# *Teaching Stories*

## How Our Stories Are Told

*Alexandria Wilson*
*Harvard University*

In order to enter the exhibit area at the Museum of Man and Nature in Winnipeg, you first must face a mural depicting an Oji-Cree creation story. The painting, by Daphne Odjig, tells a story as old as life itself—one passed from generation to generation, carrying with it our religion, our culture, our existence. A story like that can only be told and listened to, never written down. Stamped in lines of black letters onto a white page, recorded and reduced, repeating itself with each reading, the meaning of that story would be lost. We must tell our stories carefully.

I was 15 when I first saw that painting. It was a perfect piece of commissioned art, brilliantly colored and obviously symbolic in a way that was pleasingly "primitive" to the museum board, I was certain. And huge as it was, it was secretly eloquent in the thin lines that connected each animal to another, whispering to me, this is how this world was created.

I had arrived at the museum alone, but fell in with a group on a guided tour. The painting, the tour guide pointed out, described a "creation myth. Actually, Native people came to North America over the Bering Strait land bridge." He led us into the museum's first exhibit. One wall was covered with a map of North America; small, caveman-like figures were painted on it, walking a step or two behind huge animals, moving down the west coast, heading south. "They crossed over the Bering Strait when the water level was low and everything was completely frozen. From there, they followed the animals, pushed south by the encroaching ice sheets until, eventually, they spread all over the Americas. They hunted mainly woolly mammoths." He turned for something beside him then spun suddenly back toward us. With a small jump and a heavy thump, he landed on both feet, knees slightly bent and face twisted into a strange and ridiculous grimace, a spear raised and ready in his right hand, a pale and dressed shape of a warrior. "This," he said, "is an atlatl—the spear they used to kill their prey," hesitating a little, standing like himself now, "I mean, a reproduction of it."

The people in the tour gasped and touched the spear in amazement. One man, who had nodded his head in agreement during the demonstration, was holding

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*Editorial Comment.* The teaching story section is new to *CJNE.* In it we hope to express the voice of Aboriginal people who teach through their stories. Stories are not interpreted, mainly because each reader applies whatever is relevant to himself or herself and will understand when and what she or he is ready to understand. Teaching story submissions are reviewed by those steeped in an Aboriginal world view, with an eye to relevance and depth of meaning.

forth to his friends, offering details about the arrowheads, how they were made, explaining how the spear worked, the physics of a successful kill. Another man, standing before the map and with a weatherman's authoritative sweep of his arm, was showing his wife the movement of the ice sheet, forcing the flow of people and animals before and behind it.

The tour continued. We were walking south from the northernmost tip of Manitoba. First "The Arctic" then "The Sub-Arctic" and on to "The Boreal Forest." The tour guide waited by the entrance to that exhibit for the group's stragglers to catch up. We gathered in front of a small video monitor, and the guide began reciting a story about Weesageychak. The monitor showed a cartoon with Weesageychak sketched as an Indian man to illustrate the tour guide's story.

I stood back and to the side of the small crowd, trying to listen but dreaming instead. As a child, the first word I spoke was *mu* (listen) in Cree. I had heard the story the tour guide was trying to tell many times before.

My father told us Weesageychak stories; my family gathered round, warm in flannel pajamas on cold and dark winter mornings. My dad would cook for us every Sunday, and we'd sit together, at the table, my mom, my brothers and me, hoping he would serve up a story while we waited for our meal. Sooner or later he'd start:

Weesageychak was hungry. *Weesageychak maka essa oma uti nootekatao, inna kayas asii ka ki michisoot.* She hadn't had anything to eat for a long time. Sure, he had been eating berries, roots, bulrushes, but he hadn't had anything that tasted really good for awhile. He was hungry for meat. *Weeasinew essa oma ka noota mechit.* Like always, he was trying to figure out a way to get what he wanted. Well, as she was walking along the lakeside, she spotted some waterfowl. He thought for awhile, trying to figure out an easy way to catch them. Finally, she came up with a little scheme. *Ketta tawen essa oma ka miskwen etak tansi kitta itakamisit.*

Weesageychak built a fire along the shore. He started singing, banging on a drum he had, and dancing to his own music. Soon enough, he attracted the attention of the birds. "What are you doing?" they asked. "I'm doing a special dance. I need your help. There's a catastrophe coming, I know it. We need a dance to avert it. I can't do it by myself!"

