

## **Gathering Stories, Gathering Pedagogies: Animating Indigenous Knowledges through Story**

This paper brings together four Indigenous and non-Indigenous teacher educators to consider the pedagogical possibilities of Indigenous children's literature in our work with preservice teachers. In this paper, we take up an invitation to consider Indigenous literary arts in relation to pedagogies, land, sovereignty, and Indigenous ways of knowing. Specifically, we do this by sharing pedagogical examples of the ways in which various picturebooks and oral stories work within our classrooms. Over the past year, we have had opportunities to collaborate and co-write in two cities. While we come from different backgrounds, communities, and positionalities, we were brought together by our shared investment in the power of picturebooks as rich pedagogical resources to spark conversations about many of the themes and topics we seek to share with our students—such as land and place, intergenerational kinship networks, community relations, language revitalization, cultural identity, and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing.

Each of us strongly believe that Indigenous children's literature, including picturebooks, offer an opportunity to reiterate to preservice teachers that “Indigenous literatures matter because *Indigenous peoples matter*” (Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* 211). For many of our students, picturebooks are a first foray into Indigenous Education. Our students come to our classrooms with varying understandings and lived experiences of colonialism and Indigenous knowledges. Regardless of our students' prior experiences, they are required to weave Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing into their professional practices. For example, Alberta has a new Teaching Quality Standard that will be implemented in the fall of 2019. Teachers will be evaluated on their ability to “develop and apply foundational knowledge about

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit” (6). As we share within this paper, we have found picturebooks and oral stories to be a safe entrypoint into this material; they offer insight into particular communities, places, cultures, and identities in an accessible and celebratory way. These texts also have a depth and complexity to them that facilitate conversations about the sometimes-difficult learning we engage in. To make this argument within this paper, we move through four examples of picturebooks and stories within our own teaching practices.

Picturebooks open up important opportunities and questions in our teaching. The visual and verbal texts of picturebooks carry multiple meanings that can be read in different ways. Likewise, we have found there to be interesting conversations to be had about the differences between a text that exists on the page and an oral story: does putting a (live) story (spirit) into book, impaling it on the page, cut off its life force? What happens when an oral culture, which is tied to lifeways and traditions, is recorded in print? Is it ethical to share information, such as spiritual customs, in picturebook form? Questions such as these guide our practice with preservice teachers. Many of our pre-service teachers are afraid of making mistakes, especially early in their journeys, but they need to learn to sit with this discomfort and to take pedagogical risks within the classroom. We believe that discomfort is when deep learning and epistemological and ontological shifts occur.

Part of our role as educators is to point our students towards the wealth of resources and tools that are available to them, including Indigenous literatures, and to help them negotiate how to critically evaluate these sources for classroom purposes. While we always encourage our students to collaborate with colleagues, Indigenous community members, and knowledge keepers, we are well aware that asking Indigenous people to carry the weight of teaching continues to rely on extractivist and exploitative ways of gaining knowledge. Indigenous

picturebooks, such as the ones illustrated below, contain cultural knowledge that can help begin the conversation. Through texts, we can have discussions with our students about protocol, how to engage respectfully with cultural knowledge, or even the various roles of knowledge keepers and Elders in different communities. While we argue that texts offer rich vehicles for doing so, we are well aware of impersonators, historical misrepresentations, and the appropriation of Indigenous stories, cultures, and communities. To help our students understand these risks, we introduce them to guides such as Alberta Education's *Our Words, Our Ways: Teaching First Nations, Métis and Inuit Learners*, which offers a list of critical questions that should be asked of every resource prior to relying on it for educative purposes. It is challenging to learn how to assess texts, and to build the relationships that are necessary to understand why a text may or may not be appropriate.

As teachers, we cannot provide our students with all of the answers, or give them a toolkit to carry into the classroom. We each agree that we do not know all of the answers ourselves. Rather, we lead by example—modeling the relationality that is needed to do this work in a respectful way. The texts we choose to use in our classrooms provide insight into Indigenous cultures and communities in ways that offer rich pedagogical invitations to engage meaningfully in this work. Including them in our practice allows us to privilege what Indigenous authors and artists are telling us, using their own words—that Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing matter.

