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# Editorial: Special Issue "Language and Landscape"

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The special issue is special in a few different ways. It will mark the beginning of International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL 2022-2032) by focusing on Indigenous languages. Second, it will showcase the research, teaching, and learning of current and recent graduate students at the University of Regina and First Nations University of Canada in the area of Indigenous languages. And finally, the issue built capacity in publishing through a mentored approach.

Kinwås, a number of years ago, I heard Dr. Emma Larocque recite her poem, "Long Way From Home," which expressed her feelings about being an Indigenous academic in a colonial institution. It stuck with me because it opened my eyes to challenges Indigenous scholars face in navigating their way through academia. Western academic institutions maintain the colonial project when Indigenous scholars are silenced, excluded, or marginalized (Kaleimamoowiahinekapu Galla & Holmes, 2020).

Dr. Larocques's poem would come to mind when I was a graduate student especially when I was feeling like I should not be there. Indigenous graduate students can find academia challenging when there are limited or no supports, such as with scholarly writing for publication. There is a phenomenon called *imposter syndrome* that is experienced by many graduate students where they doubt their abilities and they become very sensitive to criticism. In my own experience, I found that this imposter syndrome affected my ability to publish. I was scared of sending my work out in fear of being found lacking or my work not worthy. This coupled with the marginalization of Indigenous knowledges can leave Indigenous graduate students feeling like their voices do not have legitimate space in the academy.

Indigenous scholars Candance Kaleimamoowiahinekapu Galla and Amanda Holmes (2020) wrote about their experience as doctoral students at the University of Arizona when they "created a space for Indigeneity within the academy" through relationality (p. 53). They identified that "individualism, competition, commodification, and ownership" are normalized through hegemony of academic knowledge production and serve as exclusionary practices (p. 54). As scholars in the academy, we are faced with publish-or-perish, which engenders exactly what Kaleimamoowiahinekapu Galla and Holmes identified. However, instead of submitting to these traits, they brought together a group of Indigenous doctoral students and created spaces of resistance, resilience, survivance, and transformation. Likewise, we saw an opportunity to build capacity through a mentored approach to the review process and potentially transform how these Indigenous graduate students experience one aspect of academia.

The theme of this special issue is Language and Landscape. As guest editors, we invited graduate students to submit articles that focused on Stories of places and language, Stories of communities and language, or Connections between land and language in your community. We provided interested graduate students with an opportunity to attend a workshop that included information on how to navigate the process of submitting to a journal, how to write an abstract, and how to write different types of scholarly articles e.g. a conceptual paper, literature review, research paper, book review. The students were then given several months to create a first draft of their articles. Then the four guest co-editors distributed the articles so that each article was reviewed by at least two co-editors. The students were then given time to consider our feedback

and suggestions and re-draft their articles. We paired each student with an Indigenous scholar to provide them with the experience of peer review in a safe and relational space. The student authors had the opportunity to engage in collegial and supportive dialogues about their writing with their mentors through an open-review process.

We thank the several mentors who took the time to support these graduate students in the writing process.

Guest Editors: Melanie Griffith Brice, Anna-Leah King, Andrea Sterzuk, and Angelina Weenie

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# Nahkawēwin Revitalization: A Mini Language Nest Created With Hope and Determination

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**Abstract**

This research based on my master's thesis explores Nahkawēwin language revitalization. This study draws on the language nest model, which first originated with Maori grandmothers and their grandchildren in the 1970s. In this study, my mother and I created what I refer to as a "mini" language nest in both of our homes to teach my children Nahkawēwin in a holistic manner. I call this a "mini" language nest because our nest only involved myself, my mother, and my children, when other language nests around the world have had multiple grandmothers and children who are participants of the language nest. This article aims to show how this approach to language nests can be used to revitalize or revive a language using intergeneration learning and teaching. In this study, I reflect on the different challenges one may face while creating a mini language nest, and how one might overcome these challenges through different language strategies, frameworks, and teaching tools. I do not wish to present language nests as a foolproof solution; rather, I share the reality of how one thought or intention can change the outcome of language learning in a positive manner. The language nest did not only teach my children their language, it brought us together with compassion, enthusiasm, and hope.

*Keywords*: Indigenous, language, revitalization, revival, language nest, linguistic landscape, intergenerational learning.

## Nahkawēwin Revitalization: A Mini Language Nest Created With Hope and Determination

My name is Denise Kennedy, and I am a Saulteaux woman from Pasqua First Nation. I am a mother, wife, teacher and student. My passion is language revitalization and language research. Presently, my focus is rejuvenating the spoken language in our community. In this paper, I will take my readers through a study that I conducted with the hope and objective to revive the language with my children within the walls of their own home and their grandmother's home, through intergenerational learning and teaching.

This paper comes out of a study which explored Nahkawēwin (also known as Anihšināpēmowin) language revitalization. This research draws on the language nest model, which first originated with Māori grandmothers and their grandchildren in 1973 (Chambers, 2015). As a language teacher and also as a mother, it was important for me to research different avenues of language learning that would benefit my children within their own home. I also wanted to keep in mind the needs of my community and other communities who are also seeking ways to revive or revitalize their languages. Seeking answers to important questions through research is critical to addressing issues of recovering and maintaining languages (Kirkness, 2002).

In my research, my mother and I created a mini language nest in both of our homes to teach my children the gift of their language. I refer to my approach as a "mini" language nest because it only involved myself, my mother, and my children, and because it was for a short period of time during evenings and weekends. Though there may be different ways of learning the language in one's community, it is important to bring the language back into the homes, so the families are learning together (Norris, 2006). The language nest not only brought the language alive in our homes, it brought determination, hope, and connection. Though times were challenging and sometimes very frustrating because of English dominance in our society and in our homes, I found different ways and used different teaching tools in our language nest to make language learning the main focus for my children.

In this article, I present data from my research which illustrates how language nests can help families and communities revive or revitalize their languages within their own homes through intergenerational learning. Family is the most central and critical domain in the maintenance and reproduction of language (Schwartz, 2008). This research is not only important for my family, but also for the families, parents, and children in my community. The research is intended to give hope and encouragement to parents and families, that they can be a part of their children(s) language learning, whether they know a lot of the language, or a little bit of the language. Pushor (2012), a teacher and education researcher, suggested that we as teachers/educators and schools need to get "parental engagement" involved in children's learning (p. 476). Pushor's research suggested that parents need to work side-by-side with the teachers to give children the proper education that is needed for growth because parents have been the teachers since the children's birth. This is exactly what needs to be done with language learning. Language learning needs to be done within the home, with parental involvement and intergenerational transmission.

Though challenges may arise, we as Indigenous peoples must keep striving towards our language goals, and to find ways that work for our children and family members in language learning. This article offers insight of how language nest can work well, and what language learning tools may be used to have a successful language nest in our homes and communities.

## Background

The situation of Indigenous languages is diverse across Canada. For some communities, revitalization is needed, while in other communities, maintenance is needed (Galley et al., 2016). The most common step to language revitalization in communities are school-based programs, children's programs outside the school, adult language programs, documentation and material development, and homebased (Gomashie, 2019). Being a language teacher in my community, I have seen the success of students learning the language, but it needs to go farther than the classroom. Language learning needs to go into the homes, so the children have people to speak with outside of the school. School-based language learning is probably the most common form of language learning, but it is not a method that creates fluent speakers (Blair et al., 2002; McIvor & Anisman, 2018). I believe that the language needs to go back into the homes so families can start to speak their language together as a whole. Speaking one's language in the home provides the opportunity to normalize the use of endangered languages and supports the process of intergenerational transmission from parent to child (Norris, 2004).

Language immersion is a common strategy used for reversing a language shift, with the idea that language learners will use the language outside of the school with family and friends (Fishman, 2001). Language immersion programming offers the more effective solution to the challenge of language maintenance (Morcom & Roy, 2019). Immersion programs are built on the premise that the best way to learn a language is to create an environment where the language, and only the language is constantly used (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006).

Language nests are seen as one of the most successful language immersion practices around the world. Language revitalization is the main goal to achieve while creating a language nest, but there are other benefits of the language nests such as intergenerational interactions, cooperation and respect (Delaine, 2010). Research suggests that language nests show promise for the healing of intergenerational relationships and the reclamation of family ways of knowing and being (Chambers, 2014). For this study, the main goal was for the language to be used in the homes where my children were when not at school. Creating a nest was to show our families and other families that language can be taught and learned at home. Families should use the language at home as the primary language of communication so that it becomes the first language of young children (Hinton, 2001). Hinton (2013) also suggested that parents who are speakers of the language should use their language skills with children and family. Family is the most central and critical domain in the maintenance and reproduction of language (Schwartz, 2008). Chambers (2014), like other scholars who have studied language nests, said that family-based approaches to language nest development and delivery are promising approaches to developing and re-establishing emotional, mental, social, and cultural connections between young children and Elders. As one can see with all the positive outcomes besides language fluency development within children, there is a lot more that comes along with this process of language revitalization. It not only creates speakers of the language, but it creates a well-balanced holistic individual.

Other language strategies can be used in the language nests to make it easier for language learning in English-dominant areas. In a Seneca language nest (Borgia & Dowdy, 2010), Western strategies along with traditional strategies were used while teaching the children. Activities were available to the children when they were ready to partake in them. During the day the students learned the language through non-verbal gestures, Total Physical Response (TPR) language teaching, repetition, and flashcards. Children learned about clothes, food, numbers, pets, commands, names, family terms, questions, observations, and songs (Borgia & Dowdy, 2010).

Documentation is also a suggested tool for families who do not have fluent speakers in their homes, which would be in a lot of cases in our communities today. Documentation is the preservation of stories, songs, prayers, and dialogues in the language through audio and visual recordings of speakers. These audio and visual recordings can be transcribed into written form and used in the home with the families. Some suggest that documentation can aid language revitalization strategies in a positive way, but in itself it will not create speakers (First Peoples' Cultural Council, 2020). On the other hand, Hinton (2011), argues that even the so-called extinct languages are being revitalized through the use of documentation. Upon review of the literature, these are just some of the language revitalization strategies that can be used. Communities and families need to have a clear understanding of their goals before attempting either language revitalization or language revival (Montgomery-Anderson, 2008). Communities are recognizing that long-term planning is a crucial first step towards long-term continuation or revival of their language (McIvor & Anisman, 2018). Language nests should be considered within more communities because they are a great way to bring that language back into the homes with families. Language nests are seen to be one of the more effective immersion practices for early childhood learners. They have been recognized internationally as successful means for language revitalization, but this method is not as present as it should be in Indigenous Canada (McIvor, 2015). I believe that this is because we as leaders, educators, and parents have become so used to living in a colonial setting, not only within our own homes but within the classrooms and communities as well, that we forget to implement our own Indigenous teachings, languages, and worldviews in our everyday lives. Indigenous scholars suggest that Indigenous frameworks cannot be implemented unless Indigenous people accept that their own worldviews, environments, languages, and forms of communication have value for their present and future, and they need to understand how they can help to reclaim and restore them (Battiste, 2013). My research not only aims to bring the language into my home for my children, but to also bring language nests into other Indigenous communities. We need to start decolonizing our ways of language learning, and this is one way.

## Methodology

The study that informs this article set out to answer the following research questions: What are the challenges of the language nest and what were the successes and outcomes of the language nest?

I used both Western and Indigenous knowledge methods to design my research for Indigenous language revitalization. I used the qualitative approach, consistent with Western ideology and research methods, when necessary. Qualitative research addresses issues by using one of the following three approaches: (a) grasping the subjective meaning of issues from the perspectives of the participants, (b) latent meanings of a situation are in focus, and (c) social practices and the life world of the participants are described (Flick, 2011). Qualitative research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information about the values, opinions, behaviors, and social contexts of particular populations (Mack, 2005).

I used the process of self-locating throughout my whole study. As Kovach (2010) stated, preparation assumes self-awareness and the ability to situate self within the research. Self-location is used mainly in qualitative research approaches. It allows the researcher to self-reflect one's life in their research. It allows us to use our truths and our experiences as means of validation in our writing. Self-locating in my research is similar to narrative research methodology. Lewis (2014) stated that "the researcher lives within the research and is committed to studying phenomena in their natural settings" (p. 164). With narrative research, just as in self-locating, you make the

research a part of who you are. As a narrative researcher, I am not only personally involved in this study, but we tend to change as researchers and as individuals as our research and outcomes unfold (Mills & Birks, 2014). As Kovach (2005) stated, Indigenous research allows us to transform into what we are learning. Wilson (2008) stated that, "If research doesn't change you as a person, then you haven't done it right" (p. 135). Wilson's research suggests that when we place ourselves into different studies, we are there to learn and to enhance our own communities, not so much to enhance the people or communities that we are studying.

Our language nest started in September, and because of the new school and work year we were only able to work with our language nest in the evenings and weekends. We would meet at my mother's home, where we would cook, clean and visit in the language. We then would go to my house, where we would play games, play in general and do house chores. I would use teaching tools such as puzzles, board games or card games to play with my sons, we would even go shopping at the grocery store in the language. The drive to the store would be in the language. We used the language whenever and where ever possible.

The data collection that I used in my study included "close observation" which is when the researcher is not only observing but also a participant of the study. Van Manen (1990, as cited in Bjorbækmo & Engelsrud, 2011) stated that "the best way into a person's lifeworld is to participate in it" (p. 29). This type of study allows the researcher to write about what they have experienced in their research, rather than what they have observed in their research.

During the language nest sessions, I interviewed my mother through audio and visual aids in both my home and her home. These interviews were conducted in both the Nahkawē language and the English language. I later transcribed these recordings into a Word document so I could refer to the interviews during my data analysis. I also took pictures of my children engaged in speech and activity with my mother during language use. This documentation allowed me to reflect on the day and what was successful or not so successful in language learning.

I also found it important to use the conversational method throughout my data collection. This allows the researchers to collect information through story telling. Honoring orality in research not only brings the participants and the researcher a significant relationship, but also it acknowledges a holistic and natural way of collecting data. In my data collection, it was important for me to use my mother's stories about language and worldview. During the interviews with my mother, I asked her questions about her thoughts about language in the community, from the past and present perspective, would she have made any changes in her decisions about language learning in the past and as a grandparent were her hopes and dreams of language learning in the home.

## Data and Discussion

I believe that for our Nation to be successful, we must first be successful at home. Being successful at home means using the language at home. The language nest designed for this study demonstrates that this immersion practice can work for language revitalization and being successful in language learning. In this section, I will share and discuss data about the challenges that arose during the language nest.

### Challenges of the Language Nest

> My sons are just not taking to the language, they are shy, uninterested or uncomfortable speaking the language. What can we do to overcome this? What do

> we need more of? This is my fault. Why are my sons having a hard time with language learning? (Journal Entry, Sept 10, 2018)

In my journal entries, it was apparent how little the language was enforced or encouraged in my home prior to beginning this study. I believe that was because of our English-dominated society that we live in. We used our colonial way of thinking and doing things because it was the more common way of expressing ourselves, which affected my children's use of their language. As a mother, this was a very sad realization. Time restraints also played a negative impact on the language nest, because the language nest was only done in the evenings and weekends due to work and school and other everyday happenings. My children wanted time to play on their electronic devices, or to play outside on their bikes. They did not want to spend their evenings or weekends speaking the language. Our time limit was just too short for natural speaking to happen.

