

“Tapwewin ‘Speaking the Truth’
Muskeg Lake Cree Nation Reflections on Community”

By: Jarita Greyeyes
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We accept this community governance project as conforming
to the standard required.

Waziyatawin, Ph. D, Indigenous Governance Program
Supervisor

Harry Lafond, M.Ed, Muskeg Lake Cree Nation
Community Supervisor

Charlotte Reading, Ph. D, University of Victoria
Chair



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University of Victoria

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I will be forever grateful to my ancestors who allowed me to be one of their descendants. By doing so they gave me the greatest gift of all-the opportunity to live my life as mîyahkasikan iskwew.

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To my mother Carol, *I love you forever, I'll like you for always, As long as I'm living my mommy you'll be!* Thank you for your unending patience, and love. Your commitment to our people inspires me to fight harder, everyday. Nikâwiy nisâkihâw! To my father Glen, thank you for taking care of my ahcâhk and for infusing my genes with a love of all things political. I wish you were here to celebrate with us.

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Dedication

For all Nehiyaw peoples who fight bravely for our freedom, and our ancestors whose whispers in our ears help us to find ourselves once again

“But why the truth at all? Why this battle for truth and on behalf of truth? I do not remember having asked grandmother once whether the story she was telling me was true or not. Neither do I recall her asking me whether the story I was reading her was true or not. We knew we could make each other cry, laugh, or fear, but we never thought of saying to each other, ‘This is just a story.’ A story is a story.” Trinh T. Mihn-ha¹

This story is about telling several stories. It is foremost the story about the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation as we unravel the truths about ourselves and our community. Colonialism is about silencing our people, rewriting our history, and making our voices irrelevant. Conversely, this project at its’ heart is about providing a forum for members of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, of which I am also a member, to reflect upon our community, and to speak their own truth. This is also a story of how I came to find meaning while creating a constitution for the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation. This has been a process in which *miyo-wîcêhtowin* or “having good relations” has been at the centre of all the work our community has done as we recognize that *wahkohtowin* or “kinship” is the essence of our nation. By creating a dialogue through contemporary media we have been able to connect community members with ideas and reflections on one community’s current meaning of *Nehiyaw* governance and decision making.

Over the span of several months I used digital tools to create and edit video interviews of community members who had participated in the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation’s constitutional development process. The videos were posted, along with a written analysis of the underlying issues identified in the videos on a blog called “Tapwewin: Speaking the Truth” which can be accessed at <http://tapwewin.tumblr.com>. The blog is the story of our community, conveyed through individual expressions in multi-media form, and offers a forum for community members

¹ Minh-ha, Trinh T. *Woman Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality, and Feminism* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989:120-121. Print.

to engage with material in a variety of ways. This includes the ability to comment and discuss the work we have created. Although the media with which this story is told are new to the Nehiyaw people, the (Exact-Speaking People), storytelling has always been a part of our lives. We are simply digitally re-imagining our analog world.

My part of the story begins in September 2008 when I moved from Saskatchewan to Victoria to begin my studies in the Master's of Arts in Indigenous Governance program. The program was both exhausting and incredibly rewarding. I read and wrote more than I thought was possible in a nine-month period. My ideas about the world and my own beliefs were shaped by my time in the program. I also do not think I have ever felt more homesick in my life than when I was in Victoria. Despite having lived for months at a time separated from family and territory while working away from home, it was my time in Victoria that I found most difficult to endure. It was challenging to write, and articulate my thoughts to my professors and peers about Nehiyaw (Plains Cree) governance while being separated from the territory and peoples who inform my own understanding of such ways of living. Fortunately, in April 2009 the council of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation offered me an opportunity to return to my community in a work and research capacity.

In February 2009, I traveled from Victoria to Vancouver to meet Harry Lafond, a newly elected Muskeg Lake band councilor who has held several elected positions throughout his career such as Chief of the First Nation and councilor. Harry is a widely respected member of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, known for his support of members and dedication to Nehiyaw peoples across the plains. We met in a glossy lobby of a high-rise hotel downtown where a conference for Indigenous youth was taking place. As we

discussed the current climate of politics on the reserve and potential opportunities for my involvement in shaping our community governance, I became very excited. I do not think that I knew quite what I was getting into at that point, but, nonetheless, I was enthusiastic to be going home and serving my people.

The Muskeg Lake Cree Nation is a Nehiyaw community located in northwestern Saskatchewan. Although there are over 1800 registered band members, only about 350 live on the reserve itself. The community had recently come out of a tumultuous period in which members had been seriously fractionalized after alleged improprieties of the former chief came to light. The election and appeal that followed seemed to only further inflame tensions between band members and amongst families. In reaction to the incidents before the election and the continued strain on community relations afterwards, the newly elected leadership of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation decided to revive the constitutional development process started many years earlier, but never completed in any legitimate form or comprehensively written document. Although the administration had engaged some external partners to assist in the process, they did not have the internal capacity to move the project forward. When made aware of my recent educational background, the council thought I would be the perfect person to help facilitate the constitutional development project. I was not sure initially how this work would fit in with the requirements to complete my degree, or my personal beliefs on decolonization since the creation of a “constitution” fit totally within the colonial conceptions of what governance was and was not rooted in Nehiyaw forms of governance. So, initially, I did everything but work on a community governance project; I wrote newsletters, took meeting minutes, went to conferences, drafted briefing notes, listened to government

bureaucrats, stacked chairs after community events, attended kindergarten graduations, worked late nights and early mornings, wrote a lot of things for a lot of different people, and I listened and I watched. After many months of watching, listening, and thinking about all of the ideas swirling around in my brain, nothing really coalesced into a single clear vision. I wish I could say I had an “Aha” moment but it was not really like that. The time when I drove long distances, or went for runs along the same riverbanks that my ancestors visited, were the only opportunities that I felt I had time to reflect and process all that I was absorbing since I returned to my territory.

The constitutional development process thus far had consisted of holding a variety of different meetings with community members where we discussed the many things we had faced collectively, and collaborated on definitions of who were, and what we wanted to see in the future for community. We had many discussions in the more formal setting of scheduled meeting dates. But, because I am a community member who often saw those who participated in the process outside of the work setting throughout the year I was working on the constitution, I also had many other conversations that transpired over the year. It then occurred to me that these conversations, and the undocumented but very important personal reflections of those involved in process, would not be included in the final version of the constitution.

So then my goal became to find a way in which those community members could have a voice and share their truths with fellow community members and other Nehiyaw people and communities who may be going through a similar process. One thing that I knew for sure was that I certainly didn't have all the answers but I felt sure that my community did. So as my ideas became more fully formed I designed my approach to the

project and I kept in mind Linda Tuhiwai Smith's words when she wrote, "Community action approaches assume that people know and can reflect upon their own lives, have questions and priorities of their own, have skills and sensitivities which can enhance (or undermine) any community-based projects."² My fellow community members' commitments to their families, community, and nation were obvious and quite tangible in every interaction that I had with them. In addition, each person's unique view of the world adds important layers to the complex record of discussions. I recalled that the conversations we had were rich and illuminating, but we still needed to find a way in which to engage more community members in a dialogue rather than just attending presentations and meetings on the constitution.