### **Framing Our Thinking**

In framing our collaborations in this article, we align with decolonizing and Indigenous-centred approaches to Indigenous literary studies and Indigenous education, particularly those that focus

upon the relationships between literatures, learning, and communities. In other words, we echo the insistence made by Métis scholar Jo-Ann Episknew that engaging with Indigenous literatures means engaging responsibly with Indigenous people and communities: from Indigenous literatures readers learn about Indigenous people, and those understandings have an impact on people and communities, as lives and stories are inextricable. In Episknew's words, "Indigenous literature serves a socio-pedagogical function as well as an aesthetic one" (193). Reading and appreciating Indigenous literatures comes with a responsibility to Indigenous communities because literatures reflect the people and carry the cultures, knowledges, and experiences of their peoplehood. If, as Cherokee writer Thomas King as so famously put it, "the truth about stories is that that's all we are" (92), then stories must be treated with a level of care and appreciation that reflects our respect for the people. Working in solidarity with Indigenous Peoples' struggles for self-determination, well-being, and resurgence, we are reading for decolonization and Indigenization in our teaching. We take Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's point that "community-based resurgence projects," at their best, "are inherently political and cultural because the intent is to facilitate radical transformation rather than just cultural revitalization" (*As We Have Always Done* 50). Our teaching must be responsible to communities' concerns, both cultural and political. That is, we endeavour to shape our engagements with literature around the issues, knowledges, and practices that matter to Indigenous communities.

In shaping decolonizing and Indigenizing approaches to Indigenous stories it is important to us to celebrate and appreciate the creativity, resilience, strength, and "brilliance" of Indigenous people (Simpson, *As We Have Always Done* 245). In so doing, we contend that it is important both to acknowledge the impacts of colonial violence on Indigenous communities and

to resist the dominance of deficit-oriented thinking about Indigenous Peoples—even if those sometimes feel like contradictory impulses. Unangax scholar Eve Tuck has issued a call for an end to what she calls “damage-centered research” (414), warning about the “the long-term costs of *thinking of ourselves as damaged*” (415, emphasis in original), and pointing to the insufficiency of deficit-based thinking. Instead of centering on damage, Tuck reaches for desire, contending that “desire-based research frameworks” are a more fruitful way to theorize the work of “understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives” (416). We follow Tuck in her move away from damage or deficit as a central focus, and we take a parallel step to focus our own critical efforts here on appreciation and celebration of Indigenous stories. While maintaining a focus on appreciative readings, we also hold firm that it is necessary to listen to true stories of colonial violence. For instance, we see the necessity of the *truth* in the processes of Truth and Reconciliation that are sweeping across Canada. When it comes to picturebooks, there are so many quality texts that share truths about colonial violence, including the history of Indian Residential Schools, in ways that are appropriate for readers of all ages;<sup>1</sup> it is crucial for such books to be taken up in education work as well. Our focus in this paper, however, is on books that centre Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing: on picturebooks that celebrate Indigenous communities and contribute to the work of reclamation, revitalization, and resurgence. In this vein, we seek to step away from “research” being “one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary” (Smith 1), and instead step into research that serves Indigenous communities.

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<sup>1</sup> A few examples include *Shin-Chi’s Canoe* by Nicola Campbell (illustrated by Kim Lafave), *Stolen Words* by Melanie Florence (illustrated by Gabrielle Grimard), *When I Was Eight* by Christy Jordan-Fenton and Margaret Pokiak-Fenton (illustrated by Gabrielle Grimard), and *When We Were Alone* by David Robertson (illustrated by Julie Flett).

An additional core principle for our literary and pedagogical engagements in this collaboration is relationality. Attending to perspectives from Cree scholar Shawn Wilson, as well as Cree and Saulteaux scholar Margaret Kovach, we hold relationality as a shared principle underlying our various beliefs about the world, about teaching and learning, and about conducting research in a good way. We seek to enact our responsibilities as “good relatives,” to borrow framing from Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice (*Why Indigenous* 71), in the sense that kinship is not a static category of belonging but rather a “delicate web of rights and responsibilities” (“Go Away, Water” 154), requiring action. In our roles as teacher educators, often bringing non-Indigenous students into relationship with Indigeneity, we also draw upon relational frameworks that address the notion of responsible engagement across cultures, or between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people—namely Cree scholar Dwayne Donald’s notion of “ethical relationality” (543) and Cree scholar Willie Ermine’s notion of “ethical space” (202). In our work with future teachers, much of what we do is teaching them to engage, to build stronger relationships with Indigenous people and perspectives. We see stories as a powerful entrypoint to that work and as powerful ongoing teachers in their lives as educators: “Literatures, in their artistry, have the capacity to draw readers into experiences, to learning, and to relationships” (Author 328). Listening to the experiences and voices of Indigenous people, through their stories, is a way to take strong steps into more ethical, responsible relationships and engagements.