English dominance was probably one of the more challenging factors to our language nest. My sons wanted to do things that they were used to doing, but these things consisted of only English. Their main concerns were things like television watching, playing their games or going on their iPads. English dominance was so severe that people who were not involved in the language nest, would come into our homes and speak only in English. Similarly, if the television was on, it was only in English. This was probably a moment that I would describe as the breaking point in my research; I felt like the constant intrusion from English would either break my research or make my research. In order to be successful in our language learning and teaching, we had to find a way to get past English dominance. We needed to appreciate and acknowledge the small successes of language learning. What I have learned in all of this is that with patience and appreciation of our languages, those small successes can surpass the challenges of English dominance. I learned to accept the challenges and work past those with language goals in focus. In the next section, I share some of the stories of these successes.

**Successes of the Language Nest**

> After my disappointment the other day in my language nest, I have come to realize that language work is hard, no matter where we are. Especially in the world we live in today. I realize I would have to be far away in the bush with no electronics or people who want to speak English to have a fully immersed language nest. I have come to terms that I will not get the language nest I wanted, but I will get the language work that my sons and I need. I have to stop depending on my mom to make this right, and instead value her words, her teachings, and her language use. I need to step up and make language learning mine, and use it in my own home, even if mom is not there. Creator help me. (Journal Entry, September 22, 2017)

I finally let go of the thought that only Nahkawēwin was going to be present, and accepted that the English language would still be present. Instead of making language-learning a task, I shifted my perspective and tried to make it natural. No matter how badly I wanted this study to be nothing but immersion, I came to realize that it was impossible to do this due to our situation. We either went to work or we went to school where the English language was a constant presence. If we wanted to watch a movie together as a family, it would be in the English language. I finally concluded that in order to be fully immersed in the Nahkawēwin we would have to live away from civilization, away from electronics, away from stores or anything that used the English language, and that meant that we could not go to work or to school either. Once I wrapped my head around this reality, I started to work with what I had.

I was also guilty of using the English language naturally, more so than Nahkawēwin. So, I needed to make a language plan for myself and for my sons so that the language could be used all the time throughout the day, and not only during the mini language nest allotted time. I spent time researching various at-home language learning tools. I found that the key to being successful in language learning was to have patience and to have fun, as well as to realize that some language use was better than no language use at all in our homes. I had to stop thinking about all the things that I thought were wrong with my mini language nest and start to appreciate that this was indeed happening. My children were hearing it, they were involved in it, and they were learning.

I had to understand that even though my mother could not be with us from sun-up to sundown, the language could still be present. I, as a mother, had to make it my responsibility to teach my sons their language. Even though it would have been easier for my own mother to be there, I had to do this also in our home, from morning to bedtime. Using our language was harder than anticipated when we had become so accustomed to using the English language in everything we did. I had to start thinking of our language use at home as not just something for my research, but also as our new way of life. I used the language as much as I could and hoped that my sons would eventually respond back to me in the language but, for now, at least they were hearing it. I had to think of ways to make our language more alive, more present, and more important. So, I used at-home learning tools, such as labelling our home in the language, which would remind us to use the language. Until language use became natural, this needed to be done. I needed it to be visible as a reminder to us to shift from English to Nahkawē.

**Teaching Tools in My Home**

I needed to do more that would encourage my sons to use more of the language. We started playing different language games with the kids, games they liked, such as bingo. In doing so, the kids were learning different subjects in the language, such as verbs, feelings, activities, and weather conditions. For them to win the game they had to say "*pahkinake"* (I win) to claim a prize. The boys enjoyed playing this game. We also played things like *Go fish*, in the language, which they both enjoyed. Using games and stories to engage the boys seemed to be working to a certain extent. I started to buy animal and number puzzles to become more engaged with my youngest son.

> I bought the boys some puzzles for counting and learning animals today; I hope they will learn with these. I hope these encourage them to use the language more … at this point I will use anything to get them interested. (Journal entry, September 21, 2017)

We did the puzzles in the language, learning the different wild animals and farm animals. While playing with these things, I asked my youngest son *"awēnēn owē?"* (Who is this?) with no response back, so I went through the animals by myself and pretended to forget what some of the animals were, and he responded to me in Nahkawē. He laughed so hard because he found it hilarious that I forgot how to say the animal's names, or so he thought. In reality, I was creating a (pretend) language gap in my knowledge that he could then fill with his own knowledge. I also did this with colors, shapes, and numbers. It was little strategies like this that I had to use to determine if he was learning the language. To my delight, I found that he was.

> I had to trick my baby son into speaking Saulteaux today! And to my surprise he actually knew what I was talking about. It was nothing big, but it was big for us, big for our family. I pretended not to know what the animals were on the puzzles, he thought it was hilarious that I didn't know … so he corrected me! By using the

> language!!!! .... I am so happy! It was a good day today! Ci mīkwēc. (Journal Entry, September 2017)

When he got the words right, I would praise him by clapping my hands and saying "*minō tōtam"* (good job). He appreciated this praise and encouragement a lot. When he saw that his brother was using the language, he would use the language more often. Their motivation and success were contagious between them. For my younger son, his older brother's language learning played a big role in his language learning.

**Linguistic Landscaping**

I started to make the language visible in my home. This was not so much so the children could learn to read and write it, but so that they would see it every day and would be encouraged to use the language more.

> Today I made labels to put up around our home. These are done to remind me that we should be using the language rather than English. Even I have a hard time to use the language all the time. I am putting the labels up, not to teach my sons to read and write in the language, but instead to remind them of what we should be doing/ speaking instead … I believe this will help us, and will work for us. (Journal entry, September 21, 2017)

I did this to show my sons that our language was important and valued in our home. This idea came from *linguistic landscape theory* (Dagenais et al., 2009). This research showed that the languages seen in print around us indicates what languages are prominent and valued in public and private spaces and also says something about the social positioning of the people who identify with those languages (Dagenais et al., 2009). I used this approach not only to encourage my children to use the language, but also to remind myself that I needed to use the language as much as possible with my children. I created language labels and put them in the appropriate areas throughout the house. For instance, at the main door, I put labels up that read things like "*niwī mācā šikwa"* (I am going to leave now), or in the kitchen labels like *"kinōntēskatē na?"* (Are you hungry?). These types of labels were all over the house and they stayed there until I did not need them to remind me to use the language anymore.

***Pōsīns***

I searched for other ways to keep their attention focused on language learning. I wanted to find a way that would catch my youngest son's attention and keep it, while being able to use the language. This was on my mind and I would research and search different avenues for language learning amongst younger children. One evening I was just randomly flipping through my social media when I noticed someone from the community was giving away a kitten. While I was looking at pictures of the kitten, I was saying in my head "*pōsīns*," which means "cat" in Nahkawēwin. An idea came to my head that I wanted to get this kitten for my sons, not only to have a new pet, but to use this kitten as a language tool.

> This evening I picked up a kitten from the community. I normally wouldn't do this, but I needed the cat to be a teaching tool. Just maybe this cat will motivate my youngest to learn more of the language? I can tell him to feed the cat? To give him milk, to hug him, to take care of him. The kittens name will be pōsīns … tāwā pōsīyēns (welcome little cat). (Journal entry, September, 2017)

I brought it home and introduced the cat to my sons. I told them "*pōsīns išinihkāso,*" which means *"his name is cat."* Both boys fell in love with the kitten right away and were excited to learn that the cat was their new family pet. They did not know that this new family member was to be a language tool for them to learn from.

I told them that *"pōsīns*" only knew the Nahkawē language, so we had to talk to *pōsīns* in Nahkawē, because that's all it understood. They took to the rules of speaking to the kitten right away. They would say things like *"ampē omā pōsīns"* (come here cat). "*wīhsinin pōsīns"* (eat cat), "*minihkwēn tōhtōhsāpo pōsīns"* (drink milk cat) or "*minihkwēn nipi"* (drink water) *nipān pōsīns* (sleep cat). These were some of the basic words and sentences that the boys used for communicating with the kitten. I started to make daily routines for the boys to follow with the kitten: Some of the rules for the cat were *Ahsam pōsīn* (feed the cat), *nipi mīna pōsīns* (give the cat water), *mīna tōhtōsāpo pōsīns* (give the cat milk), *nākitokās pōsīns* (take care of the cat), *pēhki a pōsīn* (clean the cat), *sāwēnim pōsīns* (love the cat). Though *pōsīns* could not respond to them in the language, my boys were using the language with something that they liked and cared about, something that was their own. This was a good teaching tool to use when their grandmother was not home with us. When searching, thinking, and desperate for something that would interest my sons, *pōsīns* did a wonderful job.

**Reclaiming Domains**

After the success of *pōsīns*, I started researching more ideas for both my home and my mother's home. I needed things or activities that we needed to use the language for, things that *pōsīns* could not help with. Hinton (2008) suggests that as language learning and teaching is to take place in the homes, we should set manageable goals. I found a framework for language learning called "reclaiming home domains" (Zahir, 2018). Zahir (2018) describes the process of reclaiming domains in the following way:

> A language nest area has activities that we do regularly. For example, in the kitchen we wash dishes, put away food, make a salad, sweep the floor, etc. We call these activities domains. When we decide to do these activities only in the language, we call this process reclaiming domains. (p. 161)

This language framework seemed to put language learning in a simpler and more manageable context.

> Today I started a new language revitalization framework, called "reclaiming domains." This is where I take one part of my home and master it. I think I will have the same idea when doing this, but go about it in a different way. I will, for instance, use my baby son's bath time to teach him how to say have a bath, wash your hair, wash your belly, wash your legs, etc. I will do this in different areas throughout the house. I am quite excited to do this … there are so many different ways one can learn the language, if you wanted to. It is for sure a lot of work, but it is work that is worth it in so many ways. (Journal Entry, September, 2017)

I began by setting small goals, instead of rushing things and making impossible goals for language learning. I started with bedtime. When it was bedtime, I would speak only the language to the boys "*kawišimon"* (go to bed) from "*kāšīnkwēn"* (wash your face), "*kišipinkinīnīcīn"* (brush your teeth), "*awēpison"* (get dressed), "*kipān kiskīnsikōn"* (close your eyes), "*nipān"* (sleep) "*mino tipihkan"* (good night). During bath times I would tell my youngest son to "*Kīšīpi kisitēn"*

(wash your feet), *"Kīšīpi kikitēn*" (wash your legs), "*kīšīpi kinikēn"* (wash your arms), "*kīšīpi kimihsat"* (wash your belly), "*kīšipi kitīhēn"* (wash your bottom), "*kīšīpi kistikwanēn"* (wash your head). At first, I would have to motion to him what I was saying, then he eventually started to understand what I was telling him.

I noticed with these specific domains in the house, it was making our language learning goals more attainable and successful. My children were starting to understand and respond to more words and phrases. I started this framework by introducing certain words, for example "*ostikwan*" (his/her head)**.**" Once my boys started to understand the words, I started to make them into phrases, like "*kīšīpi kistikwanēn*" (wash your head)**.** Being consistent with the reclaimed domains and repetition played a major role in my son's language learning.

I was quite fond of this framework because what seemed impossible one day was now full of possibilities, possibilities that would change the lives of my sons. These possibilities also influenced the way that I viewed language teaching not only to my children but also to the community's children. The main idea was to create enough reclaimed domains in my home and my mother's home that our homes would eventually feel like a mini language nest.

My goal to create a mini language nest with my mother and sons was to show the importance of learning our Indigenous languages in the comfort of our own homes with family and Elders. I walked into this study thinking that this would be an easy task because I had everything I needed for it to be successful. I was humbled very quickly; I was taught that language learning is hard work, it takes time, and it may take us down different roads and different ways of learning and teaching. While living in a society where English is the dominant language, it is hard to teach and learn your language in an immersed environment. We would need a place where there are no televisions, no radios, no stores, or internet and where there is nothing but our languages and the basic things around us. But, living in a fast-paced society where people are constantly moving makes this utopia impossible.

So, my study demonstrates that we stand and deal with the situations we are in and make it work to our advantage. We use different ways of teaching, we forgive ourselves for not doing this with our children since birth, we keep moving forward with our languages, we keep teaching them and adapting them to this new world we live in, and we never give up, we only do better.

**Intergenerational Transmission**

Elder speakers are seen as a precious resource for efforts to document, maintain, or reclaim a language, and their importance to language revitalization is widely recognized (Albers & Supahan Albers, 2013). In this instance my mother was not only the grandmother to my children, but she is a respected elder of our community. It was imperative to have my mother in our nest, not only for her wisdom, compassion, and love for her grandchildren and the language, but as her overall role to the community and other people.

My mother brought calmness and encouragement to our nest through her stories, and through her understanding and compassionate heart. Though the language was natural to her, she was able to slow down her language teaching for the sake of her grandchildren. She started to implement some of the language tools that I had researched into our language teaching. She was able to engage in games, reclaiming domains and other teaching strategies that worked for my sons. Unknowingly she was using teaching tools, such as total physical response in teaching my sons how to cook, clean, and play. She would use a lot of repetition when speaking to the boys and

praise when they would understand or respond to her. These are strategies that my mother did not possess in the beginning of our nest, she had seen what worked for my sons and their language understanding and learning. My mother was very encouraging, forgiving, and understanding when it came to language use and learning in the home. She set the tone for the day, and she grounded my expectations of how "I thought" our language nest should be:

> Mom: As long as the kids are having fun my girl and learning and hearing the language, everything will be okay. If they feel you being down and negative about language learning, then they won't want any part of it either.
>
> Denise: I know mom, I am starting to realize this now. As long as we get language in, and as long as they are hearing it as much as possible …. they will get it.
>
> Mom: kēkēt (true). (Journal entry, September 2019)

My mother gave me the courage and encouragement to further implement teaching and learning strategies in my own home, even when she wasn't there to guide us. Our togetherness in language learning and teaching, our togetherness as a family brought our relationships that much closer together.

## Discussion

The primary focus of this research was to explore the challenges and successes of creating a mini language nest in the common home for language revitalization. Though the intent was to bring intergenerational learning to my children with my mother and myself, it was also to show my community and other communities that this language learning practice can be done. The research is a lot about forgiveness, understanding, and patience. I walked into this research thinking our mini language nest would run smoothly because I thought we had all of the resources needed to be successful but instead I was hit with the hardships of language revival in an English-dominated society. I was discouraged not only as a researcher but also as a mother when my children did not take to the language right away. Through guidance from my mother and other language mentors, I learned to shift my way of thinking and to instead celebrate small successes in language learning. I learned that I, as the mother, needed to find ways that worked for my children's language learning and to step outside of the box that I created for myself and our language nest.

It is our responsibilities as parents to help our children to learn in life, and also to learn our Indigenous languages. There are language frameworks that are already created that can work well for families just learning to use the language in their homes. Linguistic landscaping, reclaiming domains, using family pets, singing songs, playing games, and the list goes on. Our homes should be the main source of learning and teaching, and language nests can support this learning.

