

and traditional blanket exercises. As part of the organizing group, I hosted an Indigenous language station for those who wished to be educated on Indigenous languages. The content I covered was basic history of Indigenous languages, as well as counting and naming various animals in Ojibwe.

In my view, as Indigenous people, we can all benefit from efforts to learn, revive, and pass down our languages. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada reports that many Indigenous languages are under serious threat of extinction due to a process of systemic neglect. In my own family, there are increasingly fewer ancestral language speakers. I therefore want to be a part of the effort of coming together to save one of the most important cultural identifications that defines us. Wherever my future takes me, Indigenous languages will be a vital part of my life.

*Gitchi-Miigwech* (thank you very much) for reading!

**TAZ MCKAY WAABANONG  
GIIZIS NDIZHINIKAAZ, MAKWA  
NDOONDEM, MINEGOZIIBE NDOONJI.**

**MY NAME IS TAZ MCKAY. I AM FROM PINE CREEK FIRST NATION. HEADING INTO MY SECOND YEAR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA, I CARRY A PASSION FOR LEARNING *ANISHINAABEMOWIN*, AS WELL AS THE STUDY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE.**

**I PARTICIPATE IN CULTURAL PRACTICES, SUCH AS POW WOW DANCING, SINGING, AND A VARIETY OF SACRED CEREMONIES.**



# REVITALIZING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES THROUGH LAND-BASED EDUCATION

**ANDREA CUSTER**

## THE RISE OF THE ALPHABET AND THE WRITTEN WORD

Prior to contact, Indigenous societies, including the Rocky Cree, lived in harmony with the land. Respectful, reciprocal relationships with the land, waters, plants, and animals were the norm because they had to survive in these environments. There was no harm caused by Indigenous people who lived on these lands for thousands of years; there were no issues of deforestation; of polluted air, lands and waters; or of sick and deformed animal life. Yet in the small amount of time since European contact, there has been significant damage caused; we are no longer able to drink the water or eat the food sources from the land as freely as we once used to. What ideas and beliefs did Europeans bring with them that would cause such harm to the land? Some philosophers believe that it was the Christian and Jewish traditions and their Hebrew God that were responsible for 'Nature disdain' and ideas of dominating the natural world, while David Abram and other philosophers argue that the severing of our relationship with the land in return for written word comes from well-known Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato and their influence on developing literate 'civilized' societies.

*"A long line of recent philosophers, stretching from Friedrich Nietzsche down to the present, have attempted to demonstrate that Plato's philosophical derogation of the sensible and changing forms of the world - his claim that these are mere simulacra of eternal and pure ideas existing in a nonsensorial realm beyond the apparent world - contributed profoundly to civilization's distrust of bodily and sensorial*

*experience, and to our consequent estrangement from the earthly world around us" (Abram, 1996).* These two traditions, the religious traditions and Western philosophers, had one powerful technology in common: the alphabet. Originally, the Semitic Alphabet was associated with the natural world, such as 'alepha for ox,' until Greeks altered the Semitic technology to a point where people no longer associated letters with the natural world; the letters created were 'human-made' and written word would be connected as such. "The indebtedness of human language to the more-than-human perceptual field, an indebtedness preserved in the names and shapes of the Semitic letters, could now be entirely forgotten" (Abram, 1996).

'Socratic dialectic,' a reflexive mechanism derived from the alphabet, would now serve as an instrument for the interruption of thought patterns of oral traditions. Orators who relied heavily on repetition, habit, and rhythm to preserve their knowledge, histories, and cultures were now asked to stop and repeat in several ways the words they were speaking, thereby bringing skilled orators out of the trances on which they relied, and confounding their abilities to retell stories. The meeting of the alphabet and the resulting interruption of oral traditions has shifted our consciousness away from land and towards Western notions of what knowledge is in its written form.

## **DISCONNECTION FROM THE LAND**

Indigenous traditions used to rely solely on their sensory landscape to survive. In essence, they knew how to 'read' the land. Our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual nourishment came from the land and our languages come from our senses in relation to the land. When we are removed from the land, our senses become dulled and lulled; we become confused, disconnected, and lost. As we focus more on the written form of English language, we have forgotten the relationship and responsibilities we have to the land. The plants, animals, rocks, water, and the earth itself become obsolete. Veils cover our eyes. We cannot feel or see as we used to and our ears are muffled to the sounds they once shared with us; our sensorial participation with the world has ceased and

we have become numb to the land around us. We have failed to recall the source of our health and wealth. The result has been devastating for Indigenous peoples and the lands on which they have lived and thrived for generations. The policies to get Indigenous peoples off the land had to include getting rid of the language. The tools of this severing included the Indian Act, residential schools, provincial education systems, and renaming our lands and bodies in English, to name a few. The intent to make us forget has been great; however, we have a force and a bond that is undeniable.

## **RECONNECTING TO LAND AND REVITALIZING INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES**

Our languages are ancient; they are strong and they are powerful. The successful revitalization of Indigenous languages requires the lived experiences of our ancestors. Through these primary experiences of land, children can be connected to the magnificent sounds of communication in Nature and of language -- allowing them to feel and see the world as our ancestors once did. Through new lenses from which to experience the world, children can become enchanted with the land and language -- how amazingly beautiful, interesting, and fascinating it is -- but most importantly that they are a part of this world as part of Creation. They belong.

**MIHKO ASANI ISKWĪW NITISIYIHKASON MĀHTĀWI-SĪPIHK OHCI NĪTHA NITASKOCĀPANAK ASICI.** ANDREA CUSTER IS FROM PELICAN NARROWS AND HAS ROOTS ON THE CHURCHILL AND STURGEON WEIR RIVER SYSTEMS. ANDREA IS WOODLAND CREE AND IS A FLUENT CREE SPEAKER. SHE HOLDS A B.A. IN INDIGENOUS STUDIES FROM FIRST NATIONS UNIVERSITY, A SECONDARY LEVEL B.ED. FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA AND WILL SOON HAVE AN M.ED IN LAND-BASED EDUCATION FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN. SHE CURRENTLY WORKS AT STURGEON LAKE CENTRAL SCHOOL AS THE ELEMENTARY CREE TEACHER AND ALSO DOES CONTRACT WORK TRANSLATING WHEN REQUESTED.

