the careful acts of braiding, weaving, and knitting) and in these acts of care and creation, these words have agency in themselves; they have the potential to spin more webs, to catch more words.[116] These words have the power to

[116] This resonates with my experience of learning to speak Cree in that the language sometimes feels like a web: the morphemes that I learn in one word will show up in another new word, so that the more I learn the tighter and more expansive the web grows. This concept of language learning being likened to weaving a web resonates not only with Scofield's poem, but also with the kind advice I received in a classroom several years ago. In one of Reuben Quinn's nêhiyawêwin classes, Dr. Marilyn Shirt, Dean of Indigenous Languages at Blue Quills First Nations College, came as a guest speaker. In response to one student's plaintive "How do I start to learn Cree…how can I even hope to become fluent in this language?" she suggested that he learn just five words fluently, and that he could then go on to add to this, and that as we as language learners go along, these words will connect to new words and our fluency will grow. I believe this approach is helpful to students of any language, but perhaps it is especially relevant to students of nêhiyawêwin. To illustrate, one of the first words I learned from Tomson Highway in his 2010 Cree Literature course was sâponikan (spelled *Zhaboonigan* in the English version of the play and *Saapoonigan* in Highway's Cree version), the nickname given to the young mentally disabled woman in *The Rez Sisters / Iskooniguni Iskwewuk.* sâponikan means needle, or something that pokes through or goes through something (this nickname is in fact a constant reminder of the horrific sexual abuse Zhaboonigan/ Saapoonigan experiences, which is described in the play; this abuse is a direct reminder of brutal details of the 1971 murder of Highway's former schoolmate, Helen Betty Osborne). Two years before I took that course I learned in Dorothy Thunder's Cree class the weather verbs sâkâstew, which can be translated as "it is sunny," and kisâstew ("it is hot"). These weather verbs have a common root: -âstew, which, I have been told by Neal McLeod, suggests that these words have to do with a quality of light. Later, these two stems (âstew and sâpo) were strung together in my mind when I learned a new word on Neal McLeod's "Cree word of the day" Facebook post. There he introduced me to the word sâpowâstew, which means "light shining through" or "the light is shining through" (as in light shining through the clouds, or maybe even light shining through a window or hole. The picture he posted to go along with the word was of light shining through the branches of a spruce tree). This word stuck in the web of my Cree language knowledge because it is made out of two morphemes I already knew. The morphemes in nêhiyawêwin, like little weavers, connect words in exciting and surprising ways. This is why I suggest that the words themselves have

reconnect a young boy to his family line. These words—and the teacher who shares them—weave him back into ôhkoma's web.

Speaking is Physical

Scofield's poetry teaches us that speaking nêhiyawêwin (or any language, for that matter) is an embodied act—speaking and learning a language is something that we humans do with our bodies, something that requires flesh and breath. And it is a communal act—something that can only be done in relationship. In particular, the poem "I'll Teach You Cree" suggests that learning to speak a language connects the language learner to the speaker because the learner devotes their efforts in trying to faithfully reproduce accurate pronunciation and rhythm—it means that the student will learn to put his tongue where a native speaker puts her tongue. It means he will try to make his lips do what her lips do. He will try to make his breath move through his voice box, his mouth, and his lips in the same way hers does. In honouring the language in this way the student nourishes the teacher: "your mouth" the speaker says, "will be the branches / I am picking clean" (141). In fact, each of the four stanzas describes the language learner's mouth: as a web, as fruit-bearing branches, as a frost-exploding moon, and then finally as "the mouth of a beaver, thick and luminescent" (141). As a language learner, these references remind me of the physical work of language learning. In his nêhiyawêwin classes, Reuben Quinn always emphasizes how important correct articulation is. To help us understand exactly what our

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agency, since those connections are already there. My learning them is not the same as me creating those connections, even though my mind weaves those connections, those words, together as I learn them. As in Scofield's poem, learning the language is like learning to weave a spider's web, but at the same time, the words and the language in themselves have the agency of an apihkêsis: they are already woven together in beautiful patterns, creating surprising images and connections; it is my job as a language learner to notice and wonder at these connections.

tongues, lips, and mouths should be doing he would sit at the front of the class and use his hands to model what our tongues should be doing in relation to our teeth and our palettes, and what our lips should be doing with each sound. For example, when teaching us how to articulate the ᑦ ᑎ ᑐ ᑌ sounds he would hold one hand in the shape of the upper jaw or palette, and then, with the other hand, show us how the tongue should make contact all along the front perimeter of the palette (a contact point which, in this case, actually resembles the syllabic shapes themselves) and pull down as the breath pushes out of the mouth. The lips, he says, are what make the different vowel sounds. These sounds are not found in English. They are not the same as a "d" or a "t." In nêhiyaw, Reuben suggests, the tongue works harder—it is firmer than the English tongue when making these alveolar consonant sounds. Similarly, the lips are much firmer when making the ᐸ ᐱ ᐳ ᐯ sounds.[117] Scofield's Aunty Georgina also put emphasis on correct articulation, Scofield told me. "My Aunty would sometimes stop as she was having me repeat words and she would say 'mah! môniyaw kipîk'skwêyit!' (*You're sounding White, you're saying it in kind of a white way*). So she would stop me and she would really make sure that I was pronouncing things right, and that I was getting the accent right" (Interview). Practicing correct articulation takes hard work, but the fruits of the student's labour, if done with care, may nourish the teacher.

Scofield took his Aunty Georgina's nêhiyawêwin lessons to heart, and he also took to heart her emphasis on sound and rhythm. He honours her emphasis on correct articulation when he says, "Language is really about sound. And it's not even so much about the words, it's about the sounds of the language, and it's about pronunciation of those words. It is the cadence, it is the

[117] You can see a YouTube video of Reuben explaining correct articulation on the Centre for Race and Culture's website: https://cfrac.com/nehiyaw-language-video-articulation/

rhythm, it is the way those words work together" (Interview). At the same time, he goes on to say that

> probably the most important thing, conceptually, and spiritually, and ceremonially, is what those words mean. Not just kinship terms, and how important those terms are, but also terms to describe medicine, terms to describe our relationship with each other. I'm sure you've heard of the word *wâhkôhtowin,* so how we are related to one another, how we are related to the earth. There are many, many layers to learning; but as a little boy I was not aware of those many layers. I was really just aware of the sounds—it's like singing. (Personal Interview)

There are many layers to learning, and Scofield's poetry, and his language learning journey, illustrate how foundational speaking and listening skills really are: articulation, breath, and rhythm are what allow the language learner to begin to connect through the language.

Speaking is Relational

The imagery in Scofield's poem points at a mutual relationship between the speaker and the student. At the same time, the relationship is also intimately connected to creation—to the land. The images evoke relationships among the humans and plant-people (saskatoons), four-legged people (frogs, dogs, and beavers), and the land (through references to seasons, moons, and making camp). In this way Scofield's work explores the Cree concept of wâhkôhtowin, which is always mindful of "all my relations"—relations that include, but are not limited to, human relations. Scofield's poetry is thus deeply imbued with aspects of Cree and Métis worldview, and as Warren Cariou points out, his love poetry (and one might wish to include "I'll Teach You Cree" in this category) explores a Cree understanding of sâkihitowin (*love*), where love "is an entire way of thinking about people's relations with each other and with the world. It connects bodily experience with spiritual experience, and it is fundamentally about responsibility as well: our responsibility to each other and to the natural world that is the source of our sustenance" (Cariou, iv).

Scofield's understanding of sâkihitowin seems to be closely linked to kistêyihtamowin, the nêhiyaw concept of honour. Neal McLeod first drew my attention to this word and showed me how, if you look closely, it can be broken down into three morphemes: kistê has to do with importance, yihta has to do with thought, and mowin is the nominalizer for transitive inanimate verbs. Put back together, the word suggests that honour means thinking that something is important, that you honour something with your thoughts when you think highly of it. Scofield seeks to think highly and deeply about his relations, and his poetry honours these relations. Many of his works focus on his relationships with okâwiya (his mother), okâwîsa (his aunty, or "little mother") and his other human relatives. As mentioned earlier, in his poem "Prayer Song for the Returning of Names and Sons," the speaker invokes and invites his ancestors into conversation and relationship. Indeed, he does so through song—through prayer.

Frog Songs and Language Learning

In the first line of "I'll Teach You Cree," the speaker says "with the tip of my spring tongue, ayîki [*frog*] / your mouth will be the web /catching apihkêsis words [*spider*]" (*kipocihkân* 141). The imagery here echoes "kipocihkân," the piece that functions as a ceremonial forward to the book. In "kipocihkân" we learn that frogs are the "keepers of stories / âcimowina" (11). Reuben Quinn tells nêhiyawêwin students that ayîkisak (frogs) are the ones who call the rain in springtime, and that this is why that spring rain moon is named ayîkipîsim (*frog moon*).[118] He tells us that it is their job to call the thunder clouds, and that is why their name is linked to the

[118] This moon is sometimes translated into English as "April." However, Reuben Quinn points out that a nêhiyaw calendar year, or pêyak askiy, one turn of the earth, has thirteen moons, so they do not always match up with the twelve months of the Gregorian calendar.

nêhiyaw itwêwin ᐊᔩᑿᐢᑿᐣ or yîkwaskwan (*it is cloudy*).[119] So when the speaker in "I'll Teach You Cree" describes his tongue as a "spring tongue, ayîki" the phrase immediately evokes the frog songs of spring, and the freshness and life-giving qualities of both âcimowina and spring rains.

There is also a powerfully spiritual element to this image. I will not go into detail here, because of the deep respect given to these beings and the profoundly sacred role they play in nêhiyaw ceremony, and because I have limited knowledge of them. But I will say that the thunderclouds are linked to êkitocik (*they are calling*), the ones who are calling during a thunderstorm. I bring this up because another name for ayîkis is pipikwatêhtêw (*frog* or *toad*). Like ayîkis, pipikwatêhtêw has similar connotations and connections to rain and thunder. Since a pipikwan[120] (translated in Wolvengrey's dictionary as *an eagle bone whistle, flute*) is used in particular ceremonies to call those being (the ones that can be heard during a storm), the connection between frogs, rain, and these beings is clearly embedded in nêhiyawêwin. Therefore, there is a spiritual element attached to the image of the teacher's tongue likened to the tongue of ayîkis. The imagery here suggests that this tongue helps bring life, helps call the rain. This tongue helps bring the student and the teacher into ceremony and connects them with other non-human beings. Scofield's image of an ayîkis tongue reminds us that the language is rooted in

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119 There is a slight discrepancy between the way Reuben teaches and spells this word, and the way Arok Wolvengrey's dictionary, along with the University of Alberta's Cree language course materials, spell it. For Reuben, this word is also deeply attached to ᐊᔩ the Plains Cree word for the Creator. I want to acknowledge my respect for both Reuben's and Dorothy's teachings, so I have included both iterations of the word here.
120 pipikwanak are ceremonial instruments that I will not comment on in much detail, because of their important role in ceremony and because of my limited knowledge of them. Although I have heard these whistles used in ceremony, I do not know very much about them. For the purposes of this chapter I will rely on Wolvengrey's dictionary and some of what Reuben teaches in his classes.

ceremonies, stories, and seasons, and that language learning is also intimately tied to learning about the land, cycles, and âcimowina.

In Closing

Gregory Scofield brings his understanding of nêhiyawêwin, ceremony, and teachings to bear on all aspects of his life—and then lets them loose on the world through his poetry. When I read his work, the word that comes to my mind is kistêyihtamowin, honour. Scofield's poems honour the complexities of human existence in all our human parts: emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental. At the same time, his use of nêhiyawêwin teaches us that speaking the language also involves all of these aspects of human experience. As such, his work is also profoundly relational, so that he honours his relationships with the land, his ancestors, his lovers, and the narratives that have shaped him. Through nêhiyawêwin, Scofield is woven back into ôhkoma's web; through the ceremony of nôhkom-apihkêsîs (*Grandmother Spider*) he is connected to the web of life. His work calls for readers/audience members to reflect on their own relationships with their self, ancestors, lovers, and the place that they call home.

cihcipistikwân, Rolling Head – *âtayôhkêwin*.
this legend nestles in the strawberry
where the nose sniffs and claws
root. Chokecherries scratch,
thicken the throat. Nothing can
suck out the fester, the clash of thunder and lightning
in Rib Woman and you, alone.
This is the beginning.

–"Braids"

Chapter Four – Walking with Words: Louise Halfe's *The Crooked Good*

The Crooked Good, nêhiyaw poet Louise Bernice Halfe/SkyDancer's third book of poetry, is an epic poem that narrates ê-kwêskît's journey towards healing. This story is complex and multi-layered, because her journey is neither singular nor straightforward. Instead, her journey is curved, circular, and deeply connected to the stories of her relatives: her ancestors, her children, her siblings, and her parents. Her path is also intimately tied to ceremony, language, land, and sacred stories. Indeed, the book can be understood as a journey home, where, as nêhiyaw scholar and poet Neal McLeod explains, "'Being home' means to be a nation, . . . It involves having a collective sense of dignity. A collective memory emerges from a specific location, spatially and temporally, and includes such things as relationship with the land, songs, ceremonies, language, and stories" (54). I do not intend to explore all of the complex aspects of peoplehood and nêhiyaw sovereignty in *The Crooked Good* in this dissertation chapter, but I do maintain that, to understand this book on a deeper level, readers must pay close attention to the nêhiyaw itwêwina (the *Cree words*) Louise Halfe uses in her poetry because these words are deeply rooted in nêhiyaw laws, histories, sacred stories, and ceremonies; these words guide readers home, where home is nêhiyânâhk (*Cree territory*).

In many instances, these words are what Métis writer Maria Campbell and others[121] have termed *word bundles.* In a 2004 interview, Campbell explains how she cautions her students "not to just settle for the word, but imagine that the word is carrying this big huge bundle. What's inside? What are the roots of that word? What is the story? Is there a song in the bundle, a

[121] See also Mareike Neuhaus's discussion of "relational word bundles" in *The Decolonizing Poetics of Indigenous Literatures* where she defines "relational word bundles as figures of speech that perform a significant narrative function and, combined with other such figures, constitute the narrative grid of a given story" (17). My use of the term "word bundle" is different: I am interested in looking at the nêhiyaw itwêwina as bundles because of their layered meanings and their connection to nêhiyaw histories, sacred stories, ceremony, laws, and other nêhiyaw itwêwina.

ceremony, a protocol? Where did it come from? The word bundle is full of treasure" (200). This concept of a word bundle is especially productive given the polysynthetic nature of nêhiyawêwin, as well as the nested meanings that reside in itwêwina. When describing Anishinaabemowin, an Algonquian language that is closely related to nêhiyawêwin, Basil H. Johnston tells us that "in my tribal language, all words have three levels of meaning: There is the surface meaning that everyone instantly understands. Beneath this meaning is a more fundamental meaning derived from the prefixes and their combinations with other terms. Underlying both is the philosophical meaning" (6). nêhiyawêwin is structured similarly; each nêhiyaw word, therefore, has nested layers of meaning. In paying close attention to some of the nêhiyaw itwêwina in *The Crooked Good,* I demonstrate how one word can function as a "big huge bundle" because of the layers of meaning it has, as well as the connections it has to other words, ceremonies, and laws. Indeed, my work here aims to address what Vizenor describes as "the silence in translation" where words, when translated into English, lose their connections to stories, memories, and names ("The Ruins of Representation" 144). By attempting to read these words in context and in relationship, I am purposefully not settling for the surface layer of the words, or for the glossed English translations (provided at the back of the book). Instead, I demonstrate that, when we approach these words with care, curiosity, and respect—and in relationship with nêhiyawak—these words begin to open up the text in ways that connect our understanding of the narrative to the rich Cree intellectual traditions that underpin Halfe's work.

Journeying Inward

In her acknowledgements, Halfe tells her readers that she offers "this story as a way to go inward, so that one may go forward perhaps a little more intact" and she hopes that "in this walk wisdom is gained" (135). The text should be understood as a journey, a personal journey that

allows readers to look inward so that they can journey forward a little more whole than they were before. Cree scholar and educator Willie Ermine suggests that Cree epistemology involves seeking knowledge by journeying inward, and that the wholeness gained in this inward journey will permeate or connect to the outer world or space (103). The text, like the Rolling Head, journeys in a similar fashion, with one eye turned inward, and one eye looking out. How do we begin to talk about this journey, this narrative? My reading of this text is deeply connected to my journey with nêhiyawêwin and with nêhiyawak, and I offer the following as a way to share some knowledge that may help readers understand this text more fully. This is a gift I want to share with anyone who longs, as I do, to understand some of the mystery[122] of *The Crooked Good*. In this gifting I seek to honour the narrative, the author, nêhiyawêwin, and nêhiyawak. This chapter will not give you all of the answers, because reading it is a personal journey. Indeed, as Ermine argues in his article "Aboriginal Epistemology," for nêhiyawak "the experience is knowledge," and Cree "epistemology is grounded in the self, the spirit, the unknown" (108). In this way, Ermine's words bolster McLeod's assertion that "'the story' is always open and open to re-examination" ("Cree Poetic Discourse" 93). Instead, this chapter is like a map of my journey with the narrative and with the language, etched with care, guided by teachers and mentors, and drawn in circles around its mysteries.

pêwîcipimohtêmin. Come walk with me.

Let's start with a word.