I was also inspired by Beverley Hungry Wolf as she explained her motivations for documenting the stories of her female relatives in her book *The Ways of My Grandmothers* by stating, "I am not writing this book because I think I am an expert at my Native Ancestry and culture, nor because I expect to make much money from it. I do it in an effort to fill a space in history that has been empty for too long."³ In many ways, what we sought to do was speak for ourselves, and share our personal stories of what it meant to be a Nehiyaw person and a community member. And like Hungry Wolf, I am not an expert; I merely sought to facilitate the sharing of our collective story. Throughout this document I use the words "participants" and "community members" interchangeably, but though these "community members" of Muskeg Lake Cree Nation participated in this specific project, my relationship and commitment to them extends far beyond this period of research. My ties to those featured in the video are ones of friendship and kinship, so

² Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* London & New York: Zed Books, 1999: 127. Print.

³ Hungry Wolf, Beverley. *The Ways of My Grandmothers* New York: Quill, 1982: 16. Print.

the use of the term “participant,” although relevant for this written analysis of the project, does not fully encapsulate our continued relationship which extends beyond the confines of this project.

Also like many graduate students, I spent an extraordinary amount of time perusing various websites on the Internet in an attempt to avoid the real work that I should have been doing. During one of these avoidance episodes, I came across a group on a social networking site dedicated to my home community. People had posted videos and short commentaries expressing both their dissatisfaction with issues and their ideas to improve the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation. The users of this social networking site were both old and young and it occurred to me that using an Internet-based social medium to share the work that we were doing would be ideal. I also realized that using a blog format would allow for the production and inclusion of video, accompanying essays, and a “Comments” section would allow community members to engage and interact with the material and each other.

Ultimately, the decision to use a web-based media tool of a blog was founded on a desire to share what we have produced with as many community members as possible. I felt that if I went the more traditional route of writing a thesis, having it bound, then placing it on the shelf in the University of Victoria that no one would read the document because it was physically inaccessible thus limiting its’ audience and effectiveness. The blog will have a life beyond the thesis project and the constitutional development process. It can be a community resource, offering another medium of communication and way for people to voice their ideas, concerns, and thoughts. In addition, with a large portion of our

community members residing away from our home territories, it also allows for communication, and connection to Muskeg Lake for many who have had limited opportunities for participation in community affairs due to geographic constraints.

As soon as I arrived home the research process began. Although I did not write or submit ideas formally, I was developing relationships, and demonstrating my commitment to my fellow community members. My return home was not simply about ensuring that after a certain amount of time I was able to add a few letters to the end of my name, it was about building an enduring relationship with my territory, community, and family. Wahkohtowin is our word for kinship but this concept encompasses much more than simply relating to others, it provides the basis for our nation to function. Therefore, in my work I began from a core principal based upon the Neyiyaw concept of miyo-wîcêhtowin or “having good relations.” This concept is described in the book *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan* as follows, “The term outlines the nature of the relationship that Cree peoples are required to establish. It asks, directs, admonishes or requires Cree peoples as individuals and as a nation to conduct themselves in a manner such that they create positive or good relations in all relationships, be they individually or collectively with other peoples.”⁴

This was the guiding principle of my methodology throughout this process and was built upon the foundation of wahkohtowin from which all relationships form. It is my responsibility to conduct myself in a way that ensures good and harmonious relations with all those who I encounter because long after this project is completed I will continue to be a member of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation community and a part of the Nehiyaw

⁴ Cardinal, Harold & Hildebrandt, Walter. *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our Dream is That One Day Our Peoples Will Be Clearly Recognized as Nations* Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000: 14. Print.

nation. Accordingly, I must ensure not only that I complete this work in a way that honours and respects those who have made the choice to participate, but also that I continue to live my life in such a way that the principle of miyo-wîcêhtowin is at the centre of all I do. Because I was committed to having good relations and to treating respectfully whatever knowledge was shared with me, I began to build the foundation for my research long before I began to film or write.

Part of perpetuating good relations also meant that I would have to take complete editorial control of the video project. Initially I had considered hiring a professional videographer to assist me in the filming and editing of the videos, but upon further consideration I made the decision to film and edit myself. I believed strongly that no other person could frame the voices of those who participated in the same way that I could, or treat the footage with as much reverence as I did. I knew that the messages on the videos were very powerful and needed to be edited in a way that showed great respect to the messages of the participants. It was ambitious, especially since I had only worked on a few video productions previously and certainly nothing of this size or caliber.

In order to facilitate my new designations as director, videographer and editor, I became a member of PAVED Inc Saskatoon, which is a local organization that assists filmmakers by renting out equipment, providing training, and linking industry professionals together. Through PAVED Inc, I was able to rent high quality equipment at subsidized rates, and was able to be tutored by a professional to use video editing program. The editing process took much longer than I had initially anticipated, but it was essential that every frame of footage that was used or conversely cut from the film had a reason and purpose. The time invested in the editing process was well worth the reward

of not only acquiring new skills, but also ensuring that the knowledge shared was treated with the utmost respect throughout the process from filming to uploading the finished videos.

The inclusion of video interviews in this project was essential because it continued the tradition of storytelling among our community members, and offered a form of engagement that was familiar, yet contained much new knowledge. Nehiyaw peoples, like other Indigenous peoples place a strong emphasis on the use of storytelling to transfer knowledge, and interpret the world. By including video as an element of the blog we were able to continue the Nehiyaw tradition of telling stories, albeit in a new way that maintained core Nehiyaw values and principles. Laurel C. Smith remarks that, “Indigenous video is characterized by a particular methodology, one that is tempered by the desire to initiate and sustain respectful and reciprocal relationships with the indigenous peoples, places and practices captured by a video camcorder’s lens.”⁵ Instead of hearing stories around a campfire we are able to hear our fellow Nehiyawak from a computer screen anywhere in the world where we might be, yet these videos were created with respect and reciprocity imbedded in their creation.

The *Tapwewin* project is not the first instance of Indigenous community using video to tell their story. Hopkins a curator describes this use of digital media to tell stories in the following way, “Storytellers in Indigenous communities are continually embracing new materials and technologies, including video and digital media. I would suggest that this shift does not threaten storytelling traditions in these communities but is merely a continuation of what aboriginal people have been doing from time immemorial:

⁵ Smith, Laurel C. “Mobilizing Indigenous Video: the Mexican Case.” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 5.1 (2006): 113-128. Print.

making things our own.”⁶ The use of digital media, and video in this project was important in several ways. It allowed my fellow community members a greater level of control and ownership over their words and messages conveyed than if I had gone the more traditional route of a thesis in which all of their interview quotes would have been embedded entirely within a written project and framed with only my words instead visitors to the blog can hear and see for themselves the different truths being conveyed. The use of video as a medium was very clearly about people making this process and the videos a collaborative project.

Often there is a sense of separation when one simply reads the words or reflections of another across a written page. Video allows us to see, and learn much more from what is being said than just the words themselves. People’s statements have an inherently more profound effect when we feel as though they are speaking to us. Those featured in the videos are all leaders in the community of Muskeg Lake Cree Nation. By watching their words on video we are able to develop a bond with them and, by association, the community itself. Jennifer Deger who worked with the Yolngu peoples of Australia and a local director named Bangana on a video project comments on their experience by saying, “ Bangana was confident that the images themselves would have a powerful effect, that *the act of seeing* this video would connect viewers to their country and kin, generating an experience that would affect not only knowledge transference but, like ritual, reinforce and reconstitute at an embodied and experiential level, a shared sense of Yolngu identity.”⁷ Seeing community members share their stories with us

⁶ Hopkins, Candice “Making Things Our Own: The Indigenous Aesthetic in Digital Storytelling.” *Leonardo*, 39.4 (2006): 341-344. Print.

