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The Nêhiyawak Nation through Âcimowina: Experiencing Four-Spirit Knowledge through Oral Narratives

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Abstract

This paper connects you to the Nêhiyawak Nation of Western Canada by sharing key elements of our intellectual traditions and knowledge systems that have been shared through countless generations. The basis of this paper extends through the Indigenisation and decolonisation initiatives of preceding Indigenous scholars who have begun sharing their knowledge in a means to rewrite and challenge the dominant systems and methodological approaches that we ourselves find ourselves in. Since it does, I want you as the reader to understand that the concepts found in this paper are not the typical knowledge you are taught, and I ask you to come with an open mind as you read it since our Western society has been removed from metaphysical elements of our environment. The stories and insights of the Nêhiyawak culture found in this paper delivers an emphasis on the deep-rooted understanding of the universe linked within our language, understanding of the world, and ancestral knowledge. It is shared with you for the purpose of enlightenment, and not for academic debate. I do not own this knowledge, but these are the stories of the Nêhiyawak Nation, of which I am a part. You may not understand this paper now, but the information presented and given to you will keep with traditional customs and will make sense to you maybe not this year but maybe couple years down the road, as this is the lifelong effect of storytelling found in the Nêhiyawak Nation.

Keywords: Nêhiyawak, Nêhiyaw, oral narratives, storytelling

About the Author

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A Reflection from the Author

When I wrote this article, I was coming into connection with my role and presence as an Indigenous academic. When I read through this work now, I would tell myself that I am so proud that you wrote on this topic and shared who you are first and foremost, but I would tell myself to be as loud and as unapologetic as possible.

I have edited the article and removed the terms “Cree” and “Plains Cree” and added in Four-Spirit, unless it is a publication. The name “Cree” is not our own or what we call ourselves as it is a colonial name or identifier. To be more in line with my stance today, I feel like this correction makes this work more genuine to my people and where I come from. I also have removed Elder Brother’s (Wxxxxxxcāhk) name since it only spoken during the winter months and this is to ensure we are as close as possible to tradition as we can be in academic writing.

Knowing what I know now, of course, I would like to add and remove parts, but at the time I wrote it, it was part of my graduate study experience and when I decided to submit it, I did not know that it would connect with so many people that it does today. I could change it, but I like to reminisce with it, and see how far I have come within academia and how I wrote within a colonial institution writing decolonial Indigenous narratives.

... Ay ay, thank you, for this opportunity to correct this work as I came to know and fully understand years later.

Introduction

The way in which Indigenous peoples retain their past should come as no surprise when we state that it is outside imperial ways of thinking and education in dominant western institutions. Dominant is often used as an adjective to describe the culture of European descended and “Eurocentric, Christian, hetero-sexist, male-dominated” society, and does not include those who fall “outside” (Wilson, 2008, p.35). Indigenous peoples and their allies have taken a stand and begun an Indigenising and decolonising process that includes the retelling of cultural pasts and practices, and have advocated for their own value systems, traditional governance, and way of life in relation to the cosmos, nature, and landscape to come to forefront of discussion. Through these actions, Indigenous peoples have taken on the politics of our society in North America and

abroad, and revealed for the first time, who Indigenous peoples are through their own ontologies, philosophies, and epistemologies. And by doing so, these initiatives challenge the very core of knowledge production and purpose since they do not follow dominant and western terms of research (Kovach, 2009). Since the first ethnographic text was written to the modern-day interpretation of what it means to be Indigenous; the ways in which Indigenous peoples are recorded, presented, and perceived are done through empirical methodologies set to get at the heart of culture through subjective scientific analysis and interpretation. Often when Indigenous peoples rewrite their past their voices and concerns are overshadowed by non-Indigenous peoples and through the academic hierarchy of authority are either ‘acting’ in a position of authority and credibility or ‘acting’ Indigenous though they are (McCallum, 2009). For too long this trend has dominated academic discourse, but in order to protect and legitimatise Indigenous knowledge, Indigenous writers have implemented a mixture of existing methodological approaches with Indigenous ontologies and epistemologies.