[122] I use the word *mystery* here to echo Louise Halfe's discussion of the powerful way that the sacred story of the Rolling Head continues to live in the audience's "imagination and puzzle those attempting to unravel her mystery" ("Keynote Address" 73). *The Crooked Good* is, in part, her effort to "to unravel the story's philosophy, its psychology and spirituality in [her] language" (ibid).

iskwêw. Naomi McIlwraith, our Introductory Cree language lab instructor at the University of Alberta (Fall 2008), asks us to say this word with care, with respect. By saying this word properly and reverently we are speaking the nêhiyaw itwêwin the way it should be said. And she asks us to pay attention to this word, to the way it should be said, because this word has been denigrated through years of colonialism. In the shadow of this word crouches the ugly slur "squaw." She talks briefly about the history of this slur: about European men's inability to pronounce the Narrangansett (an Algonquin language that is in the same linguistic family as nêhiyawêwin) word *sunksquaw,* about the complex relationships between Indigenous women and European fur-trader men, and also about the legacies of residential schools and their connection to the growing number of missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada. The word, *iskwêw*, now carries this weight, and I feel it in the silence of the classroom.

Years later, Reuben Quinn shares a teaching, an origin story that he was taught about this word, *iskwêw*. ᐃᐢᑵᐤ He writes the word in syllabics on the whiteboard. He tells us that this is the one who determines future generations. A prophet, of sorts. iskwêwak, he says, "can do something that Randy or I can't do. You [addressing the female students in the class] can prophesy the future. You have the ability to foretell, to shape the future." This word describes an adult female, he says. But it doesn't really. The word suggests something like a forecaster: okiskiwêhikêw. The word for woman, *iskwêw*, comes from this concept—from the verb kiskiwêh (*prophesy*). ê-kiskiwêhikêt: *she is prophesying*. Females, Reuben tells us, have the bodily capability to prophesy the future (April 2, 2014, Jan 8, 2015, and Jan 12, 2016).

This is one interpretation of where this word, *iskwêw*, comes from. This is the one Reuben was taught; this is the one he shares with his students. There are other interpretations, Reuben says. He tells us that some people, who may have been influenced by western patriarchy,

see the word connected to iskwêyâc (*the last one*) or iskwêyânihk (*in last place*) and see the word connected to hardship. As Sylvia McAdam points out in her book *Cultural Teachings: First Nations Protocols and Methodologies,* "Colonialism introduced the concept of the superiority of men and the second class status of women" (4). The internalization of this mindset might make the connection between these two words seem natural or intuitive. Or, the reality of conditions under patriarchy might make the connection between these two words accurately clear. The stark reality is, as McAdam points out, "the epidemic violence against women" is largely due to "the devalued status of First Nations' women in society" (5).

Still others see the word connected to iskotêw (fire or flame). In her "Keynote Address: The Rolling Head's 'Grave' yard," Louise Halfe suggests that "*iskwêw*, the Cree word for woman, is related to the word *iskotêw,* fire" (71). Later, in her talk entitled "Green Earth: The Wounded Healer" she draws a clearer connection between these two nêhiyaw itwêwina: "iskotêw. iskwêw. Woman is beheld by fire. In birth we pass this fire to all those we deliver." Her words here bring to mind Sylvia McAdam's discussion of the nêhiyaw concept of manitow iskotêw and the human soul flame. In her book, *Nationhood Interrupted: Revitalizing* nêhiyaw *Legal Systems,* McAdam explains that

> when it is time for human beings to be born, they make their way to a flame. This flame is similar in shape and in form to the sun: it is called manitow iskotêw (Creator's flame). . . .in the spiritual realm of the Creator, the potential human makes his or her journey to the manitow iskotêw; they pick a tiny flame from it and place this flame at the top of their head—the "soft spot." It is believed this soft spot carries the soulflame which has been referred to as the soul or spirit. It is then that a person makes their way to the earth and is born. (28)

From these teachings, and from these teachers, I begin to see a vision of how nêhiyawak understand iskwêwak, and at the same time, how nêhiyaw women, like the Cree word today, live in tension with the ugly shadow of colonialism. *The Crooked Good,* like the word *iskwêw*,

navigates layers of meaning, layers of history, and layers of stories. It tells old stories, ancient stories, and new stories. Stories about iskwêwak—Cree women.

One word *The Crooked Good* has led me to wonder at, to marvel at, and to ponder is *miskîsikwa*. I first learned this word from Dorothy when we learned vocabulary for parts of the body in unit three of her introductory Cree class. I had fun putting these words into their various possessive forms: niskîsikwa, *my eyes*. kiskîsikwa, *your eyes*, oskîsikwa, *his or her eyes*. But at that time, the word *miskîsikwa* was still flat and rigidly connected to the English word "eyes," because this word is in its generic form: they are eyes, belonging to nobody in particular. The first time I read *The Crooked Good* I noticed that throughout her book, Halfe frequently refers to "Big Heavens" instead of the English word "eyes." For example, when the speaker, ê-kwêskît, is describing her lover's green eyes, she says "His Big Heavens / are the flash of a hummingbird, penetrating" (51). Elsewhere she describes her own "Big Heavens" straining in the dark as she works on a rabbit skin quilt, listening to her mother tell the story of Rolling Head (29). As Halfe's glossary explains, miskîsikwa are 1. eyes; 2. One's Big Heavens (130). On one level this phrase can be seen as wordplay that dances between English and nêhiyawêwin, as the word *miskîsikwa* can be broken down or translated as misi (a morpheme suggesting *big* or *large*) and kîsik (*sky* or *heaven*), followed by -wa (the plural ending for an inanimate object that ends with a /k/ sound).[123] Therefore, a poetic "translation" of the Cree word *miskîsikwa* could be "Big

[123] This is how I was taught to pluralize nouns in Dorothy Thunder's NS 152 (Introductory Cree) class at the University of Alberta: animate nouns take the –ak suffix, unless they end in /k/; then they take –wak in the plural form. Inanimate nouns take –a as a pluralizing suffix, unless they end in /k/; then they take –wa. For example, astis is a mitt, and astisak are mitts (mitts are animate). maskisin (shoe) is inanimate: maskisin (a shoe), maskisina (shoes)(see page 28 of the University of Alberta's Introductory Cree textbook). However, there are some irregular nouns, such as pahkekin (a finished hide, inanimate) that do not follow this rule (pahkekinwa is the plural form, even though this noun ends with a /n/ sound). Similarly, atim (a dog, animate) does not follow this rule: dogs are atimwak. Some linguists offer a more complex explanation of plural forms in Cree, but I personally find the rules I learned from Dorothy

Heavens." However, this phrase is almost always used in the context of ceremony, longing, or sexual attraction, so there is an intensity about this phrase that draws me to it and fills me with curiosity and wonder.

One day in class I asked Reuben Quinn about the relationship between the words miskîsikwa (*eyes*) and kîsik (*sky* or *heaven*). After some thought he begins to talk about another word: kîsikâw, which can be translated as "day." He tells us that this word, in recent common understanding, means *day*, but that that is the *easiest* way to interpret it. This is just the surface layer of the word, but beneath the word there are other meanings, connections, and teachings about how we might see the world we live in. The word, he tells us, is related to okîsikôw, which is a sacred spirit, like one of the ones that looks after water (ᐱᔦᓰᐤ[124]) or air (ᔫᑎᐣ). He explains it like this: "When the orb is in the sky, it rises in the east and sets in the west; it is an event caused by okîsikôw—it is a spiritual event; an enlightenment of sorts." He tells me: "We don't call it 'day,' but a spiritual movement. kîsikôw in those sockets: miskîsik/miskîsikwa. This has implications for how we view the world; how we're told to see the day (as a spiritual event). This resonates with *The Crooked Good,* as the Old Man, one of the narrator's four mentors, tells ê-kwêskît "the universe, / the day, was the story. So, / every day I am born" (4). These lines suggest that each day is a spiritual event: a story, a birth, the universe. We see these events

useful, since with her method, there are fewer irregular nouns, so they are easy to memorize once you come across them (Wolvengrey's dictionary, for example, puts all nouns that end in /k/ in the irregular noun category. This is why you will see what seems to be a "silent w" at the end of some nouns in volume 2; for example the Cree entry printed for the word "store" is atâwewikamikw. This practice, although logical, is confusing for language learners: some people end up pronouncing the word incorrectly, and published materials for young language learners sometimes include this confusing spelling (for example Neepin Auger's board book for babies includes the words *mistikwaskihkw* and *sisopekahikanâhtikw*. Parents and children who are language learners (who may not be trained in linguistics) will likely mispronounce these words as the "silent w at the end of nouns with a k ending" rule is not explained).

[124] I acknowledge that others, including the Elders who helped with Wolvengrey's dictionary, may spell this word differently: ᐱᔦᓯᐤ. ᐱᔦᓰᐤ is the way Reuben spells it.

through miskîsikwa, through our infinite heavens. Reuben tells me, "My grandfather comes through a doorway in the east by water, travels through the sky. As he travels, he says 'Everything I touch I'm related to.' okîsikôw. I'm related to that.… this one is ohkimaw kîsik, the leader spirit, pîsim, the sun. On a personal level we all observe life through these two balls in there, we call these miskîsikwa. Spirit is attached to this word."

Halfe suggests in her article, "Cree Protocol for Ceremony," that "eyes or *miskîsikwa* which means "big heavens," or "infinite heavens" have the capacity to see more than appearances" (Part 2, April 13, 2015). This way of "seeing" suggests that a Cree worldview is imbued with mamâhtâwisiwin, what Neal McLeod describes as "tapping into the Great Mystery." McLeod's description of Cree poetics suggests that poetic thinking is spiritual: "The process of mamâhtâwisiwin involves spirituality and the belief that reality is more than what we understand on the surface" ("Cree Poetic Discourse" 92). He goes on to explain that this term is linked to ê-mamâhtâwisit, which means "she or he is spiritually gifted" or "they know something that you will never know" (92). aspin, ê-kwêskît's mother, uses this verb to refer to âtayôhkanak, which are spirit beings that are deeply connected âtayôhkêwina, nêhiyaw sacred stories. aspin says

> kayâs kî-mamâhtâwisiwak iyiniwak,
>
> my mother, Gone-For-Good, would say.
>
> *They never died. They are scattered here, there,*
> *everywhere, somewhere. They know the language,*
> *the sleep, the dream, the laws, these singers, these healers,*
> âtayôhkanak, *these ancient story keepers*
>
> I, Turn-Around, am not one of them. (3)

Halfe's glossary translates kî-mamâhtâwisiwak iyiniwak as "People were gifted with Mystery" and kî-mamâhtâwisiwak as "They were spiritually gifted people" (129). I found it curious that when Louise Halfe read this poem aloud in the classroom and at a poetry reading at Neechi Commons in Winnipeg, she read that line in the conjunct mode: ê-kî-mamâhtâwisicik iyiniwak. Perhaps the conjunct mode rolls off the tongue more fluidly for her—or, if linguist Clare Cook is correct in arguing that the conjunct mode "is an anaphoric clause type" that refers backwards in the text or speech to some earlier indexical statement,[125] I think something profound is happening when Louise Halfe reads the poem aloud. When we read this poem ourselves (in silent privacy or aloud in a classroom), the speaker of this line is always ê-kwêskît's mother, Gone-For-Good, and her opening line, first written in English and then in Cree, is in the independent mode. She begins her story, as many nêhiyawêwin speech acts do, by making a declarative statement in which the deictic[126] properties are familiar (Cook). But when Louise Halfe reads the poem aloud in a community, there is a different sort of presence in the room. By saying this line out loud, in a storytelling context, she actively takes on the role of the storyteller, so the line not only becomes a continuous action, but everyone in the room becomes a participant in this storytelling, and the line slips from an indexical clause to an anaphoric[127] one. To me, this

[125] Cook explains that an anaphoric statement is interpreted "with respect to some other element. Just as anaphoric expressions are interpreted relative to an antecedent, so with anaphoric sentences" (1). She goes on to say that "In Plains Cree, clauses with independent verbs are restricted to (a subset of) matrix environments, and instantiate what I am calling indexical clauses. I will show that they are associated with a particular set of semantic properties deriving from their anchoring to the speech act: they are interpreted relative to the speech time, speech place, and the speaker" (2).

[126] *The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar* explains that deictic is an adjective "designating the semantic property of 'pointing', expressed lexically or grammatically, i.e. having the function of relating a sentence or utterance to its extralinguistic context (time, place, etc.)." It goes on to say that "The four demonstratives are the prime deictic elements in English, with *this* and *these* pointing to what is proximal in space or time, and *that* and *those* pointing to what is distal in space or time. Other words commonly included in this category are *here*, *there*, *now*, *then*, *today*, *yesterday*, *tomorrow*, and the personal pronouns (*I*, *we*, *you*, etc.)."

[127] *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* defines anaphora this way:

shift from the independent mode to the conjunct mode suggests that the gifted people of long ago continue on into the present, and in the performance, or Halfe's oral sharing, of the poem. This moment calls to mind Caroline Joseph's realization, articulated in her article "Silence as a way of knowing in Yolngu Indigneous Australian storytelling":

> What I finally discovered after some time was that my notion of someone telling a story, was not what it was about—the Ancestors (who are Beings, not necessarily only *human* beings) are the stories—and each is intimately dwelling as Place (in country). The tellers *become* the Ancestors, those who body forth *in* dance *as* Ancestors." (177)

In sharing the poem out loud in this way, I understood that in Halfe's performance, Gone-For-Good was "anything but gone" (5).

At the same time, it is significant that the speaker in Halfe's book makes it clear that she is "not one of them," but what this means is not entirely clear to me. Is she saying that she is not an "ancient story keeper," an âtayôhkan? This makes sense, because, the way I understand them, these are spiritual beings, and are not human beings. They are intimately linked to âtayôhkêwin, or sacred stories. In fact, I first learned this word from Louis Bird, an Omushkego storyteller from Winisk, Ontario. He calls "legends" âtanôhkan (which is Swampy Cree or N dialect for the Plains Cree âtayôhkan). So on one level, there may be no distinction between these spiritual beings and the stories they keep. Halfe glosses the word *âtayôhkan* as a "spirit being; spiritual

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The relation between a pronoun and another unit, in the same or in an earlier sentence, that supplies its referent. E.g. in *Mary disguised herself*, the reflexive *herself* is an **anaphoric** [anəˈfɒrɪk] pronoun, related to an antecedent *Mary*: the person, that is, who is said to be disguised is the person that *Mary* has already referred to. Likewise, e.g. in conversation, across sentence boundaries. Thus if A asks 'Where's Mary?' and B says 'She's in the garden', *she* in the sentence B utters is to be understood as anaphoric to earlier *Mary*.

Thence of similar relations involving units other than pronouns: e.g. *the idiot* is anaphoric to *John* in *I asked John but the idiot wouldn't tell me*; *do so* is anaphoric to *help* in *I wanted to help but I couldn't do so*. Also, in a looser sense, of any relation in which something is understood in the light of what precedes it. E.g. in *Her house is bigger than mine*, a meaning of *mine*, as 'my house', would be supplied in part by *her house*.

entity; ancient legend spirit" (129). Reuben suggests that these beings are on another level or plane, and they have their own laws (not human laws). On the other hand, in clarifying that she is "not one of them," she may be pointing to a fragmented identity, speaking as one who has been cut off from the language, the dreams, the laws, and the stories of her people. Perhaps this line suggests that she does not consider herself as one who is spiritually gifted.

Reuben once used this term, ê-mamâhtâwisit, in the classroom in this way: ᓂᑖᐳᐊᐧᑫᔨᒫᐤ ᒪᓂᑐᐤ ᐃᔨᑯ ᐁᒪᒫᐦᑖᐃᐧᓯᐟ (nitâpowakêyimâw manitow iyiko ê-mamâhtâwisit); he translated this sentence to mean something like "I believe that the Creator is capable of wondrous things, of making the amazing happen." I would never say that ê-mamâhtâwisiyân (that *I* am capable of making the amazing happen, or that *I* have the ability to think in this way, to tap into the Great Mystery); that claim sounds blasphemous to me, and yet there is something there, in the word *miskîsikwa*, which seems to suggest that we are called to open our eyes and see the wonder, the beauty, the amazement, and the love in every direction. This idea—that these four things exist in seven directions (to our left, to our right, behind us, in front of us, below us, above us, and inside of us)—is something Reuben teaches in all of his nêhiyawêwin courses. Through the language, he shows his students that the syllabics remind us that we are called to use miskîsikwa to see each day as a spiritual event; we are called to see the wonder, that it is amazing, that there is beauty and love in each direction. There is a profound sense of gratitude in this way of seeing the world. Indeed, Reuben tells his students that the greatest gift you can offer the Creator is miskîsikwâpoy. If we read this word literally by breaking down the morphemes, you might guess that it means "eye-liquid" (miskîsik, eye and –âpoy, which is a liquid suffix) but the word,

Reuben tells us, means "an unforced teardrop of gratitude."[128] Perhaps one way to "tap into the Great Mystery" is through an offering of miskîsikwâpoy.