⁷ Deger, Jennifer. “Seeing the Invisible: Yolngu Video as Revelatory Ritual.” *Visual Anthropology* 20 (2007): 103-121. Print.

creates a deeper connection as Deger notes, since these are not simply people talking about experience but these are our fellow nation and family members. Through connecting with their words we come to a unique understanding of the world as well as our individual and collective identity as Nehiyaw peoples.

Several of the participants shared with us their thoughts on what it meant to be Nehiyaw. Video allowed us to not only hear peoples comments on identity, but also to see them and, in some cases, to even see where they lived. The participants chose the filming locations⁸ and some chose to be filmed in whole or in part in their homes. In Nancy Greyeyes' video we are able to see personal objects that she values surrounding her. There are paintings from Nehiyaw artists, and pictures of her mother and other family members; all of which are part of how Nancy identifies herself. Barnes et al remarks, "Visual media offers women, minorities, HIV infected peoples, and other marginalized groups, an opportunity to reproduce and understand their world as opposed to the dominant representation depicted in the mass media...The use of technology provides people with alternate images of themselves and enables them to see themselves as they wish to present themselves."⁹ For Indigenous peoples, like the Nehiyaw who face continuous attacks on our personal and collective identity and see the state as dictator in all matters relating to Nehiyaw citizenship, even the briefest of moments in which we can articulate who we are and how we are presented to the world are essential. They are necessary because we are reminded of who we truly are, and the systems we need to change in order for us to become a functioning people once more.

⁸ In some cases where time was an issue the choices were limited to spaces within the band office and school complex.

⁹ Barnes, Donna B, Taylor-Brown, Susan & Wiener, Lori. " 'I Didn't Leave Y'all on Purpose': HIV Infected Mothers' Videotaped Legacies for Their Children. " *Qualitative Sociology* 20.1 (1997): 7-32. Print.

Nehiyaw identity cannot be separated from our Nehiyawewin language and some community members chose to use the Nehiyawewin language during their videos. Nehiyawewin is a road map for how to live our lives on our territory, for without our language, we lose the fundamental understandings of who we are. Taiaiake Alfred shared his views on the importance of language resurrection to his peoples by writing, “It is not their sacredness, essential superiority, or divine or mystical quality that is the reason for wanting to save them, but the combination of their usefulness as philosophical systems and as the gauge of peoples’ success at reasserting their authentic existence. Dominance of European thought as reflected in the hegemony of European languages can and must be challenged.”¹⁰ Although Alfred stated this in a commentary on his own peoples, the underlying sentiment is clearly applicable to Nehiyaw language as well. As Ovide Campbell in his video stated, “We use our second language too much.”¹¹ Ovide made this remark to critique the use of English in community settings and events, but the same could be said about over-reliance on English to describe ourselves, and our way of life. When we use English to tell stories about the world, the underlying philosophy is so radically different from the meanings embedded in Nehiyawewin. Ovide’s use of Nehiyawewin in his video reminds us of the responsibility of those who are speakers of the language to share their gift, but also for the young people to make a commitment to learn and understand the language of their territory and ancestors. The story of the attempts to extinguish Nehiyawewin through tactics of abuse and torture of children in the residential school system will always be remembered, but it is our turn to change the

¹⁰ Alfred, Taiaiake. *Wasáse: Indigenous Pathways of Action and Freedom*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2005. Print.

¹¹ Greyeyes, Jarita. “Blog Posting #5. “ Video. June 2010. *Tapwewin: Speaking the Truth*. Web. July 2010.

tenor of the story from horror to hope as we revitalize our Nehiyaw philosophies through language.

Kīspin ēkā ē-ayāyahk kitaskīnaw, kiwanisīnaw or “if we don’t have our land we are lost.” Our language and our peoples come from a specific territory. Without the land there would be no Nehiyawak or Nehiyawewin. Several videos contain observations from community members expressing their thoughts on the land. The importance of returning, literally, to the very earth that sustained my ancestors, was an important part of this process for me. But the return to the land is just one part in an even larger journey to help us break free of the grip of colonialism. Jeff Corntassel et al. write “For Indigenous peoples, our homelands are our future and cannot be separated from our grounding in community, languages, living history and ceremonial lives. These interconnected relationships all form the foundation for effective resistance to contemporary colonialism.”¹²

The constitutional development process is an important step in our development but it by no means will liberate us from our current colonized state. Speaking our own personal truths also helps us to understand how colonization has affected us, but merely stating the truth is not enough. Nehiyaw peoples need to take action against oppressive forces, and the creation of a constitution, which is colonial tool of governance, is not the process which will ultimately set us free. As Albert Memmi states “Everything that belongs to the colonizer is not appropriate for the colonized.”¹³ The community of Muskeg Lake, and other Nehiyaw communities across the Northern Plains must realize

¹² Corntassel, Jeff, Chaw-win-is, and T’lakwadzi. “Indigenous Storytelling, Truth-telling, and Community Approaches to Reconciliation.” *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 35.1 (March 2009): 137-159. Print.

¹³ Memmi, Albert. *The Colonizer and the Colonized*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991. Print.

that a return to our own philosophies and forms of governing is a task that is a mandatory in our quest for freedom. The framing of these ways of living through a colonial structure of a constitution cannot therefore be seen as an end result since our notions will always be hindered by the language and systems of the colonizer. That is not to say that the process of collective collaborations on definitions of Nehiyaw identity, culture, territory, and values, which the constitutional development process created opportunity for were not important, it is just that these conversations need to happen on a larger scale with more than one Nehiyaw community.

In order for Nehiyaw communities to come together as a united nation to coordinate decolonization efforts, there needs to be a collective understanding that the ongoing colonization of our peoples is something that needs to be changed. This may seem like an obvious point, and certainly during my schooling the injustice of our oppression was blatantly obvious to me, but when I returned home I found attitudes and beliefs that, to be honest, I found shocking. For example, the impetus for creating a constitution was, in part, born out of a need to remove our community from the authority of the Indian Act, which controls every aspect of our governance. But, to my surprise, when I made my constitutional presentations, I found that many members argued for the status quo; that the “Indian Act was fine” and they were hesitant to try any other way of governing. They genuinely felt that governing was best left to the colonial regime. This is the embodiment of Freire’s words when he stated, “The more completely they accept the passive role impressed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them.”¹⁴ I could see that many in my

¹⁴ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York & London: Continuum, 2000. Print.

community have accepted, and learned to live within the confines of our colonization and therefore see no need for our lives to change or be any different than they currently are.

Though the videos helped us to see some personal reflections on the current lives of Nehiyaw peoples, there still is a need for a written analysis to examine the underlying causes and effects that colonization has had on our communities. In that way, the written blog was also a perfect conduit for such information. Not only could we include videos, but there is also space for a critical analysis of issues. The accompanying blog postings were also meant as another way for blog visitors to interact with the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation process of sharing by reading the material and posting comments. The essays on the blog were meant to be a starting point for discussions among community members in the community setting, and also for the world online. Due to the hostile tone that community meetings can occasionally take when Muskeg Lake Cree Nation members meet together, the online sphere offers members a chance to raise critical questions about this process, and our current state of subjugation without fearing political or community reprisal because of both the anonymity that the Internet provides, and the ability to moderate the comments section of the blog.

