

Of Hating, Hurting, and Coming to Terms With the English Language

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This article explores the power of language and some of the barriers that face Native literacy and attempts to describe by being a culturally appropriate way of framing "literacy" for Aboriginal peoples. It begins with an introduction in the traditional manner, albeit in the English language, and then illustrates how "literacy" was taught at home. It then looks at an emerging awareness and ability to articulate what was amiss in Native life and the power of language. Whether a mother tongue or the colonizers' language, language can create or destroy. As a weapon it has been and still is used to disenfranchise Aboriginal peoples. As a tool it is used to empower Aboriginal peoples. But what is the difference? Many of our Elders survived physical and psychological abuse in residential and mission schools because of language. Sadly, the fallout from this trauma falls on the younger generations and those who for a multitude of reasons have been denied our mother tongue. We are told by some of our Elders, "You're not a real Indian if you don't speak the language." We are told by the dominant society, "English is the only language you speak; therefore, it is your mother tongue." And when we make the effort to learn our Aboriginal language we are told, "It is one of the hardest languages in the world to learn." Language as a tool always empowers our people, yet all tools to work properly for us must be respected.

My father grew up on the reserve. Unlike his siblings he did not go to residential school, but attended the Little Port Elgin Indian Day School. He attended, he says, "Just long enough to learn to read, write and do enough arithmetic to get by." Armed with his grade 8 education, he went off to make his way in the world. Like so many other young men of that time, he ended up in a lumber camp in northern Ontario. He said that once he talked to his father boasting about how he was now doing a man's work. He held up his arms to give his father an indication of the girth, the size of trees he felled. "Ah that's nothing," his father responded, "we used to cut trees like this." His father raised his arms to indicate that the trees he felled in his youth were two, three times larger than the trees my father cut down.

Work in the lumber camp was hard, but he had good meals, a warm bed, and money. Dad said the men were paid once a month, and that was when they headed into the nearest town and drank their money away. He said that before drinking away his money he would clean up and go and find a library. He liked to read and was always looking for books about Indians. Sad to say, all the books about Indians he found predicted that the

Indian would vanish from the face of the earth within 50 years. This vanishing act or this "myth of the disappearing Indian," as George Sioui (1992) calls it, started my Dad thinking.

Picture this. My Dad is 16, 17 years old, off the reserve for the first time, alone (nobody with him from Cape), and he is faced with the death of not just his whole family—mother, father, grandparents, siblings, cousins, distant relatives, the people from his community, even Indian people he did not know—but his whole race in 50 years. If he lived until he was 77 it would be a pretty lonely existence.

This prediction cropped up in each "Indian book" my Dad found. Finally, he could not take it any more. He decided to do something about this grim prediction. He would find a pretty wife and breed like crazy.

And so here I am. *Nungoskwe*, *Lenore Keeshig-Tobias ndishnikaaz*. My name is Nungoskwe, Lenore Keeshig-Tobias. I am the eldest of 10 children, five girls and five boys. Except for three, we are all married and have children. My father is now a grandfather to 29 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. I have five living children: four daughters and a son. There are 20 years between the eldest and the youngest. I also have five grandchildren. So much for our 50-year extirpation date.

Neyasshinigmiing ndoonjibaa. Where I come from, or more accurately where my sound comes from, is Neyasshinigmiing, Chippewas of Nawash First Nation, also called Cape Croker. This is where I grew up and where I now live.

I am a storyteller through my family: my father is a storyteller. He has a knack for telling stories and a real talent for finding stories and knowing what makes a story. My younger sisters and brothers have a knack for telling stories; however, I am the only one in my family who has made it a profession, meaning that sometimes I can pay the rent. I am a storyteller also because I have made a commitment to storytelling. I have also fasted to become a storyteller.

I was educated at Cape Croker by my family and the mission school there to grade 8. After that I attended the Loretto Academy in Niagara Falls, where I suffered terribly from culture shock before anyone even knew that culture shock existed. I gained weight, was depressed, and fell from being an A student to being an underachiever who, as far as Mother Superior was concerned, was "wasting tax-payers' money." My sister Nadine followed me to the academy a year later. Unlike me, she did not experience the same degree of shock, in part because she was more extroverted than I was and because we were there together. Two years later we were brought home to attend high school in Wiarton.