Does reading nêhiyaw literature require us to perform mamâhtawisiwin? When I asked Reuben about this word, he told me that e-mamâhtawisit is being capable of doing something no one else can do. He looked out the window and said that that one, piyêsîs, can do something we can't do (piyêsîsak can fly). He went on to suggest that in English, the closest he could come to translating this concept would be the capability of doing something miraculous. To illustrate, he told me stories of nêhiyawak who had travelled impossible distances in a short time, and of a healer who was able to cure a seemingly incurable illness. In a similar vein, the term mamâhtâwâcimôwin is "a special story that relates to a 'miracle' or strange and unbelievable experience" (NS 152 Part 2, 140). This particular nêhiyaw literary genre is what Louis Bird sometimes referred to as "mystery stories." Because of the miraculous element that seems to be at the heart of these related nêhiyaw itwêwina, I am cautious about applying these terms to the reading or writing process. Willie Ermine suggests this word "describes the capability of tapping into the 'life force' as a means of procreation. This Cree concept describes a capacity to be or do anything, to be creative" (104). Ermine's description of the word *mamâhtawisiwin* seems to be linked in important ways to physical procreation. Indeed, Louise Halfe, in a four-part article on Cree protocol for ceremony she wrote in consultation with four female Elders, suggests that in "*nêhiyawêwin* birth is referred to as *mamâhtawisiwin**, "arriving from a spiritual place filled with medicine powers"*** (Part 3). I have heard several Cree Elders and teachers say that when you hold

[128] This is different from ohcikawâpoy, which can be literally translated as "leaking liquid" and is the term you will find in the dictionary if you look up "tears." I understand that this is the term one would use in any other context.

a newborn baby, you are the closest you'll ever be to the Creator.[129] McAdam suggests that this is because the Creator's flame is the brightest right after we are born.

The relationship between mamâhtawisiwin, âtayôhkêwin and reading or listening to poetry is something I am still wondering about, but when the speaker of Halfe's poem makes it clear that "I, Turn-Around, am not one of them" she seems to be both humble and playful (3). On the one hand, she does not put herself in the category of âtayôhkanak, these gifted mysterious people of long ago. And yet, in telling her story, and in weaving cihcipistikwân-âtayôhkêwin (the Sacred Story of the Rolling Head), she in many ways takes on the role of these sacred story tellers. In telling this story, ê-kwêskît passes on morsels of the language, of Cree laws, and of sacred stories. In doing so she carries on the dream, the revisioning work of these ancient story keepers, these healers.

This tension between humility and playfulness, and the role of mamâhtâwisiwin in Cree literature reminds me of that âtayôhkêwin about wîsahkêcâhk. I first heard this story from Louis Bird, and again from Reuben Quinn. I even heard this story from a fellow student in Neal McLeod's Cree literature class at the University of Manitoba (Summer 2014). You can also find published versions of this story.[130] For reasons explained earlier, I won't go into details in this dissertation. But there is a story about that one, whose name is only spoken piponohk, when there is snow on the ground, who lost okîsikwa (his eyes). He lost them through his own foolishness, playfulness, and curiosity. The published version compiled by Beth Ahenakew and

[129] For example, Leanne Simpson explains how "Coming from the spirit-world at birth, children were closer to that world than their adult counterparts, and were therefore considered to have greater power—a kind of power highly respected amongst the Nishnaabeg" ("Dancing" 123).
[130] Drawing on the recollections of her nêhiyaw grandmother, scholar Shalene Jobin includes a version of this âtayôkewin in her article "Double Consciousness and Nehiyawak (Cree) Perspectives: Reclaiming Indigenous Women's Knowledge."

Sam Hardlotte suggests he lost them because he abused "a sacred rite" and he "was not serious about this sacred rite" (31). Even though the birds warned him that "something bad will happen to you" if you do this "just for the fun of it," he went ahead and did it anyway (Jobin "Double Consciousness" 54). He "did not listen to the birds' advice" (ibid). In the end, with help from the beings he met and stumbled upon on his way, he found some tree sap, some spruce gum, and he made himself some new eyeballs. One thing Reuben suggested this story teaches us is that that one always saw the world through new eyes. I see this sacred story also cautioning us to be careful with our eyes, and with the medicines and practices we learn about. You know, he never did get those miskîsikwa back, the ones he threw so very high in the sky. The version published by the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College says "he threw his eyes in the air but much too high. The next thing he knew they dropped on the ground instead of falling back into their sockets" (31). I have also heard one storyteller say those piyêsîsak ate them! In a version told by Lillian Wuttunee (Shalene Jobin's great-grandmother), a fox catches them in his mouth and runs away (54). For a moment (before I reread these published versions, and before I heard that story again) I wondered if those eyeballs were still up there, somewhere.

To me, Reuben's teachings about miskîsikwa suggest that the word *miskîsikwa* should remind me of the sun; also, I think, in light of *The Crooked Good,* the moon. And in being reminded me of these two bright orbs, the ones that allow me to see the world around me, I should also be reminded that I live in relationship with all of the beings those orbs illuminate. Louise Halfe's poem "ê-kwêskît 'awâsis êkwa nôtokwêsiw" (in English "Turn-Around Woman 'child and old woman'") links these two orbs (the sun and the moon) to eyes that dwell in the face of the sky, kîsik:

nôhkom rose high, filled the forest lodge.

Showed me many pages of her face:
awâsis êkwa nôtokwêsiw.
She arrives nightly, this bleeding sun
feather-mists over my breast,
scarred belly and seared thighs.
Stretches at dawn, shifts her wrinkles
to close one sun
(the other a wide-eyed heaven).
My nôhkomis. (79)

In nêhiyawêwin, pîsim is often translated as sun. But Reuben sometimes translates it as orb. I think he does this because in nêhiyawêwin, the sun is actually kîsikâw pîsim (some people say "day sun") and the moon is tipiskâw pîsim (some say "night sun"). The word *sun,* therefore, is not the most accurate translation of the word *pîsim.* In the passage above, Louise Halfe plays with this ambiguity, so that the moon, who arrives nightly, is also called a "bleeding sun." The phrase "bleeding sun" reminds me too of the link between a woman's menstrual cycle and the moon (many iskwêwak refer to this time as their "moon time"). This is the one who, before going to sleep, "stretches at dawn" to close, like an eye, before the other orb, the "wide-eyed heaven"—which I see as the sun—rises. I find a beautiful balance between Louise Halfe's reference to the moon as nôhkomis (an endearing term for 'my grandmother') and Reuben Quinn's reference to the sun as "my grandfather." In his book *Two Families: Treaties and Government*, Johnson tries to explain to his non-Cree readers how his worldview differs from a mainstream Canadian one. He says "But my law [Cree law] requires that I relate to entities that have a spirit within them. I recognize the spirits of the West, the North, the East, the South, the Creator, the Earth, and the spirit of this day. I recognize the spirits within plants, within animals, and within you, kiciwamanawak" (65). The word *miskîsikwa* reminds me that a nêhiyaw worldview is radically different from the way I usually see the world.

Turning Around

Although there are many voices that speak, sing, and tell their stories on the pages of *The Crooked Good*, we see the world and hear the stories mainly through ê-kwêskît, Turn Around Woman.[131] This Cree name deserves a closer look: at the heart of this name is the imperative verb kwêskî, which can be understood as a command to turn, turn about, or turn around.[132] The name is composed of the verb in the conjunct mode,[133] third-person singular. Therefore, this name can also be translated as a sentence[134]: "She is turning around," or "She turns around." As scholars, speakers, and educators have pointed out, Cree does not differentiate between male and female in the third-person singular—as Tomson Highway explains, "The most explicit distinguishing feature between the North American Indian languages and the European languages is that in Indian (e.g. Cree, Ojibway), there is no gender. In Cree, Ojibway, etc., unlike English, French, German, etc., the male-female-neuter hierarchy is entirely absent" ("A Note on the Trickster" n.p.). The *she* in this sentence, ê-kwêskît, "she is turning around," is understood as female from the context of Halfe's poetry: readers are explicitly introduced to this speaker in the second poem, "*wêpinâson"* where she declares "This I saw, *ê-kwêskît* – Turn Around Woman. I am she" (*Crooked Good* 2). The grammatical construction of this name is important, however, not because of the gender-neutral aspect of the third-person singular, but because this name, at its core, is an action, a verb. ê-kwêskît is the only character to be given a name composed of an

[131] The dash in her name is not consistent within the text. For example, on page 2 there is no dash, but on page 3 there is. Since I later quote page 2, I kept the dash out to be consistent within the chapter.
[132] See Wolvengrey's entry for kwēskīw in *nēhiýawēwin: itwēwina,* vol. 1, Cree-English.
[133] See my earlier note on the conjunct mode. H. Christoph Wolfart and Janet F. Carol suggest that the conjunct mode "consists of forms that usually occur in dependent clauses" (41-42).
[134] Mareike Neuhaus uses the linguistic term *holophrase* to describe these sorts of one-word sentences or clauses. See her two monographs for more on this, particularly on how this concept can be applied to Indigenous literatures written in English (which, she demonstrates, often bear the traces of Indigenous languages through holophrastic constructions in English).

animate intransitive verb.[135] Instead of naming her iskwêw kâ-kwêskît ("the woman who turns around"), Halfe chooses to give her narrator a name that is not noun-like at all, but is a verb in the conjunct mode, which, in many contexts, suggests a continuous or ongoing action. nêhiyaw and Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach suggests that the conjunct mode (and its common, if not predominant use by fluent speakers) "suggests a worldview that honours the present, what we now know. It also suggests a worldview that focuses as much, if not more, attention on process than on product or outcome" (66). Thus ê-kwêskît's name emphasizes the ongoing and ever present choices involved in healing, and the ongoing process of self-understanding, and of coming home. Indeed, in the context of McLeod's concept of coming home through stories (a central idea explored in *Cree Narrative Memory*), and also by seeing the verb kwêskî in the conjunct mode, one could also read ê-kwêskît as related to the concept of returning, or returning home. In his recent book, *100 Days of Cree,* McLeod suggests that the word *ê-kweskît* might be useful to get at the concept of regaining honour. He explains that we "have all made mistakes, but perhaps when we turn our lives around, when we atone, then we move towards regaining our honour" (9-10). ê-kwêskît is a woman who is turning around, a woman who is working at turning her life around, a woman who is actively seeking healing, a woman who is actively turning the stories that have shaped her life around, in order to move forward, a little more intact.[136] In regaining her honour she is also contributing to the wider goal of regaining a collective sense of dignity and understanding. The action, the movement that is attached to her name, imbues her character with agency, which is important for understanding her role in the text as a whole.

[135] Compare this name to those of her parents, aspin and wâpistikwân, or her siblings, Three Person, Mechanic, ospwâkan, and wâpan.

[136] At the end of her acknowledgements, Halfe tells her readers "I offer this story as a way to go inward, so that one may go forward perhaps a little more intact" (135).

Halfe's English translation, although beautiful, does not capture the powerful verb-based quality ê-kwêskît's Cree name carries.

The image of a woman turning, or turning around is reinforced by some of the physical aspects of the book itself: the epic poem is divided into eight sections, and each section is separated with a page that features the repeated image of a woman in the body of a snake. As readers progress through the book, they will notice that the image turns a little, so that the snake and the woman's braids point in eight directions, moving clockwise, to make a complete circle. ê-kwêskît's name and the repeated image in the book both turn, suggesting that even though this book is written in lines on pages progressing in a linear fashion, the narrative and the book itself suggest a journey that is more circular than linear (and perhaps more crooked than straight). The image that precedes the poems (following the table of contents) makes a complete circle, returning to the very same position on the last page, alongside the ultimate poem, on the facing page. Thus the repeated images, and the final image which returns to its original position, remind us of the title of the very first poem: "The End and the Beginning."

Ceremony and Writing

How to discuss the role of ceremony in nêhiyaw literature in a respectful and careful manner is a question with which I struggle throughout this dissertation. Ceremony is an essential part of *The Crooked Good*, yet as I mentioned in earlier chapters, there are rules and protocols about what can be written and what should remain private. As Kathleen Absolon explains in her book *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know,* "ceremonies are a source of knowledge—knowledge that comes directly from the spiritual realm—and are sacred, so Indigenous searchers limit what they detail" (123). She goes on to explain:

> Spirituality in the search[137] process is a considerable challenge as is the question of what to write about when it comes to sacred knowledge. The cultural context for sacred knowledge production is worth noting. Our teaching lodges and sacred medicine lodges belong in the community for our people and children and they are protected from the academy. We must be careful what sacred knowledge methods we bring into the academy. We have to be very careful about what we say or write about. (160)

In his chapter in *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations,* Daniel Morley Johnson cautions readers that "revealing sacred knowledge is a serious offence in many Indigenous nations" (216); this is true to varying degrees among Cree nations. At the same time, Harold Cardinal and Walter Hildebrandt point out that "Elders and spiritual leaders are careful not to unduly share all their sacred information and practices, but they are willing to share sufficient material to allow non-Aboriginal people to better understand First Nations' world view" (15). I am not an expert on these rules and limitations, so I have made a point of consulting with mentors and teachers—including Louise Halfe—as I go, and I begin this section by acknowledging that my understanding and knowledge are limited. Given my position as a learner and cultural outsider, I will do my best to read Halfe's work in a good way, keeping in mind that some aspects and details about the ceremonies I have participated in and learned about should not be included here.

The meaning of ê-kwêskît's name (*she is turning around*) and the healing ceremony she participates in (of which the writing of the book is a part) call to mind the turning that takes place in Cree ceremony, where participants address four directions. Indeed, the book gives a clear example of this when the speaker says, "I address the directions. / *wâpanohk, âpihtâ-kîsikânohk.*

[137] Note that Absolon uses the term "search" instead of "research" deliberately because, as she explains,
> The term "research" has a lot of colonial baggage attached to it. In most Indigenous communities, research is a bad word (Smith 1999). It conjures up suspicion and distrust. As an Indigenous knowledge seeker I have struggled with this term. While writing this book I sought to identify and create other terms that reflect Indigenous processes of knowledge seeking and production….Within this book I commonly use the words search and gather in lieu of research. (*Kaandossiwin* 21)

pahkisimotâhk. kîwêtinotâhk (70) (which can be translated as: toward the dawn, or east; toward the half day, or south; toward the dropping of the sun, or west; towards the north, or north wind). This turning action that takes place in ceremony is also deeply connected to nêhiyaw writing traditions. In fact, the nêhiyaw star chart is structured in a design that points in eight directions. The chart begins in the east direction with ᐊ, the first spirit marker in the first grandfather direction, and is composed of four ᐊᑕᑭᐯᐦᑲᓇᐦ (ahtahkipêhikana; spirit markers or syllabics). It then turns clockwise and points in the southeast direction, the first grandmother direction (you must imagine the chart drawn on the land, or written in the stars; these directions do not make sense from a Western cartographic perspective where maps are sometimes hung on walls or printed in books, and north points "up") and is composed of seven ᐊᑕᑭᐯᐦᑲᓇᐦ. Reuben Quinn[138] tells his students that there are teachings connected to each of these directions, and to the numbers four and seven, and there are human laws connected to each of the forty-four spirit markers. As I read *The Crooked Good* and see that the "Snake Woman"[139] image turns to point in eight directions, I am reminded that there are teachings that sit with each of these directions, and that there are laws connected to each of the spirit markers. The star chart and the book itself can therefore both be understood as kiskinowâcihcikana. Wolvengrey's dictionary translates kiskinowâcihcikan as a "beacon light," or a "sign." But Reuben taught us that it means "something that teaches you about life" (Feb 23, 2016). He says "the pipe is a teacher, the Sweat Lodge is a teacher, the Sundance is a teacher, and anything that's round—the sun, the nest; those are all teachers" (ibid). In this context then, it makes sense that ê-kwêskît's journey, her turning around and her coming home, involves both writing and ceremony. In this way, I can understand

[138] Reuben Quinn teaches nêhiyawêwin and syllabics through the star chart. I learned to read and write in syllabics from him, and he in turn learned the start chart from four Elders who came to teach the students at Blue Quills Residential School after it was liberated in 1971.

[139] The image is an ink drawing called "Snake Woman" by multi-media artist Paul Lapointe.

ê-kwêskît's turning as awa nêhiyaw-iskwêw opimâtisowin, this Cree woman's life journey wherein she is changing her way of life, ê-kwêskipimâtisit, she is trying to embody or put into practice the Cree teachings in each direction. I see her turning imbued with ceremony.

Rib Woman

ê-kwêskît's journey towards healing begins in Rib Woman. In "Braids," ê-kwêskît explains:

> Rosehips boiled in honey
> are not enough.
> Skunk oil in lungs
> is not enough.
> Snake dripped in ears
> is not enough.
> Sweltering rocks split the acorn of
> *miskîsikwa* – One's Big Heavens
> making the clouds weep –
> this is the beginning. (19)

Rib Woman is a central figure in *The Crooked Good.* Literary scholar Jennifer Andrews suggests that she represents Eve, the Judeo-Christian first woman who, according to the book of Genesis, was made from one of Adam's ribs; similarly, Mareike Neuhaus proposes that Rib Woman is a symbol "of adultery, of an adulterous life, and of adulterous women more generally" (*Decolonizing Poetics* 184). But I suggest that Rib Woman should be read first and foremost as a Sweat Lodge. For instance, early on in the text, ê-kwêskît tells her readers that she "Learned how to build Rib Woman / one willow at a time, one skin at a time" (4). Sylvia McAdam describes a Sweat Lodge as a lodge "constructed from willows bent to form a dome shape and covered with blankets, tarps, or canvas" (*Methodologies* 27). Indeed, in our interview Louise Halfe mentioned

that the Sweat Lodge has two different names in Cree: *matotisân*[140] and *wâkinokwân*. Reuben Quinn explained that this latter term literally means "a bent lodge." Wolvengrey's dictionary contains many related words beginning with the morpheme *wâk(i)*. *wâkapiw*: s/he sits crooked or bent over; *wâkâ*s: a banana (named thus because it is bent or curved); *wâkinâwak*: canoe ribs; *wâkinêw*: s/he bends something by hand. In the poem "*wîhtikow sâkahikan – nêhiyânâhk,*" the speaker emphasizes the bending of the willows in the making of her lodge: "My axe severs the willows. . . . Bend, bend – / willows shoved into the earth" (70). This act of bending is part of the process of building both the Sweat Lodge and the book itself. ê-kwêskît tells us, "I build this story like my lair. One willow, / a rib at a time. Bent it into my hip, grounded into earth" (6). It is a physical act, one that puts her body, the willow, and the earth into an intimate relationship. And it is a sacred act, one that involves prayer, struggle, and the help or aid of all her relations. This bending of the willows is connected to the title of the book itself, so that the word *crooked* takes on some of the graceful connotations of the word *bend.* This bending is part of a process of growing, of healing, and of sacrifice: ê-kwêskît "bled the willows, draped skins, hide, blankets, tarps / over their crippled bodies" (6). Thus the willows have sacrificed their bodies and have bled in order for the lodge—and the book—to take shape. The growth and the healing these ceremonies facilitate are deeply tied to the bending and the sacrifice of the willows. In Halfe's lecture "Green Earth: The Wounded Healer," she explains that "all that which grows does not grow up as tall and straight as we wish to believe. Growth has many paths, curves, hills, and bends. We are related within that context, wâhkôhtowin."