Linda Smith (1999) in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, present twenty-five Indigenous methodologies that can be implemented and utilised by Indigenous scholars such as *Claims* about Indigenous rights and dues for past injustices or *Testimonies* that provide oral evidence and the notion of ‘truth’ that is being revealed ‘under oath.’ For our particular discussion, I will focus on that of storytelling, as Smith (1999) explains that storytelling allows for the passing of beliefs and values attributed to each culture and people in the hope of being passed on to the new generations that follow. Russell Bishop (1996, p.24 as cited in Smith, 1999 p.145) suggests “*that storytelling is a useful and culturally appropriate way of representing the ‘diversities of truth’ within which the storyteller rather than the researcher retains control.*” Therefore, “*storytelling is a force on dialogue and conversations amongst ourselves as indigenous peoples, to ourselves and for ourselves*” (Smith, 1999, p.145). The need for Indigenous peoples to create a dialogue amongst their selves exists within two pressing concerns: “*the survival of peoples, cultures and languages*” and the “*struggle to become self-determining, the need to take back control of our destinies*” (Smith, 1999, p.142). However, I must note that the use of “story” leads into realms of myth and fiction, and I must explicitly emphasise that these views distract from the spiritual importance and why I opt for the use of oral narrative(s). With that said, this paper aims to address the importance held within oral narratives and the ontological and generational intricacies upheld by Indigenous peoples.

The ability to tell Indigenous pasts is not only a healing process for Indigenous peoples; it is also a form of decolonisation of the colonial practices that have emerged themselves into our lives year after year. Sami scholar Rauna Koukkanen attests that:

“Contemporary Indigenous peoples' narrative knowledge has to be part of the decolonization process which is taking place within all Indigenous peoples' societies. Throughout history, oral traditions have been and remain the memory of a people encompassing all aspects of life regarded important within a culture. A common view of Indigenous peoples is that stories tell who "we" are. This includes stories of origin and of ancestors, world view, values and knowledge for everyday survival” (Koukkanen, 2000, p.421, as cited in Lee, 2009, p.2).

The stories that are presented are an embodiment of Indigenous identity and crucial for Indigenous peoples to experience. The basis of oral narratives is often seen as solely “stories” in which they are believed to be false in nature. This is because as Metis writer Lee Maracle points out that:

“Academics waste a great deal of effort deleting character, plot, and story from theoretical arguments. By referring to instances and examples, previous human interaction, and social events, academics convince themselves of their own objectivity and persuade us that the story is no longer a story... It takes a lot of work to delete the emotional and passionate self from story, to de-humanize story into "theory". So we don't do it. We humanize theory by fusing humanity's need for common direction-theory-with story” (Maracle, 1992, pp.88-89, as cited in Koukkanen, 2000, p.414).

The study on the emotional and cultural relationship between oral storytelling and the Indigenous community has resulted in numerous texts written from Indigenous authors' point of views and perceptions. Jo-ann Archibald (1997, as cited in Lee, 2009) in her PhD thesis *Coyote learns to make a storybasket: The place of First Nations stories in Education*, not only integrated Sto:lo beliefs of British Columbia, but she did it through the use of Coyote, the trickster. With Coyote, Archibald (1997) was able to explore and reflect on the pedagogical value of storytelling traditions, or ‘story work’ (as cited in Lee, 2009). Archibald goes on to write that it is not to say

that non-Indigenous will forever be on the side lines of writing, but Indigenous peoples need space to talk, understand the stories in their own way, and then create culturally based discourse to develop ways to validate discourse, and when we are ready, let others join the conversation (Archibald, 1997, as cited in Lee 2009). We may lose out on insights, but this is a learning process in which Indigenous peoples need to experience and to feed the cultural longing inside and liberate their mind and body from social constraints. Morrow states that storytelling is ‘better understood by absorbing the successive personal messages revealed to their listeners in repeated tellings than by trying to analyze and publicly explain their meanings’ (Morrow, 1995, as cited in Cruikshank, 2002), and this sharply contrasts many academic disciplines protocols.