Speaking of her own people's responsibilities Waziyatawin writes, "For Dakota people, it requires that we awaken our consciousness to the potential for liberation."¹⁵ Engaging with the material on the blog by reading and commenting is one miniscule way in which Muskeg Lake Cree Nation community members can begin the process of "awakening their consciousness" to a future free of oppression. These awakenings can

¹⁵ Waziyatawin. *What Does Justice Look Like? The Struggle for Liberation in Dakota Homeland*. St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2008. Print.

initially take place on an individual level, but eventually need to be replicated on a Nehiyaw nation basis.

The Internet also allows for instant mass communication, and engagement among Nehiyaw peoples regardless of their current geographic location, which is beneficial for our process of collaboration on our collective values, and principles. Peter Dahlgren notes, “The multimedia, digital quality of ICT’s (Information and Communication Technologies) modifies traditional communication forms. Placed in the context of social movements and the new modes of political engagement, these developments remind us of the old adage that information is power. An essential element in the external strategies of social movements, as well as in the empowering of their members, has to do with the many ways in which knowledge and expertise can be redistributed, relayed horizontally, even on a global basis.”¹⁶ So the media we have created throughout this project is a powerful tool to help us to see our community members literally, as they share their reflections, as well as to see visions for a future different than our current state. Through the use of digital technology we are able to continue our tradition of storytelling in a way unencumbered by distance, including the people of the Nehiyaw diaspora living around the world. These tools empower us to present ourselves as we truly are, without state imposed elements of identity.

As a community member, and as someone who has received formal academic training, I was honoured to be able to help facilitate this process and contribute my limited skills to help create the media and accompanying written analysis used on the blog. Nehiyawak value hard work and collective undertakings that culminate in a gift for

¹⁶ Dahlgren, Peter. *Cyberprotest; New Media, Citizens, and Social Movements*. Ed. Wim van de Donk et al. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.

all community members. I feel blessed that I was able to help create this gift for our community. Cree academic and artist Neal McLeod writes, “As Indigenous people, we are attempting to revive our modes of being. Clearly, the revitalization of Indigenous cultures involves an array of people, from political leaders to religious leaders, educators, academics, writers, and artists. The survival of Cree people depends on the creative powers found within the collective narrative imagination. It is through drawing on the best of our past traditions and the embodiment of contemporary experiences that we can move towards a dynamic future.”¹⁷ It is clear that there is much work to be done in Indigenous communities by the individuals who make up those collectives. Nehiyawak know that the revitalization of our culture is a key component of our survival, and that the knowledge held by many different leaders will help us along our way.

Although this project is coming to end it certainly does not signify the end of my commitment to my family, my nation, and my territory. When I first arrived home I helped out in any area that I could because I felt that no one from outside our community would have the same level of dedication and passion for the projects we were undertaking. Our community is now coming to the point where we have many strong, intelligent and committed individuals who wish to fulfill their responsibilities as Nehiyawak and continue the fight of our ancestors. Waziyatawin in her book *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors* shared a statement from Chris Mato Nunpa who said, “Some of our people now are beginning to write for us, tell our story, instead of having some White person tell it for us, instead of having some White Ph.D historian or anthropologist or sociologist tell our story. We are telling it from our perspective and that’s really

¹⁷ McLeod, Neal. *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times*. Saskatoon: Purich Publishing Limited, 2007. Print.

important...I am now sixty-five winters, and I am tired of hearing what Wasicus have to say about us.”¹⁸

I too am tired of being told who I am, and what my community is all about by outsiders. By speaking our truth we take back what knowledge has been stolen from us in the past. *Tapwewin* the project, and *tapwewin* the act of speaking the truth have both been a process of *miskâsowin* or finding one’s sense of origin for me. I remain committed to following this path and upholding my *wahkohtowin* ties, and share the prayer of Fanon who proclaimed, “O my body, always make me a [wo]man who questions!”¹⁹

¹⁸ Waziyatawin. *In the Footsteps of Our Ancestors: The Dakota Commemorative Marches of the 21st Century*. St. Paul: Living Justice Press, 2006. Print.

¹⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1952/2008.

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Appendix – Blog Postings

Blog Posting #1

“Following the Beat of Our Own Drum”

Muskeg Lake Cree Nation Governance in the Face of Colonialism

Today we begin our journey together as we learn about one community’s path as they come together and learn from their history and collaborate on their shared values, beliefs, and visions for the future. Over the past fifteen years the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation has worked on creating a community constitution. Many community planning sessions have occurred, as community members sought to work together to create a document that embodied the varied perspectives of those individuals that make up our Nehiyaw (Plains Cree) collective. Since June 2009 the process has been more focused and formalized with a dedicated working group of participants committing their time, energy and expertise to creating the community constitution. The constitutional building process has brought to the forefront the impacts of colonization on the Nehiyaw. However, the final product of a constitution fits totally within a colonial paradigm. The creation of a constitution has made the community question who we are, and how we came to govern according to colonial authorities instead of our own Nehiyaw ways of being. The upcoming video instalments of *Tapwewin “Speaking the Truth” Muskeg Lake Cree Reflections on Community* will feature several working group participants’ views on the constitutional development process as well as our community history, and Nehiyaw perspectives on how colonialism has impacted all of those processes. By seeing and listening to the personal views of community members we gain an intimate understanding of how the individuals and communities process the effect of our on-going colonization.

“Politics has probably been embedded in the very fabric of my growing up.”

As Carol begins sharing her reflections on the community of Muskeg Lake it is quickly apparent just how important the family unit is not only to her but to all Nehiyaw peoples. The family unit has been, and continues to be a focal point for many community decisions. It is our systems of kinship and the concept of miyo-wîcêhtowin (good relations) that guide the way we should make decisions which impact our community. The family unit includes not only the parents and their children but also extended family members such as grandparents, nieces, uncles, cousins and siblings. Families provide community members/people/Nehiyaw with a place to debate to foster a learning environment where youth can learn about the values of the community, and how these values translate into corresponding actions. The imposition of the Indian Act and its’ associated style of governance has eroded the formalized role of the family in the way our nation makes decisions. Despite this, we have never discounted or underestimated the importance of the family unit as a political force.

The Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, like all other communities of the Nehiyaw nation presently governs based primarily on the chief and council system. This compulsory system of governance is based on reserve boundaries which has factionalized the nation into smaller communities. The chief, and six councillors are elected for a three year term and the system operates without any formal inclusion of the family unit. This system was forced upon not only the Nehiyaw nation but every other Indigenous group across the country. As Carol mentions in her video, it has been several generations since this change has taken place. Along with other attempts to assimilate and conquer Indigenous

peoples, this has affected how our family units function and operate, as well as completely undermined and ignored family units as governance authorities.