In what follows, each of us (four co-authors) take a turn speaking to pedagogical practices and experiences centering on Indigenous stories. As collaborative writers, we intertwine our voices to begin and close our paper, but in the middle four sections we each have a space to speak and share in our own voices. These four sections are a gathering of pedagogies

and stories. We offer these examinations and reflections to our readers in the spirit of engaging responsibility with Indigenous literatures, fostering positive learning, respect, engagement, and relationship.

### **Gathering “buckets full” with Julie Flett’s *wild berries* / *pikaci-mīnisa***

My name is (Author Name): I am a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta and am of Métis and mixed European ancestry. I live and work in (City, Province), which is in Treaty 7 territory, in Education at the University of (City). When I teach Cree-Métis writer Julie Flett’s picturebook *Wild Berries* or, in Cree, *pikaci-mīnisa*, it is for a class of pre-service teachers in a required course on Indigenous education. I find that engaging with Flett’s book enables students to consider land, language, intergenerational and experiential learning, and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. Exploring significant concepts through evocative images and text, *Wild Berries* is a powerful teaching tool. I bring students to engage collaboratively with the text, reading and enacting each pair of pages in small groups. We read, share, and discuss, for instance tackling the tensions between text and orality and the challenges of learning from the land when most of your day is spent in a classroom. The book guides us into meaningful learning.

The experiences depicted in *Wild Berries* are those of Clarence, a young boy who ventures out to pick berries with his grandma. “When Clarence was little,” we are told, “his grandma carried him on her back through the woods,” and it was only his grandma who “carried a bucket and sang” (1), but now that he is bigger, “Clarence carries his own bucket” and walks along behind his *ōkoma* while “they sing together” (3). Immediately, the book draws attention to the closeness of Clarence and his grandmother. With my students, I draw attention to the educational aspects of this relationship. Clarence’s *ōkoma* brings him out into the world and

shows him how to do and how to be in relation to the berry-picking experience. The text does not show her teaching her grandson directly: there are no explanations or demonstrations shown in the book. Rather, the closeness between the two carries with it an implication that Clarence enjoys growing up to do what his grandma does, to carry his own bucket and march along with her, singing together. Her teaching and his learning take place simultaneously, in context, through being and doing on the land. The picture on that particular page shows a happy line of berry pickers, his ōkoma leading with Clarence marching behind and the little dog bringing up the rear, all mouths open in song and limbs swinging with their walk. By the time my students encounter this image, they have read about traditional Indigenous approaches to education that include intergenerational learning and respect for kinship, and are able to see and talk about the rich learning that goes on between Clarence, his grandma, and the land.

In addition to his ōkoma and their little dog, Clarence meets several other creatures in the berry-filled clearing. For instance, we see that “an ant ēnik crawls up Clarence’s leg” and “it tickles” (15), and that “a spider kōkom-minākēsīs makes its web” (17). The pictures show Clarence watching, patiently, even raptly, as these tiny beings go about their business. Little sound effects—“Tch, tch” and “Sh, sh” (15-17)—amplify the smallness of the creatures and highlight Clarence’s attentiveness to them. Clarence shows respect for the other animals in the woods implicitly through his attention, but also explicitly when he shares his berries: “When the buckets are full, Clarence lays a handful of berries on a leaf for the birds pinēsīsak and the other animals of the woods” (21). Then, before he and his grandma depart for home, “they say thank you nanāskomowak” (23). In their relationships with the animals, Clarence and his grandma enact principles of kinship and reciprocity. My students and I—we have also read Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Simpson’s article “Land as Pedagogy”—discuss what Clarence might be learning



from his experiences on the land, from each being he encounters, and from the relationships in which he is immersed.

Importantly, each page in *pikaci-mīnisa* highlights Cree language alongside the English. I am running them together in my textual quotations here, but the book works beautifully to set the highlighted words—both the English and Cree—off from the main text with font formatting. I appreciate that this move does not prioritize the English—for instance, by italicizing only the Cree and treating it as a translation. On the final page of the story, “the birds sing *nikamo* in the clearing” (p. 27)—after the humans have left, the creatures of the clearing continue, the fox watching on as the birds share berries. The “sing” and “*nikamo*” on this page, like every other page in the story, are set off as larger and italicized, the Cree standing out red against the black of the rest of the English words. When my students engage with this book in class, they are also challenged to pronounce words in a language unfamiliar to them. Flett has kindly provided them with a pronunciation guide at the end of the book, but still they must work to practice and respect the language of Clarence’s learning. This experience is a tiny but vital site of realization for them as future teachers: a glimpse into the broader projects of language revitalization and reclamation that could be part of their work within an education system that strives to enact its responsibility to Indigenous peoples.