As one of the most valuable sources of historical information available, oral narratives and oral traditions, presents the importance of livelihood and material wellbeing for Indigenous peoples (Peterson, 2005). From spiritual understanding of the complexities of the universe to understanding oneself in society, oral narratives allow for the participants to shape their knowledge of who they are through the voices of their ancestors that are echoed throughout generations. I will begin our discussion of oral narratives by presenting views from multiple Indigenous scholars around the world as I explain the importance and significance within storytelling. I will then focus on the *Nêhiyawak*, of Western Canada whose traditional territory is across the Plains of Alberta and Saskatchewan. The *Nêhiyawak* or better known as the Four-Spirit People are a sovereign First Nation who made formal and oral agreements in the creation of Treaty Six with the British Government on behalf of Queen Victoria. The *Nêhiyawak* have long practiced, *âcimowina*, oral narratives, and these stories are embedded with teachings and lessons that are pertinent to *Nêhiyawak* being. The primary sources presented in this paper are found in Nehiyaw historian Winona Wheelers’ (2010) “Cree Intellectual Traditions in History,” in *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and their Representations*, and Nehiyaw historian Neal McLeod’s (2007) *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times*. The reason that these two sources are prominent throughout this paper is because the oral narratives and stories within the pieces have undergone the appropriate cultural protocol and through their publication allows researchers and writers to use them where necessary, but they do not belong to anyone except the storyteller. I will address accordingly the cultural protocols of *âcimowina* as I conclude with an analysis of how the Western world and academia have questioned the legitimacy of oral narratives and the future of oral literacy for Indigenous self-determination and cultural identity.

With that said, I am by no means an expert in Nêhiyawak tradition or Indigenous oral history, and through cultural protocol, I do not have the right to share stories that are not my own or others since my learning, much like Wheeler's, "*will take a lifetime*" (2010, p.48). My use of the oral narratives found in McLeod and Wheeler's work indicate this cultural right as well, since I do not have any stories that I am able to share just yet and the reason why this paper is heavily cited by these Nehiyaw scholars. It is through these oral narratives that I begin to understand the "*...basis for understanding [Nehiyaw] experiences,*" and it is through these oral histories that memory and history are transmitted, since *Nêhiyawîhcikêwin*, Four-Spirit Culture, is an oral culture, and therefore, a listening culture (McLeod, 2007). To begin to understand oral narratives, we will begin with the presentation of the storyteller, and the keeper of knowledge.

The Kêhtê-ayak, Old People

In academia, scholars have been trained to understand their primary and secondary sources to get an understanding of who has written them. In Nêhiyawak culture, the primary and secondary source material comes from living individuals who cannot be called historians. The idea of history or historians is unheard of since there is no word for "history" in the Western sense (Wilson, 1997). Instead, pasts are told through various types of stories found in oral narratives and many of them overlap each other. Nêhiyawak have two common forms of stories called *âtayôhkêwina* and *âcimowina*; where *âtayôhkêwina* are sacred stories that account how the world was shaped, when animals and humans could talk, and when *Wîsahêcâhk* transformed the world of misadventure, love, and mischief we have come to know today and where *âcimowina* account a time after *Wîsahêcâhk*, but still incorporates mythical elements (Wheeler, 2010). Storytellers to teach lessons about greed, respect, and humility, to name a few, use *Elder Brother* as the main character as he is a cultural hero amongst the Nêhiyawak (Innes 2013). It must be noted however that one cannot simply go in and out of Old People's lives without establishing bonds, familiarities, and reciprocal relationships with them. The Old People are living sources and their ways of knowing and teaching must be considered within their own contexts (Wheeler, 2010). From how they understand the world around them to the cultural values and laws that they live by, the Old People are strong in their roles as keepers of community knowledge (Wheeler, 2010). *Kêhtê-ayak* can be a *kisêyiniw*, "elder" or *kiseyiniwak* "elders," who stand by their community as people who have demonstrated throughout their lives generosity, skills, and wisdom (Wheeler, 2010). The late Alex