I have a degree in fine arts from York University. I have worked as a journalist, editor, culture worker and consultant, anti-racism worker, workshop facilitator, education trustee, and child care worker, and now I teach at George Brown College. During the summer from May to the end

of August, I work with Parks Canada as an interpreter. I take people on guided hikes throughout the Bruce Peninsula National Park and Fathom Five National Marine Park. I tell them about the local fauna and flora, the natural history, and the Aboriginal history of the area. I have the better of two worlds.

As a child I remember being teased because we did not understand Anishnabemowin, the Ojibway language. We were told that we were not real Indians. But then, we were never taught our mother tongue. This was a way of protecting us, shielding us from punishment that we would surely receive at school if we ever spoke the language.

By the time my father was ready to teach us Ojibway, we were already too far in the school system to want to learn. Like so many others, we heard the same script with slight modifications. Here is George Sioui's version (1992). I like it the best. This is from *For an Amerindian Autohistory*, (written in accordance with Amerindian values).

Your ancestors ... were savages with no knowledge of God. They were ignorant and cared nothing about their salvation ... The King of France took pity on them and sent missionaries who tried to convert them, but your ancestors, the savages, killed those missionaries, who became the blessed Canadian martyrs. Now, thanks to God, and His Church, you are civilized people. You must ask God's pardon every day for the sins of your ancestors, and thank Him for introducing you to the Catholic faith, for snatching you from the hands of the Devil who kept your ancestors in a life of idolatry, theft, lying and cannibalism. Now get on your knees, we're going to pray to the blessed martyrs. (p. xi)

Our nuns were not French, so we didn't get the "King of France taking pity" bit. We got the "Holy Father taking pity" instead. Like so many other Aboriginal children we wanted to distance ourselves from that horrid image.

The unemployment, the living conditions on the reserve, dirt roads, outhouses, no electricity or no running water; the house parties and broken families, the cowboy-and-Indian movies, and the media reports—were all continual reminders that we were just a few steps beyond savagery and light years from civilization.

My mother did not speak much Ojibway. She knew words. To this day she chides herself for not being able to learn the language. "It just doesn't stick. My brain doesn't hold it," she says. Ironically, both my mother's parents spoke the language, but I think my grandfather taught my grandmother.

Although my mother could not teach us the language, she did teach us other things. She read to us. She taught us beauty. She drew our attention to the colors of the sunsets, the expanse of winter landscape surrounding our unique vista below and above the limestone bluffs and the bay. She taught us beauty through her quillwork: forest flowers, birds, deer, bear. She told us of her dreams and we told her of ours. She told us of her dreams and always encouraged us to tell about our dreams. I remember

her and her sister and my grandparents telling of their dreams. It was a family tradition.

My son told us of a dream he had. It was about running away from his Dad because his Dad was trying to eat him. In another dream an eagle was perched outside his bedroom window, its feathers ruffled by a breeze. A short time ago my daughter awoke laughing. She had dreamed that she was a *ginabec*, a little snake, and that she was scaring people: her grandmother, aunts, cousins, and me. She would slither into sight and people would scream. She would then slither away and hide. She was laughing because when she awoke she was still hiding and still flicking her tongue in and out.

We have always been encouraged to tell of our dreams. In turn my siblings and I have long encouraged our children to tell their dreams. I have come to realize the importance of doing so. A dream is something that only the dreamer sees and experiences. In telling a dream to others, one has not only to remember the dream, but also to find the right words to express what only she or he has seen and experienced to enable others to see and experience the same. To be able to do so is a remarkable accomplishment in communication, especially for a child.

Once the dream is disclosed, we are then guided to a possible meaning. "Maybe you are really angry with your Daddy." "Maybe the eagle has something to tell you." "Remember baby rattlesnake got into trouble because he liked to tease." "I know. But it was fun."

We do not sit down and do a detailed dream analysis. No, suggestions are made, and the dreamer then makes what she or he will of their dream. I am speaking here about the day-to-day, week-to-week kind of dreaming, not ritualized dreaming when an in-depth dream interpretation would be offered.