“It’s so hard to get out of that Indian Act Mentality”

The inability to envision a life free of the constraints of the Indian Act, not to mention a life free from all forms of subjugation, is like a sickness that has infected practically all Indigenous peoples in this country they call Canada. This is not to say that people from the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, like many other people in other Indigenous communities, are not frustrated because it is obvious that we are, but it seems as though very few people are able to move beyond the frustration to focus on rebuilding and re-envisioning life where we do not simply play by the rules of our colonial oppressors. Carol’s comment about the difficulty of thinking beyond the Indian Act is an understatement. At every turn we are met with yet another area of our life that is under the control of the state. After many generations of colonization and oppression it is no wonder that that we find it troublesome to shake off the mentality engrained in us through the Indian Act. But it is our responsibility to counter the colonial dictates of how we are to behave, and how we are to govern if our children and their grandchildren are to ever know what freedom is. To challenge the state defined roles of who makes the decisions in communities, is to look beyond the chief and council model and towards a governance model based upon Nehiyaw values and traditions.

This topic is further explored in the following posting corresponding with the second video installment featuring long time community leader Harry Lafond. It is important to acknowledge our feelings of anger and frustration at the current system, for it is these feelings that can drive us to seek out the change we so desperately need. Carol

labels our community a “rebel” community, as we tend to do things our own way and to an extent that is true. Our community has refused many times to think inside the boxes that have been assigned to us, but the true revolution has yet to come. The creation of a constitution is not the end of our process to remove ourselves just from the Indian Act, but the start of a journey towards becoming truly self-determining.

“That idea that we are accountable for everything to the Department of Indian Affairs is so skewed. We are accountable to our own.... To ourselves”

The system is designed to keep us from truly serving our own. What quickly has become apparent to me since I have returned to my home community is the extent to which all our energy as band staff is focused on not our fellow community members, but appeasing the colonial authority. As my mother once remarked to me, the Indian Agent may have left the reserve but that is only because they can do it remotely now. Apparently it is not just clever young Indigenous peoples who can use the internet for their bidding. With a click of a mouse, a community’s funds can be halted which sends communities into tailspins. Like rats scurrying to get the last bread crumbs, we are totally distracted from what should be our sole goal-ensuring that all the members of our community have what they need to lead healthy, purposeful, and whole lives. As Carol states, we have become so habituated to the concept that we are accountable only to our colonizers, when we should be accountable to our own peoples and ourselves. This is a continuation, and extension of our Indian Act mentality that is so difficult to shake off and offers another opportunity to return to the family unit as the initial site of resistance to such behavior. The shift of accountability from colonial authority back to our own family members is an immediate and accessible way to start this transformation.

Part one of the series of five installments of series *Tapwewin “Speaking the Truth” Muskeg Lake Cree Nation Reflections on Community* featured Carol Lafond. As a band staff member, committee member, and constitution working group participant Carol’s insights into our community come from many years of service to her people. My eyes were opened to our true level of subjugation when I became a member of staff at Muskeg Lake. The frustration felt by Carol is palpable when viewing her video. Although we strive to provide meaningful programs, events, and services to our fellow community members, it can feel at times that our sole purpose is to fulfill the every whim and fancy of the Department of Indian Affairs. Identifying our own limitations to conceptualizing a life different from our current situation is difficult, especially as the areas from which we traditionally gain strength and insight, like the family unit, have seen their power eroded. We must regenerate our family units as decision making centres with power and authority. Our responsibility is to make certain that our family is taken care of, and it is they who will hold us accountable for our inaction, or actions. Our constitutional development process has brought to light many issues. Together we will find ways to address the needs of our community, and rise from our knees to live on our feet once more.

Blog Posting # 2

“What Has Become of Us?”

The Resurgence of Nehiyaw Governance and the Effects of Colonization

Harry Lafond’s insights give us another personal perspective on the community of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation and the Nehiyaw nation as a whole. As we continue on our

shared path, making sense of what has happened to us and how we will move forward, Harry's comments on the effects of colonization on our communities plainly state what we need to overcome and the ways which we should return to. A longtime community leader who has served the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation in many capacities, from elected positions to consistent volunteer, Harry has significant knowledge on the history of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation constitutional development process. While Harry sees a need for the reinvigoration of our Nehiyaw forms of governance on a community level, he also sees a need to work together as a Nehiyaw nation as a whole, not simply embracing the idea of nationhood based on the reserve system. This is an important distinction that many communities must make as we begin to unravel, examine and evaluate our governance structures.

“We need to take the bold step of saying this is who we are, this is what we believe and this is the history that we want to create for ourselves into the future.”

In early February of 2010 Harry Lafond and I sat along with several other council and staff members in a boardroom in Saskatoon and listened to the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs (INAC) tell us that they were creating a tool to evaluate the way our community governed itself. We watched a middle-aged white man tell us that the assessment tool would be created (or had already been he wasn't quite certain himself) without consultation from the Indigenous peoples it affects and would be used to alter the way funding was dispensed to the bands. It is in moments like these that it takes every fiber of my being not to reach across the table and throttle the INAC representatives. Instead, I stared blankly while imagining all manner of things involving death and destruction. Moments like these remind me of the importance of the effort we undertake as a community, to work on the way we govern ourselves. They remind me of the many

appalling crimes already perpetrated against us including the overt subjugation of our lands and peoples, and that we are still dominated by settler society. The constitutional development process of our community is an example of taking the “bold step of saying this is who we are, this is what we believe and this is the history that we want to create for ourselves into the future” (Harry Lafond). It is important that our voices come together to create and evaluate our governance structures, rather than an outside authority dictating to us how we shall live. This is a “bold” yet necessary step in our development.

“We value our capacity to pass onto the next generation what they need to become productive people.”

Harry mentions the importance of education to our community. While the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation is known for its high post secondary education rates, the value we place on education extends beyond participation in formalized Western education. We see the family unit as an important incubator of knowledge about our community and the world. Harry sees education as integral to the development of his family and the individuals who make up that unit. Education is the start of the passage to action. Harry stated his hopes for his family in the video when he notes “I would like to see my family be productive people, they understand livelihood, they understand what it means to take care of yourself...they understand that in the context of the history of the treaty relationship and that they will fight for that. They will take up the battle and try to get recognition of the dream of their great grandfathers.” This is an inherently more complex meaning of an education and what it means to be a productive person than simply obtaining a degree or certificate and entering the workforce. Before we take on the responsibility of fighting for something, we must understand what it is exactly that we are fighting for. Education surrounding the decisions of our ancestors and what these

decisions were formulated upon is required for us to carry through with the visions of those who came before us.

“One of the things that we have lost over the last hundred years is that strict sense of nationhood. We’ve replaced it with what I think is a very weak notion of nationhood based on community.”

As we reflect upon how we came to be the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation and what that means to us, we must look further than our community; we must look to the past. The youth in our community do not have a concept of a larger Nehiyaw nation in the same way that their grandparents did. Part of colonization hinged on dividing our great nation. Much knowledge of how the nation as a whole was governed was lost as we grew accustomed to the method of governance forced upon us based on our organization as smaller communities. When our relatives signed treaties, including the treaty which led to the creation of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, there was a sense of a plural leadership of a singular nation. This style of governance was dismissed when a compulsory chief and council system was implemented. As Harry describes, “colonialism has forced a very triangular model on us through the Indian Act. This notion of chief and council has become more like a supreme leader....that is destructive in that we don’t have the mechanisms to gauge accountability and transparency from that kind of leadership structure.” Our community, like many other Indigenous communities, has had to find a way to function in the current system and has faced leaders who may have acted in way that is not in line with our Nehiyaw values and principles of leadership. One of several reasons that a community consultation process was restarted in the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation was that some members felt that the current system was too easy to manipulate and that we were not abiding by our values. Chief and council may behave in a way that

is not community sanctioned. The current system encourages an autocratic leadership style, which is the opposite style of leadership that Harry describes in the video. In the previous video Carol expressed her concern with what she saw as a widespread perception that we are accountable to only INAC and not to our fellow family or community members. Harry's description of how Nehiyaw governance ought to function is in direct opposition to these perceptions.