I know in many cases in communities, not all families are fortunate enough to have a fluent speaker ready and willing to help, or have a fluent speaker in the home or family at all. I believe more research needs to be conducted with adult language learners in a family environment so they can teach their children the language. I believe it is fine if families are learning together. At this point and time, any amount of language use and learning is great. If parents can model language learning in their homes, for their children, language revitalization would take place more often and throughout more homes. People need to learn how to learn and help one another teach the language, even if it is done amongst each other without any fluent speakers. Language learners, with a lot of patience and determination have the ability to learn their language with the proper tools.

Perhaps language immersion models such as the Master-Apprentice program, also known as the Mentor-Apprentice Program in British Columbia, can be implemented more in communities. More research studies and more knowledge about this program can benefit adult language learners and set a foundation for them to learn the language for themselves and then to implement the language with their families and children. The Master Apprentice program allows adult learners to be partnered up with a fluent speaker or elder to learn the language in real life situations, which can include performing traditional tasks and skills. It could also involve teaching home concepts as cooking and cleaning etc. If a person commits to this learning style for a long period of time, the apprentice will be at least conversationally proficient in their language and ready to be language teachers to other people (Montgomery-Anderson, 2008).

Other language revitalization models that can be researched are models such the reclaiming home domains. Families can be taught this tool to use in their homes as a learning experience for language learning and teaching. One does not necessarily need a fluent speaker to do this, which could give people and families the hope of language learning at their own pace. A lot of the time not having the proper resources or enough resources for people is discouraging enough that they do not to try or follow through with language learning, let alone revitalization. The reclaiming domains model would make language learning that much more attainable and motivating to pursue because it is less overwhelming for the learner. As Hinton (2013) explained, in order to strive towards the larger goal of language nests, it serves teacher learners to set smaller, manageable goals. I do agree with this, but also if people were to know and understand the concept of reclaiming domains, this model can be used for families to create their own mini language nests in the home. Once one is taught to reclaim domains in their homes, they can eventually create mini language nests in different parts of their homes, which would eventually lead to a whole language nest in the home. The goal in today's language learning is to use the language as much as you can whenever possible.

For myself, my future study will relate to ways to implement these language revitalization models into our communities and homes, and to build the confidence within our Nation to want to learn the language and be consistent in using it. It is important to teach families that it is fine to start with no resources, that it is okay to be your own resource, that it is okay to make mistakes, and that slow progress is better than no progress. Our Elders, our knowledge keepers, and our language keepers are very important and guide the way to our Indigenous way of life and worldviews, but when they leave this world, we cannot use that as an excuse to sit and ponder the would haves, the could haves, and the should haves. It is imperative for us to live in a world where our elders have showed us enough knowledge to grasp our own language learning and way of life as Indigenous people.

## Conclusion

Taking the initiative to retain or revitalize a language is hard but rewarding work. A lot of times, we have a plan set in our minds that we think will be successful for our families' or communities' learning. Once this plan is altered in some way, we get discouraged and want to stop. No matter how hard language learning is, we cannot stop, we have to keep going. We have to learn different avenues of learning and teaching the language that fit the needs of our families, children, and community. We have to celebrate the small successes and find the encouragement to keep going. Our culture and language are who we are as Indigenous people; we cannot just give up when times get hard. Our children and our communities deserve so much more than that.

Different learning tools need to be implemented with different people in different situations. What may work for some people may not work for others. Encouragement and determination are big factors in retaining a language, especially when it comes to maintaining a language nest. Living in a fast-paced society where English is the dominant language in every facet of daily life can sometimes be discouraging. Even though English is the dominant language in our communities and resources are scarce, language learning is achievable through research of what our families and communities need. Our Indigenous tongues need to be normalized and used every day, everywhere, and anytime. Language learning should be taught in the homes through intergenerational learning with parents, grandparents, and siblings. If resources are scarce and fluent speakers are not available, language revitalization models such as the Master-Apprentice Program and/ or reclaiming home domains can be implemented for adult language learning, which can eventually be transmitted to the rest of the family for learning. Language learning/retention/revitalization is a long process, and it is a hard process, but it is necessary.

This study is a small language revitalization model that is filled with many tools that can be used by anyone who is seeking to revitalize, retain, and learn their language. One need not depend on anyone for fluency, funding, or resources if one has patience, determination and the willingness to try. Language learners cannot expect to become fluent speakers overnight, or within a week or within a month; language learning takes time. When times get tough, language learning still needs to be done. Small accomplishments in language learning are still accomplishments. People have to get over the fears of failing. Our languages make us who we are as Indigenous people.

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# Our Language is From the Land: la laange coshchi la tayr

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**Abstract**

This article documents how my cultural identity as a Métis woman is inherently linked to Michif words and phrases that originate from the land. Through the Michif language I continue to situate myself directly on the Saskatchewan prairie landscape. And it is because of the collective efforts of Michif speakers and Métis Old Ones who work tirelessly toward the rejuvenation of Michif language that I have been led toward working within the healing landscape which I now occupy.

*Keywords:* Métis land claim, Métis rights, Métis self-government, Métis Nation

## Our Language is From the Land: la laange coshchi la tayr

As Métis people, we have a unique history and culture, specific territorial land bases and we continue to contribute to the thriving and equitable economy within the colonial nation of Canada. The Métis are a remarkable Indigenous nation known for our distinctive language and art as well as for our significant political contribution to the settlement of Western Canada. All of this history, culture, landscape and economic contribution are reflected within our Michif language, which represents our continuing links to the land and our ongoing efforts to maintain our cultural identity (Bakker, 1997).

Historians like Daschuk (2013) and Teillet (2019) informed readers that the fur trade period was the only time when all three land-based partners—First Nations, Métis and European settlers/fur traders—established and maintained economic parity between themselves. Michif language was instrumental in facilitating this multicultural industry to literally break ground for generations of land speculation and land development, allowing for the thriving creation and growth of land-based and resource-based industries. Once those objectives were solidly entrenched within the young colony, the Métis and our Michif language were quickly sidelined to become Canada's "forgotten people." (Sealey & Lussier, 1975)

In this article, I document how my cultural identity as a Métis woman is inherently linked to Michif words and phrases that originate from the land. Through the Michif language I continue to situate myself directly on the Saskatchewan prairie landscape. And it is because of the collective efforts of Michif speakers and Métis Old Ones who work tirelessly toward the rejuvenation of Michif language that I have been led toward working within the healing landscape which I now occupy.

### Michif Within My Family

The narrative of my Métis family history is based primarily on that of my father (Cardinal) and mother (Pelletier), my paternal and maternal grandfathers (Cardinal, Pelletier), my paternal grandmother (Racette-Cardinal), my great-grandparents (Cardinal, Racette, Peltier, Russell) and great-great grandparents (Cardinal, Racette, Peltier, Grant). The stories of my parental and maternal Métis families occur within specific periods of history and specific geographical areas of our province as well as within Manitoba and the northern American states of Minnesota, North Dakota and Montana, during the late 1700s to present day.

According to the oral history ("stories") told within my mother's Métis family, within the blink of an eye, within one generation of my mom's birth, the Michif language began to be lost. These stories, as told by aunts, uncles, and older cousins, tell me that Michif was spoken regularly by my Métis grandfather until he left the Qu'Appelle Valley in southern Saskatchewan around 1950 to live with his new wife in the urban setting of Regina. After that, the only time he used his Michif language—his birth language—was when he was in a face-to-face or telephone conversation with my great-grandmother, Lucy Peltier (nee Russell), who primarily spoke Michif and only reverted to English when she needed to. He also spoke Michif occasionally when visiting his oldest brother, James Peltier, but these were very rare occurrences. In his later years, my grandfather admitted that his goal was to assimilate into urban life and work; as such, he refused to speak Michif to his children or even talk to them about his Métis heritage and upbringing on the land in the Qu'Appelle Valley. But there is evidence, according to our family storytellers, that he had great pride because he was humble about his Métis family and their very early

accomplishments in entrepreneurship and the development of the Métis and settler communities at Katepwa Lake. The stories go like this:

> Near the mid-point of the Qu'Appelle River Valley there are three lakes which run together; they are known as Pasqua Lake, Mission Lake and Katepwa Lake. By the late 1800s, many Métis families were on the move west, out of the Red River region and White Horse Plains of modern-day Manitoba and into the fertile, relatively unsettled area now known as the Qu'Appelle Valley in Saskatchewan. In 1876 two young (and I might add handsome) Métis-American *(otipêyimisowak = "burnt wood people")* brothers, Clement and William Peltier arrived at Katepwa Lake along with a group of Métis and white settlers. They were quick to establish a small road allowance community at the eastern end of the lake. Farther upstream, at Lebret and Fort Qu'Appelle, there were already growing communities which were competing for the prime river bottom land upon which they had all come to stake their claim. Métis families were scattered all along the Qu'Appelle River Valley (*li tayrayn araa enn rivyayrin*) road allowance communities and by 1880 Clem Peltier had become a successful businessman and land owner (*ana li tayrayn ka tipayhtuhk*). Along with James Grant, son of the renowned Red River Métis leader Cuthbert Grant, Clem quickly acquired stock, machinery, land and capital. It is reported that these two entrepreneurs were very generous with their assets and supported many of the other new farmers in the area. (B. Cardinal, personal communication, January 2022)

As I recall and write these stories, I make instant connection to all the Métis values and traditions I have observed and learned since childhood: Generosity, humility, family, strong work ethic, community support, charity and collective well-being.

**Figure 1**

*Peltier's (sic) Ferry Over Qu'Appelle River*


*Note:* This is a photo of Clem Peltier with eldest son James at the turn of the 20th Century, transporting Mr. A. Leach, Postmaster, to deliver mail to Katepwa Post Office (ca. 1904) Retrieved from https://www.metismuseum.ca/resource.php/04727

In my mother's family, these stories are all told in English; any Michif translation has only recently occurred since my mother began a Michif language class just over 3 years ago. Our family's real introduction to Michif language was through my father's family—the Cardinals, Racettes, Fayants, and others. Both of my paternal grandparents spoke fluent Michif and English; they would easily move from one language to another depending on who they were speaking to, what they were speaking about, and their need to clearly communicate with one another, their 13 children, and their extended family members. My brother and I were introduced to our dad's family from infancy but when I think about it, I was about 3 or 4 years old when I first remember hearing the word "Métis" and conversations spoken in what I now know to be Michif.

My dad and his parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins all spoke Michif, some more fluently than others. My dad and his remaining siblings and cousins still occasionally speak in Michif, especially when they're talking about land and land-based activities such as fishing *kwaashkwaypichikay*, hunting *machiihk*, medicine *mooshahkinikew la michinn* and berry picking *mooshahkinikew enn grenn* and, of course, golf (*aen sport*)! However, every attempt my parents have made for my brother and I and my daughter to acquire the Michif language have been unsuccessful. So I ask myself, "Why is that?"

## Michif as the Centre of the Nation: Métis Political and Community Aspirations

To articulate our Nation's "political" Métis connection to the land, it is important to understand some of the common terminology associated with contemporary discourse concerning Métis land issues. Some the terms people tend to be most familiar with are "Métis land claim," "Métis rights," "Métis self-government," and now, much more frequently, "Métis Nation."

Just as First Nation peoples of Canada describe themselves through the lens of individual Nations and specific languages, so do modern-day Métis people and our related organizations and institutions. It's 2022 and the Métis Nation collectively have legitimate claims to inherent rights to land and resources, as well as other rights based upon historical and present-day Treaties with the Crown. So, too, do Métis have legitimate rights based upon our significant historical contributions to the development of Canada—contributions largely unrecognized by mainstream society. While First Nation claims in Western Canada tended to be defined and disputed within the framework Treaty (Daschuk, 2013), Métis claims were more often based upon economic, political, and moral arguments. Only in specific instances were Métis claims made on purely legal grounds based on entrenched Constitutional rights (Teillet, 2019). The turning point in these inequitable political and nation-to-nation relationships finally came in 2016 with the Supreme Court of Canada's decision on *The Daniels Case* (Teillet, 2019). This decision directs the Federal Government to adhere to the language in Section 91.24 of the Canadian Constitution:

> (1) that Métis and non-status Indians are "Indians" under s. 91(24) of the *Constitution Act, 1867*; (2) that the federal Crown owes a fiduciary duty to Métis and non-status Indians; and (3) that Métis and non-status Indians have the right to be consulted and negotiated with. (Supreme Court of Canada, 2016)

From most appearances, this decision has had positive impacts on the social, financial, economic, health and well-being of Métis people as well as creating stability within Métis communities and families in Saskatchewan (Métis Nation Saskatchewan, n.d.). Most significantly, the outcomes have resulted in the establishment of a strong, influential Métis-led administration to oversee and manage these significant new resources and to ensure accountability to the Federal Government. Here in Saskatchewan, the Métis Nation and its communities and families are benefitting from

long overdue supports for Métis-specific housing, community infrastructure, post-secondary education and skill training, Métis-specific health, wellness and mental health programming, and cultural revitalization—with significant attention being paid to documentation, preservation, and transmittal of the Michif language.

Many ask, "Why is so much emphasis put on revitalizing the language?" and, for me, it is self-evident: Our language is unique in the world but if we are not enshrining it in every aspect of our lives as Métis people, the language will become extinct in less than one generation. As someone who has grown up around the Michif language but also someone who has not been completely immersed in the language, I clearly see the risk that language loss will have not only to my generation but also to my daughter's generation and to our connection to our culture and the land.

Iseke (2013) revealed how the loss of Michif language is a direct result of colonization and provides compelling rationale for the urgent need to reclaim and revitalize Michif in order to preserve authentic Métis culture:

> Métis traditionally were hunters and trappers and these Elders, in other places, discuss these historical practices (Iseke, 2009, 2011). These lifestyles kept them close to the land and communities of Michif speakers. But modern lifestyles including jobs for wages have created the conditions of a rapidly changing society, moving to urban lifestyles and moving away from the linguistic communities and thus linguistic conditions outlined by these Elders. The importance of continuing community contact in order to keep languages alive and in use is outlined by the Elders but in current decline. The global impacts on local cultures and the linguistic imperatives required to engage in the current global economic and political realities have been part of the linguistic shift under both colonization and subsequent globalization. (p. 106)

There should be hope as the Michif language education is now being promoted, revitalized and supported here in Saskatchewan in quite unique and tangible ways. This work really all began over 40 years ago with the creation of the Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research (GDINS). Once again, I turn to the stories of my Métis family—especially my mother, B. Cardinal (2022)—who was one of the original employees hired to work at GDINS in 1980:

> The late Allan Blakeney became Premier of Saskatchewan in 1971. I remember it clearly because it was the first time I could vote! Almost simultaneously the Métis Society of Saskatchewan (MSS) leadership had also changed and the new President, Jim Sinclair, was working his way across the province to establish a much larger presence for Métis people and the nation both at community level and with the federal and provincial government. This included changing the name of the MSS to the Association of Métis and Non-Status Indians of Saskatchewan (AMNSIS). AMNSIS leadership were brash and aggressive and I remember them holding rallies in communities and the big message was always about self-government, nation-to-nation relationships, land claims, and education. AMNSIS and the Blakeney government began having serious discussions about these three topics and by the late 70s, funds had been identified to establish GDINS as Canada's first Métis-specific post-secondary institution and academic research

centre of excellence for historical Métis research that would become the body of work that eventually formed the land claims and self-government claims.