I am trying to stress the importance dreams and dreaming play in Aboriginal education, Aboriginal way of life, Aboriginal science (as opposed to Western science): "Dreams are considered gateways to creative possibilities" (Cajate, 2000, p. 65). Dreams or visions are recognized as "a natural means for accessing knowledge and establishing relationship to the world. They are encouraged and facilitated" (p. 71).

From my experience I offer my understanding of what happens when children are encouraged to remember their dreams. Here I use the child as an example, although the same process holds for adults. First of all, remembering takes place. Remembering takes practice, so why not start the practice at a young age? Second, the telling of dreams is, I believe, a true exercise in communication. It is the articulation of the warping in-and-out of sensations and locale and knowing. It is something that only the dreamer has seen and experienced, and the dreamer must convey its essence to the listener so that there is no doubt about what the listener is hearing. Third, the dreamer moves to a higher level of understanding or

knowledge of self, which is gained in reflection on and in knowing what a dream stands for or what it says. Fourth, sometimes understanding gained from dreams is for the benefit of the people.

Perhaps Dad is a little too harsh with his son. Learning takes a certain amount of risk, knowing when to seize the moment, and laughing at one's own foolishness indicates a degree of self-knowledge.

It is the telling of dreams—the accurate or as close to accurate communication—to which I draw your attention. This, I believe, is the beginning of literacy.

Reading was important in our family, as it had been in my mother's family, as it is in my family and my daughters' families. My mother read to us: "The highwayman came riding, riding, riding ..." (Alfred Noyes). "Rats! They fought the dogs and killed the cats" (Robert Browning). "They were coming across the prairie, they were galloping hard and fast; / for the eyes of those desperate riders has sighted their man a last / Sighted him off to Eastward, where the Cree encampment lay." (E. Pauline Johnston).

Although the white poets gave us good stories, Johnston, of course, was the poet we most closely identified with and understood.

Poetry, parables, psalms Mom read to us. I remember one particular afternoon. It must have been summer because we were not in school. She gathered us on her bed and began reading a most horrific story. This was something she wanted us to know about. The book was called *Hitler's Ovens*.

Dad read to us as well when he was able to work close to home and be at home in the evenings. He was not much for poetry. He liked narrative. Once he and Mom read to us a *Reader's Digest* condensed novel entitled *The Lion*. It was about a family living in a game preserve in Africa and their experiences with an orphan lion cub. This was years before the movie *Born Free*. Dad sat in the big armchair; Mom and the younger children sat on the chesterfield. We older kids sat on the floor at their feet. I cannot remember where exactly in the story we were, but Mom was reading. Then her eyes welled up with tears, her voice cracked. She passed the book to Dad. Soon he too was crying and had to pass the book back to Mom. The book went back and forth, and we sobbed and sobbed.

Years later Dad would leave magazine articles out for my sisters and brother to read. He would even question them later to find out if they read the articles. Those articles contained lessons that he wanted his children to learn.

Reading aloud was especially important for us because of its closeness to oral tradition: the sound of the human voice articulating ideas and concepts, illustrating and animating pictures, bringing the past into the present. We were read to mostly during the summer.

More often we were told stories. We heard stories about our parents' youth, stories of our grandparents, aunties, uncles, stories about our com-

munity. There were Dad's work stories, his lumber camp stories, Mom's stories, both Mom and Dad's hunting stories, stories of our family growing up. And, of course, we heard the Nanabush stories.

I like to wake up or fall asleep with the radio or television on, not for the music or the news, but for the sound of people talking, the sound of the voices. It reminds me of my grandparents and my childhood. Gramma and Papa's was where people talked and laughed late into the night, and I awoke to hear people talking and laughing and going about their early-morning chores, carrying in wood and water, making breakfast, and tending the farm animals.

Although I was writing in the English language the source of my inspiration was my Aboriginal culture. I was not attempting to copy or mimic English writers. I was articulating the world I had grown up understanding. But until I was able to articulate this so that others understood, I found myself running into barriers.