“Cree democracy demands a multi-faceted leadership... democracy is about consultation, it is about dialogue and it's about consensus decision making.”

As we wrestle to make sense of the forced destruction our own forms of governance in the face of continued oppression, the process of coming together to discuss how we want to live is all the more essential. It is the conversations around every table, be it in the band office boardroom or around our grandmother's kitchen table, that will bring us together once again. The Muskeg Lake Cree Nation, like every other Indigenous community, has leaders who are not formally recognized. By seeking these individuals out, and taking the time to understand how their visions for the future fit in line with all of the other community leaders, we move one step further away from the tyranny of the triangular model of governance imposed upon us. Both the constitutional development process and this collaborative research project put personal perspectives at the forefront. It is through each person's unique understanding of the world that they share with their fellow community members that we are able to weave together the fabric of our nation.

Blog Posting # 3

“NEHIYAW ASKIY”

askiy ôma ohci kîyânaw; the earth is us

Installment three of five of *Tapwewin "Speaking the Truth": Muskeg Lake Cree Nation Reflections on Community* features Kevin Greyeyes. To know Kevin is to share his love for not only Cree people but nehiyaw askiy, or Cree land. As Kevin mentions in the video, one of his main duties is to care for one of our lands called Pitihkwakew Sâkahikan. Kevin is a vocal supporter of not only our attempts to regain territory that was taken from us, but also restore our connections to that territory. It is through these connections with the land that we learn much about ourselves and our nations. **OUR LAND IS US, WE ARE OUR LAND.**

Nehiyaw traditional territory is vast and the imposition of the reserve system changed our way of life and relationship with our territory dramatically. Our forced separation from our territories, along with various other attempts to assimilate and destroy our nations has culminated in our community's relationship with our territory being profoundly different from the relationship that our grandparents, great-grandparents, and ancestors had with nehiyaw askiy. The Muskeg Lake Cree Nation's separation from our territory did not occur in isolation. Throughout North America, a similar tactic was replicated resulting in a widespread phenomena of dislocation and disruption of connection to the land evidenced in our small community. Recently, the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation has made several attempts to bring part of our territory back under our own control. We have also introduced programs and opportunities for community members to re-establish a connection to such territories. Connection with, access to, and a meaningful relationship with our territories is an essential component of our strategy to decolonize ourselves and communities and is important to restoring our understanding of the world through land based interactions.

This is our Territory, we never left by choice, nor have we forgotten

Muskeg Lake Cree Nation has long been known for our innovative and independent style. Community members pride ourselves on doing things our own way and the approach the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation has to our lands has been no exception to this rule. Like many other bands whose treaty allocations of lands were never fully honoured, Muskeg Lake entered into the Treaty Land Entitlement process to gain compensation for these lands. Work began in the early 1980s to purchase land in Saskatoon, the largest city near our home reserve. In 1988 thirty five acres of land were designated an urban reserve, the first of its kind in all of Canada. Named Asimakaniseekan Askiy, or Soldier's Land, in honour of our veterans, the creation of an urban reserve was significant in several ways. Although the purchase of land and the designation of reserve status did nothing to challenge the colonial idea that land is nothing more than a commodity with an assigned monetary value, it could be said that this was our first attempt to formally restore a connection with land in an area that has always been frequented by our peoples. Ka-misî-saskatonamiskâk is a place where we have gathered long before settler populations built a city they call Saskatoon there. Our urban reserve is used solely for our economic ventures, which include leasing office spaces and a gas station. At this point no community members reside on Asimakaniseekan Askiy. Despite this, the creation of an urban reserve is one way that our community has said "This is our territory, we never left by choice, nor have we forgotten." This is important because Indigenous peoples and settlers alike have been indoctrinated into the colonial line of thinking that reserves are the homeland of the Indians. As generations pass since the first group of ancestors were forced onto reserves,

we must resist the temptation to lapse into complacency by only defining our territory as the boundary of our reserve.

“We Need to Stand Firmly On Our Own”; Reinterpreting our History

The Muskeg Lake Cree Nation has recognized that connection to our lands is not simply about being able to point them out on a map, but involves a different level of interaction. The creation of the urban reserve was a significant milestone for our community, but our visions for regaining land did not end there. We have also acquired Pitihkwakew Sâkahikan, a lake property approximately an hour from the rural reserve. Kevin Greyeyes is currently the manager for the lake, and his excitement for this site is palpable. Many different visions have been suggested for the lake including cabin and resort development, but there is one plan that is particularly promising. The creation of an interpretive centre at Pitihkwakew Sâkahikan that would tell our history as a community and as part of a larger nehiyaw nation would be an important continuation of tawpwewin or speaking the truth. Telling our story, of how we came to be placed in this area, and how our relationship with our larger territory has changed is of key importance. In a recently completed survey on governance in Muskeg there was reticence to proclaim that we are the original peoples of this territory. We, Muskeg Lake Cree, did not choose this spot, rather it was decided for us by the state; our territory actually extends far beyond the reserve boundaries. This is an important lesson for our own children, and for those settlers who surround us and who perhaps wish to keep us hemmed in. Speaking the truth about our territories through an interpretive centre could be one way of doing this but there are many others.

“From Yale to Jail and All Points in Between”: Experiential Learning and Nehiyaw Askiy

The island. The island on our lake, not Pitihkwakew Sâkahikan but Maskêko-Sâkahikanihk (Muskeg Lake). In the heart of our community across from the school, and the band office is a lake. On the lake is an island. The island has been home to a culture camp for many years. The island is a place that holds many happy memories for many generations of Muskeg Lake children. Although the popularity, and perhaps quality of the culture camp, has ebbed and flowed over the years, one constant has remained and that is the innate understanding that unless children spend time on our territory they will never develop a connection to it. Last year one of the parent volunteers told me that the children were crying and begging to stay on the island. Our youth wanted nothing more than to keep sleeping in the tipi where they could see the same stars our ancestors saw and hear the same animals that their grandparents hunted. We cannot expect our youth or our disconnected adult population to respect, honor, and understand our territory if they have not had any meaningful interactions with it. Temporary retreats on our lands, such as the ongoing culture camp, offer an opportunity to experience, in however a limited fashion, an expanded notion of what nehiyaw askiy truly means. By deepening our understanding of our homelands as more than just the things we can see, and as more than just a series of lines drawn by Indian agents, we come to understand the places from which we were created, the places which sustain us spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically.

The encroachment of settlers into our territory and the eventual assignment of reserve lands to our ancestors has completely altered the way Nehiyaw peoples understand and relate to their traditional territories. The process of decolonizing our conceptions of land, and how we should relate to the land, is a difficult process. After

many generations of reserve bound communities, the expansion of the concept that our homeland extends far beyond the reserve boundaries is one that is entirely different from the colonial narrative. To speak the truth about how the land has shaped us, and to express and fulfill our own desires for a relationship with nehiyaw askiy that is not limited by the current imposed boundaries, is one step on our journey to living our lives in way shaped by our ancestors and ourselves.