Flett’s book *Wild Berries* opens up excellent conversations in my classroom around Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing. This charismatic little book, with its beautiful artwork and simple-yet-densely meaningful text, brings my students to consider what it means to come to know from the land, to be in relation, and to act in responsible ways. When it comes to bringing future generations of children to learn about the world, I feel better knowing that they have listened to this story’s beautiful pedagogy of gathering.

**Connecting to History through the Multilingual Plains Cree Story *Honouring the Buffalo/Hommage au Bison/êwako ôma ohci paskwâwi-mostos kâ-kistêyimiht: nêhiyaw-âcimowin***

(Author) nitisikasôn. BC ohci niya kayâhtê. oskana kâ-asastêki niwikin mêkwâc. My name is

(Author). I am a settler scholar originally from the Peace River area of Northern British

Columbia, I grew up on Treaty 8 Territory. I am now living in (City), also known as the place

where the bones were gathered. I am teaching language, literacy, and social justice classes for

pre-service teachers and graduate students in a French Education program. The 2018 gathering of

the Indigenous Literary Studies Association at First Nations University of Canada in oskana kâ-

asastêki included the theme of Gathering Bones. In this paper presented at the ILSA gathering, I

focus on my experiences of teaching the story *Honouring the Buffalo: A Plains Cree*

*Legend/ewako ôma ohci paskwâwi-mostos kâ-kistêyimiht: nêhiyaw-âcimowin* or *Hommage au*

*Bison* in French Education classes. This dual-language book is available in both English/Cree

and French/Cree editions.

I often teach with Indigenous children's literature in my Education classes, particularly

picturebooks. While reading Indigenous literatures, my students and I have discussions about

how stories open up new possibilities for readers to understand historical and contemporary

Indigenous perspectives. In the context of teaching pre-service elementary teachers in a French

education program, I selected the French and Cree bilingual picturebook *Hommage au*

*Bison/êwako ôma ohci paskwâwi-mostos kâ-kistêyimiht: nêhiyaw-âcimowin* as a course text for

my students. In the context of living and teaching on Treaty 4 territory, this text is informative

and relevant for education due to its focus on the history of the connection that Plains Cree have

to the buffalo, as well as the portrayal of kinship relationships, intergenerational learning, and the connection to land and place.

This story was told orally by Wisdom keeper Ray Lavallée (Cree/Saulteaux) who shared this story with author Judith Silverthorne. As a non-Indigenous writer, Silverthorne acknowledges the importance of following protocol and respecting these stories. Silverthorne wrote the story in English, and it was then translated to Cree by Randy Morin. The Cree text was edited by Jean Okimâsis and Arok Wolvengrey. The French version was translated by Fransaskois author Martine Noel-Maw and published by les Éditions de la nouvelle plume (2016). The story has the potential to connect readers in three languages, Cree, English, and French, with audio-recordings available on the author's website. With Cree (nêyihaw) language featured prominently on every page in the picturebook, this text supports language revitalization. Cree words are also included in the English and French text, such as Mosôm (grandfather) and Nimosôm (my grandson), along with pronunciation guides at the bottom of the page.

The illustrations in *Honouring the Buffalo* are paintings by Mike Keepness. Mike Keepness is from the Pasqua Nation. He lives in the Qu'Appelle Valley and draws inspiration from the lands for the illustrations in this picturebook. The illustrations depict the strength, resilience, and strong kinship ties of the Plains Cree living on the land, with colourful depictions of daily life throughout the seasons.

*Honouring the Buffalo* begins with a young boy asking his Mosôm to tell him the story of the Buffalo. They drive out to the prairie together for the storytelling, the learning takes place on the land in a similar way to the book *Wild Berries*. While Mosôm tells the story, we hear the Buffalo describe to the Creator all of the ways that his body was used to help people survive by providing food, shelter, clothing, instruments, tools, and more. For example, the Buffalo

describes “Winter robes will make them comfortable in the cold and snowshoes will help them get around in the deep snow. For their ceremonies, they will use my hide to craft drums and drumsticks, rattles, and masks” (16). The story provides extensive details on all of the uses of the Buffalo, accompanied by colourful illustrations. Towards the end of the book, there are several pages of photographs presenting ‘Things Made from Buffalo’, these photos are of objects (from the Royal Saskatchewan Museum) such as a flint knife, snowshoes, leather and hair toys and dolls, leather pouches, moccasins, a tooth necklace, and a ceremonial headdress. Factual information about the Buffalo is also provided, along with an educational guide.