[140] This is the more common word, and unlike wâkinokwân, it can be found in several dictionaries; see for instance Wolvengrey's entry.

The other Cree name for the Sweat Lodge, *matotisân*, echoes the word mâto, which means *cry*.[141] Louise Halfe told me "matot'sân . . . means crying with my relatives." She went on to explain how "all of the relatives that are in there, the earth, the ants and the creatures and the rocks and the willows and the hides, those are all of your relatives and not only are they human beings but also those entities are honouring and witnessing and validating your pain" (Interview, Saskatoon, Dec. 17, 2015). Thus Rib Woman, on one level, is the lodge where people come to pray, to cry, to sing, and to heal. And in this prayer, in this ceremony, a deep connection is acknowledged, created, and nurtured not only among the human participants in the ceremony, but also among the non-human participants: the willows, the sweetgrass, the stones, the earth, the grandmothers and grandfathers, and more. These relations are remembered and honoured in Rib Woman, and the prayers and pain these relations witness are carried and marked by the willows, the ribs of the lodge. In "The Last Message," the speaker of the poem remembers a dream that came to her the night she stripped the old lodge in the spring, preparing to rebuild it in the morning. In her dream,

> The ribs of men, women, children struggled
> to lift the ribbons, cloth, blankets they
> had worn.
> They sobbed as they worked. (120)

Thus the memories of these prayers are worn by the willows: they wear the wêpinâsona (*cloth offerings*) and other ceremonial offerings that the weepers brought with them into the lodge. The work of remembering, witnessing, and renewing is carried out not only by humans, and not only in this physical dimension; this work is also carried out by non-human beings, as witnessed by the speaker of the poem in her dream.

[141] mâto is the singular imperative, or a command said to one person

wâhkôhtowin

Central to this ceremony is one of the forty-four human laws embedded in the star chart: wâhkôhtowin. This is not a term that is easy to translate into English. wâhkôhtowin is translated in Wolvengrey's dictionary as relationship; it is sometimes translated as kinship, and McAdam translates it as generation ("The Pipe Laws"). This last translation suggests that the Cree concept of wâhkôhtowin is informed by a responsibility to the many generations that came before us, as well as the many generations yet to come. Diana Steinhauer, in her talk "Traditional Woman Teachings," teaches that the law of wâhkôhtowin, particularly for women, means that women must speak on behalf of those who cannot speak: the children yet to come, the plants, and the animals. Sylvia McAdam suggests that there are actually two related Cree laws that sometimes get used interchangeably: wâhkômtowin refers to "the blood kinship of human beings" while wâhkôhtowin "is used to describe the kinship connections to all of creation" (*Nationhood* 60).

In her keynote address at the 2016 Indigenous Languages Conference at University nuhelot'įne thaiyots'į nistameyimâkanak Blue Quills, McAdam explained that the /m/ in wâhkômtowin is connected to mihko, the nêhiyaw word for blood. My understanding of a Cree perspective on wâhkômtowin is limited because I grew up in a Dutch-Canadian family, using Dutch and English words to refer to my relatives. However, kinship is always an important topic in Cree language courses, and from what I have gathered through learning the language, wâhkômtowin brings to mind intimacy, closeness, and inheritance. In Cree, to refer to "my relatives" or "my relations" one would say niwâhkômakanak. Cree kinship terms are complex and reveal a distinct perspective on kinship that is not the same as that in the English language or in mainstream North American culture, with its limited focus on the nuclear family. For example, in Plains Cree culture there is a closeness between sisters that ripples through a web of

relations and generations. To illustrate, a Cree speaker would refer to their mother's sister as nikâwîs, which is the diminutive form of nikâwiy, my mother. An English translation could be "my little mother." If that aunty has children, that Cree niece of hers would refer to them using the same kinship terms that she would use to refer to her own siblings. Along the same line, that "little mother" or aunty would refer to her niece using the same term she would use to refer to her own daughter, nitânis. There is also a word that Reuben taught us, kîwê-wâhkôhtowin, which means "going home relations," and this concept refers to the way that relations are brought home, or closer together, in the web of kinship relations. The way he describes it, the term refers specifically to the way that kinship is brought closer together as families widen: for example, if a Cree woman's sister becomes a grandmother, that woman would also refer to the child as nôsisim, my grandchild. On a few occasions, I have heard Elder Jerry Saddleback suggest that Cree is a very compassionate language; you can hear this compassion in Cree kinship terms. These endearing diminutives (such as nikâwîs,[142] "my little mother") and intimate terms (such as nôsisim, "my grandchild," as opposed to "my niece's son or daughter") point to the profound love and tenderness that underpin the Cree concept of wâhkômtowin. At the same time, these kinship terms point to a web of connections that suggest that we are responsible to and in intimate relationship with many beings (both human and not) that extend far beyond the boundaries of nuclear families.[143]

[142] As Freda Ahenakew explains, "if you want to indicate that there is a close relationship between the possessor and the possessed, you can form a diminutive from the possessive stem…In other words, the diminutive can also be used for terms of endearment" (*Cree Language Structures* 163)

[143] In fact, it is not simple or easy to find a term for "family" in nêhiyawêwin: it is a word that language learners often ask about, but it seems that the words offered are not particularly common. I have heard a few such words, such as peyakôskân (I was amused to see that this word, in Wolvengrey's dictionary, can mean "one family; one pair (at cards)" (vol 1 179) or kistôtew (which the *alperta ohci kehtehayak nehiyaw otwestamâkewasinahikan / Alberta Elder's Cree Dictionary* classifies as a verb, meaning "being together with the entire family" (304).

Louise Halfe's book, *The Crooked Good,* can be understood, in part, as a narrative that follows one woman's journey towards healing. But as mentioned, this journey is not a singular or individual journey; it involves reclaiming lost narratives and lost memories. Her journey is woven together with the narratives of her family members, particularly her sisters, mother, and grandmothers. In this way, wâhkômtowin can be seen as an important element in the book: her journey is not hers alone, but it is always tied up with the journey and narratives of her blood kinship relations. In the poem "Sugar-Shack," ê-kwêskît describes her memories of her childhood home, a cabin framed with aspens and chinked with mud and dry grass. Years later she recalls:

> The last time I was there the windows were slatted,
> sunlight streaked filtered walls, the door jammed.
> In the vandalized room I collected *cîpayak*,[144] wood,
> fire smoke, grease, jelly rolls, dried meat.
> Lifted my family off the floor. (17)

The book thus narrates her story, as well as the stories and memories of her sisters, Three Person and wâpan, her mother, aspin; as well as ôhkoma, her grandmother and the generations of grandmothers that stretch before her.

In his article "Cree Poetic Discourse," Neal McLeod suggests wâhkôhtowin can be translated in English as a "poetics of empathy," an "embodied, poetic understanding of the world" (94). He adds "through relations, we are able to create the web of understanding of our embodied locations, and extend it to a wider context of collective historicity" (94). McLeod's ideas here are illustrated by English River Denesuline Nation Elder Frank McIntyre's description and lived experience of the way his great-grandfathers' voices can be heard echoing across the

[144] *ghosts* (as glossed by Halfe in the glossary at the back of her book)

land. He recalls how, as a boy, he and his father sang a thanksgiving song when they were out on the land:

> So he starts singing and I start repeating his song with him and he would tell me to stop. So we would stop, now listen to our grandfathers and great grandfathers. You can hear them singing with us. In every hill around us you could hear the echo, even further, now you hear that? We are not the first persons in this country. They were our forefathers, our great-grandfathers that were here. I could hear all the echo around us and the spirit of our great grandfathers . . . supporting us" (Cardinal and Hildebrandt 12).

In this way, Louise Halfe's book is a lot like that song that the Elder sang with his father. By singing this song, and by writing this poetry, Louise Halfe connects the stories of ê-kwêskît and her sisters to the stories of their mother, their grandmothers, and their great-grandmothers—stretching back to time immemorial by connecting these lived experiences to those of Rolling Head, a woman who plays an important role in the Cree Creation story (a sacred story that I will discuss, in the context of Halfe's work, later on in this chapter).

By connecting ê-kwêskît's lived experience and personal narrative to an âtayôhkêwin (sacred story), Halfe illustrates how the concept of wâhkôhtowin is spiritual, and is not limited to human-human relationships. As Sylvia McAdam and others point out, wâhkôhtowin is a Cree law that governs not only human relationships and blood kinship, but also human beings' relationships to the rest of the beings in Creation. Cardinal and Hildebrandt suggest that wâhkôhtowin is actually a doctrine that informs the "laws governing all relations" (14). Elder George Brertton explains in the short film *Wahkohtowin: The Relationship between Cree People and Natural Law* that

> when we talk about wâhkôhtowin, you know it's that we're related. The Creator had created this universe and everything, and that universe relates to us, wâhkôm'koy'ah. We don't relate to it, they relate to us. And as we are on this earth we are related to everything that's in creation – the trees, everything, the grass, the rock, everything. It's

> part of the earth, just like we are. The earth provides for us, today we call it the Mother Earth, she provides everything for us. [145]

This ties into how Sylvia McAdam outlines Indigenous peoples' reciprocal relationships with the land and their responsibilities to her:

> Tobacco is also offered when a First Nations' person takes medicines, plants, stones or other such items from the earth. Every time you pull a plant from Mother Earth, she feels that pull, and you must always make the proper offerings of tobacco and prayers. By offering tobacco in gratitude and thankfulness, you are ensuring that this pulling of Mother Earth's hair will not hurt her too much. She must understand that you comprehend your relationship to her and that you know that what she is giving you is one of the parts of her body. Through honouring and understanding that relationship to Mother Earth, you also honour and understand your reciprocal relationship to all of life and creation. (*Cultural* 17)

Honouring and understanding wâhkôhtowin is a central concept in the nêhiyaw worldview, and it is a foundational concept in Halfe's book. In a comment about the title of her book, Halfe explains, "wâhkôhtowin is our crooked good and in essence we walk this path in a crooked bent over manner holding hands with every stranger that we meet" ("Green Earth"). This comment inspired me to hear and see the word *wâhkôhtowin* with more layers: the word (even though the standardized spelling and linguistic history of it might not support this) echoes the morphemes wâk(i) (bent or curved) ohtê (heard in pimohtê, which means movement by land; walking. The pim- morpheme suggests movement, and the -ohtê suggests movement over land, or a walking

[145] I surmise that wâhkôm'koy'ah, written without the Elder's elision, would probably be (ê-) wâhkômikoyahk "(as) she relates to us, as she is related to us." The –ikoyahk ending on this verb tells the listener that the Elder is referring to the universe or Creation as a third-person, relating to the first person inclusive (us, including the listener). Thank you to Arok Wolvengrey for helping me with this word. As a side note, it is interesting to note the similarities between the Elder's comments on wâhkôtowin here and Daniel Heath Justice's discussion of kinship in "Kinship Criticism and the Decolonizing Imperative" where he states, "While the land herself is of central concern to most indigenous epistemologies, we don't know her outside of our relationship(s) to her (or to the other peoples who depend on her for survival). We often call her Mother; we—like the Animal-people and Tree-people—are her kindred, and ours is a relationship of reciprocity. She gives life and sustenance to us, we (ideally) give her respect, honour, and care" (162).

movement) and ito, which suggests reciprocity. Finally, -win is a nominalizer. In this way, I surmise that Halfe hears the echoes of these other Cree morphemes in the word, which makes it sound like the concept of walking together, a reciprocal walk, which is bent or curved. Halfe's imagery here brings to mind the way bodies bend when we pick medicines from the earth, the way bodies bend when praying and braiding sweetgrass, or the way bodies bend when entering a sweat lodge, and how these ceremonies remind participants of (and help them to honour and understand) their relationships—wâhkôhtowin.

This image of journeying together, holding hands with every stranger that we meet, also reminds me of pîcicîwin, a Round Dance. In the poem "Round Dance," ê-kwêskît's elderly mother, aspin, criticizes the community for forgetting the responsibilities that go along with kinship ties. She exclaims that "wâhkôhtowin *was a mess, Men donated bastards, / left their seeds homeless, penniless. Father's Day is a mess"* (115). She also criticizes some of the men in her family for forgetting what the âtayôhkêwina teach them about wâhkôhtowin:

> Your uncles say we don't come from animals – they've
> forgotten wîsahkêcâhk, his shifty ways. Wolf boy – mahihkan.
> They don't know nothin'. Pretend they have mamâhtâwisiwin –
> special powers." (116)

Thus, in the text, this dance brings the community together, but aspin's and ê-kwêskît's words also bring criticism and remind readers about broken relationships and unfulfilled obligations. The honesty and the humour in this poem remind me of the image of a crooked good: a dance and a journey that is not perfect—and is indeed marked by flaws and deep wounds—but in acknowledging this, the ceremony is good.

Reuben tells me that the word pîcicîwin (Round Dance) comes from micihciy (hand) and it means to "bring your hand in." "What they mean," Reuben tells our class, is that you

> clasp hands with the person next to you, and then you use your body … one leg is going to the beat of the drum, the other one is dragging on the ground so that what you're doing is using your body as a communication device to the Ethereal, asking Mother Earth to keep her roots healthy and to bring them out in the springtime. That's what you're doing.

Louise Halfe tells me that this dance is also "in honour of the ancestors, those that died before us" (Dec 17 2015 Interview). In this way, this dance, this ceremony, embodies wâhkôhtowin; here participants honour and understand their relationships with each other, those that are living, as well as those who have passed on. In asking Mother Earth to keep her roots healthy, and bring them out in the springtime, dancers are reminded of futurity and of the generations of children yet to come. So pîcicîwin reminds me of Adams's translation of wâhkôhtowin as "generation," relating to creation and birth, as well as to generations both past and future. At the same time, Reuben Quinn's teaching about pîcicîwin prompts consideration of our relationship with the earth, the roots that are hidden there, and our reliance on them. Thus these two words for Rib Woman, *wâkinokwân* and *matotisân,* work as word bundles, because bundled up with these words are the concepts behind them and the other Cree words they evoke. Together the two work to point to foundational knowledge upon which the book is built.

Teachers

Early on in the book, ê-kwêskît tells her readers that she was "taught by Old people" who "worked in lairs, in the full veins of / Rib Woman" (3). The concept of lairs is woven throughout the text, and can bring to mind different sorts of lairs: the rooms where writers write, offices where counseling sessions take place, a coyote's den, or any other private place where work and healing take place. In her class on Cree women's literature, Louise Halfe talked about lairs: how they are dark, like a den, or even a Sweat Lodge. She also mentioned that there are lairs in our bodies, and she weaves these images throughout the text. For example, our mind or head is a lair,

and stories and experiences dwell in "memory's cave" (29); our hearts are lairs, and ê-kwêskît senses that "somewhere in his secret lair he knew" (1). People's wombs are also like a lair, and Halfe connects wombs to nests (25) and to the Sweat Lodge. In essence, she says, "We're a walking Sweat Lodge" (Class Lecture). Lairs therefore bring to mind a place where healing takes place in the heart, the mind, the spirit, and in our bodies. Later on in the text we learn more about what the Old Man taught ê-kwêskît through the Sweat Lodge ceremony. In the poem "My Teachers" she tells us

> The Old Man would say
>
> *I was dinking in my head.*
>
> Hand pointed to Rib Woman,
>
> *This is our psychology.*
> *All the answers are inside you,*
> *everything you need. Dink for yourself.*
>
> When I, *ê-kwêskît,* still wanted clarity,
> the Old Man
> would open his palms,
>
> *Let's check out the policy.* (100)

When I first read these lines, I thought that the Old Man was being playful or evasive by holding up his hands and pretending to consult an invisible policy book. It reminded me a little of some of the jokes I hear nêhiyawak toss around, about, for example, being careful not to forget your "ticket" to come to a ceremony. Later I thought that this line reminded me that unlike Western European traditions, nêhiyaw traditions, particularly when it comes to how philosophy and psychology are tied up in ceremony, are largely unwritten. I think that the line "This is our psychology" points to this fact. But these lines also remind me of the very personal journey involved with nêhiyaw ways of knowing, as outlined by Willie Ermine.