Bonias, from the Little Pine First Nation in Saskatchewan, gave the analogy that a *kisêyiniw* is like a duck beating on the ground with its wings to distract a potentially dangerous predator, thus giving its little ones enough time to run and hide (Wheeler, 2010). *Kisêyiniw* is derived from the word “*kiséwew*” which means protector, and therefore, an elder does not only teach valuable lessons but protects the young, and that is what a true elder does, they encircle themselves around their children and grandchildren (Wheeler, 2010). With the greatest respect, the *kêhtê-ayak* would tell stories for the youth to ponder and think about or ones that were told with great exuberance. If the youth did not believe the *kêhtê-ayak*, the elder would stick a knife in the ground and state to his audience, “*If you do not believe what I say, you can use this knife on me*” (McLeod, 2007, p.12). Many of the Old People were hesitant to claim that they completely knew the oral story and began with *namôya mistahi ê- kiskêyihtamân*, “*I do not know very much,*” or used the phrase to emphasise their own limitations (McLeod, 2007). Storytellers would acknowledge how they came to know a story, and statements such as “*my father had told me*” indicating an “*oral footnote*” similar to Western culture’s bibliography (McLeod, 2007, p.16). Filled with compassion, empathy, and kindness, the Old People are the embodiment of oral history in Nêhiyawak Culture.

Storytelling was and still is an integral part of everyday Nêhiyawak life. Stan Cuthand, from the Little Pine Cree Reserve in Saskatchewan, recalls legendary storyteller *Sakamôtâinew*, the son of renowned chief Poundmaker. *Sakamôtâinew* would often forget the story and the adults would recall how the story started and in so doing, brought the whole audience together. His humility in himself allowed him to connect to the people and since he was typically the one who told stories during hard times, would attend wakes and his stories would help the mourners relieve their anger and grief (Wheeler, 2010). Storytellers like *Sa kamôtâ-inew* would tell miscellaneous stories or little stories about how things were like before the Treaties, or stories of personal actions such as giving away horses, winning a wife, or holding a feast, and for *Elder Brother* his greatest stories were those of *Elder Brother* (Wheeler, 2010). *Elder Brother* like many Indigenous terms, has multiple meanings, typically known as the trickster, he can also be the narratives of the elder brother known as *âtayôhkêwina* (McLeod, 2007). It might be said, in fact, that *Sakamta-inew* was a contemporary embodiment of *Elder Brother*.

Âtayôhkêwina places importance on the “spiritual history” or the narratives involving spiritual beings known as *âtayôhkanak*, meaning the “spiritual helpers,” who can be spiritual

grandfathers or spiritual grandmothers (McLeod, 2007). These narratives give insight into the way that Nêhiyawak people relate to their ecology and environment, and importantly with other beings (McLeod, 2007). In order to understand the oral history of Nêhiyawak, one must take into the consideration the Indigenous perspective and ways of knowing that shaped the cultural forces in the first place (McLeod, 2007). Put simply, “spiritual history” stresses the audience, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to engage in oral history narratives through the lens of those who experienced it firsthand and challenges the Western notion of linear time (McLeod, 2007). Nêhiyawak narratives are then constructed in relation to space and location rather than linear time and therefore exist through long stretches of time (McLeod, 2007). Scholars will often use the term “cultural history” as a means of characterising the Indigenous understanding that all aspects of their oral tradition are viewed as history, and this distracts from the idea that these oral narratives can exist within the present.

The ability to stretch over long periods of time is partly due to the collective memory anchored in places and landscape. Keith Basso (1996) in *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*, identifies time as a place maker, where though we are in the present, ancestral events are also occurring at the same time. Though Basso presents Western Apache belief, the emphasis on landscape can be transcended across the Indigenous globe. Indigenous people remain attached to an area of land over an extended period of time through connections made through the knowledge of plants, sacred sites, and songs (McLeod, 2007). An example comes from Isadore Pelletier, an elder at First Nations University of Canada who talked about *mistasiniyak*, big stones commonly referred to as ‘grandfathers’:

“The stones, as you probably know, are listeners, they are grandfathers, they are older than, you know, just as old as Mother Earth... and that’s why we call them grandfathers... there was a reason why they put them, they’re all spaced equally around, and the significance of that is when the person spoke, her got up and spoke, and they spoke, they spoke the truth... there was... no lies told when they spoke there...” (Pelletier, as cited in McLeod, 2007, p.20)

The *mistasiniy* were places where the people would gather and pray to honour the buffalo who sustained them (McLeod, 2007). Leaving gifts of thanks, such as tobacco, the rocks were places of worship and healing, and when missionaries came, part of the Christianisation involved erasing

Nêhiyawak memory from landscapes that withheld sacred stories (McLeod, 2007).