*Honouring the Buffalo* informs readers of the cultural significance of the Buffalo for the Plains Cree, while also shedding light on the massive decline of the buffalo population due to colonization and settlement. My students and I gained a deeper understanding of the importance of buffalo for the Plains Cree in Treaty 4 territory. Furthermore, the story enabled our class to learn about how the buffalo have always been deeply respected by Indigenous people. In response to *Honouring the Buffalo*, I invited my French Education class to work on a project that was multimodal in nature by incorporating multiple modes of communication including visual, oral, movement, video, and music. They worked in literature circles to read the story during our class time, and worked on exploring a theme in the story to develop an oral/multimodal presentation as a class project towards the end of the term. The story provided rich material to be creative in response to the text through movement, poetry, and language. Furthermore, the students in my French Education class considered the possibilities of teaching with this text in their future classrooms, how they may explore the richness of the themes through discussion, games, art, visits to local historical sites and collaborations with knowledge-keepers and Indigenous community members.

In my French education class, we listened to the Cree audio version of the text while following along with the French version. It would be very valuable for children and teachers to have the opportunity to interact with Cree language speakers by inviting a Cree speaker to the classroom or having an exchange between a French immersion and Cree immersion school. In the Fall of 2018, all of the languages in this story came to life for my students when I invited the author Judith Silverthorne, French translator Martine Noel-Maw and a Cree language instructor from First Nations University, Bill Cook, to animate the story in English, French, and Cree. For many students, this was the first time they heard a story in the Cree language and had a powerful impact on their way of thinking about language revitalization. Hearing this story read aloud or in audio format is important as the story was originally an oral story, told by Ray Lavallée. Oral storytelling is featured prominently in *Honouring the Buffalo* as it is through story that the Mosôm teaches Nôsisim about how the Buffalo was valued and continues to be respected today.

*Honouring the Buffalo* illustrates the power of the loving intergenerational relationship between osisimimâw (grandson) and omosômimâw (grandfather). When the omosômimâw finishes telling the story to osisimimâw, he sings a song and the a herd of buffalo run across the prairie to greet them. While the Old one sings, the young boy watches him close his eyes and he does the same, and “Even though he didn’t know the words, he began to sing softly” (35). The old and young generations are closely connected here through story and song. The final double-spread portrays both of them looking out over the prairie sunset, hand in hand, while the young boy asks, “Mosôm, will you teach me the ways and the songs to honour the Buffalo?” and Mosôm replies, “Grandson, there is always much to learn about Buffalo Medicine” (39). These words emphasize the importance of the younger generation learning from Old ones through

songs, knowledge, stories, and ceremony for the strength and empowerment of Indigenous communities in future.

Many Indigenous artists, scholars, and storytellers have developed creative works related to the buffalo that provide valuable opportunities to extend learning beyond the book through connections to community resources. In Regina, Saskatchewan, the Buffalo People Arts Institute is doing important work to share knowledge of the buffalo with people of all ages. Following my presentation of this paper ILSA gathering in June 2018, I have collaborated with Joely BigEagle of the Buffalo People Arts Institute and invited her to share her passion and extensive knowledge of the buffalo with students at the university and with young children. BigEagle's dynamic presentation deepened our understanding of many of the themes in *Honouring the Buffalo*, and provided us with hope as she also spoke about 'bringing back the buffalo'.

## **Dibaujimowin**

...The philosophy of the original people

was based on the timelessness

and harmony and the power of Creation

and humanity's place in it... (Solomon 80)

Wiikwemkoong doonshiba, Nido minissing. Jijak ni-dodem. (Author) dishnakaz. Nin anishnaabekwe. Dibaujimowin...so the story goes...

Our people say that when the pale face came, they laid claim to the lands, and made their mark. They made great efforts to conquer our spirit as a people. In this, they did not succeed. We are still here; our languages, our traditions, our belief in a brighter future for our children. At other times and perhaps more and

more often, I remind myself that I can erase, awaken, and rejuvenate all that is beautiful. It is a story I can tell, a story I can write, a story that speaks of my experiences of happiness and great hope. It is time to tell a new story, a very pleasing one of promise and new hope to honour my mother's namesake "Pitawanakwat," meaning between the clouds or coming cloud; to show great hope and promise for our people, the Anishnaabe. It is time to redefine, realign, and reassign my experiences—a way to tell a story through my experiences for future generations. From the Anishnaabe prophecies it was foretold that there would be some dark passages of time and great difficulties to overcome. As Anishnaabe people we can get past this. We can move forward from here.