Blog Posting #4

“I’m nothing if I’m not Cree”

Miskâsowin: “Finding One’s Sense of Origin and Belonging, Finding ‘One’s Self’ or ‘Finding One’s Centre’ “ (Cardinal and Hildebrandt)²⁰

In the fourth installment of the series *Tapwewin “Speaking the Truth” Muskeg Lake Cree Nation Reflections on Community*, Nancy Greyeyes states emphatically, that she ‘Is nothing if she is not Cree.’ Many from our community, including myself, share this sentiment. It is our identity as Cree people which we use as a foundation for many discussions on how we wanted our community to relate to each other, and other peoples, nations, and states. But our identity, our collective statement defining who we are, is not as straightforward as proclaiming our English tribal affiliation.

In the second installment Harry Lafond alludes to our community’s mixed heritage, which acknowledged, adds another layer of complexity to our collective

²⁰ Cardinal, Harold & Hildebrandt, Walter. *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our Dream is That One Day Our Peoples Will Be Clearly Recognized as Nations* Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000: 14. Print.

assertion that we are a Nehiyaw (Plains Cree) community. While Muskeg Lake people are very proud of our position as Nehiyaw peoples, we also strongly identify with our colonially imposed definition of identity. We are the people of Indian reserve 102! We are representing the 375 registry number of the Register of Status Indians! Our ongoing subjugation as Indigenous peoples is dependent on many factors including the necessity of the state to have control over who is, or is not, Indigenous and, by extension, who and who is not a member of our communities. Colonization, various attempts at assimilation, and hundreds of years of interaction between settler and Indigenous peoples created communities which may be very different from those of our ancestors. Yet, through personal and collective journeys, we can embrace *miskâsowin*, a process of finding our own sense of belonging. We recognize our ancestral heritage, while also acknowledging the impact of colonization on our identity as Nehiyaw peoples. Working together as a Nehiyaw nation is key to finding ourselves once again.

Our original identity as Nehiyaw peoples, although relatively intact, has been affected by the widespread embracing of the colonially given identity of Muskeg Lake Cree Nation Indians. Community pride is a positive attribute, but our community, as one part of a larger Nehiyawak (Plains Cree Nation), needs to move away from our insular tendencies and work together with our fellow sisters and brothers if we are to be become truly self-determining. It is through the continued splintering of nations into smaller communities, and attachment to the colonially imposed identities assigned to us that our community-level efforts are limited, no matter how fierce. If we continue to work alone, and focus solely on our own community initiatives based on the reserve boundaries we

will always be easily defeated. As a lone voice we will be easily ignored, but with the voice of many Nehiyaw peoples our voice will be undeniable.

The imposition of the reserve system is perhaps one of the most successful attempts to control and disempower our nations and has effectively crippled collective organization among Nehiyaw peoples. After our community's ancestors signed Treaty Six, and we were assigned to a rectangular section of land in the northwest of what is now known as Saskatchewan, our lives were irrevocably changed. A central component of our lives and by extension our Nehiyaw identity, was the constant movement to find resources that nourished body and soul, and this vanished with the imposition of the reserve system. Our nomadic lifestyle came to an end. In an earlier posting we emphasized the restoration of a connection, and intimate understanding of Nehiyaw askiy, as a fundamental component of our strategy to live lives free of colonially imposed definitions. The connection to our territories extends farther than decolonizing our conceptions of land; it is about returning to our identity as Nehiyaw peoples.

As mentioned in previous postings and videos, Indigenous peoples, and the members of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation in particular, have struggled with defining exactly who we are. This was the proverbial "tough question" during the constitutional development process and at our meetings we focused on this question many times. Many community members struggled with the concept of a constitution. It was a word and concept that meant little to many of our people. The constitution working group had to come up with a way to explain the work that we were doing in a way that made sense to our friends and relatives. We decided we could best explain constitutional development as a process of collaboration to define who we are, what we believe, and how those ideas

translate into the way we make decisions, and by extension deliver programs and services. People became interested in the work we were doing because, since the imposition of the Indian Act, our ability to define who we are and who our citizens are has been taken away from us. During constitution development discussions we came to know that we never gave up the right to decide who we are, who is a member of our communities, and our nation. Our ancestors did not give up this right during our negotiations to sign Treaty Six, yet our colonial counterparts have, to this day, attempted to usurp our control in this area through the Indian Register.

The Indian Act has permeated every facet of our lives as Indigenous peoples, and decolonizing our individual and collective identities is neither simple nor straightforward. The Indian Act and the use of monetary disbursements to select groups of people has been an insidious way to entrench division between families, communities, and nations. The creation of the reserve system was the first of many attempts to further fractionalize Indigenous communities. The removal of Indian status from women who married non-status individuals and the subsequent reinstatement of these individuals through Bill C-31 inflamed tensions in communities. There were those who saw the return of these individuals as a threat to the already small pool of resources allocated for community members.

Another layer of division was added when government funds started being dispersed according to residency. It is only in recent history that Indigenous peoples in this country and from the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation were allowed to leave the reserve without a pass from an Indian agent or move off the reserve without losing their status. Once allowed to move from the reserve, many from our community moved to the

neighboring cities and towns. The exodus from the reserve has resulted in the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation current rate of off-reserve residency growing to approximately 85 to 90% of our total population. Many programs funded by the department of Indian and Northern Affairs base per capita disbursements on the number of status Indians living on reserve only. Thus people began to identify themselves as an on or off-reserve person, a further disconnection from identification with our Nehiyaw nation. Infighting over limited resources further inflames these false divisions between status, non-status, Bill C-31, and on or off reserve people. When we identify ourselves based on state assigned identities such as these, we move further away from the idea of being a Nehiyaw person who is part of a nation based on our culture, language, values, and ways of being.

Finding one's self, and finding one's nation is a momentous task in the face of the many attempts by the colonial powers to keep us from doing exactly that. The effect of Canada's policies of cultural genocide have changed how we think of ourselves, and Indigenous peoples' ability to understand or articulate these ideas in our own languages. Language is a powerful tool on our path to rediscovering who we are, a topic which is further discussed in the essay accompanying Ovide Campbell's reflections on community. Divisions between families based on externally driven identities must end, and the key to this lies in our Nehiyaw concepts relating to kinship. Nehiyawewin contains words and phrases for family and community members with meanings that go far beyond their English counterparts. Returning to these concepts, and related behaviors which respect and honour our relations is one way to mitigate differences based on our various colonized identities.

Despite the many attempts to obliterate our identities as Nehiyaw peoples we remain, as individuals and as a collective, a Nehiyaw nation. Our ancestors fought and signed treaties for us to remain Nehiyaw. Through *miskâsowin* or finding ourselves, our sense of origin, and our centre we continue the struggle of our ancestors to allow future generations to live Nehiyaw lives.

Blog Posting # 5

“Speak Cree, Live Cree, Die Free”

Language, Freedom, and All Things In-between

Nehiyawewin is more than the language through which our nation communicates; it is also the key to understanding our territory, our way of life, and our history. To lose our language is to lose much more than words, but to lose our interpretation of the world. Like many other communities, the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation has struggled with the steady decline of fluent speakers. The legacy of the residential school era has effectively halted intergenerational transmission of language from parent to child. As many of our youth, and middle-aged adults no longer speak our nation’s language, we look for innovative ways to encourage Nehiyawewin while also ensuring that the English used is relatable, and we work to create in English what is useful to community members of all ages. Our struggles with language both Nehiyawewin and the language of our oppressors, are far from over, but new tools and old knowledge can assist in our efforts to ensure our language will weather the storm of colonization. Ovide Campbell’s thoughts in the final installment of *Tapwewin Speaking the Truth’ Muskeg Lake Cree Nation*

Reflections on Community give us a personal insight into the power of language, ceremony, and knowledge that we will not soon forget.