It was an exciting yet scary time. AMNSIS knew that they would only have one crack at making GDINS a legitimate, successful model so they strategically recruited Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders, academics, researchers, community developers and educators to build the core structure. This successful model still exists today.

When I look back at the very first public relations document produced by GDINS, it's that document that truly drew me to the Institute. It was early, early days and the document was produced to promote the Institute at the annual Back to Batoche Days in July 1980. That's where I first became aware of this new, exciting place for our people. I applied for a job there and the rest is history! But when I look back at that document now, 42 years later, it is really quite revealing what they were mandated to do and to focus on—but also what they weren't paying much attention to at that time.

The two big gaps that stick in my mind are the fact that they never once used the words "Métis" or "Michif" in their promotion of the Institute and not once did they identify the need for Michif language revitalization and education in their early work or, in fact, for many years to come. I can only speculate on why that was: Was it because the word "Native" was more acceptable and implied inclusivity? Was it because the white consultants had no clue about the Michif language or concern that it was on the cusp of being completely lost? Was it because with so few Michif language speakers left in the province, assumptions were made that language revitalization was unattainable? Was it because the AMNSIS politicians and GDI board members were consumed with "getting the Institute off the ground and established" to meet their own political needs before they began to get really hard push-back from their communities about the intrinsic importance of language and cultural rejuvenation and recognition? Probably all of that and much, much more. But eventually, the mandate of GDINS did begin to shift toward prioritizing Métis-specific culture and Michif language—its collection, documentation, identification of different dialects, identifying speakers and teachers—all that goes in to preserving and revitalizing language for current and future generations. And thank Creator that they did prioritize Michif language and make it an indelible component of the Institutes' primary research and preservation. Eventually Michif was incorporated into the SUNTEP curriculum because there was enough hard evidence that without our language, we really would have little else to identify and solidify us as Métis people—people of the buffalo; people of the land"—to solidify us as a legitimate and distinct Nation.

It was really during my sixteen years off and on with the Institute, while your Dad and I were going down different paths toward our own cultural immersion and healing that the significance of what everyone was doing at GDI really crystallized for me. By 1982 the Devine government were making strenuous and aggressive efforts to close the Institute's doors, and there was an incredible community response and revolt to those attempts to close us down. This resulted in rallies and protests across the province led by influential and strong leaders such as

> Clifford Laroque, Jim Sinclair, Harry Daniels, Jim Durocher, Frank Tomkins, Grace Hatfield, Bernice Hammersmith, just to name a few, along with some extremely hard-line media coverage, and fierce lobbying by our communities and supporters. It all came to head in the national calling out of Devine as a racist by Sinclair at the First Ministers' Conference in 1987. Stunning and spectacular!
>
> The Institute and its staff and board members and our Métis communities across the province continued to stand strong…and we survived! And now, today, GDI is the only Métis-owned, governed and managed research and post-secondary education and training institution of its kind in Canada. And you, my girl, and your brother and your beautiful daughter will all continue to benefit from the work they have done and continue to do—to keep the Michif language and our culture and our links to the land alive and thriving. (B. Cardinal, personal communication, January 15 & 16, 2022)

My brother and I literally grew up within the hallways of the Gabriel Dumont Institute. As urban Métis kids, we could very easily have been assimilated into the mainstream education system where we went to school and the urban landscape where we lived. By having direct access to Métis family—the very distinct urban Métis family of our maternal grandfather and the rural/small town family of our dad's traditional Métis community—we were provided with an understanding and pride in who we are as Métis people.

## Michif as Our Direct Connection to the Land—Now and for Future Generations

For the past 25 years I have worked within the Regina Public School Division, in numerous elementary schools, many of which have high enrollments of First Nation and Métis children. It astonishes me that there are many First Nation children and families who can speak their traditional language—some with more proficiency than others. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for Métis children and their family members. As part of my academic research toward my master's degree in Educational Psychology and now my studies toward my PhD in Education, I am driven to explore the impacts of intergenerational trauma on First Nation and Métis elementary school students. One of the Indigenous research methodologies I propose to use is to link the students to their understanding and comfort with the land. Although the full scope of my research and methodology has not yet been finalized, my early readings reveal to me that I may be on the right track. For example, over the years I have come to realize that what Teillet (2008) discovered about the interconnectedness of the Michif language and the Métis Nation being seen as a distinct people with distinct territory and land is undeniable (and an ongoing challenge): Métis culture and land are entwined, and it is the Michif language that solidifies this relationship:

> Another reason the Northwest Métis were not seen to be a distinct people is because it was thought that they had no unique language. Language is one of the most readily identifiable boundaries of a society. Unfortunately, the Métis kept their own language, *Michif,* hidden:
>
> > …our grandpa and grandma and aunties…they were laughing and they were joking and…they were speaking Michif…not once did I ever hear them speak it outside of those walls…even to this day they won't speak it. Even though I have heard them in private speaking it, they, they just won't do it [in public] because of the stigmatism…

> I went to school for Grade One only. I liked school, but we had nothing to eat for lunch. And it was hard because at school they spoke English and we didn't speak English at home. All our family, all our relatives spoked Michif. I still speak Michif today with my brothers and sisters *(Affidavit of Clara Langan, sworn October 1998, paras 4-5).* (Teillet, 2008, p. 37)

In my parenting I have made it a practice and a tradition to take my daughter out on the land during every season. We are almost always accompanied by her *mooshum* (grandfather Rick Cardinal) because he grew up in a family that survived solely from their land-based knowledge, even though they lived in a prosperous town just east of Regina. He always uses Michif to describe what we're looking for—the medicines, the plants, the berries, the animals, fish, landmarks, golf balls—and over the years my daughter has begun to identify these elements in Michif as well. She now knows and speaks more Michif than I do and that is a very good thing!

For me these experiences and practices validate the critical importance of bringing back our traditional language and utilizing it to its fullest capacity. GDINS now does a remarkable job of achieving this goal; they have a complete publication department devoted to documenting, writing, illustrating and creating all types of written materials with the objective of emphasizing Michif within everyday Métis life (GDI, 2021).

Preserving and promoting Michif language—of which there are three distinct dialects Michif, Michif-French, and Northern Michif (GDINS Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture, n.d.)—must remain a priority if Métis culture and traditions, use, respect and preservation of the land are to survive into the next generations. In 2022, we continue to occupy and use vast landscapes for hunting, trapping, fishing and harvesting medicines and plants, as well as for artistic inspiration. Our communities remain solidly rooted within historical geographic areas along Métis trade routes. We have always seen, and continue to see, ourselves, our families and our communities as a fulsome and unique Indigenous nation. Our Michif language captures and reflects this inherent alliance and it is up to us as members of our Métis nation to preserve this unique relationship. In 2022, we also occupy urban landscapes through our presence in our homes and neighbourhoods, schools, places of work and recreation, and within the economy. Michif may not always be spoken in these places and spaces but we walk proudly as Métis people because our language is being documented, taught and revitalized.

Teillet (2008) best described our fundamental relationship between our language and our landscapes in the following:

> Mobile peoples do not tread heavily on the earth and the Métis are one of these Peoples. Métis culture prized freedom first. They describe themselves as *otipêyimisowak* (the independent ones). They left few markings, built few monuments or permanent buildings, and their constant movement meant they could be over-looked by other cultures that invested more heavily in settlement, infrastructure and possessions. Their possessions of value were those that permitted and enhanced their mobility—their guns, tools, horses and their carts. To other more material cultures, this kind of mobile culture was largely invisible. But mobility has always been part of the Métis culture. *Ou je reste? Je ne peux pas te le dire … Je reste partout … Such is our course of life.* (p. 38)

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# Asônimâkêwin: Passing on What We Know

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**Abstract**

This paper will explore the history and present-day land use, and the islands and rivers located around Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan. I will share how storytelling and spiritual ecology have always connected the people of Île à la Crosse to these landscapes and waterways. The knowledges that have been passed on to me through oral storytelling and research have been written in this paper. Learning these stories and histories shapes our identity as Indigenous peoples.

*Keywords: asônimâkêwin,* Île à la Crosse, Métis, Michif, land, *Sâḳitawak*, spirituality, spiritual ecology, waterways

## Asônimâkêwin: Passing on What We Know

> Land has traditionally been considered a sacred, healing space where anyone who is connected to a place can find what he or she needs to maintain, sustain, and build a healthy life. (Okemaw, 2021. p. 19)

This paper focuses on the Cree term *asônimâkêwin,*[1] passing on what we know. I have learned the concept of *asônimâkêwin* from teachings shared with me during a land-based language immersion camp with Dr. Angelina Weenie (personal communication, July 27, 2021). Dr. Weenie is a First Nations woman from Sweetgrass First Nation in Saskatchewan. I have had the honour of learning from her through course work at the First Nations University of Canada. She has encouraged me to record my community's landscapes and stories.

Through *asônimâkêwin*, I will pass on my knowledge of the land and waterways, the Michif language and the history of my home community of Île à la Crosse, Saskatchewan. I will explore the history and present-day land use and the islands and rivers located around Île à la Crosse. I will share how storytelling and spiritual ecology have always connected the people of Île à la Crosse to these landscapes and waterways. It is my hope to share what was been passed on to me by *nîtisânak*, and *kihtêyak*, with the next generation.

### *Nîya*

*Tânsi Krissy Bouvier Lemaigre nisihkâson. Sâḵitawak ohci niya. ninâpîm, Justin isihkâsô. Nitânis Kassidy êḵwa nikosis Kale isihkâsôwak. Ni-miyowihtîn dahwârr ta-ayâyân. Apisîs poḵo li Michif êḵwa nehiywîwin ni-pîkiskwan. Nimoshômak, nohkomak, mîna nocâpânak oḵimâw âsotamâḵêwin mitâtaht. Maḵa nocâpân Abraham oḵimâw âsotamâḵêwin niḵotwâsik ohci kîpîtahtcihô. Nimoshômak, nohkomak, mîna nocâpânak, Nêyihawîwin, Denesuline êḵwa Li' Michif kî-pîkiskwêwak. Askî kâpimâcihowak. Na kininahawmomwahk nicawasimsak askî apâcihtatwaw.*

My name is Krissy Bouvier Lemaigre. I am from Île à la Crosse. My husband's name is Justin. My daughter is Kassidy and my son is Kale. I love to be outside. I speak a little bit of Michif and the Cree language. My grandparents and great-grandparents were a part of Treaty 10 Territory in the province of Saskatchewan, with the exception of my great-grandfather, Abraham Ratt, who came from Treaty 6 Territory. I come from a history of rich languages and land use. My great-grandparents and grandparents spoke Cree, Dene, and Michif. They respected the land and used the land to survive. Respecting and learning from the land is what has been passed down to me. This teaching I will pass down to my children.

### *Sâḵitawak kayas*

*Sâḵitawak* is the second oldest community in Saskatchewan, Canada. As I learned from *nimama* Karen, *Sâḵitawak* means "a meeting place where it opens." The fur traders changed *Sâḵitawak* to the name Île à la Crosse. Île à la Crosse translated to English means "Island of the Cross."

The Beaver River, Churchill River, and Canoe River meet at Lac Île à la Crosse. The Churchill River connects Lac Île à la Crosse through a series of lakes to the Methye Portage and to Lake Athabasca. This became the trail to the Northwest Territories. Because of its prime location along the Churchill River, *Sâḵitawak* quickly became a major hub on the fur trade route during the latter part of the 18th century and most of the 19th century (Longpré, 1977). Cree, Dene, French, and English were the languages spoken during these centuries. Many of our people were multilingual and spoke all four of these languages fluently in *Sâḵitawak* and on the trail to the Northwest Territories. During these years, a distinct Métis community formed through familial

and trading relationships between the Indigenous inhabitants and French traders. Hence, the beautiful Michif language, a mixture of the Cree and French languages, was born.

### *Sâḳitawak anohc*

Today, Île à la Crosse is a strong Métis community. English is the dominant and commonly used language in the community. Michif and Cree are still spoken in the community, but not as prevalent as in the past. School and community efforts are currently underway to keep our languages alive. At the school level, Michif language nests are a part of the prekindergarten and kindergarten programs. Michif classes are taught from Grade 1 through to high school where Michif 10 and Michif 20 classes are offered. Michif language and culture are very much a part of the school environments. At the community level, morning radio programming is done completely in the Michif language. Guest speakers from the community and surrounding areas often call in to share stories in Michif about life in the past. When the community gathers, the Michif language is included in introductions and prayers.

Our families continue to hunt and fish and gather berries and medicines to keep our traditional ways with us. The islands around our community that were once lived on throughout the years have become seasonal homes for camping and gathering. The land and waterways are still a big part of our lives. Forestry, wild rice harvesting, and commercial fishing continue to be sources of employment and livelihood for our people.

### Islands and Rivers

I have learned of the islands and rivers that Île à la Crosse families lived on from *nimoshom* Napoleon. Many of the Métis families lived on different islands around the Île à la Crosse area: *Niyâwahkâsihk* (Sandy Point), *Ali Baloo*, *La ḳrrôsil* (Big Island), *Niyâwahkahk* (South Bay), *Opâsêw Sîpî* (Canoe River), *Asawâpêw Wâsaḳâmîciḳan* (Fort Black) and *Amisko Sîpî* (Beaver River). In the past, families lived in these areas year-round. They used the land and water for hunting and fishing, and for gathering berries and medicines. They also grew big gardens in the summer, which were harvested and preserved in the fall to put away for the long winter months. As Dr. Angelina Weenie has shared, these places in our communities are significant as they become our places of knowing and being. The stories and landscapes become our identity (A. Weenie, personal communication, July 28, 2021).

**Figure 1**

*Map of Île à la Crosse Area*


*Note*. Map of Île à la Crosse area. A= Niyâwahkahk; B= Niyâwahkâsihk; C= Opâsêw Sîpî; D= *Amisko Sîpî; E= La ḳrrôsil; F= Asawâpêw Wâsaḳâmîciḳan; G= Ali Baloo.* Adapted

from Map Data © 2022 Google (https://www.google.com/maps/@55.4328039,-107.8479807,11z).

*Niyâwahkahk* is the Michif name for South Bay. *Niyâwahkahk anohc* is a seasonal spot for families to camp in the summer months and to gather berries. Families from Île à la Crosse, Buffalo Narrows, Beauval, Canoe Lake, and Cole Bay gather during the summer for activities such as camping, swimming, picnics, weddings, berry picking, and various cultural activities and celebrations. There is always more than enough food and laughter can be heard for miles around. You can also hear the Cree, Dene, and Michif languages in many camping spots and on the blueberry and cranberry patches. *Lî blowan êḵwa wîsaḵîmina* are picked and preserved for the winter months. Cree, Dene and Michif are spoken with the older generations. The English language is spoken with the younger generations.