(Author 2)

In my paper for the Indigenous Literary Studies Association (ILSA) 2018 gathering at First Nations University of Canada, I initially wanted to animate a Nanabosho legend on the creation of hoop dance. I had shared this story once before at an Anishnaabe Language Conference in Winnipeg and thought it would be appreciated by my audience at ILSA. McLellan's picturebook *Nanabosho Dances*, published in 1991, animates Nanabosho's walk and pulling his first willow as he creates the hoop dance. This is a highly entertaining and culturally informative story. Furthermore, the watercolour illustrations by Rhian Brynjolson beautifully depict the lifeways of the family, their intergenerational learning, aspects of ceremony such as smudging, dance regalia, and Nanabosho's creation of the hoop dance. The book itself begins with Ni Mishomis and Kokum lighting a smudge to share with their grandson as they begin to tell the story reflecting a traditional way of storytelling. I had not taken into account the spring season for the ILSA gathering taking place being incongruent with the winter season for storytelling and was

remiss in terms of being able to be a storyteller. Upon reflection, I adapted my paper to focus on the importance of storytelling, art and song in my teaching.

Storytelling has always been a way of communication, teaching, learning or entertainment of the Anishnaabek since the beginning of Turtle Island which is its own story. The story of creation when sky woman came down and helped us by landing on a turtle's back while our natural world tried to find earth in the endless water. Starting from our creation story to the birth of Nanabozho, story is foundational to izhitwaawin (culture). Johnston writes in *Ojibway Heritage*, to better understand our people “would be through ceremony, rituals, song, dances, prayers and stories as it is through these that belief about life, being, existence and relationship are symbolically expressed and articulated” (7). In this expression of story, the spirits are speaking and storytelling is about oral communication.

Oral communication is viewed as a dialogue between spirits. Our story is filled with the breath of life. Once story is written down it is considered impaled on a page and the life force from which it comes in human spirit is no longer there. To share story is to fill it with life-blood and feeling through the subtleties of voice, tone, inflection, rhythm, eye movement, body signals, hand gestures, emotion that relay the stories mood. Storytelling is alive and is in a way about performance. The translation from oral story to the written page with the increasing genre of Indigenous literature has been troubled for decades. Language translation is a prominent challenge as many speakers say that the English language falls short of descriptive words for exact translation. There is also a developing recent move towards writing in Indigenous languages. This is an effort to claim space in the field of literature to speak to the fact that our language and culture is still here. This is a positive step towards language revitalization for youth



and future generations. Although Indigenous oratory is not easily translatable, it “can be reimagined” (Murray and Rice xix).

Oral story requires a certain interaction with the reader. In Johnston’s words, “it is not enough to listen or to read or to understand the truths contained in stories; according to the Elders the truths must be lived out and become part of the being of a person” (17). The purpose of storytelling is for teaching and it is through the interaction of the storyteller and the listener wherein intellectual interpretations take place. Storytelling is also about learning. It is our way of education.

The traditional way of teaching

was by example and experience

and by storytelling. (Solomon 79)

Here Solomon reminds us of the teachings of strict adherence to the sacredness of life whether human or animal or plants (Solomon 79).

In the *izhitwaawin* of the Anishnaabe there are two forms of story: *dibajimowin* which is personal stories, teachings and histories. *aadizookaan* is traditional or sacred story (Author 1) Stories therefore will always have a varied point and purpose. Sacred stories or traditional legends are shared in ceremony. *Dibajimowin* or personal stories and teachings are shared every day.

Drawing inspiration from Solomon’s words, I see the value of storytelling in relation to my teaching practice. When I am teaching, I feel the powerful exchange between people through oral storytelling. I am most comfortable in song and music. That’s where I began teaching when I first worked with young children and continue now, teaching at the university. Song is a form of story and poetry. Singing makes my spirit soar.