I describe briefly cultural differences, particularly in regard to literature even when written in English. Years ago I was working on a story that I hoped would be my first screenplay. It was about a little girl who acted out her frustrations by stealing from her friends and her favorite teacher. The story editor, a non-Native, suggested that I eliminate one of four small porcelain bunnies so that there would be only three. The child was stealing the bunnies one by one. Four bunnies, the editor said, was "pushing it." The story would lose "credibility with the audience." It was best to have only three bunnies, like three acts in a play and three strikes and you're out. I was purposely structuring my story around the number four, a sacred number for Aboriginal people. This was a healing story. My response to the editor was to ask how he proposed to take away the west wind. Ironically, I am now married to that story editor. He still thinks in threes, but he knows about *neewin*.

Speaking of rabbits, an Aboriginal student related an incident from one of her literature classes in which a non-Native student was convinced beyond doubt that the Native poet they were studying was referencing *Alice in Wonderland* because a rabbit appeared in the poet's work under discussion. We laughed, "Alice who?" References to Bugs Bunny would have been closer.

There are many misperceptions about Aboriginal stories and writing. Speaking collectively, here is a partial list of what has been said by non-Aboriginals at one time or another to me and to other Aboriginal writers.

- Indians don't play chess.
- Indians don't talk like that.
- Make it more Indian. Change the crows to eagles.
- Including a white character in the story would give it a wider audience.
- There's no such thing as Native literature.

- If you want a degree in Native literature, you will need a strong background in English literature first.

It is as if "Indians" were to be viewed only under glass; our work was to be measured against the backdrop of English literature—or worse, some romantic Anglo notion of who we were.

These were the kinds of comments, and in addition often workshop facilitators could not offer the same degree of advice and guidance to Aboriginal students as they could to their non-Aboriginal students. Coming out of these workshops was frustrating. We were not understood. We always felt as if something was missing or that there was something wrong with us. Later we came to realize that the professors, the facilitators, had no clue, no cultural context to know where our voices were coming from.

Therefore, in 1984 Daniel Moses and I founded the Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster (CRET). We intended to consolidate and gain recognition for Native contributions to Canadian writing, to reclaim the Native voice, and to facilitate the creation and promotion of literature by First Nations writers. We offered workshops and seminars that dealt with relevant themes and related topics, readings, and performances. We offered critiquing and consultation services, and we published a journal. We wanted to affirm our cultural identities and create a place and a presence for Native writers.

It did not take much to kickstart Trickster. Within a couple of years he was popping up in poems and plays across the continent. Not only that, but non-Aboriginal writers started looking for their own cultural tricksters.

Paula Gunn Allen (1986) writes,

The oral tradition from which the contemporary poetry and fiction take their significance and authenticity, has, since contact with white people, been a major force in Indian resistance. It has kept the people conscious of their tribal identity, their spiritual traditions, and their connection to the land and her creatures. Contemporary poets and writers take their cue from the oral tradition, to which they return continuously for theme, symbol, structure, and motivating impulse as well as for the philosophic bias that animates their work. (p. 52)

It is interesting to note that Gunn Allen's (1986) book of essays was in the works about the same time that the Committee to Re-Establish the Trickster was taking shape and coming into being. We were drawing from the same spring.

Early on, when I realized I was developing a public profile as an Aboriginal student, journalist, poet, and culture worker, I consciously set forth ways to foster and promote a greater understanding of Aboriginal cultures and histories. I was relatively successful as a culture worker. But every once in a while, I was beset by a great lump of emotion. It was always there, somewhere. Overindulgence with alcohol was one of its triggers. It felt like hate, like anger. It felt awful, and I felt hateful. And I

wanted to be the nice person I knew I was. I loved profoundly and cared and worked to make a better world for myself my family, my friends, my people. One day I realized I was not a hateful person, and that I did not hate. I hurt. I was hurting. I was in pain.

It was as if I had been peeling away the outer layers of an onion. It felt as if a shell over my back had split and my wings could push out and unfold. It felt as if I was being drenched in, cleansed, by a warm soothing summer shower. I could differentiate anger (I was not angry), hate (I did not hate), and hurt (I did hurt).