*Niyâwahkâsihk* is the Michif name for Sandy Point. Sandy Point is a small piece of land between Île à la Crosse and Patuanak. There are still cabins at Sandy Point that belong to the Gardiner, Morin, and Misponas families. These families resided on this land year round. Today, these families camp, hunt, fish, and practice our traditional ways of life. *Niyâwahkâsihk* was and still is a stopping place for the people of Patuanak who travel by water.

*Opâsêw Sîpî* is the Michif name for Canoe River. Canoe River connects us to our neighboring community of Canoe Lake. There are many cabins alongside this river. Families use these cabins year round for camping, hunting, fishing, and learning from the land. *Maskihkî* is the Michif word for medicine. Two of the common medicines still picked from this river are *wacask omîcôwin* and *wascatamô*. These medicines are picked in the summer. They are dried and used for medicinal purposes throughout the year. I have learned about these medicines from *nimama* Karen. As a young girl, she would accompany her *moshom* Abraham on the canoe as he collected these medicines.

*Amisko Sîpî* is the Michif name for Beaver River. The Caisse, Laliberte and Desjarlais families still have cabins along this river. Beaver River connects us to our neighboring community of Beauval. Beaver River is used for fishing in the summer and winter months.

*La ḵrrôsil* is the Michif name for Big Island. In the past, the Ratt family resided here year round. They had a home and a garden and they hunted from this piece of land. Today, there are no houses or cabins on *La ḵrrôsil*. Families gather for swimming, boating, and picnicking in the summer months.

*Asawâpêw Wâsaḵâmîciḵan* is the Michif name for Fort Black. As learned from village council member Gerald Roy (personal communication, May 29, 2022) recently, Fort Black was the site of the first Northwest Trading Post. It was a trail that was used to haul freight to northern communities along the Churchill River system. In a documented interview in the *Sâḵitawak Bi-Centennial* book, the late Elder Vital Morin shared that,

> There used to be a wagon road from Fort Black all the way to Meadow Lake. That road was cut open. There was a government project in those days. I worked on that road myself, that was in the forties. The road was all handmade—corduroying the soft spots, the sandy spots, and then pulling some soil on top of that. There were a lot of mud holes. At that time, we worked for 50 cents a day, this was in 1940-41. (Longpré, R., 1977, p. 57)

There is more history in Fort Black that needs to further explored. The Fort Black Trail was designated a historic site in 1953 by the Government of Canada.

*Ali Baloo* is a tiny island near tip of the Île à la Crosse peninsula. There is no English translation for this name. *Nimoshom* Napoleon grew up on this island. He lived on *Ali Baloo* with his parents and his brothers and sisters. *Nimoshom* and his family had a deep connection to the land as they relied on it for survival. They had a big garden in the summer months. The potatoes they harvested were stored under the floor boards of their home. *Nimoshom's* mom, Flora, preserved fruits and vegetables for the winter months. *Nimoshom* and his brothers fished and hunted for game. Today, there is only one house left on *Ali Baloo*. The plants and shrubs have grown over most signs of settlement.

The lakes, rivers, and islands are very much a part of who we are. They are just as important to us today as they were to the generations of the past. These islands and waterways tell us beautiful stories of family and connection. They also tell us stories of the hardships that *nîtisanak* faced during their time on Mother Earth.

**Storytelling as a Way of Preserving the Legends of Our Lands**

Families that lived in Île à la Crosse and the surrounding areas told stories and legends as a way to pass down our histories. Bone et al. (2012) described the importance of oral stories in the following:

> We are an oral people. We cannot transfer our way of life through written words alone. Sacred law must be spoken and heard. Our way of life is meant to be lived and experienced. Our words are meant to inspire and guide our fellow human beings to follow the path of the heart. (n.p.)

Today, our stories seem to be safely tucked away. It takes trust and relationships to find and hear these stories. There is a story as told by *mônôk* Isadore. It is about *La ḳrrôsil* and how Île à la Crosse came to be named:

> *Amiskowîsti ohci kâ-kî-mâcipayit, nîso amiskwak î-kî-wîkitwâw Amiskowîsti. Ekotohci a la ḳrrôsil kâ-kî-mâcipayik. Piyak kîsikaw amiskwak kî-sipwîcimîwak î-kî-pâm-natonâtocik. Amiskwak namwâc ohci pîḳîwîwak. Amiskowîsti kî-pahkihtin ekotohci mîtawîwin eḳota mîtawîwak môniyâwak la crosse isihkâtamwak eḳwânima mîtawîwin. Eḳotohci Île à la Crosse owîhôwin kâ-kî-mâcipayik.*
>
> Big Island was once a beaver lodge to two beavers. One day the beavers swam away, looking for each other. The beavers never returned and the lodge eventually collapsed and became a lacrosse field. This is how Île à la Crosse came to be named. (I. Campbell, personal communication, July 25, 2021)

Our stories are important. They are who we are; they are a connection to the land and to our ancestors. Our stories, from our voices, must be passed on to the next generation through oral storytelling and they must recorded from *kihtêyak*, our old people. This is how our histories and who we are as a people stay with us and with the next generation.

Stories were also told by *kihtêyak* to teach lessons. There is a local story about a giant sturgeon fish in our lake. *Nâmêw* is the Michif word for sturgeon. The name of *nâmêw* is Puff. It is told that Puff lives below *La ḳrrôsil*. There are three rivers that all meet around *La ḳrrôsil* and the currents are quite strong. Children were warned not to swim past the drop off at the beach or

Puff would come, grab you, and take you away. It is believed that this story was told to keep children from swimming too far out on the lake, to prevent possible drownings. Stories were told to pass down histories, to teach lessons and to keep our people safe and away from harm.

## Spiritual Ecology

Spirituality is an inner connection to everything around one: the land, the water, the animals, the stars, the sky, and the spirit world. Spirituality is a connection to our past, our present, and our future. I am most at peace when I am surrounded by trees and water. I feel that is where healing takes place for me. I am blessed to live alongside the Churchill River. I watch her throughout all six seasons: spring, break-up, summer, fall, freeze-up and winter. She is beautiful and magnificent. She provides life every day. The trees that surround me are my protectors. They give me a sense of security and peace. They, too, are life givers. They give us new breath. The most precious gifts that I have received are rocks from Mother Earth. They are calming for me. I feel grounded when I have a rock in my hand. When my children or my students give me rocks, I feel it is a blessing and a reminder for calmness and peace.

There has always been a spiritual connection between Indigenous people and the land. *Nimama* shared a story about her *moshom* Abraham and picking medicine from the water.

> My *moshom* Abraham would take me on the canoe when he went picking medicine. It was beautiful. I would sit in the front and he would paddle. It was quiet and peaceful. He spoke to me in Cree. I felt very connected to my *moshom* and the land. (K. Bouvier, personal communication, May 15, 2021)

There is so much to learn from this short story and the spiritual connection to the land. *Nimama* felt most at peace when picking medicines with her *moshom. Moshom* Abraham knew the waterways and thanked the Creator for this knowledge and the medicine. He shared this experience with his granddaughter. This memory will forever be etched in her being. It is not only a spiritual connection to the land, but a spiritual connection to her *moshom* as well.

I had the honour of attending a land-based learning opportunity on spirituality. Knowledge Keeper Kelsey Bighetty from Pukatawagan in Northern Manitoba was our guide through this learning. I learned of connections to the land and land as a living being. Mr. Bighetty spoke of his battles and feeling alone in this world and how it was the land that saved him.

> I was feeling alone so I started to pray to the Creator. All of a sudden, two blades of grass started talking…then the trees started talking…the rocks started talking. All things of the earth are alive. Everything has a purpose in life. (K. Bighetty, personal communication, July 28, 2021)

This personal story of healing and connection to the land is spiritual. With the help and support from the land, Mr. Bighetty was able to make changes to live a healthier life.

It is challenging to capture and write the essence of spiritual ecology, it is something that we feel in our soul.

## Language and the Land

As Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, the land has been and continues to be our teacher. Land-based learning, as defined by Okemaw (2021) includes, "prior knowledge known by Indigenous people about the plants, medicines, and animals of the land and respecting the sacredness of the

land and particular places (p. 90).” This definition fits right in with *asônimâkêwin.* We pass on what has been given to us by *nîtisânak* and *kihtêyak.*

In my home community, the young and the old are relearning the teachings from the land and *kihtêyak*. Culture camps are one way that school and community groups are bringing back land-based learning and language learning. Both the elementary and high schools organize seasonal culture camps for students. These camps teach students about, survival, ecology, hunting and fishing, and medicines. The schools bring in local Elders and Knowledge Keepers to teach students this way of life. When our students are in this setting, they are so at ease and much learning happens. Some of the goals of culture camps are to reconnect our students to the land. Teachings of keeping the land clean, taking only what is needed and offerings of tobacco to thank her for her gifts are the bigger goals of these camps. It is vital that our students understand these teachings.

Community groups such as the Île à la Crosse Friendship Center have offered healing camps on the land for both men and women. Again, local Elders and Knowledge Keepers are brought in to teach and listen. These camps address the negative impacts of oppression, colonialism and racism. It helps our men and women reconnect to the land and find healthy paths to healing.

I had the privilege of attending a woman’s healing retreat in the winter of 2022. This retreat was held outside the community, at a cabin in the bush. At this retreat, I participated in a grief healing circle with Elder Marie Favel. This was a very powerful experience for myself and the other women present. It was healing. At this camp, I was honoured to share my gift of beading alongside two fellow beaders, Erin and Chellsea. Meals and tea were shared throughout the day. As a group of women, we healed through voice, beading, and food. This is one example of the type of camps that the Île à la Crosse Friendship Center offers community members.

As Dr. Weenie (2020) discussed, land represents a relationship between people and place. Indigenous people are all about place. We are all on different journeys of healing and reconnecting. We are finding our ways back to the land: to connect, to heal and to belong.

## Conclusion

Learning about the history of our landscapes and waterways, stories and legends, spiritual ecology, and our languages is crucial for our identity. Passing on these stories to our children and the next generation is equally as important. *Asônimâkêwin* comes in many shapes and forms. The knowledges that have been passed on to me through oral storytelling and research have been written in this paper. Learning these stories and histories shapes our identity as Indigenous peoples. It shows our deep connection to the land and waterways. This knowledge needs to be passed down from generation to generation, to maintain our Indigenous identities.

[1] See Appendix I for a Glossary of Northern Michif Dialect

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## Appendix I

Glossary - Northern Michif Dialect

*anohc:* today

*asônimâkêwin:* passing on what we know

*kayas:* a long time ago

*kihtêyak*: Elders

*lî blowan êḵwa wîsaḵîmina* : blueberries and cranberries

*moshom* – grandfather

*nâmêw*: sturgeon fish

*nimama:* my mom

*nimoshom* – my grandfather

*nîtisânak:* my family

*Niyâwahkahk:* South Bay

*Niyâwahkâsihk:* Sandy Point

*Opâsêw Sîpî:* Canoe River

*Sâḵitawak:* a meeting place where it opens

*wacask omîcôwin:* rat root

*wascatamô:* roots of the lily pad

# Miskasowin askîhk: Coming to Know Oneself on the Land

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## Abstract

*miskâsowin askîhk* is a nêhiyawêwin word that translates roughly "as finding oneself on the land." Throughout this paper, I aim to tell a story about the journey I have taken on the land, with the language. The paper also addresses a process of coming to find myself throughout these experiences and relationships with land and language. Through my stories on the land, I have learned that I belong to the land and that the land teaches me. The article also shares what I have learned from Elders, Knowledge Keepers and literature. Namely, learning language on the land, with the land's resources, is an effective way to revitalize language and reclaim Indigenous identity in a balanced way. I finish this paper with the description of a project that I would like to research further. The project involves hand making beaded leather mitts while learning to speak nêhiyawêwin. This project is connected to asōnamēkēwin, a word in nêhiyawêwin that means that it is our responsibility to pass on knowledge that we learn. This is another important nêhiyawêwin phrase that guides me on this journey. It is my responsibility and I pass this responsibility onto anybody that I teach, to teach what they learn.

*Keywords*: land-based learning, Cree language learning, language revitalization, best practices

## Miskasowin askîhk: Coming to Know Oneself on the Land

**Figure 1**

*Matilda isiyihkāsow nicāpan*

*Note*. A copy of a family photo of my câpan (great grandmother), ca. 1978.

> To lose your language is to lose the soul of your culture, and when the language is gone you are forever disconnected from the wisdom of ancestors; the loss of language inevitably results in losing the gods you pray to, the land you live on, and your own government and sovereignty. (Lilikala Kameyeleihiwa, 2004, as cited by Aguilera & LeCompte, 2007, p.11)

I have chosen the above quotation because it speaks to me as a nêhiyaw (a Cree person), as an educator, and as a mother. For me, it rings true when Lilikala Kameyeleihiwa says that when one loses their language, they lose the soul to their culture. Indigenous Elders say that language is in the ceremonies and that if we do not know the language, we cannot properly and fully understand ceremony. I think about all the meanings within each word in nêhiyawêwin (Cree language) and those meanings connect us to our way of thinking, our culture. If we lose the meanings in all these words, we ultimately lose our culture. At times, I feel disconnected from my ancestors. Both nikâwiy (my mom) and my father's families. This may be because I am also part Scottish. And it may be because I also grew up away from both my families. Lilikala Kameyeleihiwa's words seem particularly true when I spend time with my cousins who do not fully nêhiyawêk (speak Cree) but are more proficient in the language than me. Because they were raised in a location where the majority of people speak nêhiyawêwin, in Pinehouse Lake, northern Saskatchewan, they have been able to hear the language more often than I have. As a result, they are able to understand conversations in nêhiyawêwin (Cree language) and are confident in responding in nêhiyawêwin. Not being fully proficient in nêhiyawêwin makes me feel disconnected because I question where

I belong and who I am. I sometimes feel that I do not know if I know my family enough. I am also preoccupied with questions such as Do they know me enough? If my ancestors and living family are not from here, then where do I belong? and Where am I connected?

Yet, I have hope. As I learn my language, I feel empowered, closer to my family and more connected to the land of my ancestors. To me, feeling empowered is reflected because the language was forcibly removed from Indigenous people through multiple colonization efforts (residential schools, pass and permit system, and government policies), and yet, the language still exists today. Despite efforts made by European settler governments, nêhiyawêwin is still spoken today. People are still trying to reclaim what was taken from them. While I feel this disconnection, I also feel inspired, grateful, and connected to them in a way that I cannot explain. ê-nêhiyawêcik (they speak Cree) in front of me and they assume I know what they are saying. Sometimes I do and sometimes I do not, but I am a part of these conversations and I love being able to hear nêhiyawêwin and being connected with my family at this level. To me it is spiritually, emotionally, mentally, and physically inspiring and healing. As I write this paper, I am privileging nêhiyawêwin and I will provide English translations when appropriate. Through Indigenous methodologies (see Absolon, 2011), I have learned that it is important to start your research paper and all things really, by situating yourself. Wherever you are, you introduce yourself so people know where you come from and who you are related to. It helps to set the tone and lets people know your relations, where you come from, and the perspective from which you are located. I have already begun this paper by doing so and will continue in the next few sections.