“Some of the words you put on there is very high words, especially for some of the Cree people. Especially for the ones with low education. I know it’s in your category but it’s not in ours. “

At times, academic institutions can seem like extremely hostile and lonely places. As Indigenous students, it can be a heartbreaking experience to leave the communities and families we hold so dear and embark on an academic journey. We are often compelled to do what we can to assist our communities efforts to become truly free from the colonial nightmare we have suffered for hundreds of years. For some, we venture into the academic realm to hone the skills which we think will be of use to us personally and to our Indigenous communities. As we progress further and further into our studies it can often seem as though we are learning a language very far removed from the language of those whom we love, and seek to serve. We adapt our language and writing to fulfill the requirements of our areas of studies within the formalized educational setting, but this language is not the language of our people even when English is the predominant language at home. Once I returned to my home community I struggled with how to communicate the ideas and concepts that I was eager to share with my fellow Nehiyaw friends and relatives in a way free of the chokehold of academic jargon that I was so used to using after more than nineteen years of formalized western education. There is often discussion on decolonizing language and concepts but part of the work that needs to be done, if our work is to be useful and relevant to the members of our home communities, is finding a way to make our language less academic so that the majority of those with whom we work are able to meaningfully engage in the work we produce. As Ovide

states, there is a need to ensure the language used when communicating with community members is easily understood by those whose first language is Nehiyawewin or who have various levels of literacy in the English language so that all have an opportunity to participate without language limiting anyone from full engagement.

“A lot of our people talk Cree but they don’t teach their kids to talk Cree.”

As we try to find a balance between the needs of the younger members of the community who only speak English, and those whose first language is Nehiyawewin, we must examine how the language dynamics of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation came to be. Perhaps the use of the phrase “language loss” was an incorrect term to use earlier since the part of the state’s assimilationist goals was to completely eradicate Indigenous languages. The purpose of residential schools was not to educate the Indigenous children forced into these institutions, but to strip them of their language, culture, and values. Abuse in all forms was rampant in these institutions with some types of abuse sanctioned by the officials in order to reach their goals of cultural genocide. When children spoke their own languages instead of English they were met with horrifically harsh punishments. In *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School* Celia Haig-Brown comments on cultural genocide saying “The elimination of language has always been a primary stage in cultural genocide. This was the primary function of the residential school. My father, who attended Alberni Indian Residential School was physically tortured by his teachers for speaking Tseshaht: they pushed sewing needles through his tongue, a routine punishment for language offenders.”²¹ With such

²¹ Haig-Brown, Celia. *Resistance and Renewal: Surviving the Indian Residential School*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1988. Print.

punishments being commonplace, along with the myriad of other abuses residential school survivors faced, it is no wonder the current language speaker demographics exist.

The Muskeg Lake Cree Nation's language speaker distribution includes no fluent speakers among the youth, and the last generation of those who learned Nehiyawewin at home were our grandparents age, those who were born in the 1930's and who were forced to attend the residential school in Duck Lake. The connection between the abuse suffered at residential school as punishment for speaking an Indigenous language combined with the extremely high rate of attendance at residential school from Muskeg Lake community members has culminated in the end of intergenerational transmission and the associated inability of the youth to speak our native language.

“I made a mistake with my daughter. I made a mistake myself. I didn't teach her Cree. And that's what's happening. I'll admit I made a mistake and I see it now. This is where I feel sorry for the younger people like you, you don't understand Cree. “

When Ovide made the above statement we must place it in the larger context of our experience as colonized peoples. Ovide's "mistake" was not his own failure but a decision made due to the external pressures faced by Indigenous peoples during our subjugation. It takes great courage, tenacity, and healing to overcome years of torture and suffering our people felt during their captivity in residential schools where the language was forbidden. It is not just Ovide's family where at-home learning of the language taught from parent to child has ceased. In the overwhelming majority of families in which the parents attended a residential school, their children no longer speak Nehiyawewin fluently. In my own maternal family the last person to learn our language at home was my grandmother Madeline Greyeyes, who as a child attended residential school for many years and did not teach any of her children Nehiyawewin. Madeline is a fluent speaker

and though she didn't teach the language to her descendants, she formally studied in the area of linguistics, and recognized the wealth of information held in the language, as well as the importance of intergenerational transmission. When her father, the person who taught her Nehiyawewin passed away, she proclaimed at his funeral that "The door to my language is closed." My maternal great-grandfather's passing has had a profound effect on my family since he was the last great speaker of our language, and not only taught my grandmother, but also helped my mother to partially learn the language. Just as my family faced a crisis in terms of our language loss, a similar crisis loomed community wide and alternatives to at-home language learning were conceived.

Nehiyawewin instruction in the school system has been one way in which our community has responded to the issue of language loss. The children of the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation had been educated away from the community since the law required formalized education, and we worked hard to campaign for a school to be built on the reserve itself. Finally, after many years of dedicated efforts, we took over the education of our children in the early 1990's and several years later we opened the kihiw waciston (Eagle's Nest) school on the Muskeg Lake Cree Nation. A core tenant of the institution was that it would educate the children in not only Western education but also include teachings in our language, and from our own culture. Although there have been many struggles with our (Eagle's Nest), taking control of our children's education, including Nehiyawewin instruction, has been an important step for our community, especially in promoting language use for our youth.

Ovide mentions language instruction in the school in his interview, and he identifies a missing element in the current language programming –the involvement of

parents. As stated earlier, parents of children who are school-aged rarely use Nehiyawewin as the first language of the home. This creates a gap (which Ovide alluded to) between what the children learn at school during the day, and the language used at home after school has finished. Ovide remarks, “We are using our second language too much. And, this is where our parents and grandparents should be teaching these kids at home, talking to them so they can understand.” Language instruction in the school can only go so far, it is the involvement of fluent language speakers, be they aunts, grandfathers or cousins, that is a key to our community’s strategy for increased Nehiyawewin use among the youth. The battle to save Indigenous languages must be fought on many fronts; it is through the collective action of many that we will find the most success to save our interpretation of the world.

Words are tremendously powerful things. When we use English words we have the opportunity to illuminate ideas and concepts for our friends and family when previously words had been used by colonial authorities and their agents to shut them out of processes and prevent them from understanding important changes to their way of life. By re-learning, and using the language of our ancestors we have an opportunity to understand ourselves, our territory, and our nation in a completely different way. It is to our Nehiyaw values that we should return and from which we should look for guidance during our times of decision-making. Our goal should be to find ways to maintain community cohesion that are in line with the ways our grandmothers and grandfathers lived. Communicating these values and ideas in the language of our ancestors bring us closer to the true meaning and intent of such ideas. The importance of using Nehiyawewin cannot be underestimated. We have the power to reshape our world on our

terms. Those terms should be in the language of our territory, and understood by our ancestors and our descendants who will become a part of our Nehiyaw nation.