Nêhiyawak emphasised *wîtaskiwin*, which meant to live together on the land in harmony throughout the landscape and where they were able to communicate with other beings, especially the *pawâkan* (McLeod, 2007; Wheeler, 2005).

Linking a person to the rest of creation, *pawâkan*, are dream keepers and could be any being, from a small insect to a bear, and gives its human counterpart various powers and abilities (McLeod, 2007). Many Indigenous communities hold the belief of animal counterparts, where the soul of the animal is linked to a human, and often are able to change within forms. For example, the practitioner will transform their selves into the animal with the strongest medicine since in most cases; the human form is not powerful enough to endure what they are healing at the time (Ahenakew et al., 2000). Categorized by Western academia as “shapeshifting” we are exposed to the deep spiritual power that animal-human relationships present and the cultural beliefs that come along with the ability. As well, dream spirits as accounted by Nehiyaw Elder Sarah White-calf, were where the Nêhiyawak learned valuable skills such as sewing, given by the porcupine to a certain individual. The porcupine appeared in the woman’s dream but only as a human, and there taught her how to use her quills to sew and do quillwork (Whitecalf et al., 1993).

Clifford Sanderson, a respected storyteller and elder from the James Smith Reserve, exemplifies the power of the *pawâkan* after his father had passed away. Sanderson’s grandfather *asiniy-kâpaw*, had a bear as his dream helper, and when he passed away a small bear came out of his chest and walked around (McLeod, 2007). A story like the one above exemplifies the importance of other beings to the narrative of Nêhiyawak and allows people to tap into the land around them presenting the Indigenous mindset. “*Tapping into the mystery*” is a central process of Nêhiyawak consciousness and knowledge, and those who are able to tap into their power are, *omitêw* (McLeod, 2007, p.30). It is not only collective memory that allows the Nêhiyawak to remember their history, but the use of mnemonic devices.

Artistic illustrations and depictions come in various forms, shapes, and mediums. From landscapes, tipi coverings, ledger paintings, petroglyphs, or stones themselves, to name a few, these forms of “art” are mnemonic devices that act as memory aids or re-emphasise teachings to Indigenous oral historians and storytellers. Vine Deloria Jr. (2006, p.149) in *The World We Used*

to Live In, emphasises on “*Sacred Stones and Places*” by presenting various examples of how the landscape triggers stories of specific importance. For instance, in the story “The Island Sacred Rock” English explorer Sir George Simpson learns of how many spirits dwell inside rocks, specifically the one where many of the Natives near the Columbia River would bring offerings of salmon (Deloria Jr., 2006). Believed to bring rain, the rock is respected by the Natives but Simpson orders one of his men to move the stone, and though unsuccessful find themselves caught in a violent storm. Simpson was warned that no human should touch the stone, and thus learned of the teachings of respect and actions towards the sacred.

We learn from this rock and many other petroglyphs and material culture how Old People are able to remember an oral tradition that does not need text but imagery withheld in their minds. The Old People knew how to interpret and listen to the world and relied on dreams and intuition for knowledge through spiritual beliefs and practices. Nêhiyawak life involved thanking the Creator for the gift of life and drew highly on the ties to the other beings (McLeod, 2007). The earth was connected in every shape and form and for us; it is hard to define in Western languages to obtain full comprehension.

Power of Words

Words have an unspeakable power as they not only can heal, protect, and counsel, but also can cause harm (Wheeler, 2010). *Nêhiyawîhcikêwin*, Nêhiyawak culture, indicates that spoken word is sacred and so early in life one is advised to speak with care because words are *manitôkiwin*, which means that speech is equivalent in effect of making something sacred or making ceremony (Wheeler, 2010). Therefore, when the Old People accept tobacco from someone seeking knowledge and share the pipe, they are committing themselves to tell the truth, and bound by the presence of the Creator to speak from their heart (Wheeler, 2010). The pipe is the direct connection to the Creator and when the treaties were signed the pipe was used at the beginning and ending of every set of Treaty negotiations because as late Pauline Pelly, elder of the Saulteaux band in Treaty 4 territory states, “*we as Indian people when we want to tell the truth we put it in the hands of the Creator*” (Wheeler, 2010, p.55, video recording).