Tammy Ratt nitisiyihkāson. oskana kâ-asastâki, minahik waskahikan sâkahikan, êkwa Swift Current ohci niya. mâka mêkwac oskana kâ-asastēki niwikin. Niya nēhiyaw êkwa Scottish iskwêw. nikakwê-nêhiyawân apisis. nîso nitotanisin, Darling isiyihkâsow pêyak nitânis êkwa kotak nitânis Coral isiyihkâsow. niwicêwâkan Boyd isiyihkâsow. nitatim sôkâw isiyihkâsow. Niya okiskinwahamâkêw êkwa okiskinwahamâkan. Bernice Lariviere isiyihkâsow nikâwiy. Minahik waskahigan sâkahikan ohci wiya. tâpwê ê-miyo-nêhiyawêt. Bill Aitken isiyihkâsow nohtâwiy. Swift Current, Saskatchewan ohci wiya.

I am called Tammy Ratt. I am from Regina (Pile of Bones), Pinehouse Lake and Swift Current. I live in Regina (Pile of Bones). I am a Cree and Scottish woman. I try to speak Cree a little. I have two daughters. Darling and Coral are their names. The one who I walk with is Boyd. My dog is called Sugar. I am a student and a teacher. Bernice is my mom. She is from Pinehouse Lake. Truly she speaks good Cree. Bill is what my father is called. He is from Swift Current, Saskatchewan.

As a nêhiyaw iskwêw (Cree woman), it is important to me to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing and being because I want nitanisak (my girls) and ancestors, as well as the people who read this, to know the importance of being Indigenous. I want them to know that I honor this about myself and I hope they honor it in them or around them as well. The approach I use in this paper is a self-reflective methodology. I will be sharing my personal perspectives on land, language, and how I teach through stories. I see all these elements as interconnected and are a necessary part of Indigenous ways of thinking, living and teaching. Sometimes I do not know how to explain how this all connects or why it makes sense. I just know that it does. It was suggested by a dear friend that "perhaps, the more [I] learn nêhiyawêwin (four-part being of this land language), the more [I am] connecting to all life of the land and in order to connect to the land, [I] need to embody the language and the land (L.Whiskeyjack, personal communication, May 25, 2022). I feel that this suggestion fits with what I am trying to explain throughout this paper.

I have been teaching for 15 years. I love being a teacher. I have not been passionate about many things, but I believe that I was born to be a teacher. The first 2 years of my career, I was given the opportunity to teach Introductory nêhiyawêwin and a syllabics course at First Nations University of Canada. I feel fortunate that I was able to start my career there and then went on to teach for the local school board. I have been a high school teacher since. I have always taught Native Studies, Cree and usually Art classes. Since 2020, I have also been teaching as a sessional instructor at the First Nations University of Canada in the teacher education program and I teach beginner Cree language classes. Along with my professional background I also have great passion for engaging and supporting Indigenous arts. I bead and make maskisina (moccasins) êkwa astisak (mitts). Since I can remember, sākāhk (the bush) is one of my places of getting grounded, unplugging from the technology and reconnecting to myself and all my living relations. Nistês (my brother) tells a story about me running into the sākāhk alone where he would chase me to bring me home, and he would say when he told that story that he was afraid but yet I would run in without a care. I know that he was not actually afraid, but cautious of the surroundings. I love when he shares this story because it reflects my connection to the land. This tells you a little bit about my where I have gained the personal and professional experiences that have brought me to this passion with the language, the land and art.

I teach in an urban school with the highest population of students who identify as Indigenous in Regina. I became a teacher to teach Indigenous students in an urban setting. This was a choice I made because I was a student who attended a high school in an urban setting with no Indigenous representation on the staff of the school I went to. I believe this is still one of the greatest flaws in this city's education system: a lack of Indigenous representation on teaching staff. I feel like I would have done better and felt better if I had been around people who looked like me and have some of the same experiences as me. This was a conscious choice as I see the need for Indigenous teachers in urban school settings to connect with the high population of Indigenous students. There are many teachers in urban areas who do not think they have access to the resources on the land, but I have searched and learned there are many resources to incorporate land-based education. I believe the best way to transfer knowledge onto the next generation is to be on, and connect to, the land as a living relative through learning nêhiyawêwin, engaging in Indigenous art-based practices, cultural activities, and ways of knowing.

Education should be fun and mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually fulfilling. This paper will explore my best practices of sharing knowledge and learning a second language on and with the land to support and prepare Indigenous students to connect and develop their cultural identities and skills. I will introduce how I have connected to the land and share the benefits, share my learnings on land-based learning and teaching, and discuss a project I have been preparing alongside the students that may be offered as a course in the future. This project fills me with pride and joy as I connect with my family's community, hear nêhiyawêwin and learn from and within the land.

## askîhk nitipêyihtâkosin (I Belong to the Land)

> Always walking a known terrain, leaving, always coming back to the known reality, walking with one clear intent—the will to remain rooted to familiar ground and the certainty of knowing one's place. (hooks, 2009, p. 2)

This paper begins with a photo of my câpan (great grandmother). Matilda isiyihkâsow (is what she is called). I did not know her because she passed on to the spirit world before I was born,

but I feel a deep connection to her when I flesh hide, when I wear floral, and when I work and learn through the lands that she called home. I am connected to her when I speak and hear nêhiyawêwin. Through this experience of kinship connections, I know there is a need for all Indigenous students to connect their bodies, minds, and spirits to the land through learning to speak their Indigenous language so that they can connect and feel a belonging with their ancestors. The connection we gain improves the health and well-being of our identity.

It has been stated that more research needs to be done on the positive effects that language learning has on mental health, like some of the studies that have been done showing evidence of the positive effects that language learning has on the mental health of Indigenous people. Jenni et al. (2017) found the following three themes in the reflections of participants from a mentor/apprentice program: (a) cultural and spiritual health and healing, (b) health outcomes, and (c) negative impact on the well-being of Indigenous people. Everyone is made up of the physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional. It is hard to distinguish and separate the benefits of land-based learning and language on our emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical well-being; all of these elements are interconnected as reflected in the medicine wheel teachings. To keep the health and well-being of a person in balance, one must give equal attention to each domain of being since they impact one another. White (1996) stated that "the healing of ourselves, our families, our communities and our Nations must take into account everything around us, and within us [and] that we need to have interconnectedness in all things to achieve balance" (p. 121). The imbalance within the domains can help or hinder our general health. The physical is sustainable living, being self-sufficient and physically healthy. The mental is the knowledge gathered from the land and language. The spiritual is the connection to our people, our culture, and our environment. The emotional aspect is the strength of our identity. The land and language heal us.

As a nêhiyaw educator to Indigenous people who will become teachers, it is important to take any opportunity to learn from the land and to speak my language to inspire future teachers to do the same. To take advantage of the learning opportunities out there for us to learn. asōnamēkēwin is a word in nêhiyawêwin, it means it is our responsibility to pass on the knowledge that we learn (Weenie, 2020). I carry this responsibility with great care as our Elders and Knowledge Keepers will not live forever. Our future generations will need this knowledge for their health and well-being; we need to pass on this knowledge to ensure our stories and teachings will live on through generations. We need to learn and experience the kinship connection with the land through learning the language. Our language comes from the land. When we share the language we share our ancestral teachings of the land.

## nitâcimowina askîhk (My Stories on the Land)

> We're all storytellers, really. That's what we do. That is our power as human beings. Not to tell people how to think and feel and therefore know-but through our stories allow them to discover questions within themselves. (Wagamese, 2016)

I love to tell stories about my experiences on the land as I am always trying to find what connects me to the land and to my family. They remind me that I belong to the land. I tell these stories to remember all the teachings and experiences that contributed to shape me into the person I am today. These stories have taught me the importance of family, culture, language and community.

Sivak et al. (2019) completed 16 interviews in a Barngarla community in Australia. The interviews were based on personal perspectives of participants on how language reclamation affects them socially and emotionally. Some of the key themes that were presented from the

participants reflect the same learnings from my stories, such as the "connection to spirituality and ancestors; connections to culture; connection to community; connection to family and kinship; connection to mind and emotions; and the impacts upon identity and cultural pride at an individual level" (Sivak et al., 2019, p. 1). As Thomas King (2003) wrote, "The truth about stories is, that's all we are" (p. 2) I believe that when we tell our stories it makes it easier for people to connect with you because they actually start to know who you are as a person and an individual. I love to share stories as a way to acknowledge and ground my whole body, mind and spirit to the land and to make connections with other.

For as long as I can remember hearing the stories from nikâwiy (my mom) and family, they would talk about how I always wanted to be outside. Nikâwiy would say, "It would be -40 out and Tammy would be outside playing." In the summers, I would go up north for a few weeks to Minâhik waskâhikan SK, which is where most of my family is from. I would spend most of the time at Spigama, the name of the place where my uncles' cabins are. Everybody in the community calls it Spigama, which means "across the lake." The thing about place names in nêhiyawêwin is that they were named after what people saw and what was done there. Spigama must have just become the proper name after some time. When I was there as a young child, there was only one cabin and an outdoor kitchen that my uncle made. I always thought it was cool because the older cousins had tents out there and they would have actual beds and buckets with makeshift toilet seats. It was their bedroom during the warm months. I usually stayed in the cabin with my uncle's family, unless nikâwiy was there; then we got to stay in a tent that had an actual bed; my mom put a bucket in the tent with a card board seat for night time pees. I loved it. My uncle would come pick me up on the boat when my family came to town. I think it was because I always enjoyed being outside and eating wild meat. Porridge always reminds me about Spigama. Every morning it seemed there was a giant pot of porridge cooking in the outside kitchen stove. This is where I found my belonging of comfort and safety. nêhiyawêwin was all I heard in camp and I was able to say words in nêhiyawêwin to my cousins. "pîtâ the ball" I remember saying when we played in the water. I was so proud.

I lived in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada from the age of 2 to 10 years old. For a long time, Yellowknife was home. Even after the move from Yellowknife to Regina, I always wondered when I would be moving back home. Even though I spent half of my life in Regina, it was getting to the point of whether I could still consider Yellowknife my home. The winters are long and cold in Yellowknife, but even in the winter there we would go on day camps with close friends and have a big bonfire. We would dress warm and spend the day and into the night visiting. I remember watching my boots smoke as I kicked back and warmed my feet by the fire. These were some of my most cherish memories. Life was good. Being on the land was perfect in any temperature; it was healing to be with our friends on the land visiting in the different temperatures and colours of the land.

Towards the end of my secondary Indigenous Education degree, I participated in a nêhiyawak language experience (Daniels, 2021; Daniels-Fiss, 2008). It was the second year Belinda Daniels from Sturgeon Lake organized this camp. This camp was originally a part of her master's project. My experience at this language camp was probably one of the first times I was confronted to step outside my comfort zone as we prepared to perform a play in nêhiyawêwin. I met the most beautiful iskwêwak and their families. I had morning coffee on a deck overlooking the lake. We set up tents and tipis and slept there. There was were so many teachings I learned during the camp, such as the following: we are all connected, and if we live a good life, we will be

taken care of and loved. I learned that the best place is to be surrounded by loving people and that if you want to learn a language then to spend time with people who will help get you there. This is where my love for land-based learning as a method for language revitalization started. I have now been to this camp four times and have brought nitanisak (my daughters) along the past two years. Connection to community and culture matter.

A few years back, during a February break from the school where I teach, I was fortunate enough to be a part of a nêhiyawêwin immersion storytelling camp in La Ronge Saskatchewan. The people who hosted the camp are near and dear to my heart. There was no other way I would want to spend a February break than to be in cabins heated with wood fires. There was no electricity, so when it got to sun set, it was dark. We ate supper by candlelight, stayed up late and listened to all the Elders and hosts tell stories in nêhiyawêwin. During the day we worked in pairs to create our own stories. I also was able to check muskrat traps, cook muskrat tail, and stretch muskrat fur. I did some ice fishing and rode around on a ski doo. I was immersed in the language. I was inspired and filled with pride and joy that I come from this amazing culture and this perfect place. I have been to many nêhiyawêwin immersion camps but this one's primary focus was teaching language through stories. This one was my favorite and I will continue to try to attend this camp or more camps similar to this one. I felt that I was able to challenge myself when I could work on my own story during the day. I would have eventually liked to share my story but was not given that opportunity. When I am an Elder able to speak nêhiyawêwin fluently, it will be my turn.

I have used the land's resources and materials for the art that I create. All the art skills I learned I use to practice with my own students. As a class, we learned to stretch, scrape, and flesh a moose hide. What we need to learn next is to hunt the moose, which I am trying to convince people to help me to learn to do this. With the moose hide in its raw hide state, people can use it to make drums and rattles. When you pass the rawhide stage, you work the hide into its smoked stage, you will have soft leather. With this soft leather one can make anything: mitts, moccasins, bracelets, earrings, and much more. With the fur, one can use it as liner or trim for mitts or moccasins. Within our class, we experimented with fur. We washed and dyed the fur different colors and then did some moose hide tufting onto leather. Tufting is a form of appliqué; you pick up little bunches of fur and you sew it onto the leather, then trim it to create a design. I have attended a porcupine quill workshop and have done some experimenting myself with porcupines and porcupine quills. Many people harvest porcupine quills from roadkill and they often will leave tobacco to honor and give gratitude to the spirit of the animal.

My students and I have picked, washed, dyed, and created art with porcupine quills on different materials. I have learned from these experiences that the land does sustain us in all aspects of life, living and enjoyment, feeding us, warming us, and allowing us to be creative. I have also found that students love to be a part of these experiences. They love experimenting and learning along the way. The art supplies we create are made available to us from the land. The land and the language are connected; the names of things are usually a description of what they are and what they are used for. Most Indigenous arts, such as beading, working with hide, dance, songs (ceremony), sewing (clothing, blankets), are intertwined and express our identity and way of life as Indigenous people. These are the things that kept us alive. Being able to hunt and then use the whole animal is art in itself: from scraping to smoking, stretching into raw hide for tools or drums or carrying on to make smoked traditional hide for clothing and shelter, and also to make all tools for survival.

Our Indigenous languages, all Indigenous languages, are how we communicate to live, to create and to experience life together and with much deeper meaning. In nêhiyawêwin the words mean more, they are more specific to the activity, they are much more descriptive. Cikâstêpayihcikanikamik is a word in nêhiyawêwin that is used for movie theater. It means a building where movies are made. Cikâstê-shadow/payi-occur, happen/ ikan-indicating a thing happening/ wikamik is a word for building. Literally, the word means "the building where shadows are made." This is how most nêhiyawêwin words are made in little pieces that describe what is happening. I would say art does the same thing it can describe feelings, memories, represent social issues and so much more. Language and art portray the same things;

> [Language] is a tool used for recording and preserving thoughts, and is a form of communication, equally, art may be used as a tool for recording and preserving thoughts, and as a form for expressing or communicating those thoughts. Therefore, language and art may be interwoven, complementing one and another. (Sinclair & Pelletier, 2012, p. 11)

It makes sense that art would be a method used to teach language. In Taiwan, Pyng-Na Lee did research with a Paiwanese music teacher who uses primarily traditional music to teach Paiwanese language. The teacher, Ms. Wong, teaches in her home community and speaks her native language. She has learned ancient songs from tribal elders through oral tradition. She believes that the songs should be passed on to younger generations because it is important to culture (Lee, 2020).