In terms of language revitalization, I admire the work of Anishnaabe playwright Alanis King, who has produced work entirely in Anishnaabemowin. When I asked King what it means for her to be a contemporary storyteller, she shared these words:

When I reflect on story particularly Anishnaabe story it immediately puts me in a time and place where I belong. There is room for you. It is who you are. And to me that is so special to know your being comes from somewhere and is attached to life since time immemorial. As an Anishnaabe creator of plays I always feel I'm celebrating the Anishnaabe worldview, championing our stories, our language, our myth, our history even the tough times...in a good way for the people and our ancestors who I always pray to for help and guidance. We have so many characters to entertain all of us which includes the little two-year olds to the elderly. The laughter heals us all, the tears set us free. Mino bimaadziwin.

### **Modelling relationality through *P̄sim Finds Her Miskanow***

My name is [redacted]. I am a scholar and educator of British descent now living and working with/in Treaty 7. I grew up on Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe Territories and lived in many different places before moving to [redacted] (the [redacted] name for [redacted]). I have been honoured to work with and learn from Blackfoot and Cree communities in Alberta and Manitoba over the past five years. As a result of these ongoing relationships, I was asked to teach a section of Indigenous Education, a mandatory course for pre-service teachers at the [name of Institution]. While the course is written and led by my Indigenous colleagues, I find myself continually dwelling in the complexities of what it means for me, a settler descendent, to teach this course in a respectful and relational manner. Picturebooks offer an opportunity for me to

foreground Indigenous voices and stories and to work towards Indigenizing my pedagogy and curricula.

My teaching is ultimately informed by my community-based work and what I have learned from these various lived experiences. For example, I am part of a cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary project that involves Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers from universities, governments, educational resource organizations, museums, public schools, and communities located along the Churchill River. The overarching purpose of our project is to contribute to the ongoing work of reclaiming Aboriginal languages, histories, and knowledges among Asiniskow Ithiniwak (Rocky Cree) communities of northern Manitoba. At the heart of the project is the development of a cycle of picturebooks based on oral histories told by Rocky Cree Elders and knowledge keepers. In 2016, prior to my involvement with the project, Cree Elder William Dumas and Mi'kmaq illustrator Leonard Paul published the project's first picturebook, *Pīsim Finds Her Miskanow* (hereafter *Pīsim*). This text has become central to my teaching as it exemplifies the importance of integrating culturally relevant curricula, and foregrounds many of the key teachings of Indigenous Education that I wish to share with my students in the brief time we have together. For example, this picturebook sparks conversations about the importance of land and place, orality, community and kinship relations, identity, and language.

Importantly, rather than taking a pan-Indigenous perspective, this text provides tremendous insight into the stories and traditions of a particular community and place. At the outset, we learn that the Rocky Cree are a “distinct group of Cree-speaking people living in the northern boreal forest of western Canada. They are the most northern group of Cree” (Dumas and Paul 2). Specifically, Dumas and Paul tell the story of thirteen-year-old Kayasochi Kikawenow (Pīsim), a young Cree woman living in the late 1600s at Nagami Bay, South Indian

Lake. The text shares a week in the life of Pīsim as her family prepares for and undertakes the journey to the Spring Gathering. The story margins consist of maps, descriptions of material objects, transcriptions of songs and stories, and accounts of cultural traditions, offering supplementary information about this community to the reader. The reader learns about seasonal moon phases, Askihk (clay pottery), birch basket construction, canoe building, and fish-smoking. We learn how place-names are formed; how camps are laid out along river-banks; the significance and process of finding one's 'miskanow'; and how kinship patterns are established. The settings represented are actual places known to this community, and are located on maps and in dialogue using Cree names. As language is a carrier of cultural identity, this text works to preserve and reclaim language by intercepting Cree language throughout. In the case of *Pīsim*, the medium of the picturebook (through its integration of text and image), brings to life this particular place, celebrating the culture and identity of its community through a strengths-based approach. The Calls to Action released by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada remind me of the disconnection between Indigenous students' lives in and out of school, and the importance of representing community and cultural values appropriately in school texts. In response, the explicit situatedness of *Pīsim* provides an opportunity for *all* readers to learn about and engage with Rocky Cree identity and, importantly, for Rocky Cree readers to see their histories, stories, and identities celebrated on the page. For Rocky Cree readers, the book "symbolizes the birth of a sacred bundle. It is a gift to the children of today who are seeking their identity" (Dumas and Paul 1). While Dumas and Paul's text is specific to the Rocky Cree, tangible connections can be made between this text and other picturebooks we share.

*Pīsim* embodies many of the key teachings I seek to convey within my classroom.