"Well, of course we'll help," the birds said. "What do you want us to do?"

"Watch me carefully, the way I dance around the fire, then follow me. It has to be done just this way, with your eyes closed and everything, or it won't work. Watch."

And Weesageychak started dancing around the fire again. The birds watched carefully, practicing their movements a little, and then fell in behind Weesageychak, eyes closed, dancing in step with her.

When Weesageychak caught up to the last bird in the line, the goose, she grabbed it by the neck. He swung it around and around in the air until its neck broke, then threw the bird into the fire.

The loon smelled the singed feathers, started to worry and opened its eye just a little for a peek. It saw Weesageychak twirling around the next bird at the back of the line. The loon sounded the alarm.

"Weesageychak's killing the geese! Weesageychak's killing the geese!" All the other birds got away—even some of the geese wobbled out of Weesageychak's reach. Weesageychak was so mad at the loon that he started chasing it around and around the fire. He took a kick

at it, caught it right in the rear and sent it flying. She caught up to it and kicked it again. The next time, she kicked it so hard that its body moved forward and left its legs behind.

"Thus," my father would explain, "the loon has its strange anatomy and the goose has its long neck."

Now, here I stood, positioned between caricature and history, listening to that same story told in the earnest, abridged language of an anthropology student. "The trickster figure, Weesageychak, is the central character of Cree mythology." I couldn't help but laugh a little. The name sounded strange in his mouth, with the uncomfortable pronunciation of a foreign word, his emphasis on all the wrong syllables. I was sure that Weesageychak herself, himself, was giggling with me.

The tourists, though, were restless, and the guide began herding us into the next room. The room was already inhabited by the lifeless forms of a diorama. The trees had been constructed, "needle by needle," the guide said proudly, "entirely out of wax." There was a running stream, stuffed animals, and people. Suddenly I was scared. The people looked familiar. An old woman, a man, and some children, each face shadowed with memory for me. The guide announced that each of the people were wax replicas of real Indians from The Pas Reserve. I looked up at him and whispered, "I'm from The Pas Reserve."

We finally made it through the Plains and back to Winnipeg. While the rest of the group were crawling inside a tepee, the guide asked me what I had thought of the tour and the exhibits. I told him how we pronounce Weesageychak. "He isn't just a man," I added. "Weesageychak can be whoever it wants, a woman, man, animal or all at once. That's what makes the stories so good." The guide asked if I would like to work part-time at the museum, perhaps on "The Native Peoples Tour."

I said I would think about it and got his number.

Of course, I couldn't resist his offer. The next week I went on a few tours with other guides and then I was on my own. Here was my chance to tell a good story. I could talk about the painting, trace the creation story it told. I would push the group past the land bridge section, reminding them that it was just a theory, "a scientific myth, in fact, that recent evidence suggested was false."

It wasn't long, though, before I realized that most of the museum's patrons preferred wax casts to living Indians. What if that family from The Pas was really here, no longer frozen in an ahistoric wilderness? Say they were standing just inside the museum doors, out of the cold, trying to figure out what they wanted to do in the city. The kids would be asking for McDonald's and the parents would be trying to figure out how they could do that and still squeeze in some shopping, all before it got too dark to start the drive home. The museum patrons would move around them; some would even find another exit. None, I knew, would look straight at them, listen a little, smile at the children, or offer directions to a good mall with a McDonald's.