Breach of negotiations when the pipe was smoked indicated *pástáhowin*, and indicated that breaking such vows “*bring about divine retribution with grave consequences*” (Wheeler, 2010,

p.55). The Nêhiyawak believed that the use of the Bible by Treaty Commissioners was a solemn promise to God, and so it was believed that *pástáhowin* applied as well. Therefore, it is believed that the Creator gave all people the spoken word and the ability to memorise so they can keep their laws, lessons, and histories protected for future generations. Although some Peoples have turned away from the spoken word in favour of writing, Nêhiyawak cultural oral traditions remain strong (Wheeler, 2010). This is true even in instances where written forms are available. Though oral history has remained a strong entity of Indigenous communities, there is still the lingering fear of the repercussions of losing oral histories and tradition. According to late elder Atimoyoo Smith, the Old People were polite when they doubted something in a story someone was telling, and though they never accused the storyteller of lying they would simply state, *āyanwētēman*, “*I don’t believe it*” (as cited in Wheeler, 2010, p.57). However, *kitāpwētowino*, “*we believe differently*” now than in the past, and is best exemplified by Winona Wheeler’s (2010) experience with Smith, a respected elder and purveyor of Nêhiyawak knowledge and history:

“There are so many things today that distort the way we see and believe, that distort human memory, so many old stories, but we start to believe what we are told now. Start to believe what they [Moniyawak] tell us to know and we don’t believe the old ways anymore. We start to believe we are not alive, what we believe is obliterated... They will make us believe that black is white, that’s how powerful it is. That’s how the stories of our Old People get so far away. We just try to grasp it. A person will turn into animal, he did turn into a weasel, he did turn into a coyote, to get away from the people who were trying to kill him, to survive. I didn’t get that stamina and thinking to make me into something. And so, really, I’m becoming nothing” (Wheeler, 2010, p.58).

The effects of colonisation had taken what Nêhiyawak took to be true and caused it to be distorted from its original meaning. Many Indigenous languages, though unique share similar patterns where one word has multiple meanings, for example in Anshanaabek (Ojibwe) *ishkode* means fire but it also means the heart of the lodge, or the heart of an individual. The missionisation processes that occurred during colonisation caused perceptions to become integrated, expanded upon, or deleted, and in doing so caused Indigenous realities to be lost and cross culturally miscommunicated (Wheeler, 2010).

The inability to see Nêhiyawak customs in their own context has inhibited Western Culture and academia to properly understand *âcimowina* and has caused the teachings and significance to become lost in translation and/or silent on paper. There remains the challenge of trying to integrate *Other Ways of Knowing* into history, and it requires alternative ways of learning and understanding to be established (Wheeler, 2010). Thus, a series of Indigenous scholars ranging from Anthropologists to Historians have taken it upon themselves to ensure oral history and traditions are upheld and have marked a movement forward from the Western perception of Indigenous culture.

Rethinking Western Perceptions on Oral History and Tradition

One must understand that Indigenous peoples historically lived in a world dramatically different from the one we know today, and predominantly the Western world has been forged to think empirical and scientific (Martin, 1987). Where “*civilization looked past the significance of nature and subdued it by Christianity and the remaining residue of power left in nature is incomprehensible to them*” (Martin, 1987, p.28). In a real sense, nature has become a proverbial Tower of Babel, where the Western world cannot understand or see the power of what is in front of them (Martin, 1987). For the Indigenous Nations, nature was alive, and provided spiritual and physical sustenance.