Some time later, I was speaking to a group about things Native and my hurt came out. I told the group,

Sometimes I hate this language. I hate this language, these words that come out of my mouth because this is not my mother tongue. I hate this language because I cannot speak my mother tongue, because my mother tongue was denied to me. But this English language is the only language in which I can communicate.

Over the years I have heard many times how our Elders were beaten for speaking our mother tongues, how they suffered to keep these languages alive, how they would speak them secretly. However, the degree to which they suffered for the language did not really hit home for me until I had the opportunity to read through Elders' testimonies to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (1986).

Until then I harbored a certain amount of resentment for Elders who denied me recognition: identity, culture, and belonging because I could not speak the language.

What kind of Indian are you? Don't know the language. Can't even speak the language. You're not Indian unless you speak the language. Only real Indians speak the language. You will never understand what it is to be Indian unless you speak the language.

Added to these beliefs were ideas about language acquisition that further alienated me from my heritage and my mother tongue. One language instructor said that Ojibway was one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn, that it would take a lifetime and still one would not achieve fluency.

Well, I tried. I took classes whenever possible. I started doing this when I first left the reserve. No language was being taught at Neyaashiinigmiing then. I have amassed Ojibway lexicons, Ojibway workbooks, Ojibway dictionaries, lists of words and phrases, and audiotapes (at least three sets). I was a single parent then, so the language for me more or less remained in the classroom. However, my children and I were able to toss words around.

I must admit that I probably know more than I give myself credit for, and given some practice I could manage the rudimentary phrases. I am somewhat comfortable with identifying and saying words: *hello, see you later, potatoes, meat, apple, shit, and fart.*

Aboriginal languages were seen as barriers to civilization. The use of Aboriginal languages was prohibited in both residential schools and reserve schools (Indian day schools). This was "expressly to dislodge from the children's minds the world view embodied in the language" (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, vol. 3, chap. 3).

Our Elders as children received and survived the frontline assault on our culture and languages. My father, his brothers and sisters, and countless others of his generation and mine were punished for speaking the mother tongue. Randy's father had a pin stuck through his tongue for speaking the Salish language and as a result did not teach his children the mother tongue or talk to his children about their Aboriginal heritage until he was much older and time was precious. My friend Nancy, who is a few years older than me, told me that her head was clunked or rapped with knuckles, ears pulled, and her inner arms bruised from the wrists to the elbows.

Is it any wonder, then, that these people revile and berate the replacement language, English? This is the language that has become our primary means of communication between generations, between First Nations, and cross-culturally.

For the tenacity and bravery in their young hearts not to let the language go, I have nothing but admiration and appreciation for the Elders and those people of my generation, for the speakers of the language. Imagine children in resistance. Indeed, they were children, not the adults with years of accumulated experience and wisdom, the people we esteem today. And yet these same people would chide me and others like me for not speaking my mother tongue.

Basil Johnston (2002), in "One Generation from Extinction," laments the loss of Aboriginal languages and in doing so expresses what many Elders have said and that we who speak the English language cannot express.

They [Native people] lose not only the ability to express the simplest of daily sentiments and needs but they can no longer understand the ideas, concepts, insights, attitudes, rituals, ceremonies, institutions brought into being by their ancestors; and having lost the power to understand, cannot sustain, enrich, or pass on their heritage. No longer will they think Indian or feel Indian. And although they may wear "Indian" jewelry and take part in pow wows, they can never capture that kinship with and reverence for the sun and the moon, the sky and the water, or feel the lifebeat of Mother Earth or sense the change in her mood. (p. 64)

Johnston (2002) goes one to speculate that without the Aboriginal languages, the kinship between people and the wolves, bears, and caribou dissolve, and the "Elder brothers" become simple commodities to be killed and sold. To this he adds, "They will have lost their identity which no amount of reading can ever restore. Only language and literature can restore that 'Indianness.'"

To me Johnston's lament is the ultimate expression of ambivalence for the English language. The loss of kinship with the animal people and identity, I believe, is more the result of acculturation policies, practices, Christianity, and Western world views than is the loss of language or the use of English.