In conversation, Louise Halfe and I talked about how to approach or read nêhiyaw literature respectfully. I was troubled in part by my position as an outsider trying to read nêhiyaw literature in a good way. When I taught *The Crooked Good* to a group of social work students at Maskwacîs Cultural College as part of an English 100 class, I was surprised when some of the students objected to reading published versions of cihcipistikwân-âtayôhkêwin (the sacred story of the Rolling Head) in summer, and that a couple of students were dismayed to learn that this âtayôhkêwin has been written down and published by Cree people (I had planned to read Edward Ahenakew's and Ida McLeod's versions before discussing *The Crooked Good* in class). They struggled with the fear of pâstâhowin—that if they read or discussed this story out of season and outside of the ceremony usually involved in oral storytelling, they were stepping over a line that, if crossed, risked bringing misfortune on to themselves or their children or grandchildren. I learned a lot from my students at Maskwacîs, and they made me more aware of the spiritual implications of reading this book. Because of these experiences, I was struck by some of the front matter in Sylvia McAdam's book, *Nationhood Interrupted,* in which the Elder, Allan Joe (A. J.) Felix, directs readers to smudge and pray before reading the contents of the book. He speaks directly to the reader and says "Each one of you who are about to read this book, what you are doing is seeking knowledge. The knowledge shared here is of a spiritual nature, this is why you must enter this knowledge-seeking with smudge and prayer. . . . After your prayers are done, read the contents of this book with compassion, respect, and courage" (17). It made me wonder if I should approach *The Crooked Good* in a similar way: with smudging and with prayers. When I asked Louise about this, she reminded me that personal responsibility is also an important aspect of approaching Cree literature and said

> that's not up to me to tell. I can give them that suggestion but in the long run it's a personal choice. . . . Because I'm quite aware that life is ceremony, but it's a really

> individual choice. Our Elder, when he didn't know the answer, or didn't know how to guide us, you know what he'd do? He'd open up his palms and say "well let me check the policy." He'd literally lift up his hands and he'd go "Let's check the policy." And that goes to show he didn't know, and he wasn't going to implement something that he didn't know. And it's the same with ceremony; I asked him one day if I could go to a particular ceremony and he said well I don't know anything about it, but it's up to you. It always came back to self-responsibility. It's up to you. (Interview Dec 17, 2015)

This reminded me of a word that I first came across in Jean Okimâsis and Solomon Ratt's *Cree: Language of the Plains* (workbook and CDs). (When I was on maternity leave I would listen to these CDs while I nursed my son, trying to get a better feel for the rhythm of the language and a keener ear for aural comprehension.) One of the drills used the word *tipêyim* (to be in charge of him or her; Wolvengrey's dictionary suggests that tipêyimêw means: s/he owns, possesses, is in charge of, controls, rules over, or governs someone) in the reflexive mode; for example nitipêyimison means "I am in charge of myself"; kitipêyimison, "you are in charge of yourself" (*Workbook* 234). At the time I thought this was a strange word choice. I hadn't heard or read this reflexive verb in many other contexts, but after my conversation with Louise, this word took on more meaning for me. When reading nêhiyaw literature, learning about ceremony, or writing a dissertation kitipêyimison, *you are in charge of yourself*. It's up to you.

I came across this phrase, "it's up to you" again in an article Ross Hoffman wrote about the teachings of the late Joe. P Cardinal. Hoffman, who worked with Cardinal for many years, witnessed and experienced Cardinal's use of this "nondirective direction" many times (25). Hoffman believes that "those four simple words, 'It's up to you,' contain a powerful and deep teaching about personal agency and individual responsibility. . . . We have been given the gift of free choice and with that gift comes responsibility: responsibility to ourselves, to others, and to 'all our relations'" (25-26). I mention this teaching not only because it has guided me in my search for understanding my role as a non-Indigenous scholar of nêhiyaw literature, but also

because the late Joe P. Cardinal's teachings speak to all readers of *The Crooked Good*, since his words grace the second page of the book (the second epigraph is an excerpt from Elder Cardinal's counselling words, translated into English by Jean Okimâsis and Arok Wolvengrey). I also suspect that "The Old Man," one of ê-kwêskît's four mentors, is a fictional Elder based on the late Joe P. Cardinal. Hoffman explains that Elder Joe Cardinal referred to Raymond Harris, an Arapaho Elder who mentored Cardinal, as 'the Old Man." He goes on to explain that "this was a term of respect, since Joe Cardinal was himself two years older than Raymond Harris. In turn those of us who studied under Joe's guidance refer to him as 'the Old Man" (23). Some of the teachings that Hoffman outlines in his article can be seen in the way the Old Man mentors ê-kwêskît in *The Crooked Good*.

Hoffman suggests that one of the most significant teachings he learned from Elder Cardinal was that during a fasting ceremony, participants will battle personal demons. Hoffman explains: "He never spoke of a battle with hunger, or with thirst, he would say, 'for some of you, the battle you face will be with your greatest enemy … yourself.' In personal conversations with him he would say that the hardest thing for people is not going without food or water, it is being alone with themselves" (26). This idea, that sometimes the most powerful and difficult struggles we face are within ourselves is explored in Louise Halfe's text, and can be understood more clearly by taking a closer look at the passages that refer to pâhkahkos.

Before I go into a close reading of these passages, I want to mention that for many Cree people,[146] pâhkahkos is a real and powerful being who plays an important role in ceremony. This is not a being that I have prayed to or experienced in Cree ceremony, so I want to make it clear

[146] I use the term "Cree people" here instead of the preferred term nêhiyawak because nêhiyawak only refers to Plains Cree people. The being I refer to in this section is not limited to Plains Cree culture.

that what I know I have learned from Louis Bird and Louise Halfe in their Cree literature and Cree oral stories courses and in my interview with Louise, as well as through the oral and written stories they share. Louis Bird does not put stories about Pakaaskokan[147] in the category of âtanôhkana (âtayôhkewina in Plains Cree; *sacred stories* or *sacred story beings* in English) but he does emphasize that these stories are deeply mysterious and are based on his people's experiences. In his class he told us one account of Pakaaskokan that a close friend of his experienced, and he likewise made reference to his uncle who also had an experience with this being (other stories he learned from his mother and other Elders in his community). Similarly, Louise Halfe told me a story about a time when pâhkahkos guided her father home when he was lost in the wintertime (Personal Interview, Dec 17, 2015). Dorothy Thunder once warned me to be careful about writing about pâhkahkos, and it is my intent to write about this being respectfully and cautiously. I write about pâhkahkos here in order to gain a clearer understanding not only of *The Crooked Good* but also, in reading her work in this way, a clearer and more compassionate understanding of ourselves and each other.

pâhkahkos plays an important role in Louise Halfe's poetry, and is linked to her exploration of psychology, trauma, and healing. Halfe's glossary suggests that pâhkahkos is a

[147] As far as I can tell, Pakaaskokan is the Swampy Cree way for writing and saying this being's name. When I asked Louise Halfe if indeed Pakaaskokan and pâhkahkos were the same being, she indicated that she thought they were. I have decided to keep Louis Bird's spelling when talking about his words and text. Alberta Plains Cree standard roman orthography would not use a capital letter, and when I listen to Louis Bird say the word, I would spell it pâhkâskokan because the emphasis falls on the first syllable, and though both the first and the second syllable sound long, the first one is longer (the /h/ sometimes lengthens the preceding vowel). His pronunciation also convinces me that these two are closely connected not only on a narrative level, but also on a linguistic level. Interestingly, the –kan ending makes this name sound more like a "thing" to me; it reminds me of words for tools and machines, like pimihâkan (thing that flies, and airplane). Perhaps this morpheme points to the supernatural or mysterious qualities of this being; the –kan makes it sound like he is a being who does something not natural, almost mechanical. Louis sometimes playfully refers to Pakaaskokan as "Mr. Bag-of-Bones" which perhaps gets at the mechanical connotations of the Omushkego name.

"Boney Spectre, Hunger spirit, spirit being 2. flying skeleton" (130). I first learned about this being from Louis Bird, who told several Omushkego stories about Pakaaskokan, which he describes as a boney spectre, a mysterious human skeleton with a human voice that can leave you numb with terror. He told us a story about a time when Pakaaskokan got caught in a tree, and two young men had the opportunity to help him. Sometimes, upon request, Pakaaskokan foretold the future. Sometimes the sound of his wailing echoed over winter travellers and left them paralyzed with fear; it was a sound they never forgot. In his book *The Spirit Lives in the Mind: Omushkego Stories, Lives and Dreams,* Louis Bird published many of the Omushkego stories he learned. I will share an excerpt of one of his stories about Pakaaskokan here because I see this story holding teachings about mental illness. I heard his story years ago in his class,[148] but have only come to understand these teachings in the story through my discussions with Louise Halfe and by reading her poetry. Louis Bird's story provides context and a starting point for understanding Louise Halfe's use of pâhkahkos; he tells one of the stories about Pakaaskokan this way:

> There were two young men, maybe the older one was about twenty years old and the other one was, maybe, eighteen. These two hunters were travelling out there in the Bay, on the coast, near the coast anyway, where they usually hunt. And this was in the fall, just when it begins to freeze up and we usually have those big storms. They saw this cloud formations coming – very low and lots of snow. So they decided to go into the shelter of the trees and sort of hang around there for a while. And this wind came over, very strong. And then they hear this voice all of a sudden – there was somebody screaming, like in pain. And then right away they remember about Pakaaskokan.
>
> So they know it's Pakaaskokan and they really get scared. The storm went by, but the voice was still there somewhere. It should have gone with the wind, but it didn't. The voice remained there amongst the trees, and they said, "Yeah, maybe it's stuck on the tree." They know this happened in the past. So the rule is that if anybody hears the voice they should go and check and release the bones instead of letting them stay stuck there. So they know this story. They said, "Well we should go and check and see if we can help." So they walk around and then, sure enough, there it was on top of a broken tree.

[148] You can listen to recordings of Louis Bird on the website www.ourvoices.ca. There are several recordings of Louis telling stories and talking about Pakaaskokan.

> And there is the skeleton, stuck there and making a noise. And it says, "Release me! Come and release me!" Sort of moaning and screaming.
>
> So when they get near, it knows that they're down there and says, "Okay, please release me!" So they said, "Before we release you we'd like to ask you something." And then it said, "what is it?" So they said, "We understand that you can tell us something." And it said, "What is it that you want to know?" So the older one said, "I want you to tell me how long I will live in this world." So the skeleton said, "Since you are such a courageous person that you are willing to come and help me and release me, you shall live to be very old and have white hair." In those days you got white hair when you were around eighty, or somewhere in that range. So he says, "Okay." And the younger man says, "What about me? How long would I live?" And Mr. Bones says, "Since you were reluctant to help and you discouraged your friend from coming and releasing me, you shall not live to see another winter. You will die soon." And the boy says "Well." He didn't say "thank you" because it's not a very good prediction. (*The Spirit* 56-57)

Earlier in this book, Bird describes Pakaaskokan as a skeleton that "has no flesh, only bone, lungs, a heart that is pumping, and a voice box. And it travels in the atmosphere. And whenever it travels, it seems to be talking and mourning" (55). The most significant aspect of this being seems to be his voice, since some of the stories Louis Bird told us involved people who became paralyzed with fear upon hearing this voice, even though they didn't see him. He describes this voice as having a hollow or metallic quality, sometimes like an outdoor loudspeaker, or a voice in large hallway (*Our Voices* "Skeleton Mystery" PDF transcript 2, 8). This voice, he says, sends shivers down peoples' spines and can create a fear that chills the bones, or chills your soul—a fear that you cannot hide or run away from (ibid 2). He notes that sometimes Pakaaskokan speaks to Omushkego people in their own language, but at other times he is not understood (ibid 3). In the story above, it is through the words and voice of Pakaaskokan that we can begin to learn something about mental health. Note that this being is capable of talking, mourning, and screaming in pain, and when he gets caught in the tree, he calls out; he is crying out to be released. And there is a rule that the hunters already know, a story that teaches them that they should help release this being, instead of letting it stay stuck there. In conversation, Louise Halfe suggested that pâhkahkos represent "the skeletons in our closets" (Interview). If we understand

pâhkahkos this way, then the story takes on deeper layers of meaning, so that his voice is connected to memories, traumas, things that need to be released and healed. Rereading Louis Bird's story in this light, I come to believe that the story teaches us that it takes courage to face those skeletons, but that we have that responsibility. We also seem to have the responsibility to encourage each other in this process, and that our lives may be longer and healthier if we do so.

When I talked to Louise in her home that winter, we spent some time discussing pâhkahkos because I wanted to make sure I understood how she was writing about this spiritual being before I wrote about it in my dissertation. Like so many aspects of culture and spirituality, this being is more complex than I originally thought, and Louise explained that pâhkahkos is at once a spirit of giving as well as a hunger spirit. She explained that she understands this being as a "famished spirit. He is hungry. And the hunger comes from the need to self-heal . . . pâhkahkos is calling for the person to heal themselves. And pâhkahkos is within us as we speak, all the time" (Interview).

When I think back to Louis Bird and his stories and teachings, I remember that he was always clear that this being is mysterious, and that it is something that he doesn't fully understand; even though he asked many Elders about it, he never got an answer that fully satisfied him. This is what he tells his students and his readers: "Some elders say it's a being that came out of our ancestors' dreams. They said it is a dream being that our ancestors have created in their dream quests, and that their visions have brought it into being. And we experience it because we inherit it. That's as far as people explain" (*The Spirit* 56). This concept of inheritance is picked up in *The Crooked Good* as the speaker describes her family and says "[W]e inherited laughter, mule skulls, working hands. None / escaped *pâhkahkos*" (7). Later ê-kwêskît tells us that her sister, Three Person, "carried *nôhkom*'s sausage, walked on *nôhkom*'s bologna / legs

stuffed with Jesus and *pâhkahkos./ It was so tiring,* she said" (114). Therefore, I understand pâhkahkos as a being that is in part associated with memory and psychological wounds, some of which may be inherited. pâhkahkos may represent all sorts of skeletons, but here I see him associated with the spiritual abuse that took place in residential schools, the long and ongoing experiences of fragmentation resulting from colonization, as well as intergenerational trauma.

pâhkahkos appears not only in *The Crooked Good* but also in Halfe's earlier collection of poems, *Bear Bones and Feathers.* In the poem "Pākahkos[149]" Halfe writes about how this being, who represents the skeletons in the speaker's closet, can weigh the speaker down ("You jumped on my back // For a thousand years you were / The heavy bones / The companion that would not leave"), can haunt her ("Your hollow mouth / Stared through my heart / With empty eyes"), and can leave her mute ("I / ran without a tongue"). However, in "Pākahkos" the speaker learns to face this being, to honour it in ceremony, and to heal:

> I fed you the drink of healing
> You ran skeleton fingers
> Down your face and onto mine
>
> I gave you a prayer cloth
> I wove a blanket of forgiveness
> You covered us both, skeleton and flesh.
>
> I gave you the smoke of truth
> You lit your Pipe to life
> You lifted it to your ghostly mouth,
> To mine.
>
> My *Pāhkahkos* companion,
> My dancing Skeleton
> My dancing friend. (9)

[149] In *Bear Bones and Feathers,* Halfe uses macrons on the long vowels, and in *The Crooked Good,* she uses circumflexes on the long vowel. They are equivalent.

Thus pâhkahkos is a being that you cannot run away from (like the fear that Louis Bird describes). But when this being is honoured and faced with compassion, healing can occur. Like the skeleton that is caught in the tree, pâhkahkos is begging to be released; in Halfe's understanding, pâhkahkos is calling out for the person to be healed. Louis Bird's story reminds us that facing this being takes courage, and that we should address this being with compassion and respect. When I talked to Louise about pâhkahkos, I asked her how we can do this. I asked her, "Do you honour that entity in ceremony or is it also through mental health, as in honouring those skeletons in the closet?" She told me "Absolutely; you do it through mental health, you do it in the sweatlodge" (December 17 Interview). She went on to explain:

> there's a psychological shift in people when they participate in ceremony. I don't think they recognize that shift, but there's joyful celebration, there's the grieving celebration all entailed within that ceremony, and it's a private, private shift, it's not necessarily evident to the other participants. It's very private. And if you think of the word psychology or psychiatry and you take that word apart psyche actually means in Latin wind spirit and soul, and our Elder used to say that "this is our psychology, our ceremonies." (Personal Interview)

In our discussion, Louise Halfe made it clear that pâhkahkos is honoured in different ways, in different seasons, and in different ceremonies. She was careful to point out that this complex being is both a hunger spirit and a spirit of giving, and that these aspects of pâhkahkos help us to grow as human beings. She explains it this way:

> pâhkahkos is of course to be feared because it's the skeletons in our closets that it represents. Sometimes the skeleton is a good skeleton because it shows us all of the wonderful things we've already unpacked but we need that skeleton in order to grow, and I think what's happening in our community is the philosophy and the psychology has been forgotten, so they literally take this mythical, spiritual creature as a destructive force; it's not! … Santa Clause is like that skeleton in the closet – you bring all the good gifts out. And it's the spirit of giving, and pâhkahkos is that; … you give the sacred and the profane simultaneously, and it's up to you to decide what do I need to learn today and how shall I celebrate this teaching, whether it's a wound or an accomplishment, it's still unpacking the backpack.

pâhkakos helps us to be mindful of our experiences, our feelings, our wounds, and our gifts. So this "bag of bones" is a mixed bag, but perhaps we need these bones, these memories, these pains, these joys, and these sorrows to be human.