Centrally, the text allows me to model the importance of positionality and relationality as a non-

Indigenous educator committed to engaging in this work in a good way. As we share *P̄sim*, I recall my own visits to the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation, as my relations within this community, and others, continue to guide my own unfolding understandings.<sup>2</sup> While my experiences in northern Manitoba frame the importance of relationality in this work, the picturebook itself is what teaches the intricacies of Rocky Cree culture and history—stories that will never belong to me. As such, students are reminded of the value of picturebooks for delivering vital stories that cannot always be taught through first-hand experiences. I remind students that my practices in the classroom are always centered around my continually unfolding understandings of Indigenous Education, rather than ever assuming that I am (or can ever be) an ‘expert.’ As most of my students are also non-Indigenous, positioning myself as learner, and explicitly sharing my own (quite recent) learning process affirms, I hope, that they too can engage with this work meaningfully, even if they are just at the beginning of their journeys.

### **Where The Spirit Soars: Hearing, Listening, Seeing Stories**

The stories we have chosen were carefully selected as they show a positive example for children and for our future teachers. Teaching with Indigenous stories, such as the picturebooks and oral stories we have discussed in this paper, is a powerful way to learn. As Indigenous and non-Indigenous teacher educators working with pre-service teachers, we have found that stories open up spaces to learn from the voices of Indigenous authors and storytellers. Indigenous stories encompass holistic learning by touching on all aspects of our being.

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<sup>2</sup> I draw upon perspectives from Shawn Wilson, Margaret Kovach, and Paulette Regan in thinking through this point.

## ***Language***

Importantly, the picturebooks *Wild Berries*, *Honouring the Buffalo*, *Pīsim Finds Her Miskanow*, and *Nanabosho Dances* each have included some Indigenous language in the texts. The addition of glossaries, pronunciation guides, and audio-recordings of stories further enhance engagement with Indigenous languages. With 2019 being the year of Indigenous languages, we hope to see more books being published in dual-language and Indigenous language editions. Such texts are powerful resources for all readers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and adults. They provide an entrypoint to learning language and aspects of the culture. The inclusion of Indigenous language in children's books is a step forward on the journey towards reconciliation.

## ***Relationships***

Relationships are central to the stories that we read, tell and hear. As educators we feel it is important to acknowledge where the stories we read are coming from, and to learn about the communities and authors who have shared these stories and knowledges. When we share a text with our classes, we feel a responsibility to learn about the creators of the text (Indigenous authors, artists, oral storytellers, translators, editors, and publishers). In reflecting on Episknew's notion of stories serving a "socio-pedagogical function" (193), it is in extensive study alongside the literature that this can be accomplished. Furthermore, we feel a responsibility to learn about the broader context of the stories. As noted by (Author), reading Indigenous literary texts "fosters relational understandings between readers and Indigenous communities" (312). When reading about the significance of gathering berries, learning songs from Old ones, or the history of the birth of the hoop dance, readers may gain an understanding of these lifeways. For (Author), "emotional connections, fostered relationally through stories, can enable

readers to consider their own roles and responsibilities” (326). As in the tradition of hearing a story multiple times and each time getting something new from the story, the picturebooks also enable a stronger connection and deeper understanding each time.

### ***Visual***

Furthermore, the visual images in *Wild Berries*, *Honouring the Buffalo*, *Pisim finds her Miskanow*, and *Nanabosho Dances* are deeply informative. They too tell a story. The artistic depictions bring to light the ways of being and doing within Indigenous communities. Visual images, including paintings, maps, photos, show the geographical and cultural location of each community. Aesthetic responses to literature can be modelled from the artistic representations in the literature.<sup>3</sup> For Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers, the visuals provide necessary information regarding cultural practices and lifeways. Between the Indigenous art and the text it becomes a small enculturation for the non-Indigenous reader, while empowering Indigenous readers with a sense of identity and connection.

### ***Nurturing the Spirit through Story***

Inspired by the words of Chief Dan George (1982) we have focused on selecting Indigenous literature that enables our spirits to sing. By enabling our spirits to sing through engaging with Indigenous stories, we also acknowledge Eve Tuck’s (2009) notion of a desire-based framework that

accounts for the loss and despair, but also hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the not yet and, at times, the not anymore . . .

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<sup>3</sup> For more on this point, please see (Author and Author).

Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future. It is integral to our humanness. (417)

Children's literature with a positive representation of Indigenous communities allows for hope and affirmation. Through a creative representation of traditions that are still alive today, these stories affirm identity that is strengthened by connections to the past while providing hope for the future.



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