From the first contacts with Europeans, Indigenous peoples have been presented in complex dualities often as the noble savage, or the savage warrior (Lische & McNab, 2005). Sadly, Indigenous peoples live in an imaginary world that is not their own, and the Natives that popular culture believe they know, do not exist. Since Europeans wrote records, the Indigenous voice has been left out of the history books, and stereotypes and misrepresentations have been able to thrive on series of inaccuracies. Daniel Francis in *The Imaginary Indian*, rationalises that: The Indian began as a White man’s mistake, and became a White man’s fantasy. Through the prism of White hopes, fears and prejudices, Indigenous Americans would be seen to have lost contact with reality and to become Indians; that is, anything non- Natives wanted them to be. (1992). In order to be clearly represented as the people they truly are, Indigenous peoples must tell their own stories of themselves outside of the constraints of dominant European worldviews that drive our Western society. In presenting Indigenous histories, Indigenous peoples move away from the prejudices of Western society and allow themselves to be free from the constraints of imperialism and

colonialism that continues to dominate Indigenous peoples as this movement initiates the decolonisation and indigenisation process for Indigenous livelihood.

Indigenous history cannot be read literally but must be interpreted and this is largely because Western history speaks to the past while, Indigenous history is seen as speaking to the present as an ongoing process (Dickason, 2005). Memory is a beautiful gift, and in context with Indigenous oral traditions is resonant on senses that evoke emotional responses and causes a relationship to grow between the storyteller and the listener (Wheeler, 2005). Slowly, historians are coming to realise that Indigenous oral traditions offer new insights and valuable information on significant historical events. Scholars are becoming increasingly aware that the conventional, academic, document-driven approach is elitist and colonial (Wheeler, 2005). Devaluing oral history and writing it down causes the moment in time to become no longer alive, when in Nêhiyawak belief it was *êpimatciw akitêmake*, something that has spirit, and something that can give life (Wheeler, 2005). Furthermore, cultural fluency – based within a solid understanding of Indigenous oral history – is essential to truly grasp Indigenous concepts embodied in colonial agreements such as treaty council minutes, and in some instances, actual written agreements (Wheeler, 2005). However, great strides towards improving Indigenous history do not lie in academia alone, but on the political level as well.

The St. Anne Island Treaty of 1796 presents how oral history is regarded in Canada on all levels of government. The Treaty meeting was held in a public gathering where the Crown promised a large Reserve that included free trade, border crossing, and other rights, but there is no record of this meeting in the Treaties or Surrenders book, only a surrender document (surrender #7), dated 8 days later (McNab, 2001). This surrender document states that the Indigenous peoples relinquished the land where the Treaty was negotiated. This example points out flaws that exist with written records versus oral narratives, and how self-serving many written records are between Indigenous peoples and colonial governments. In Canada, the constant myth concerning Indigenous history is that Indigenous people had no history, and if there was any record made by Europeans it was used to showcase the territory and show promise of profit to the respected empire (Dickason, 2005).

During the time when the Numbered Treaties were signed, Indigenous communities looked to education as their future and insisted that Indigenous worldviews and cultural orientations were taken into consideration, but Western European models were imposed without question (Dickason, 2005). In an effort to assimilate the Native peoples of the prairie territories, the colonial regime of the time, though we can still argue that it exists today, were unaware and unwilling to attempt to understand Indigenous perspectives or ways of knowing and therefore attempted to break how Native peoples see the world by dismantling the very foundations of Indigenous society such as kinship relations, cultural traditions, and language. This initiative was through the enforcement of residential schools, and it was believed that by forcing Indigenous peoples to learn European customs, languages, and lifestyles they would become assimilate into Canadian society easily. The only thing that Indigenous peoples had to do was give up everything that they were, as a result this act resulted in some of the most racist, inhumane treatment ever inflicted by human hands and lasted until only a few decades ago. However, these atrocities were unsuccessful, though they were damaging and have caused a traumatised generation that exists throughout the generations, I present it solely because, even in the face of hardship, starvation, and genocide, we still exist, and we still are here. Much like our traditions and customs, and ethics and protocols, our stories and experiences before and after contact still exist. Indigenous oral history had the ability to last and allow for the preservation of Indigenous knowledge, culture, and education. Education was a must when Treaty Six was signed.