In response to this lament I wish to say that I have been touched by the land, I have been kissed, scolded, tested, teased, and inspired. I have sat out on the land and called for a vision. I have never wanted to leave Neyaashiinigmiing, and when I did I always returned. When family disputes and alcohol or reserve politics and feuding drove me mad, I could always find refuge in the arms of a tree or between the bony knees of rock piles or on the shoulders of a bank. The trickling stream would quench my thirst, cool my brow, sing, and carry my troubles away and bring me to a new way of looking at things.

I had to work my way through my own ambivalence, to put distance between negativity and myself. It was difficult to operate under the influence of negativity. So I had to examine how and why I use language. As a weapon or as a tool? They are both instruments. A weapon is an object or instrument in fighting. A tool is an instrument to achieve a purpose.

As mentioned above, I came to see myself and my work as a culture worker, a storyteller, an educator—fostering and promoting a greater understanding of Aboriginal peoples, cultures, and histories, not as waging war. I work to empower Aboriginal people. With non-Aboriginal people I work to enlighten them about things Aboriginal. While writing or preparing for a talk, I consult my dictionaries, synonym finder, and thesaurus. I have to know what I am saying. I read my material aloud, because if my tongue stumbles over the cadence, then the word or words, or the arrangement, are probably wrong. Above all I need to respect the tool I work with so that it serves me and I do not serve it. I work in the English language.

Before closing I briefly sketch an outline of the "Storytelling Circle" and show how the oral tradition of storytelling is complemented by the printed word. The basic quadrants or the four divisions or classification in the storytelling circle are storytelling, oral history, oratory, and reportage. I borrow this basic outline from Jeanette Armstrong (personal communication). To this I have added the colors of the medicine wheel and affixed a value to each colored quadrant and the printed-word genres. The spoken word and the printed word are part of our reality. The northern quadrant is the Storytelling quadrant and is represented by white to symbolize winter, the traditional storytelling time and wisdom (as in the years of accumulated experience and understanding). The eastern quadrant is Oral History represented by the color yellow, which symbolizes spring and birth or awakening. The southern quadrant is Oratory represented by the color red to symbolize summer and persuasion or passion. Reportage, the

giving of news and information, holds the western quadrant and is represented by black to symbolize autumn and the present (today as we step toward our destiny).

This storytelling circle that I propose can and does incorporate the printed word. Under Storytelling along with *myth* and *legend* (and I do not like to use these terms, I prefer *teachings*), in this section we can put poetry, song, short fiction, novels, drama, anecdotes, jokes, and so forth. Oral History then includes autobiography, biography, history of the family, community, and nation. The counterpart of Oratory are editorials, letters to the editor, sermons, dissertations, and public speech of course. Reportage includes brochures, newsletters, manuals, cookbooks, and similar material.

The Storytelling Circle is a part of Oral Tradition. All too often we think of storytelling and oral tradition as synonymous and forget that there are other ways of communicating and not necessarily through stories. There is movement, repetitive movement, visual representations, touching, tasting, behavior, and lifestyle.

In closing I share this poem with you. Miigwech.

Trying to Fly

You used to dream
about trying
trying to fly
fly off somewhere
or return
home from
somewhere and
you'd not be able to make it
because you could
not get
your feet
beyond the tree tops!

The branches held
held onto
you, impeding
journey after
journey, and all your
efforts for
a quick way home.

You would will
yourself up
to the sky, into
the sky. You would
leap toward the
clouds. You would run
and then jump
up. You would leap
from boulder then
from fence post, from
buildings, from tall
buildings,
but alas,
always you found yourself
tangled in branches.

At other times,
you simply
had no energy,
not even the
slightest bit
of Momentum to rise
into the beyond.

The years moved
on steadily, and
you grew up,
grew older, and
wiser
but in dreams
you remained
hopelessly
hopelessly
caught in
the trees.

One day
after taking stock,
after turning a
number of other
things around
in your life,
turning things
around, to look
at in a new
way, a new light,
you thought
to yourself—*maybe*
I'm doing this
all wrong, maybe
this is not
what it appears to be.

That's when you
discovered the trees—
the trees—the trees.
They were playing
with you.
They were keeping
your head
out of the clouds,
your feet off
the ground.
They were
holding you up,
lifting you
up to heaven.

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