**kîkwây askiy nikiskinwahamâkon (What the Land Teaches Me)**

All my experiences on the land with those who love learning and teaching the language have brought me pure joy. It is in these moments that I feel exactly where I need to be. These experiences on the land, I know I belong. It is where I connect with my ancestors that have passed and where I feel connected to all the good things about being Indigenous. A big part of why I want to teach on the land is because it is good for the mental health, identity development, cultural learning, and learning good life skills. I have come to find myself on the land—miskâsowin askîhk. I have learned to honor and love myself on the land and through learning my language. I know the students I teach will come to know and love themselves in the same way.

As I reflect on what the land teaches me, I remembered the story below told by nikâwiy ototêma (my mom's friend). I asked her to tell me a story about Pinehouse Lake, where my family is from. As I reflect on what the land teaches me, it brought me back to this story:

> May 3, 2020
>
> Pinehouse Lake Story
>
> Kiyas mana ē-sīnowak ē-kī-mamawacik ē-kī-kowacocik onikikwaowa ekwa otema. ē-kī-macīcik, ē-kī-opāhicik, ēkwa ē-kī-paktohowācik. Were were rich in traditional foods. ē-kī-asamtocik mwīkawīhak mōcinakītotiw. Ka-kī-kiyatcimot e-kī-wīcitocik ē-pinawasocik. Kīyā-pitsanos āpis kwapatīn. Nīhiyomaskīkiya nikī-mosakinkatiki. Mwīmstahi pohcswōn ohci tākōn. Ki-apic anohc nēhiyomaskīkiy mōsakinkatiw.
>
> (In the old days' people used to love to be together out on the land with family and friends. They used to go hunting to gather food, trapping, and fishing. We were so rich in traditional foods. People used to share the food, no one was ever hungry. All relatives of family used to share stories and used to cook together. We still see this

happening today. At the same time as gathering food, traditional medicine was also gathered. There was not much sickness, even diabetes. People were healthy, and still today some of our people practice traditional medicines.)

Scenery is beautiful everywhere we go, especially when we go canoeing. It was emotionally healing when out on the land there were no distractions, just a sense of peace being out on the land. Still today families like to go out on the land. Our land is still clean and peaceful. Even our water is still clean, our traditional medicines still good, and fish is still rich and healthy. Still rich in traditional foods we still eat and practice a traditional lifestyle.

Many of our children were taught respect, not to disrespect. The Elders taught us this. That is still seen in our young people today. Especially not to ever disrespect an Elder.

Still rich in traditional food, no one should ever go hungry.

Religion was strong among our Elders. They used to have lots of respect for the Bishop. When he landed and from off the plane people would stand up palm trees from the plane landing and to the church and they follow him to church. This was showing a warm welcome. Praying is still strong today

Our Elders are still strong today. One of our Elders had delivered 500 babies at the time there was no road out and no airport. She was the only one to deliver babies. They are all healthy babies. She did not have any training. Even she was a very strong woman. Some of her family still practice traditional medicine that she taught them.

Our community is still a great place to live. We live by a lake if you look out the window you see water. People are still close to each other. No one gets hungry, someone will always provide for them.

When a person was struggling with things in life, people would go and support them right away. Even if there was a loss of a family member people would go take food and gather with family members. Today this is still very strong practice. When a person gets sick people would gather to support and pray for them for healing. This was all taught to us from a long time ago, respecting one another not to disrespect anyone. We still see that today in our community a good life.

We still continue to use our land to survive like fishing, hunting, and gathering meat. I still practice this today. Living off the land is such a healing experience.

People used to go out on the land in the winter season and come back home when the ice melted. This is good practice to live off the land

Our community is a great community, prayer is still strong today, and we still eat traditionally today. (Phyllis Smith, personal communication, June 26, 2021)

The story teaches me and reminds me that, in some cases, wisdom sits in places and everything is connected. It teaches me about peace, comfort, patience, and love. Phyllis even talked about how the land is healing for us, emotionally, like a doctor or medication. She shares how the land has beautiful scenery and provides us with food and medicine. She talks about the movement of the people in the different seasons, which I think is in our blood. Many Indigenous people still move, they come and go, and do not stay in one place. I think this is just another reason why the

Western education system is tough for many Indigenous students. They travel when something comes up. They are not held back when something important happens in their lives. I love this about Indigenous people. It is important to value Indigenous ways of being. In the Saskatchewan Indigenous studies curriculum, one of the outcomes is to value Indigenous ways of being. This story teaches me that everything that we need and could want is provided to us from the land. Wahkotowin is a nêhiyawêwin word that describes our relationships to everything. It says that everything is connected to everything, the rocks and trees, and our relationship to all things. It is because of these connections that we need to respect and honor kikâwimaw askiy (our mother earth).

**naspasinahikêwin êkwa nêhiyawêwin (Art and Cree Language)**

I have learned through experiences with the land, the language and art that it is important to incorporate them into your teachings to students. I am grateful I was gifted with the knowledge to teach them to other people. asōnamēkēwin - it is my responsibility now to pass this knowledge on. In this section I explain a program that I have not yet implemented fully. I have been using the arts as a pedagogical method but I have never conducted research about it. I have done bits and pieces of this project as an art project with very minimal language learning through the years and would like to explore it further through research one day. I would love to teach students in nêhiyawêwin how to make beaded hide astisak (mitts) in a nêhiyawêwin immersion style. The students will follow directions while practicing in speaking nêhiyawêwin. They will learn sewing and beading terms, how to say the supplies and colors. They should be able to tell us what they are doing in nêhiyawêwin as they do it. At the end of this project, I would like the students to be able to tell a story using their mitts. This is important because I know that using traditional Indigenous education is lacking in the Western education system, and reclaiming our traditions is what I believe will help give us back more of our identity.

Sometimes I do not know how to explain how this all connects or why it makes sense. I just know it does. I talk to nitotêmak (my friends) and they help me understand why it makes sense and that I am not just seeing it this way because I want to see it this way. I have to ask "Am I crazy? Does this make sense?" Then, I go back to the stories; I go back to what the students tell me about their feelings, how they connected, and how they enjoyed learning through traditional Indigenous education. Sometimes there is misconceptions about land-based learning and doing traditional Indigenous art. People wonder if we are following the curriculum. The curriculum guides and supports the learning, but it is so much more than the curriculum. Land-based learning is mental, as well as, spiritual, emotional and physical. These school lessons addressed identity, worldview, positive mental self-view, and healing. I go back to what I felt as a young person and I hope to offer what I missed and so truly wished for. I would like to be able to focus all the things that I have learned on the land and teach nêhiyawêwin while we learn all the things on the land, but for now I am focused on the traditional Indigenous art of creating beaded astisak.

> Indigenous land-based education is its own paradigm based on Indigenous worldviews and beliefs and the passing on of knowledge to one another and to the next generation …. It is also a form of understanding our place within, and our responsibility to, the wider universe …. If you understand—through our kinship structures or the way the language is structured—that parts of the land or animals are literally related to you, then you have a different kind of relationship with the land: you have something more like a familial relationship, where protection is

> naturally a part of it. I think that's really important. (Alex Wilson, as quoted in Canadian Commission for UNESCO, 2021)

The purpose of the program I want to create is to promote positive self-identity through language, culture, and traditional Indigenous art. Having completed all my education in urban settings, I have come to realize there was a lack of opportunities for traditional Indigenous art and the lack of opportunities in urban settings continues today in most urban education settings. In an urban setting, you do not get to hear the language as you would if you were in your home community.

In Pinehouse Lake, Saskatchewan (Northern Indigenous community), where my family is from, nêhiyawêwin is the primary language. I have been told through the years from Elders, Knowledge Keeper, teachers, and through readings that language is what connects us to our ancestors, our culture, and our identity. In urban schools we are missing these aspects of our experience. Norris (2009) wrote that in bigger cities, "transmission and continuity are significantly reduced" in terms of Indigenous languages (p. 4). Indigenous people are the minority in urban settings and there is so much systemic racism in Western societies and institutions, including the schools. As Indigenous people, we have so much to be proud of; our language and culture are at the center of our identity. Within systems of oppression, we are trained to think we are less-than. We see and sometimes experience negative perceptions that non-Indigenous people have of us and it can take a toll on our four domains: mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional parts of ourselves.

Many Indigenous people are migrating into urban areas and send their children to public school systems that lack the Indigenous language and culture. Indigenous people, language, culture, and worldview are all under-represented in our education system. This creates barriers for the high population of First Nations, Metis and Inuit (FNMI) students. It is important to continue to incorporate Indigenous Language and work towards creating language and cultural programs that are beneficial for all students, regardless of their language speaking abilities. Because I have spent much of my leisure time outdoors and I take every opportunity to attend outdoor culture camps, I am so filled with joy when engaged in traditional Indigenous activities, connecting to and being on the land. I have asked students and parents what they would like to learn and how they would incorporate nêhiyawêwin in their lives and a common theme is the benefits that traditional Indigenous activities would bring to the identity of the student and their families. I do not think that I will create fluent nêhiyawêwin speakers in an urban setting, but I do hope to create lifelong learners and inspire the students to continue to learn their language.[1]

## Conclusion

I conclude with a letter to my future students, which summarizes my exploration of best practices for sharing knowledge and learning a second language on and with the land to support and prepare Indigenous students:

> tânisi okiskinwahamâkanak (hello students)
>
> Tammy Ratt nitisiyihkâson. I want to teach you to bead and sew mitts, while teaching you to speak some nêhiyawêwin. I hope you enjoy beading, sewing and nêhiyawêwin as much as I do. I know it is not for everybody, but I just know that it should in some way be a part of your lives. Some of you may or may not have parents, grandparents and possibly siblings who speak their Indigenous language. Some of you may even know words in your Indigenous language. I believe that learning traditional Indigenous art and your Indigenous language is good for our

Indigenous identity. I think it is good for mental health. I believe these things connect us to the land and this is a part of who we are as Indigenous people. So, I would like to take this journey with you, learn from you and about you. I hope as we carry forward you will share your thoughts with me. miyaskam askîhk is a word in nêhiyawêwin that means finding oneself on the land. I believe that we can find ourselves on the land and through this project. āsōnamēkēwin is a nêhiyawêwin word that means it is our responsibility to pass on the knowledge that we learn, therefore I want to teach you all this and hope you share the knowledge (language, beading, and sewing) that you learn through this project to the people in your lives now and that become a part of your lives in the future. I am so grateful that I get to be doing this with you all. I am thankful that you allow me to teach you and I want you to know that you teach me so much in the journey.

ninanâskomon (I am grateful) to be a part of this with you.

êkosi (that's it)

[1] See Appendix I for a glossary of terms

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## Appendix I

## Glossary

āsōnamēkēwin (our responsibility to pass on knowledge that we learn)

astisak (mitts)

câpan (great grandmother)

êkosi (that's it)

ê-nêhiyawêcik (they speak Cree)

iskwêw (woman)

isiyihkâsow (is what she is called)

kikâwimaw askiy (our mother earth).

kîwêtinôtâhk (in the north)

maskisin (moccasins)

miyo-pimatisiwin (living a good life)

naspasinahikêwin (art)

nêhiyaw (a Cree person)

nêhiyawêwin (Cree language)

nikawiy (my mom)

ninanâskomon (I am grateful) to be a part of this with you.

nistês (my brother)

nitâcimowina (my stories)

nitanisak (my daughters)

ototêma (her/his its friend)

sākāhk (the bush)

# Ta-ohpinamahk ôma Michif opîkiskwîwin êḵwa nehiyâw pimâtisiwin ôta Sâḵitawak: To Bring to Life the Michif Language and Indigenous Ways of Life in Île à la Crosse

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## Abstract

This paper will discuss ways of uplifting the Michif language and Indigenous ways of life in Île à la Crosse. Language and culture in Indigenous ways of life are extremely important and if we do not have language, then we most often lose our culture as well. The Michif language has been on a continuous decline in our community because our youth are not being taught the language at home. Culture is not as prevalent as it once as well. I discuss my upbringing and various cultural activities that are being taught in our schools to bring our language and culture to life again.

*Keywords:* Michif, language, Métis culture, land-based learning, decolonization, relationships

## Ta-ohpinamahk ôma Michif opîkiskwîwin êḵwa nehiyâw pimâtisiwin ôta Sâḵitawak: To Bring to Life the Michif Language and Indigenous Ways of Life in Île à la Crosse

Language and culture are essential to the Indigenous way of life. Connection to land and animals through language, culture, values, and beliefs are vital to Indigenous people. Willie Ermine (1998) stated, "Loss of language creates the danger of loss of identity" (p. 21). It is clear to see that when a language is lost or in danger of being lost, loss of culture is also at risk. Culture and language come hand in hand, they inform one another. Culture and language come hand in hand; you cannot have one without the other. Kirkness (1998) affirmed that,

> The importance of language as an expression of a culture, of who we are as a people must be upheld by each individual, each family, each community, and each nation. Language is the mind, spirit, and soul of a people. Every effort must be made to protect, preserve, promote, and practice our Aboriginal languages. We must gather into the circle all the knowledge and wisdom we possess to ensure their survival. The documentation has been done, and what is left to be done is action. The last generation of fluent speakers are with us. Without their help the work toward the survival of the languages will be more difficult. (p. 104)

This is why ta-ohpinamahk ôma Michif opîkiskwîwin êḵwa nehiyâw pimâtisiwin ôta Sâḵitawak is so crucial.[1] My generation has a huge responsibility ta-kocîtahk ta-ohpinamahk opîkiskwîwina ôta Sâḵitawak.[2] The younger generation in Île à la Crosse is not learning the Michif language because the language is not being passed down to them in their homes. This is of no fault to the parents, there are many reasons for this occurrence. One of the main reasons is that of colonization. The reason I say my generation has this huge responsibility is because we are the generation that needs to learn the language from our Elders in order to pass it down to our children. Once we learn the language, it is our responsibility to pass the language down to our children, grandchildren, and families. Through this paper, I will discuss how land is our best teacher and can provide students the content needed to learn about our Métis culture and language. Interacting with our natural environments allows Michif to be taught and learned with more ease. There is a sense of safeness and calm when connecting to the land and speaking the Michif language. This paper is based on experiences with Elders and âsônamekêwin[3]—the teachings passed down to me by nohkom êḵwa nimoshôm êḵwa nôcâpânak.[4]

### Situating Myself

Erin Laliberte nisihkâson, Desjarlais nistam nî-apacihtân. Sâkitawahk ohci niya. êḵota ôma î-kî-nihtâwikiyân. ninâpîm, Austin isihkâsô. nitânis Mikaela êḵwa niḵosis Lucas isihkâsôwak. nohkom êḵwa nimoshôm, Ovide êḵwa Irene Desjarlais nikî-ohpikihikwak. tâpitâw nimoshôm êḵwa nohkom kî-nehiyawîwak. apisîs poḵo Michif êḵwa nehiyawêwin ni-kî-pîkiskwân, âta nikî instohtamân n'dayamowin. tâpitâw kihtâyak kî-pî-kîhokîwak wâwîs nôcâpânak Francois Desjarlais êḵwa Napoleon êḵwa Marguerite Johnson.