For the Nêhiyawak, education is a lifelong process that strives for spiritual, mental, and physical balance, and emotional wellbeing within the context of family and community (Wheeler, 2005). *Kiskinohamat-owin* refers to the reciprocal and interactive teaching relationships between student and teacher and is a community activity, and an aspect not presented in Western techniques of hierarchies (Wheeler, 2005). The student-teacher relationship is based on life-long obligations, responsibilities, respect, and trust, and with some degree of personal sacrifice, and this is an integral aspect of establishing a relationship between storytellers and students. Education has been an important aspect of Indigenous customs but is based within relationships, and oral narratives are one of the most important teaching tools available not only pertaining to life lessons but important spiritual and traditional customs. It is through oral narratives we find one of the greatest resources available to Indigenous peoples, as it allows for Indigenous history to emerge and proceed in both an ethical appropriate and respectful way.

Conclusion

Oral history is an entity that is powerful beyond words, and the context in which it is written is as complex on its own. We touched only briefly on the Nêhiyawakâcimowina, *Four-Spirit* oral traditions, but as powerful and useful oral histories and traditions are, there remain problems that exist due to previous relationships between Indigenous communities and scholars. Realising that many Indigenous communities have been exploited during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century due to scientific inquiries such as done in the field of anthropology, many communities feel a need to protect their selves from outsiders who want to learn about their culture and customs. Seen in many of the “as-told-to autobiographies” written throughout the twentieth century, many Native people would be astonished and gain a sense of vulnerability to find out that their “adopted scholars” had used their culture and stories (Cavender Wilson, 1997). Therefore, a sense of responsibility should be acknowledged when handling oral histories such as the ones presented above.

When a Nehiyaw person is learning oral traditions they are encouraged to engage with their teacher and ask questions so that they will learn what is culturally appropriate to become public knowledge and what is not, or what narrative style is the most appropriate when a story is asked to be made into text form (Wheeler, 2005). It must be acknowledged that respect and cultural responsibility is required for Nêhiyawak “copyright” laws and that protocols exist in order for trust to be established and maintained with academia. However, not all knowledge and lessons are unknowable to the public or young learners but access to knowledge requires long-term commitment, often through an apprenticeship, and payment in various forms (Wheeler, 2005).

Winona Wheeler (2005) exemplifies through Maria Campbell’s book *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, that Campbell was able to obtain the stories in her work by becoming a helper or servant to her teachers with payment of blankets, tobacco, and even a prize Arabian stallion. A majority of the time gifts and tobacco will be enough for payment, but in many cases, they are a means to receive instruction on the appropriate protocol, this is known as traditional copyright (Wheeler, 2005). Where the right of ownership is recognised and the storyteller has exclusive ownership, and typically applies to stories in ceremonies. There is only one Nêhiyawak word for stealing, *kimotiwin*, where any and all theft is unconscionable (Wheeler, 2005). Taking ownership

of a story not your own without permission from the original teller and when it was only shared with you is in Nêhiyawak belief, stealing (Wheeler, 2005). However, this understanding of copyright is not always protected in conventional copyright and intellectual property laws and therefore, it does not always protect Indigenous knowledge from outside researchers (Wheeler, 2005). Therefore, I firmly believe that if you wish to work with elders and their stories, one must always treat a narrative as a living being, since it is. By doing this you ensure that the narrative is protected ethically, and the story is upheld in the highest honour. Therefore, it has been clear that anyone who wishes to work with oral histories must become fully informed about their roles, responsibilities to the community, and the limits of what can be shared or not. Simply, researchers must “*take the time to learn how to learn*” (Wheeler, 2005, p.204). Through reading Wheeler’s work, I realised how many of her sources are used time after time, and we witness how she has formed bonds with them and this is required in the oral practice. For hundreds and even thousands of years oral narratives have survived and brought forward lifeway’s for Indigenous peoples across the world. By using *Nêhiyawakâcimowina*, I have attempted to illustrate how intricate our culture is. This paper can only tell you what Nêhiyawak oral narratives encompass and can only speak as well as the author reads. There is much to learn by simply sitting and listening and if you ever get the chance to sit with a storyteller you will notice that their “*...brains were like paper*” (Wheeler, 2010, p.54).

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