I didn't last long at the Museum of Man and Nature. I finished the course I had been taking at summer school and was able to return home. I haven't been back to the museum since then—I've tried to stay out of any museum. Now I'm here, trying to use Indigenous epistemology to invigorate psychology's approach to our community. I'm far from home now, but our university has some resources for the

work I want to do. I can search the campus databases and find lists of books, journals, and writers, all of them here. I can talk about the Cree cosmologies and cultural congruity, and my classmates will nod in acceptance, a small gesture that sometimes seems to acknowledge the authority of my own community's experience of our world. I am grateful for these things.

Most of the university's books on Native Americans are kept in the Tozzer Library, adjunct to the Peabody Museum. You enter through large glass doors, go up a few steps to a tiled mezzanine that forms a bridge between the museum on the left and the library on the right. Artifacts are hung along the passageway, and a carved wooden cradle and a rock shaped into a giant figurehead sit at either end. I've been in the museum once, as much the fool now as I was as a child. As gullible as Weesageychak's geese, I was lured by a museum worker's request for help. My friend and I had been asked for feedback on a new exhibit on the Sundance. We had shown up at the museum just as it was closing and had been directed to the main exhibit area by an impatient staff member, obviously ready to leave. We circled through the museum, past a series of reconstructions of Native American life, movie-set miniaturizations of a Plains Indian tepeee, a Pueblo, a longhouse. The scenes were strung together against barely lit walls and we couldn't find what we were looking for. How could they make a display out of the Sundance anyway? No one goes to a Sundance just to watch or imagines he or she can learn from it by looking at it. Each person present at that ceremony must be a part of it. It made no sense.

That was my only trip to the Peabody's exhibit area. I use the library unwillingly. I have felt uneasy there, really, from the first moment I stepped past the cradle into the circulation area. I made my way up the stairs to the second floor. A huge thunderbird is suspended in mid-air, right there in the library. I found my books and settled down at a table to read. There, in lines of type on sheets of paper brown and brittle with age, and in nostalgically sepia-tinted photos reprinted in modern texts, I found my people pressed flat and dry between the pages. The thunderbird hung heavily over each page and all around me. I looked up from my books right into its face, and it called me over with its eyes.

When I stood, a sharp pain shot through my back, and my knees buckled. I waited, then stood again and walked across the room to it. It had been carved from an enormous tree, painted black and white, green and red, dark and violent colors in the overlit library. Its wings extended across the entire width of the skylight it was trapped beneath. I turned to look behind it. A thick metal bar extended from the wall and stabbed into its back, welding it in place. When I saw the bar, my head started to spin. I felt as if I was going to throw up. I braced myself against the wall, whispered a prayer to the thunderbird, then left the library.

I'm not ready to return to the library or the museum yet. Friends will retrieve the books I need. And in the end, no one from the museum remembered to ask us what we thought of the Sundance exhibit. I still catch myself sometimes, appealing to Western science to shore up Indigenous knowledge, starting into a creation story when someone asks why there's a turtle on my shirt.

I'm trying to learn Weesageychak's missed lessons, how even our most naively misguided actions linger in their unintended effects. I think about the thunderbird,

hanging over fictions and truths. I think of the stolen skeletons, scalps, clothing, tools, and totems next door. I picture the museum's basement, walls covered with dark wooden cabinets, each cabinet a stack of thin drawers, each drawer filled with lines of carefully measured skulls. And before I can cry out, I imagine undoing it all, the "heroic fool" will to make real the unreal.

I will pull open each drawer, a thousand empty eyes witnessing again, and I will inhale deeply in the dust of my ancestors. I will breathe a deep and swallowed breath, one I refuse to let go, and when I leave, my ancestors will be with me, there in my lungs, smuggled out in my flesh. We will walk back across the bridge, up the stairs, stand under the thunderbird and push. Our push will be stronger than iron, wood will be stronger than iron, and the iron bar will snap. We will give one fabulous push until the thunderbird breaks free. It will lift past the glass skylight and move, red and green, black and white, the colors of the forest again beneath a blue sky.