In *The Crooked Good* the speaker, ê-kwêskît, and her sister, Three Person, take part in a fasting ceremony at a Parch Dance. In the poem "In the Darkness of the Rolling Head," readers witness Three Person's terrifying struggle with pâhkahkos, with the horrors of the skeletons in her closet, while she fasts in her lodge:

> Three Person pulled the tarp
> tied herself into the buffalo robe and slept.
> Before the first bird sang someone
> grabbed her ankles.
> She clawed the bodiless fingers. Broke free.
> Clutched her chest, contorted, she grabbed a fist.
> Sobs heaved. Mucus ran. In lucid moments,
> she noticed teeny spiders skate on the globs.
> Bunched grass. Rolling Head is mounds of earth,
> standing wood, a cricket. Three Person
> was with *pâhkahkos,* on the road to deliver
> poultice to the sufferers. *pâhkahkos* jeered in her ear.
> Problems were medicine.
> When she got a flat tire. It was medicine.
> When she got sunstroke. Medicine.
> When the bingo passed her. Medicine.
> Drank Buckley's. Polysporin wormed her cuts.
> Antibiotics gave her trots. White man's medicine.
>
> Maybe it was Onion Man, *aspin,*
> *mâtahikan,* perhaps her old lover Delicious
> Fork. Maybe her heart-eating children. So
> Many curses. Over and over Rib Woman
> played back the projector. (72)

Here we witness what the late Elder Joe Cardinal may have meant when he said, "For some of you, the battle you will face will be with your greatest enemy…yourself" (qtd. in Hoffman 26). When I read this poem I am troubled by the fact that Three Person does not seem to be able to

face pâhkahkos with the same compassion and courage that the speaker in "Pāhkahkos" does, and therefore does not seem to enjoy the peace and the lightness that the speaker in that earlier poem enjoys. While she is able to offer "poultice to the sufferers," she is not able to honour her own suffering. Instead, inside her fasting lodge, she experiences terrifying emotions and worried thoughts. She is unable to take responsibility for anything that happens to her (like not getting a job or getting sunstroke); by not greeting or acknowledging these things, she alienates herself from her experiences, and pâhkahkos "jeers in her ear." During the ceremony she relives her mistakes and worries: "Over and over Rib Woman / played back her projector" (72). It is as if, in the darkness of the lodge, the endless black walls make room for her fears to be played over and over like a film in a dark room.

When Louise and I talked about this poem, as asked her if Three Person suffers because she wasn't able to face those skeletons in her closet or to unpack some of those things she was carrying. Louise responded that "sometimes the issues are too heavy" or "are just too difficult to face." She went on to explain that sometimes "the psychological impact of whatever abuse they've had is clasped so tight that it's hard for them to release because when they erupt it might be in anger or self-destruction, but they wouldn't know how to contain that eruption, so what do you do? Lash out? So it becomes internalized and self-harm. … pâhkahkos may be too powerful for them at that point, because that's pâhkahkos helping them perhaps contain that hurt. It's gotta leak out a little bit at a time" (Interview).

Indeed, Three Person is haunted by sexual, physical, emotional, and spiritual violence. As a very young child she is sexually abused by her father, though no one acknowledges this. In fact, when she tries to bring this secret to light, she is violently silenced by her mother. In the poem "The White Goddess" the speaker of the poem tells us that

No one knows *wâpistikwân* dug
into her diapers. …

One day Three Person told *aspin*
her sin. *aspin* screeched. Told her not to lie.
Struck her with a cast iron frying pan.
Left a bald spot.

ê-kwêskît tells us that she and her siblings

lost our bundles, wandered maggot streets,
collected toys from throw away sites. Courted beneath
blankets behind bars.

Three Person made fatherless babies.
They fought for her dangling breasts
and learned to hate men with bad breath. (25)

We also read that as an adult Three Person marries mâtahikan, a violent man who drags, scrapes and gouges her skull and leaves wounds that create scars, "white islands hidden beneath her hair" (14). In marriage she "became a pounding board, a cave / where he left his squish" (39). The abuse she experiences throughout her life is both inherited and passed down to her children. In many ways pâhkahkos can be seen as representing intergenerational trauma, and we can see in this text how unhealed wounds and horrors have the potential to be passed on to future generations. ê-kwêskît tells us "Three-Person, Mechanic, *ospwâkan*, I, *ê-kwêskît*, *wâpan,* / we inherited laughter, mule skulls, working hands. None / escaped *pâhkahkos*" (7). Indeed, in the poem "Three Person – *nisto-iyiniw*," we learn that this sister was conceived out of wedlock, and that "*aspin* never forgave her for being born. / *aspin*'s bitter medicine stitched her mouth" (39). This at once echoes the way aspin's own mother (ê-kwêskît calls her nôhkom) "threaded her mouth" (13). When aspin is old, she says "*I suffer now / because* wâpistikwân*,* kôhkomak *beat me all my life"* (117). The experiences of the mother are echoed in her daughter's life experience, and the text shows how bitterness, judgement, and abuse can silence a person and

make it difficult, if not impossible, to discuss and address the underlying issues. Thus aspin jeers at her daughter, Three Person, calling her children "*Loose shoe, one shoe, five shoe /* as if Gone-For-Good, *aspin'*s never been a loose woman. / Her bitter root spews, / *Sperm donors, that's all she collects*" (80). This pattern of mothers stitching their children's mouths closed by not allowing abuse or pain to be discussed is learned and passed down. What is difficult about these passages is that on one level they seem to suggest that abuse and promiscuity can become harmful intergenerational patterns; the text suggests it is the silence around these issues that allow them to be passed on. Thus Three Person becomes "*aspin*'s Cinderella, *wâpistikwân*'s dirty poke" (39). Because of the silence surrounding sexuality and abuse, Three Person's children do not escape sexual violence. Not only do they learn to "hate men with bad breath," but we also witness how

> A child's ear leaked.
> Another was strangled by invisible hands.
> A son robbed a daughter's night.
> White Goddess did not see,
> so twisted in the sweet tongue. (85)

Although some critics are quick to celebrate Halfe's exploration of sexual desire in this text, a careful reading of the book reveals that "romantic fever"[150] is more complicated and potentially destructive than it might first appear. In her recent book *The Decolonizing Poetics of Indigenous Literature,* Mareike Neuhaus argues that *The Crooked Good* "ironizes the colonizer's positions by fully embracing the very stories that are savage and sinful in the colonizer's eyes: 'We all had loves. Secret loves. Snake-tongued lovers' (7)" (182). Although the book is clear that there is nothing inherently wrong with sexual pleasure or desire (see the orgasmic description of the birth of Rolling Head in the poem "First Sound"), the text reveals that it is powerful, and can be

[150] "Romantic fever" is referenced throughout the narrative: as we read we learn that many of the characters struggle with "romantic fever." ê-kwêskît tells us that "Romantic fever runs in my family. / Men's. Women's. / A catching disease" (98).

destructive; in the passages above we see that romantic fever can blind a mother to the abuse of her very own children, and this tension gets at the heart of the book.

<u>cihcipistikwân âtayôhkêwin: Sacred Story of the Rolling Head</u>

The Rolling Head story has many teachings embedded in it. In this sacred story I hear warnings about the dangers of obsession, hints about the law of ᒥᔪ ᐅᐦᐱᑭᓈᐊᐧᓱᐃᐧᐣ (miyo-ohpikinâwasowin: *good child-rearing*) and what can happen if that law is broken. In many ways, this âtayôhkêwin is at the heart of *The Crooked Good.* But, just as pâhkahkos embodies both hunger and generosity and is honoured in different ceremonies depending on the season, cihcipistikwân (Rolling Head) and matotisân (Rib Woman) are connected to ceremonies that take place at particular times and in particular seasons. In the very first poem of the collection, the speaker tells us "I've sat with Rib Woman / since *âtayôhkan* became Big Thunder / and her Big Heavens awoke in us" (1). Later we read that "In the spring / Rolling Head awakens, becomes Rib Woman" (20). Rib Woman is therefore associated with spring, with the thunder that signals the changing of the seasons, and the ceremonies that are connected to this. On the other hand, Rolling Head is associated with dreaming, with wintertime, and with the sacred stories that are told during this time. The specific âtayôhkêwin that Louise Halfe suggests is the wintertime manifestation of this being is cihcipistikwân âtayôhkêwin, the sacred story of the Rolling Head.

Rolling Head is deeply connected to wintertime, in part because traditionally this story would only be told in this season. The speaker in *The Crooked Good* explains it this way:

> Stories are not told in spring, summer,
> autumn. Too many listening Spirits
> (though I know Spirits listen all the time.)
> I'm too busy gardening, planting flowers,
> picking berries, canning. I don't have
> time to tell you a story. To have you listen.

> When the geese drop snow feathers,
> the restless spirits will no longer punish us.
> Under this blanket some spirits will sleep,
> others will watch the roll of language.
> They will be swift with the winds
> if I offend them. (111)

In the summer of 2015, Elder Jerry Saddleback visited the English 100 class at Maskwacîs Cultural College that I was teaching to help us approach *The Crooked Good* respectfully. I arranged Elder Jerry's visit to our class after some students expressed uneasiness and fear about reading and discussing published versions of cihcipistikwân-âtayôhkêwin during the summer. Before he spoke, I offered him tobacco, and he smudged and prayed before he began. He told our class that because we had followed this protocol, we were able to discuss some parts of the Creation Story in the summer. Among other things, he explained that the Plains Cree Creation Story has four versions. He talked about how, before Europeans came, Cree communities would gather in the winter and set up four lodges.[151] The Creation Story or Long Story[152] is told in a sacred encampment, and a different version of this story was told in each lodge. In the East lodge the introductory version would be told. This version takes six days and nights (and several Elders working together) to tell. In the South lodge there is the general version. It takes sixteen days and nights to tell. In the west there is the specific recited version—it takes forty-four days and nights to tell. Jerry suggested that people generally didn't listen to this version until their grey-haired days. In the north there is the ceremonial version, and that version, Jerry tells us, takes four months to tell. It takes most of the winter. Elder Jerry suggested that it takes a lifetime to learn

[151] Cree people still gather in the winter to hear and tell âtayôhkêwina, but Jerry seemed to suggest that they are not told in the same sustained ways (for example, I don't think there are story-telling lodges that run continuously for days, weeks, and months on end, but I could be mistaken).

[152] ayi hay hay hay (deepest thanks) to Elder Jerry Saddleback for taking the time to review my work here, and for correcting some of the details concerning how this story was traditionally told. This information, first shared with me in the classroom at Maskwacîs, is quoted here with the Elder's permission.

this version, because if you know this version you will also know how to carry out any one of the Plains Cree sacred ceremonies. Learning this version is a way for a person to become inducted into the role of a ceremonial leader. Jerry's teachings at once reminded me of something that Louis Bird had told us in his class: that each âtanôhkan (*sacred story*, in Louis Bird's Swampy Cree) has at least four versions: a version for children, a version for young adults, a version for parents whose children have grown, and a version that only Elders know. Jerry Saddleback's teachings also reminded me how little I know. I suspect that all of the published versions that I've read,[153] and most (if not all) of the oral versions I have heard, would likely fit into the first category—the children's version.

At this point in this chapter, you can decide whether or not you want to read a printed version and my discussion of this sacred story. Your decision might take into account the current season or your personal beliefs about sacred stories and how they should be shared. You may want to smudge and pray. You may decide to just go ahead and read. You may decide to skip these passages. It's up to you. kitipêyimison.

Because this story fits into the category of âtayôhkêwina, Cree sacred stories, I want to be careful about re-telling the story here. However, readers who are not familiar with the story and who do not have *The Crooked Good* fresh in their memories might have a hard time following

[153] There are several published versions of cihcipistikwân-âtayôhkêwin, including Ida McLeod's version in *nehiyaw a-tayôka-we-na (Cree Legends)*, Edward Ahenakew's version in the *Journal of American Folklore*, Louis Moosomin's version published in Leonard Bloomfield's *Sacred Stories of the Sweetgrass Cree,* the version published in *Sacred Stories of the Sandy Lake Cree* told by Elders at Sandy Lake, written by James Stevens and illustrated by Carl Ray, and Louise Halfe's 2006 "Keynote Address: The Rolling Head's 'Grave' yard," first delivered in 2004 at the "'For the Love of Words': Aboriginal Writers of Canada" conference. Anishinaabe artist Daphne Odjig has also painted powerful illustrations of this âtayôhkêwin.

me. So I will share the version of the story that aspin tells in *The Crooked Good.* [154] In the book, ê-kwêskît tells us that she and her sisters waited for the right time to hear this story. She tells us how they "waited long for this night. / Waited for the river to wear her ice-suet clothes. / Waited to wear our snowshoes, and track rabbits (22). Finally their mother, aspin, unfurls the story:

> kayâs êsa. *A man and a woman left the main camp*
> *with their two boys. They travelled, travelled, travelled,*
> *thick into the forest, thighs sucked in muskeg.*
> *The family fed the mosquitos.*
> *They gathered blue and cranberries, pin and bunch berries,*
> *mushrooms, rosehips, mint and muskeg.*
> *Juncos, chickadees, nuthatches, and whisky-jacks flew, scolding.*
> *Squirrels hoarded pine cones and hazelnuts. In the thickets*
> *bear, moose, elk and deer watched. The family*
> *pitched their tent upon a promise*
> *of birch and aspen syrup, spruce needle chews. A creek*
> *sang itself into a gorged lake. Here shadows waved.*
>
> sâkâstêw *peeled the night cloud, stretched into daylight.*
> *The man gathered his hunting tools, bannock and rabbit.*
> *He was gone all day.*
> pahkisimotâhk *curled into the darkness*
> *and pulled up her night blanket.*
> *The man returned*
> *Supper unmade. Wood untouched. His wife's*
> *tanning undone.*
>
> *…*
>
> *The man asked the boys what they did all day.*
> *The thoughts wrestled, twisted out: "Mother feeds us*
> *and scolds us never to follow her, she gives us work."*
> *Mouths pointed to the forest.*
>
> *For days the father shadowed his wife's movements. One day*
> *she sat on a large log. Fists drummed.*
>
> *A snake slithered out*
> *followed by small snakes, excited tails flipping,*

[154] For brevity's sake, I am only re-writing aspin's words. In the book, e-kweskît's words and experiences punctuate the story and its telling. By omitting them, I am not minimizing or dismissing these important parts, but I am interested here in getting the story across the page without taking up too much space.

squirmed under her warm hands. This he watched.
Hard.

He filled his bundle; tobacco, stone axe, arrows and bow.
Gave his sons an awl, a flint, a rock, a beaver's tooth.
Told his sons the medicine's secrets
to be used only when the sky was red.

One day the man rose before the sun,
he drummed the log. The man bellowed.
His axe sliced the heads off each snake.
At camp, his wife still asleep,
he boiled broth, offered her the soup.
Her lips smacked thankful for the food.

...

The woman shrieked, her lover trickling down her mouth.
The sky bled, the husband severed her head, and
cast her body to the heavens and he too ascends,
his body the milky way. Her body dressed in streaks
of green, purple, pinks, pale yellows – the bursting veins
become the sky dancers. The head rolled, weeping.
In the distance the boys watched. When the sky darkened
they ran, bundles bouncing.

...

kayâs êsa. ê-kî-mamâhtâwisicik iyiniwak. *Long, long, ago*
the people were filled with mystery and magic

...

The head wept. Sang. Rolled. Bumped along
the trodden trails. Their home eaten by fire, flames leaped,
raced toward her. In the distance the boys heard their
mother's terrible cry. They ran. Ran. Ran.

Hearts raced. Wind burned throats.
Bones bent and stretched. Their mother's breath
at their heels.

...

"âstamik pê-kîwêk. *Come home. Come home.*
I love you my babies. My babies. My sons."

The head begged. Their father's wrath
coiled, held them to their gut. Icy fingers threw
their father's awl. Thorns, rosehips brush,
thistles, brambles, burrs sprung and crowned
the Rolling Head. Hair caught, tangled in these claws.
Rolling Head wept. She struggled, ripped
her face, gouged her eyes. She called. Called.
Still the boys ran, ran, ran.
A fox trotted by, heart filled by the Rolling Head's
wail. He led her through the pass. She rolled. Rolled.
Rolled. "âstamik nipêpîmak. nikosisak." *Her voice*
bee-shit sweet. Still the boys ran.

...

With severed breath she sang,
"nikosisak, nipêpimak. *Come home to your mother's hearth."*
The eldest boy threw a flint. Fire spread behind them.
Rolling Head's face, blistered bacon.
Hair a burnt trail scorched the summer soil.
Her breath a wind of flames at her son's heels.
Gasping the eldest son turned again. Threw
the rock. Mountains, rocky hills, steep crevices, ravines rose.
She bayed, bayed, bayed.
Rolled back and forth. Back and forth.

...

"My babies. My babies. My sons. My little sons.
Come home. Come home. Come home
to your mother's heart."
The boys bled, moccasins eaten by their run.
Bellies empty, eyes swollen, they limped.
Still a beaver's tooth flew, a great river formed.
The boys walked, bellies rolled with water.
They gave themselves to the night.
Across the lake Rolling Head promised
a large water bird marriage if she would spread
its wings. The Swan commanded her to stay still
during the ride or her lonesome bones would
collapse and they would drown.

...

The head clung. Crushed the swan's back. The bird
screeched, flopped and flipped the Rolling Head.

Deep, deep into the black depths, the Rolling Head
became a sturgeon. It flips its tail fin
and devours the river's rotten flesh.

...