My name is Erin Laliberte, originally I used the name Desjarlais. I am from Île à la Crosse. This is where I was raised. My husband's name is Austin. My daughter's name is Mikaela and my son's name is Lucas. My grandmother and my grandfather, Ovide and Irene Desjarlais, raised me. My grandparents always spoke Michif and Cree in our home. I only speak a little Michif and Cree but I understand the language. There were Elders present in our home regularly, the most frequent being my great-grandparents Francois Desjarlais and Napoleon and Marguerite Johnson.

I have lived in this community all my life, except for leaving to attend university. I used to travel to different communities with nohkom eḵwa nimoshôm to visit their friends, and in doing so, I would always have kids my age to play with. I was always jealous of the children because they could speak their Indigenous language, and I could not, especially when we went to Minahik Wâskahiḵanihk.[5] I could understand the children speaking in Cree, but I would only respond in English. It had never occurred to me at that young age to try and speak my language. I always felt inferior, like I did not belong to the Indigenous world because I did not speak Michif.

When I began my teaching career in Île à la Crosse, I was told that I was to teach Michif because it was known that I understood the language. Because of my feelings of inferiority, I did not feel right in teaching my language. As time went on and I was mentored by other teachers in our school, those feelings of inferiority dissipated. It was when I began my first Master's of Education journey in 2012 that I started to feel more confident in teaching the Michif language. On that educational journey, I began to accept who I was as a Métis woman and a Michif language learner; it just took time. I am proud of who I am and of my upbringing, and all that my family has taught me.

In beginning my own process of decolonizing, I have become immersed in the Michif language so that when I speak in English, I am rethinking my words in Michif and I then repeat the English sentence in the Michif language. nohkom eḵwa nimoshôm spoke to me in Michif and Cree all of the time so I understand both languages, and what I did not understand, I was never afraid to ask what it meant. Now that I am older, I am trying to speak Michif more often and am beginning to teach my children at home. nimâmâ Barb eḵwa nipâpâ Ted[6] are helping me now that nohkom êḵwa nimoshôm î-naḵitaskîcik.[7]

## Learning From the Land

Being on the land always gives me a sense of peace. There is a connection to land that is tough to explain. In being raised by nohkom êḵwa nimoshôm, we spent a lot of time out on the land, at our family's or another family member's cabin, on the land picking berries, or collecting medicines. I feel like I was fortunate in the way that I was raised. I still remember being a little girl and exploring nature, being in awe of the land and creatures around me. nohkom instilled pride in our language and culture at a young age. I learned from nohkom êḵwa nimoshôm through watching and listening. Learning cultural activities was never forced upon me; it was always my choice to learn. Angelina Weenie (2020) wrote, "In Cree, the term for passing on the teachings is *āsōnamekēwin*. I am passing on what I have learned from *kēhte-ayak* and knowledge keepers and through lived experience, about land-based education (p. 4). When thinking about my childhood, I am taken back to a rich learning environment filled with Indigenous ways of knowing and living in nature. These are the teachings that my grandparents passed down to me.

I am taken back to the times when nohkom and I would make la ḵalêt[8] together and how she would show me how to mix it and knead it just right. I think of how proud I was when she would put my little la ḵalêt on display for the family to praise. I also think of when the whole family would go out in the spring to collect waskwayâpoy[9] and then make waskway sîwâpoy.[10] During this time, we were surrounded by our extended family. I vividly remember how everybody had a job to make the waskway sîwâpoy, and everyone was always busy. This activity takes a lot of patience, and as a child, I did not have much of that. What kept my attention was being out on the land with my cousins, enjoying and exploring nature. Weenie (2020) stated, "Our families were self-sufficient, and I was learning how to interact with land-based activities. My mother and

grandmother were sharing cultural practices with me in a significant way" (p. 4). I agree with this statement because Indigenous people learn how to be self-sufficient when out on the land using Indigenous ways of knowing and living in nature. This is what my grandparents taught me, and I will continue to pass on that legacy.

âsônamekêwin gifted to me by my grandparents is something that I love sharing with my students. Land-based activities such as plucking and preparing ducks, skinning and cooking rabbits, and making bannock on a stick, leave more of an impact on my students. Students keep the memory of being out on the land with them because it is something meaningful and it is a connection to who we are as Indigenous people. At our schools in Sâḳitawak,[11] we hold cultural days at certain times of the year. Students are given the opportunity to participate in cultural activities that are relevant to the season. Elders, being a part of the cultural days on the land and speaking Michif, make these days more meaningful to the students. They make wonderful connections with the Elders, and the knowledge that is shared by the Elder is more sacred to the students. Shawn Wilson (2008) stated,

> The importance of relationships, or the relationality of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology, was stressed by many people who talked with me about this topic. Several stated that this relational way of being was at the heart of what it means to be Indigenous. (p. 80)

This statement resonates with me because relationships are who we are as Indigenous people. Relationships with each other, relationships with the land around us, and relationships with our spirituality are the foundation of Indigeneity.

I am decolonizing my practice by teaching my students the Michif language and Métis culture as I know it. By doing this, I am fighting for what I believe in, which is revitalizing our Michif language and encouraging a traditional Métis way of life. I teach my students aspects of their culture that they may not have known before, such as taking them out to make connections with the land and collecting waskwayâpoy and then making waskway sîwâpoy, picking berries and medicines, preparing rabbits and ducks. Students may not have been taught these practices by their parents or grandparents due to the legacy of colonialism. I also think of the wonderful ways of knowing and living in nature that I was brought up around, that nohkom eḳwa nimoshôm taught me. Through another act of decolonizing, I am teaching my students this knowledge. I am also teaching my children what nohkom eḳwa nimoshôm taught me, teaching them things about our culture that were passed down to me. In doing so, I am teaching precisely the way nohkom eḳwa nimoshôm taught me. I fully believe that all of my life experiences are helping me become a more culturally responsive educator.

## Storytelling

Storytelling plays a massive role in Indigenous research and also everyday life as an Indigenous person. In all reality, everything is a story that people have created. Elders are such gifted storytellers, and when they tell stories, one takes what one needs from those stories even if one feels they are irrelevant at the time. The moral of these stories may be necessary for the future, and you can think back on the teaching from stories once listened too. Herman Michell (2009) affirmed that, "Building relationships with *Khîtîyâk (the old ones)* is the first step when gathering local knowledge. Cree people are gifted in diverse ways. We possess different forms of traditional knowledge and skills" (p. 69). Storytelling is just one example of how teachers can teach our students about their history and culture. Sharing cultural stories through language is more

beneficial than sharing in English. Topics for storytelling that teachers could teach students about are the stories of Wîsahkecahk,[12] stories that teach a lesson, also using storyboards and felt boards, stories that have been passed down from our câpânak[13] and grandparents. The story of how Île à la Crosse got its name is one example of what can be taught to children. One could teach this by using storyboards or felt boards and using stick figures to tell and show the story.

There are many variations to story of the way Île à la Crosse got its name but nôcâpân[14] Nap Johnson's story is the one that I remember being told as a child. He was interviewed by Michael Tymchak in October, 1975 for the Our Legacy Research Project. A portion of nôcâpân Nap's interview transcript is as follows:

> N: They said that this manager that was there, Fort Black…that's how they come to call that Fort Black…I guess they make a place where they got buildings in here and they put sticks around the Fort. Yes, I guess that's why they named…and another thing, this Mission Point here, we are over here now, this new town, Mission's over there and then there's an island here what they call…Ile-à-…they used to play ball there, they call "lacrosse." So, "Ile" is "island" in French and then this is how they got this name of "Ile-à-la-Crosse" here.
>
> M: From the Indian people who came to play lacrosse there?
>
> N: Lacrosse here on this island, yes, so that's why they call this.
>
> M: And that was actually just a little island off…
>
> N: Yes, a good-sized island…nice flat ground you know. (Tymchak, 1975)

Nap explained how Indigenous people played lacrosse on an island that is visible from Île à la Crosse, now the island being spoken of is called Big Island. There were a lot of French settlers here at that time, he explains that "Île" means island in French, and that is how Île à la Crosse got its name, the island where lacrosse was played.

nohkom eḵwa nimoshôm were wonderful storytellers, they painted out their stories so well that you felt like you were a part of their journeys. nohkom received her gift of storytelling from her father, my câpân Napoleon Johnson. When I was a little girl, I would sit and listen to him tell stories of his life and Indigenous legends and was captivated. He was a very animated storyteller and I use his gift of storytelling when I teach my students. I utilize storytelling as much as I can in my classroom, stories that are relevant to our area; Sâḵitawak is very rich in heritage and culture.

## Land-Based Learning and Identity

As an educator, I teach within the conventional Western school system. I teach what is given to me through the Saskatchewan curriculum, which is designed through a colonial lens. Throughout this curriculum and pedagogy, land-based learning is hardly noticeable. If teachers want students to learn Indigenous ways of living in nature and the Michif language, including land-based learning and language is the responsibility of the teacher. Simpson (2014) stated,

> Not one time has an Elder ever told me to go to school to learn Indigenous Knowledge. Not one time has an Elder told me to go and get a degree so that I can pass Indigenous Knowledge down to my children. Yet, we place tremendous pressure on our youth to gain western academic credentials. (p. 14)

My grandparents encouraged me to get a Western education while growing up and as Simpson (2014) stated, a lot of pressure was put on me to succeed in Western academia, so I in turn set the same expectation for my children. This pressure, perhaps, stems from being so accustomed to colonial beliefs that have been forced upon us, Indigenous people feel the need to overachieve within their system.

Although there is pressure to achieve in Western academia, there is equally as much pressure to reclaim Indigenous ways of living in nature. The need to take back what was taken from our great-grandparents and grandparents through the residential school era. Simpson (2014) wrote,

> My experience of education, from kindergarten to graduate school, was one of coping with someone else's agenda, curriculum, and pedagogy, someone who was neither interested in my well being as a kwezens, nor interested in my connection to my homeland, my language or history, nor my Nishnaabeg intelligence. (p. 6)

This was my reality; the traditional knowledge that I had in being a Métis woman was dismissed and invalidated. What I learned about Indigenous history only came in university, and even then was all surface level.

Colonialism and the after-effects from residential school play a large part in the disconnection of Indigenous peoples to their language and culture. Wildcat et al. (2014) stressed, "Settler-colonialism has functioned, in part, by deploying institutions of western education to undermine Indigenous intellectual development through cultural assimilation and the violent separation of Indigenous peoples from our sources of knowledge and strength—the land" (p. II). The residential school era was a disturbing part of Canada's history from which Indigenous people still suffer. The racism that was produced in those schools is still alive and visible today. There is a disconnection between Indigenous people and the land and language because of the residential school era. This is why many people do not know their language and culture. There is a sense of being afraid to practice Indigenous ways of knowing because, for many, it was not allowed and was practically erased from their memory.

During a land-based immersion course in July 2021, Elder Mary Ruelling, a Dene Elder from La Loche said, "There is a balance between the land and animals. A mutual respect." This statement resonated with me because all Indigenous stories discuss how we need to respect all living things. We give tobacco or a prayer for what we take from Mother Earth to show our thanks. The respect between the land and animals is an example for us to show that kind of respect when out on the land, being in nature. From her research Okemaw (2021) relayed what an Annishinaabe language teacher explained: "that [the Indigenous knowledge system] IKS is embedded within the ancestral language…and … Indigenous people 'are gifted and born with IKS'" (p. 78). These two statements made so much sense to me. There are things that, as Indigenous people, we just know. Cultural things that to us are just second nature because they are embedded in our ancestral language and our way of thinking. Being out on the land is natural, and I believe it has to do with the mutual respect for all living things that Elder Mary had discussed during her presentation.

To reclaim our language and cultural practices, we need to go back and visit with Elders and take back what is rightfully ours—the land. Wildcat et al. (2014) stated, "Land-based education, in resurging and sustaining Indigenous life and knowledge, acts in direct contestation to settler colonialism and its drive to eliminate Indigenous life and Indigenous claims to land" (p. III). Our ability to live on the land and for the land to sustain us is a reclamation of our Indigenous

ways of knowing. Our relationship with the land and the respect that Indigenous people show for the land and animals is one of great responsibility.

As people are beginning to decolonize their lifestyles and reclaim their Indigenous ways of living in nature, I have noticed that many families are getting back to Indigenous ways of life, living on the land and providing a cultural lifestyle for their families. Within our schools at Sâḳitawak, we have begun to provide land-based education while also incorporating our Saskatchewan curriculum requirements through the land-based activities we teach. Our elementary school and high school share a school cabin that is about a half-hour out of Sâḳitawak called Amiskowîsti.[15] We also have an outdoor kitchen on our elementary school grounds. These two examples of places we can do some land-based learning activities, although anywhere outdoors in our beautiful community would provide land-based knowledge. Our schools also share a school greenhouse, and we have begun to take our students there to teach them about gardening for sustenance. We, as educators, are trying to provide the best of both worlds for our students.

Within our schools, the traditional cultural activities that we show students are rabbit snaring, ice fishing, and how to clean and prepare ducks, just to name a few. While out on the land doing these cultural activities, we have an Elder and helpers to show the students how to do these activities. The Elder and helpers usually speak continually in the Michif language, which is very important for our students to hear. They need to be able to be in the moment culturally and in the moment with the language. Simpson (2014) declared, "The land must one again *become* the pedagogy" (p. 14). I wholeheartedly agree with this statement. We must reclaim and restore our Indigenous ways of knowing and living in nature. We need to take back what was once forcefully taken from us.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have discussed land-based learning and ways in which ta-ohpinamahk ôma Michif pîkiskwîwin êḵwa nehiyâw pimâtisiwin. The process of reclaiming our Indigenous ways of knowing and living in nature and also reclaiming our language will take time and effort, but it is something that our community of Sâḳitawak will benefit greatly from. Of course, there are some aspects of cultural life and nêhiyâw pimâtisiwin[16] that have been left behind or forgotten such as living on the trapline, it does not mean that we cannot reconnect with those ways of life and teach them to future generations so that they will no longer be forgotten. This is not to say that the act of trapping is forgotten or not a way of life anymore, it just means that the act of living out on the trapline does not occur, in my knowledge, anymore. Okemaw (2021) stated, "Reconstructing these knowledges and the ancestral languages will take a concerted effort on the part of parents, teachers, communities, and Indigenous and non-Indigenous governments" (p.79). It is achievable but requires all stakeholders to be committed to the process, no matter how long it takes.

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Endnotes

[1] To bring to life the Michif language and Indigenous ways of life in Île à la Crosse.
[2] To try and bring our language to life here in Île à la Crosse.
[3] The passing down of teachings.
[4] My grandmother and my grandfather and my great-grandparents.
[5] Pine House Lake

[6] My mom Barb and my dad Ted
[7] My grandmother and my grandfather have left this earth.
[8] Bannock
[9] Birch tree sap
[10] Birch tree syrup
[11] Île à la Crosse
[12] A Cree culture hero. A legendary figure.
[13] Great grandparents.
[14] My Great grandfather
[15] Beaver lodge
[16] Indigenous way of life

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