In sleep this is where we go. ("Listen: To the Story" 22-29)

There is so much that can be said here about the relationship between Rolling Head and ê-kwêskît, and about how Louise Halfe uses this sacred story in her work. ê-kwêskît acknowledges that this story is powerful, and she struggles to understand her relationship to this âtayôhkan and how this sacred story has marked her ancestors and her family. Along the way she wonders about the risk involved; she asks

> the chickadees, the snow, the sky
> if I filled my being with her breath
> would I be butchered too? Would I give chase to
> what my loins delivered? Would I be spurned? (26)

Since I understand *The Crooked Good* as a journey towards healing, I see Halfe's use of cihcipistikwân âtayôhkêwin tied up with ê-kwêskît's struggle to come to terms with both intergenerational trauma and the power of female desire. I believe she also struggles with how this story has sometimes been told and interpreted in the last few hundred years, in the wake of colonialism. In the poem "Revelations" ê-kwêskît sees a vision of herself violently fragmented—butchered. She tries to find the pieces of her body, hoping to put herself back together:

> Found a finger, a hand, a thigh, a leg.
> Searched for my ribs. Lost my heart,
> could not see. Lost my head, could not speak.
> I did not trust *kêhtê-iyiniw*. So
> I went to the dreamer. Rolling Head.
> Swam in her skull, gouged and borrowed
> her eyes, her tongue.
> It was the only safe place. (45)

When she says "I did not trust *kêhtê-iyiniw*," I wonder if she did not trust the sexism that is woven into some of the tellings of this story, even when it is told by respected Elders and storytellers. For example, in her article, "Stretching through Our Water Sleep: Feminine Narrative Retrieval of cihcipistikwân in Louise Halfe's *The Crooked Good*," Anishinaabe scholar Leslie Belleau makes this point:

> Rolling Head in Edward Ahenakew's account of "chichipischekwân/Rolling Head" falls under a masculine narrative, in which Rolling Head is cast as a wicked, vengeful, and crafty woman with a restless spirit who ultimately comes to a deserved end of disembodiment, left literally as a rolling head bent on destroying and harming her children. There is no narrative empathy toward the female in the earlier version of the story, and this alone creates a narrative that privileges the male" (340).

When I read how she "Swam in her skull, gouged and borrowed her eyes, her tongue" and that this was "the only safe place" it strikes me that this is a moment where ê-kwêskît's understanding of the story is quite different than my initial understanding of it. When I first heard cihcipistikwân-âtayôhkêwin from Louis Bird, we heard how Rolling Head used her mouth and her tongue to offer sexual favors to the animals in order to gain their help in pursuing her children. Halfe makes reference to these often-deleted details when she tells us that the Rolling Head "promised a large water bird marriage if she would spread its wings" (29) and reminds us that "the swan's breast is filled with adulterous tales" (21). Thus readers may be reminded of other versions of this âtayôhkêwin; at the same time they may also be reminded of other "adulterous tales" in which swans play a role (such as the Greek story of Leda and Zeus). So when ê-kwêskît tells us that this was "the only safe place," she seems to at once challenge the ways this story is often told, and at the same time she finds safety where other storytellers and listeners may have found something to distrust, fear, or despise. In her struggle to understand this sacred story, this âtayôhkan becomes one of her greatest teachers.

Neal McLeod emphasizes the need for a "poetics of empathy" when reading nêhiyaw literature ("Cree Poetic Discourse" 94). He goes on to explain how in "her book of poetry, Halfe radically questions the way in which cihcipiscikwân (Rolling Head) has been told and urges us to recover the hidden female voice" (ibid 95). Indeed, I have heard this story told, and read this story written, in ways that make it difficult to feel empathy for the woman or to see things from her perspective. I am grateful Louis Bird was the one who first told me this story, because his telling was in many ways more balanced and empathetic (and humorous) than some others. I also appreciate Ida McLeod's[155] published version of the story, because she too includes details that create opportunities to understand cihcipistikwân as a complex character, one who is worthy of empathy. For example, she names both the husband and the wife: "Long ago a young man named Tawaham, his wife White Feather, and their two sons lived in a tipi near a beautiful lake" (1). She also reveals that White Feather was still nursing the younger of the two boys, making her separation from him painful in a physically and spiritually profound way and perhaps creates deep spaces of empathy that only a mother who has nursed a child can fully understand. Like so many sacred stories, I believe, this story's power to teach lies in its difficulty. Louise Halfe reframes this story in order to bring back some of the depth and complexity that has been lost through the violent simplification of this âtayôhkêwin. By approaching this âtayôhkan with care, respect, and empathy, ê-kwêskît is able to learn from her; in this process she allows cihcipistikwân to grow into the guide, the grandmother, and the teacher that she was meant to be.

As mentioned, I first heard cihcipistikwân-âtayôhkêwin (the sacred story of the Rolling Head) from Louis Bird, a well-known Omuskego storyteller, in Winnipeg, 2010. I was taking a course at the University of Manitoba called "Literature in Translation: Cree Oral Stories" and it was there that our class spent days listening to—and sometimes discussing, recalling, and

[155] Thank you to Neal McLeod for drawing my attention to this version.

learning—Cree oral stories. When I think back to the way Louis told the story, the first detail I remember is that the woman in the story was sad. I remember wondering, why was she sad? In that brief moment before the story unfolded, I imagined that it would be about the woman and her journey from sadness to happiness or fulfillment. This detail, that she was sad, is also important because for me, it created narrative empathy for the woman. Right from the beginning of the story, I cared about her and was interested in her perspective.

Later, when we discussed this story with Louis Bird, one of my peers in the class asked him why the woman was sad. Louis suggested that perhaps this story can teach us something about sexual relations and proposed that she was not being satisfied sexually by her husband. He laughed and went on to say that young men had to learn that there are other ways to satisfy a woman, and he insinuated that the woman's husband did not take part in very much foreplay or oral sex. I remember we all laughed together, and then we moved on and Louis Bird began to tell us another story.

When I look back on that moment I remember Louis Bird's more general comments on Cree oral traditions: "First laugh, then comes the really tough understanding. Enjoy first, understand later." Her sadness haunts me, and I think that on one level Louis Bird made us laugh and think about the sexually incompetent husband because he wanted us to take more time to think about why the woman was sad. In his 1992 MA thesis, Walter Lightning explores the concept of the compassionate mind in Cree teaching and philosophy. As he learns from Elder Louis Sunchild he comes to realize that

> the way that the Elder told the stories was a way of giving me information that would become knowledge if I thought about the stories the right way. The stories were structured in such a way that each story's meaning got more and more complex and rich as I thought about it. The Elder knew that I was not ready to understand the deeper

> systems of meaning and could not take it all in at once, so he constructed the story so that its meaning would continue to unfold. (15)

For me, cihcipistikwân-âtayôhkêwin is similarly complex, and it is a story that I continue to puzzle over and ponder. It is a story that grows with me and my life experiences, continually unfolding and challenging me.

Why was the woman sad? The story and the storyteller did not tell us the answer to this question outright. Although I think her sadness can be read in a number of ways, I think the issues of sex and sexual satisfaction are a good place to start because they resonate deeply with themes in *The Crooked Good.* Indeed, in her keynote address, Halfe suggests that perhaps the snakes in the story "responded to her air of alienation or her loneliness. Her husband provided well, but apparently was unavailable otherwise. If you leave things or people to themselves they go elsewhere for nourishment" (69). Woven throughout the text are stories of yearning, stories about lost loves, arranged marriages, and the conflicting desires of women. In the poem "Beheading," we read that ê-kwêskît's mother, aspin, had dreams of becoming an army nurse in the Second World War and that she was deeply attracted to another man, but was married off to wâpistikwân. At two different points in the text she asserts, "*I did the leaving. I never marry him, White Hair / did the marrying. . . . Not me. Not ever. I had no say"* (13, 34). It is important to note that aspin's desire for love and tenderness points to a lack of these things in her marriage; moreover, her desire and her yearning poignantly underline the abuse she endures in her marriage to wâpistikwân, a violent alcoholic. When aspin was a newlywed, she "guarded her thoughts, / covered her blotched face with creams. Hands grew inward. / She averted her eyes for fear they'd run" (88). Years later she tells her daughter,

> *I waited all my life for the love I lost.* pâhpiwiyiniw –
> *Laughing Man from Red Iron. Stingy old bag spooked him*
> *good. I know Onion Man long time. We too had long wait.*

> *And that old bugger, your father, smoke, drank himself – if it weren't for him these hands would work, feet would still dance.* (35)

aspin seems to have little agency in her life: she has no say as to whom she marries, what dreams she follows, and instead lives in the shadow of violence. And like her children and her parents and grandparents before her, she had no say about whether or not she would attend residential school. We read that "boarding school pinned her arms," thus making it difficult to embrace her children or show them a mother's affection (13). ê-kwêskît's ôhkoma, aspin's mother, is also cut off from her children through her residential school experience: she dresses "like the French women she studied under. / Ruled the house like the Oblate Sisters" (34), which evidently means she makes her daughter work hard at starching and ironing her mother's clothes, but she herself is stingy with her love. And whereas aspin's mother attends the reserve's fiddle dances, she is overly controlling of her daughter's social life, caging her "as if she was like Rapunzel" (34, 13). Thus the powerless refrain, "I had no say," is deeply connected to colonial violence, and this violence is responsible for the way her children are cut off from the nourishment they need in order to thrive; indeed, aspin says, "*If I could breathe I would teach you these – /* short muffled song / *I never heard it again"* (35). Like the Rolling Head, her breath is severed (28). She is unable to provide the love, the care, and the guidance her children need, and she is unable to pass on the nêhiyaw songs, language, or knowledge they hunger for. aspin later concedes, "*We gave our children to Indian Affairs. / To the priest. Nuns. . . . . At least I gave them winter stories"* (41). Because of this domestic and systemic violence, aspin later tells her daughters how

> she could never see beyond the
> crushed chokecherries on granite.
> Pounded on a lifeless fridge, a jar
> opened her arm. She sucked the juice,
> sprinkled sweet sickness, fried berries
> and fed us. (35-36)

This is how the poem "Beheading" closes, and I read this passage as aspin's admission that the violence in their home and the violence of colonization prevented her from nourishing and raising her children the way she would have wanted. Indeed, what she feeds her children is at best a mixed blessing, since this "sweet sickness" is associated with both language loss and promiscuity.

ê-kwêskît tells us that "the sickness of the lost tongue / stole my sleep" (61). This phrase "sweet sickness" becomes the title of a later poem about Three Person, ê-kwêskît's sister, who also suffers from "romantic fever" (93). In that poem and in "The White Goddess," we see how Three Person suffers violence in the context of romantic relationships, and we witness the power that sexual desire has over her: "Romantic fever grabbed clumps of hair, / stuck a needle in Three Person's head. / The White Goddess could not sleep, / dug a worm from her heart. / Still the heart walked. Walked. / Snake blinked its sweet tongue" (85).

Unlike her mother and older sister, ê-kwêskît marries a kind, loving, and gentle man; yet she does not escape the helpless refrain: "I had no say." She sees herself as a "give-away, / a daughter of the country / in a mountain marriage" (59). She remembers the many marriages between Cree women and fur-trader husbands that came before her, and this legacy reminds her that "Love no matter how deep/ has its penalties" (59). The voices of her female ancestors jostle for her attention as she records them on the page:

> *nôhkomak*'s voices keep interrupting, eager
> to have their say. I see them, give-away brides
> starry-eyed as I, as they trudged behind
> their fur-trader husbands. (60)

She goes on to record snippets of her ancestors' stories of love, loss, betrayal, and longing. It is significant that through ê-kwêskît's writing, these women are finally able to "have their say."

And as she weaves these voices into the fabric of her narrative, she also reworks threads of cihcipistikwân's narrative, offering this original nêhiyaw mother a place where she too "can have her say." Thus, on one level, Halfe uses the story of the Rolling Head to write about iskwêwak and their broken homes and their loss of agency at the hands of domestic, systemic, and colonial violence. As Neal McLeod points out in his discussion of Halfe's book, cihcipistikwân's "home has been altered and destroyed by a series of factors, not simply because of Rolling Head's infidelity. . . .—the father has pushed things beyond livable limits" (95). He goes on to argue that in Halfe's telling, "the old narrative of cihcipiscikwân is described as a 'nightmare' or an embodiment of trauma, which has occurred collectively through colonization" (98). Thus Rolling Head's story becomes a vehicle for discussing contemporary experiences of colonization, including the ways in which residential schools violently separated parents from their children, as well as the many ways in which nêhiyawak have been cut off from their language, culture, and history.

At the same time, Louise Halfe does not leave Rolling Head in the silent realm of nightmare. Instead, through ê-kwêskît's relationship with this being, Rolling Head becomes a guide and a teacher; she slips out of the nightmare into the role of mother or grandmother. By giving her this new life—by allowing her to have her say—Halfe explores yearning, and the tensions surrounding desire, the writing process, and fidelity.

As readers, we notice that throughout the text ê-kwêskît is pulled between love and fidelity to her Beloved and her powerful desire for Obsession. It is in this struggle that Rolling Head awakens and becomes ê-kwêskît's counselor and a guide. After all, "*cihcipistikwân* knows how yearning / crawls underground, blind hands / feeling in the lair. Desire flicks its tongue" (21). Rolling Head has powerful experience with yearning and desire, and for this reason, she is

the one who is able to counsel ê-kwêskît. In the poem "White Island," we read that Rolling Head takes ê-kwêskît "for a stroll" (54). On their walk, Rolling Head guides her to "a coyote's den" and this becomes her lair (54). "*There,"* Rolling Head said, "*you will pick your lover out of your skin"* (54). This line is a repetition of the earlier command to "*[p]ick your lover out of your skin"* when ê-kwêskît recalls Magpie and the powerful desire she feels for this other man, to whom she is sexually attracted—but who also seems to be linked to the writing process, and the work she has decided to undertake.

ê-kwêskît never tells us who exactly Obsession is. She teases her readers, asking us near the end of the book "Have I told you his name?" (123) even though she told us earlier that "I won't share his name. / *nika-kiyâskin.* I'd lie if I did. Never mind" (56). But what we do learn from what ê-kwêskît does share with us is that he is a fellow writer (82), a man who is sparse with his words (56), and one who has struggled to overcome addictions (121). She has known him for many years (53), and her attraction to him is powerful:

> Magpie stole my heart.
> . . .
> His medicine wedged,
> attached to my head,
> wormed into my sleep,
> swam in my womb.
> I burned and burned. He was like that. (51)

It is this powerful sexual and intellectual attraction that ê-kwêskît struggles to overcome in ceremony. In the poem "Excavating," ê-kwêskît shares this struggle with her reader:

> Obsession. Obsession. Obsession.
> Over and over I leave him here.
> Friends, that is all.
> My rock has four heads
> I found at Holy Lake. I smudge, cradle,

and sleep with it. This is my Beloved,
our children. I show my want.
A treaty. Yes, a treaty.
Still
hungry heavens bend, breathe me.
Knees stagger from this whorish inflammation.
He walked away from another. He doesn't
reveal names. I know, say her name.
A storm, red, black flushed. I've gone too deep.
Inheritance at work.
Swallow this bitter root. (74)

In the context of this struggle, one of ê-kwêskît's teachers, the Old Man, reminds her that "*Your Beloved loves you more than life"* (101), and it is Rolling Head who provides her a safe place to explore and work through her desires. We read that "Rolling Head swallowed my lover and me. / In her cavity / we made love, / sweating to tear our skins apart" and yet, this seems to take place in the realm of dreams, since, a few lines later, we read, "Though I've made love with my lover / I've never touched / his flesh" (55). Thus the cavities in Rolling Head provide the only safe place for her to come to terms with her desire, even as Rolling Head guides her in her struggle to keep her promise to her husband, her promise to herself to find healing, and her promise to craft this book through her writing.

The first epigraph in Halfe's book is from Rumi: "A thousand half-loves must be forsaken / to take one whole heart home." Thus I see ê-kwêskît's journey, in part, as her struggle to forsake a promiscuous past, and her half-love for Obsession, in order to break the intergenerational pattern of giving in to romantic fever. She is open about her past: "I am not a saint. I am a crooked good. / My cousins said I was easy, therefore / I've never been a maiden[156]" (4). But, living up to her name, ê-kwêskît, she decides to turn her life around. She

… married Abel, a wide green-eyed man. Fifty years now.

[156] This line is ambiguous. In this line I read the possibility of sexual abuse at the hands of these cousins. Others read this line more straightforwardly as someone who has been sexually liberal from a young age.

Inside Rib Woman I shook hands with promise.
Promise never forgot, trailed me year after year.
His Big Heavens a morning lake
drowns me in my lair.
I learned how to build Rib Woman
one willow at a time, one skin at a time.
I am only half done. This is part of the story. (4)

This choice to turn her life around and stay faithful to her husband is part of her promise to herself to travel the difficult and curvy journey towards healing. Indeed, ê-kwêskît describes her husband's voice as "a prayer lifting off a lake, / broad as a tree trunk, moves as an infant's finger. / He is woodsmoke, grassfire soot, grapefruit, / a writing paper, a song in the sweat lodge. A stake / in Rib Woman" (6). He is "deeply patient" (6) and supportive of her decision to turn her life around (1). They have been married for fifty years (51).

It is in her relationship with, and fidelity to her Beloved, that Rolling Head takes on more layers of meaning. In the poem "Manyberries" we read:

Earth commanded Beloved to

Kiss me, kiss me. I ain't too vain to take these dentures out.

Rubbed against him

She doesn't have you, doesn't have you. I have you.

she sang, threw her arms around Beloved.
I stretched, full length
against his sinew. Earth sang,

We must chant our last song before the wind dies,

united all our breathing, covered us in
her quilted star blanket.
We wed again and again. (113)

cihcipistikwân âtayôhkêwin is commonly referred to as a creation story. For a long time I didn't understand why. Louis Bird emphasized in his telling that this was a beginning story. And I

could see how it was a beginning story in that it tells us about the childhood of two very important beings in Cree sacred stories. The bodies of their parents also rise into the heavens: in Louise Halfe's version, the father's body becomes the Milky Way, while the mother's body becomes the northern lights. But lately, after reading and walking with *The Crooked Good,* I have come to see the Rolling Head as the earth. This is my understanding of the story, and if this is a mistake, it is my own.[157] I have come to think this way because she is a mother, the first mother. And the earth turns; you could say it rolls. And, if I am to understand Elder Brertton correctly, she is forever trying to relate to her children. In the poem "Her Many Faces" we read how "Rolling Head coaches from a branch" but then shifts and seems to become the earth itself, trod upon (99):

> a waiting bush trail worn out by
> boots that crush her lungs. Stud metals bite,
> sandals chafe her skin,
> sneakers spring her awake, her breasts' sour
> thickness runs.
> She lies, as the mindless walk.
>
> She brushes against the pretty girl, clings
> to her sweater. The girl looks, doesn't see.
> She slaps the broad hunched man, stings his startled
> face. Giggles. At times outstretched hands cradle
> squirrels, offer them to a camera,
> brags a singsong,
> *"See."* (99)

Thus the Earth seems to be one of Rolling Head's many faces. Or maybe Rolling Head is one of Earth's many faces. At the very end of Halfe's text, the voices of The Rolling Head and ê-kwêskît, the narrator, merge together on the page. The final lines in the book read

[157] This interpretation was also inspired by Tomson Highway's comments on this narrative in his class. In his book, *From Oral to Written*, he writes "And if Rolling Head is the planet—the original mother goddess whose head rolls through the universe calling out the names of her children—us—then we are participants in a cosmic journey" (174).

I'm earth
born each moon,
waxing and waning,
bleeding eggs.
I'm painted red on rocks;
I swim the caves in lakes
where my head sinks.
And I drink to roll again. (124)

To me, these lines are a clear indication that one way of understanding the Rolling Head is to understand her as the earth.

And so I wonder: If the Rolling Head is the earth who is always reaching out to her children, relating to us, what does that teach me? How does this change how we should read and understand cihcipistikwân âtayôhkêwin? And how does this help me to see the world through my Big Heavens? How do I honour the earth that so passionately, playfully, and steadfastly relates to me? How do I honour all of my relationships with everything my tiny orbs allow me to see? These are questions that I carry with me in my journey. Right now I am working hard at learning to listen. Learning to listen to the Cree oral histories of this land, the stories behind the places that bear European names, and the poets and political activists who remind us that our relationships are still broken today. I am learning to listen to the Cree language, trying to see the world through another worldview. I am learning to listen to the land, my body, and how they might teach me to walk this crooked good, this pathway, this journey, pimâtisiwin.

…Closed in my tired, forgetting sky, I hurt her physically, and I am sorry that I was not strong enough to hold the fire of Gabriel's beach with grace.

I realized, at that moment, I had truly become my father's son, a bearer of his anger. I realized my hands were not strong enough to hold the fire of Gabriel's beach. I was part of a chain that stretched to the past, a darkened legacy which had its roots in *ê-mâyahkamikahk* "where it went wrong" 1885.

To save ourselves, our families, and our communities, we need to find our way back to *kisiskâciwani-sîpiy* the Saskatchewan River, the river of our language, of our ceremonies, and of our honour.

I have heard in the old days, the *okihcitâwak* would deal severely with any man who hit his wife. The old *okihcitâwak* measured their lives by the ideas of bravery, courage, and selflessness. We need these things if we are to find the river within our bodies. I need to find my way back to the river like my father before me.

–excerpt from"Words for My Sons" *Gabriel's Beach*

Practicing Not Talking: On Not Writing a Dissertation Chapter on Neal McLeod's Poetry

On a bitterly cold night, maybe it was January. After the storytelling and ceremony I was standing outside in the Elder's yard with a friend, one of the oskâpêwisak. Maybe he was smoking. I can't remember. I remember the stars were so bright—the air sharp with cold. We talked and at one point he glanced at me, then looked back at the stars, and said, "My people have all of these things [ceremony and stories] and yet, we are so lost." I remember that I said nothing. I wanted to say—so many things, but none seemed right. I wanted to quote a poem. The poem "Sons of a Lost River" echoed in my mind:

> *we would forever be*
> *sons of a lost river*
> *a river that had lost its way*
> *and wandered through*
> *old sleeping valleys*
> *hollowed water*
> *no longer shaped*
> *by the wind of dreams* (*Gabriel's Beach* 63)

I believe that Neal McLeod, and Neal McLeod's work, has much to offer and a great deal to share. He and his work have taught me much. But for now, I will set his work aside. For now, I will listen.

***

I wanted to write something like a talking circle. I wanted to write something that echoed such a ceremony, write something that was informed by some of the talking circle's guidelines. Because there are several—in fact there are many—people who have offered me wisdom and stories and careful thought when I approached them with my knotted thoughts and feelings, my tangled mess of morals and grief that threaded their way around the challenge of what to do with my

plans to write a dissertation chapter on Neal McLeod's work in the wake of his assault charge and the flurry of open letters that followed.

The version of this dissertation that I defended on September 16, 2019 included a number of news articles and open letters—my intention was to let the voices of those who had spoken publicly on the issue have their space. As in a talking circle, I tried to create a space in this dissertation where I would let each take their time, and where I would not interrupt or judge. However, due to copyright issues, this version of my dissertation does not include those letters and news articles, although they are included in the bibliography. You may choose to go out and find these documents on your own if you wish to.

***

In early October, 2017 Erica Violet Lee, Nickita Longman, Sylvia McAdam, Lindsay Knight, Night Kinistino, and Dawn Dumont signed and posted an open letter to the University of Regina Press, petitioning the editor and the press to remove Neal McLeod's work from a forthcoming anthology, in light of his recent assault charge, in solidarity with survivors of domestic abuse, and in order to draw attention to the issue of violence against Indigenous women, and to disrupt the culture of silence surrounding these violent systems we are a part of, and to demand change:

Lee, Erica Violet, Nickita Longman, Sylvia McAdam, Lindsay Knight, Night Kinistino and Dawn Dumont. "An Open Letter to the University of Regina Press, regarding the kisiskâciwan anthology." kisiskâciwan. https://kisiskaciwanopenletter.tumblr.com/ Web. 11 October 2017.

This open letter drew attention from the media, and Marsha Lederman at *The Globe and Mail* covered the story on October 11, 2017. It was later revised to include more input from Erica Violet Lee, and I include citation information for that version of the article here:

Lederman, Marsha. "Indigenous anthology stands by decision to include poet despite controversy." *The Globe and Mail* 12 October 2017. Web. retrieved Oct 12, 2017. https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/news/british-columbia/indigenous-anthology-stands-by-decision-to-include-poet-despite-controversy/article36559475/

On October 18, 2017 the CBC published an article, co-authored by Brandi Morin and Elisha Dacey, which announced that McLeod had decided to withdraw his work from the anthology:

Morin, Brandi and Elisha Dacey. "Writer with violent past withdraws work from Indigenous anthology." *CBC News* 18 October, 2017. Web. Retrieved Oct 18, 2017. http://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/neal-mcleod-indigenous-anthology-1.4360122

The following day, Jesse Rae Archibald-Barber, the editor of the anthology, wrote the following statement, and posted it on his Facebook page:

Archibald-Barber, Jess Rae. "Editor's note on kisiskâciwan: Indigenous Voices from where the River Flows Swiftly." *Facebook* 19 October, 2017. Web. Retrieved October 19, 2017. https://www.facebook.com/jesse.rae.37

The following citation information directs you to Neal McLeod's open letter:

McLeod, Neal. "Open Letter." *Word Press* 17 Oct 2017. Web. Retrieved October 29, 2017. https://nealmcleodopenletter.wordpress.com/

Finally, Tasha Beeds, Neal McLeod's former fiancée, and the victim of the assault he was charged with, responded with a responsive letter, which can be found here:

Beeds, Tasha. "A Responsive Letter…" *kâ-pimotêt aski-iskwêw (Walking Earth Woman/Tasha Beeds)* 23 October, 2017. Web. Retrieved October 30, 2017 https://askikwew.wordpress.com/2017/10/23/a-responsive-letter/

***

A talking circle honours confidentiality. What is shared in the circle stays in the circle. There are stories that I will not share, but I will say that over the past year and a half, since I found out about Neal's assault, I approached a number of people, both female and male, both nêhiyaw and môniyâw, both older and younger, both mentors and friends, for their thoughts on the issue, in an attempt to clarify my own position[158] as a scholar writing a dissertation on bilingual nêhiyaw-English literature. No two people had the same response, the same advice to offer, or the same relationship to the issues of gendered violence, colonialism, and accountability. I am honoured and grateful for each of these people who shared their time, their careful consideration, their stories, and their experiences. I wanted to find a way to reconcile or bring harmony to all of the stories and advice these people offered me, but at this point I know this is not possible. So for now I have decided not to include a chapter on Neal McLeod's work in my dissertation. I will cite some of his critical work, such as *Cree Narrative Memory,* because his work in the field is incomparable. I have chosen not to interview him at this time. I have decided to let some space open up, for me to listen to those who need to speak. I have chosen to make space for silence.

[158] Some of the questions that whirled through my mind were: should I still write a chapter on his work as planned? Should I still interview him as outlined in my plan of research? Should I make an effort to not cite him or his work in my writing? Should I contact him directly? Should I mention his name, or recommend his books, when teaching literature or Cree language classes? Do I tell other people about his assault?

awahê: Take Whatever Good Things You Find Here With You

awahê! Wolvengrey's dictionary suggests this word is an IPC (an indeclinable particle) and that it means *be careful!* or *take care!* (plural: awahêk!). I learned this word from Reuben, and the way he teaches it, the word—like so many nêhiyaw itwêwina—has other meanings, and more layers, than the dictionary translation is able to convey. One day I asked Reuben if there was a way to wish someone safe travels in nêhiyawêwin, or if there was a parting phrase with that sentiment. He taught us to say *awahê*, and said that it means something like, "As you travel, I wish for you to see good things, that you will travel safe, that you will be blessed on your journey home, and that when you arrive, you will bring all of those good things to your home fire."

> It's been such a long journey.
> We are almost finished.
> –"Walking Away" *The Crooked Good*

And now my writing is coming to a close. And now your time reading my work is coming to an end. I hope that you will gather good things from what I've written here, and I hope that you might carry those good things with you. I won't tell you what you should take with you, or what conclusions you should have at this point—that is up to you. kitipêyimison. As Louise Halfe made clear to me in our conversational interview, "It's a life-long struggle to understand and come to your own perceptions… it always comes back to self-responsibility. It's up to you." But perhaps it would be kind for me to remind you of a few things, and then to turn our thoughts to future journeys and travels.

My dissertation explores this basic question: What do the nêhiyaw words and phrases embedded in the poetry of Louise Halfe, Gregory Scofield, and Naomi McIlwraith teach readers?

When I began my research I was only beginning to learn nêhiyawêwin, but I noticed (and was troubled by) the sparsity of literary scholarly engagement with the language and with the bilingual work of these writers. In 1989 Basil Johnson published "Is That All There Is? Tribal Literature," an article drawing attention to "eminent scholars, none of whom spoke or attempted to learn the language of any of the Indian nations about which they were writing" (5). He went on to say, "Modern scholars, because they are not required by their universities to learn, are no more proficient in a Native language than were their predecessors" (5). With Johnston's words in mind, I set out to learn nêhiyawêwin with an aim to apply my knowledge of the language to my reading of current bilingual nêhiyaw-English literature. At that time, I did not have a clear awareness of the legacy of linguicide, and the challenges that Indigenous communities face in re-learning and re-vitalizing their languages. I also did not know that my own efforts at learning to speak and understand nêhiyawêwin would be so arduous and challenging. Although my central question may seem simple on the surface, and although I initially thought I could do this work in the typical way a literary scholar does her work (by working carefully—but often in isolation—with the words on the page), I soon learned that I needed to take time to learn and reflect on the issues concerning language revitalization and the ongoing reality of linguicide, on my own positionality, and in relation and conversation with nêhiyaw language teachers—and the authors themselves.

The resulting text (and the journey that it documents) is far different than the text (and the method) that I had first envisioned.[159] I found that many of my assumptions and approaches to learning and research (ideas and attitudes that I inherited as a white woman, born into a family of

[159] For an example of the kind of work I had done prior to my candidacy exam—which turned out to be a turning point in my research and methodological journey—see my 2012 article, "*nêhiyawaskiy* (Cree Land) and Canada: Location, Language, and Borders in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*" published in *Canadian Literature,* issue 215.

Dutch post-war immigrants, and educated in Canadian schools and academic institutions) were inadequate and inappropriate for exploring the question I sought to answer. The methodological shift that occurred along the way can be summed up as turning my attention to relationships and trying to understand and put into practice the concepts of miyo-wîcêhtowin êkwa wâhkôhtowin. This shift was something Louise and I touched on in our conversation, particularly when we were discussing Sylvia McAdam's book, *Nationhood Interrupted: Revitalizing* nêhiyaw *Legal Systems*:

Angela Van Essen: Mmmhmm. Yeah. I was particularly struck by that front matter, written by an Elder, where he really tells the reader to stop, and to smudge and pray before reading

Louise Halfe: mmhmmm

Angela Van Essen: because I think, for me, growing up and doing all these degrees in universities, it was a completely different approach to reading and to a text where it's often just like–

Louise Halfe: head work

Angela Van Essen: yeah, in your head, right? And so this included, or made me think about my relationship with the Creator, and sweetgrass, and other spirits that I can't even see, right? It made it more relational.

In his chapter "Theorizing American Indian Experience," Craig Womack says,

> I want to leave space open for other spiritual presences besides my own and that of my own species—such as water, wind, landforms, spirits, ancestors who have passed on, stomp dance singers long since dead who join their voices with ours at the grounds as we sing during the night dances, any number of other lives we share the planet with who help shape our, and their own, realities. (367)

It takes a lifetime to understand, put into practice, and live up to the teachings and laws of miyo-wîcêhtowin êkwa wâhkôhtowin, but I have learned that one way we might leave space for other spiritual presences in literary analysis is to stop and pay attention to nêhiyaw itwêwina. These words, as my research demonstrates, are richly woven, with kinship chords connecting them to

other nêhiyaw words, and to ceremonies, memories, people, and land—as well as to âtayôhkêwina êkwa âcimowina. At the same time, my research also indicates that these connections cannot often be seen by simply finding an English translation in a Cree-English dictionary. In her article "Beshaabiiag G"gikenmaaigowag: Comets of Knowledge" Anishinaabe scholar and poet Margaret Noori reminds us that "[k]nowledge recorded in the original language preserves subtle, hard-to-translate ideas" (35). As a language learner and cultural outsider I have also learned that the ways I have come to know and experience these connections are not formulaic, predictable, or easily replicated. My findings have come to me by spending a lot of time listening to nêhiyawêwin—listening to nêhiyaw storytellers, teachers, and poets. I have of course also spent a lot of time with dictionaries, grammar guides, and books. But when I look back on this journey, I am reminded of an image that my late friend Randy Brown shared with me, when we were talking about language learning, ceremony, and knowledge-seeking. He compared knowledge-seeking to a boy standing in a pond, trying to catch tadpoles. He said that it is impossible to grab them, those tadpoles. Instead, you need to learn to be still, to hold your hands under the water and wait patiently for them to swim into your hands. When this happens, you can gently lift them up. It has been my aim in my research to be patient—waiting for the words and the connections to swim into my hands—and carefully lifting them up. In this way I endeavor to respect the agency of those words as well as the authors and language teachers who helped me—to allow them to guide my reading, rather than my own desires to grasp or control the poems.

Finally, a conclusion, I am told,[160] "must highlight the student's contribution to knowledge." However, writing this dissertation has been as much about contributing to

[160] By the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research's minimum thesis formatting guidelines

knowledge as deciding what *not* to share. Part of my contribution, then, is demonstrating the value of knowing when to remain silent, learning how to listen, and sensing what should remain private—what should remain in the community—and what can be appropriately shared. This topic needs more attention and work—particularly in the field of Indigenous literary studies, where we are on the one hand committed to reading Indigenous literatures in the "cultural, historical, political, and intellectual contexts from which [they] emerge," and at the same time, doing so in an ethical, reciprocal, and respectful manner (Justice, "Kinship Criticism" 165). This tension becomes palpable when research moves beyond the relationship between the reader and the text and begins to include the relationships between the scholar and the poets, the teachers and the language learner, the môniyâskwêw and nêhiyawak. This tension (between reading a text in context, while striving to respect and support the people for whom this context is *their* culture, history, language, and lived experience) is also particularly pertinent when it comes to language, because Indigenous languages are both rich with wisdom, stories, and insights and, at the same time, the site of immeasurable intergenerational loss.

By setting up the research in the context of linguicide and Indigenous language rights and resurgence, this dissertation shows how current nêhiyaw and Métis poets are contributing to language revitalization efforts and advocating for Indigenous language rights by reclaiming their language and affirming its capacity for poetic richness. At the same time, my work in reading these poems and learning the language seeks to honour these rights and bolster this resurgence. As multilingual poet Gloria Anzaldúa writes, "Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate,…and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than them accommodating me, my tongue will be illegitimate" ("How to Tame a Wild Tongue, 81). While it would be erroneous and arrogant for me to suggest that my work

brings legitimacy to nêhiyawêwin, I do dream of a future where Indigenous languages are healthy, vibrant, and fluently spoken in communities all across Turtle Island. I dream of a future where nêhiyawêwin has official language status in nêhiyawaskihk. And I look forward to reading more nêhiyaw-âkayâsîmowin poetry by these authors—as well as from younger emerging poets who are working hard at reclaiming their language. These poems have taught me so much, and their words—particularly their nêhiyawêwin itwêwina—continue to teach me as I hear them in new stories, hear them connected to other itwêwina, and when I return to them with new eyes.

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