

Cree Narrative Memory

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Narrative Process

Nêhiyâwiwin, Creeness, is a lived memory which is held in stories and relationships. My articulation of Nêhiyâwiwin (Creeness) in this article is a continuation of the stories that I have heard from my family and friends throughout my life. Nêhiyâwiwin involves the spiritual world and dimensions of reality beyond the immediate world of physical experience. Nêhiyâwiwin is more than a collage of facts and dates, but rather is a living tradition which evolves through time as an organic process. People live the stories of Nêhiyâwiwin and are the vehicles of collective memory. Nêhiyâwiwin emerges from the individual lives that linger in the expanse of the collective memory. In this paper, I want to explore Cree narrative memory and stress the importance of Cree paradigms.

Perhaps the strongest conduit to the past, and the layers of Nêhiyâwiwin, is nicâpan (great-grandfather) Kôkôcîs (Peter Vandall). He used to talk about the travelers: These travelers would go from camp to camp. They would tell stories, keeping people informed; they traveled for hundreds of miles. People knew what the role of the travelers was and they respected them, and they would feed them.

Storytelling has been the way Nêhiyawak (Crees) have preserved collective memory for countless generations. Storytelling has been an ongoing process, linking the past to the present and the present to the past. However, in our age, we (Nêhiyawak) have lost some of the respect that we once had for these people. People no longer value stories in the same way that they once did. Today, apathy threatens Nêhiyâwiwin more than oppression. In many ways, one could draw parallels to the Irish experience. Once the Irish were no longer oppressed after 1922, the language was no longer hidden and "dangerous;" people no longer put the same effort into preserving it. I think that as Nêhiyawak, we are in that position today: we

need to revive our story-telling traditions. We need once again to return to the Old Ones and their words, the Old Ones whose knowledge is essential for our survival. Stories are internalized and rethought and woven into existing experience; the life history approach to understand a people stresses the importance of narratives and the importance of living these stories.

The eternal echo of stories is needed for Nêhiyawak to know again what made us a people. We need to ask ourselves: What thoughts did our ancestors think? What stories did they tell to help them lead good lives? The stories, and a return to them, are essential if we are to reverse the destructive patterns that have emerged in the last 125 years. Stories, narrative memory, and the living of this memory, is the only thing that can revive our people and our way of life. The narrative memory of Nêhiyawak is rich and multi-layered, and within it we can draw upon a variety of sources which provide us with guides for living our lives. We draw upon the lectures (teachings) of the Old Ones that once served us so well. We can also draw upon the lived stories of our great leaders such as Mistahi Maskwa (Big Bear) and John Tootoosis.

Nêhiyâwiwin provides us with narratives that we can weave into our present experiences. The weaving of these stories into the present is an essential aspect of Cree memory in that it is an ongoing process between the present and the past, and also between the individual and the collective. While we cannot live in the past, we can draw upon the memories of the past to make sense of our experience today. We can use the stories embedded in Nêhiyâwiwin as Mistahi Maskwa did, to try to struggle against circumstances so that we can thrive as a collective and to find alternative ways of seeing and thinking. Cree narrative memory is more than simply an academic exercise in archiving information and sounds. Cree narrative memory is an ongoing attempt to find solutions to problems that we face today such as breakdown of families, loss of language and a general loss of respect for ourselves and others.

Another key aspect of Cree narrative memory is the use of dreams and helpers which hold reality. The Old Ones saw ahead and knew of the things that would happen. Pîkahin Okôsisâ (the son of Pîkahin) from the Cîkâstêpêsin Band, prophesized in 1897 great changes that would occur. He foresaw the events of the twentieth century and the turmoil that people would experience. All of this was recorded in narrative memory. Mistanâkôwêw (Badger Voice), the person who was given syllabics from

the creator in a dream, also saw into the future and knew of the challenges the Cree people would face in the future: he knew of the pressures that we would experience in trying to maintain our place in the world. However, these two and others also saw hope. Pîhkahin Okôsis spoke of a time when his people would find a home and have good hunting. Mistânaskôwêw spoke of the power of syllabics which would help preserve Cree narrative memory in the future. Also, Mistahi Maskwa himself knew of the massive changes that would occur, yet he saw promise in trying to adapt to new ways.

The past is alive, and we must constantly rethink our relationship to it. The past comes alive through stories, and through our connections to the people who are telling the stories. I think that is why older people stressed kinship when they lectured about things. Kinship talks about the relationship between people, and affirms the process of transferring knowledge. Nêhiyâwiwin consists of a collection of images and stories which manifests through time and space along different paths. One cannot speak of one Cree history, because there are many different aspects to it.

Collective memory is an ongoing narrative from which truth emerges. Truth emerges through the process of articulating and putting forth a worldview. Truth is an ongoing process of revealing and concealment, and narration is an inherently finite process which, while bringing forth certain possibilities of reality, conceals other possibilities. For every revelation of a narrative, there is also concealment; while one narrative will bring forth certain possibilities of Nêhiyâwiwin, it will also limit others.

Nêhiyâwiwin is also multi-layered in that it takes decades to digest information and stories. Not everyone does this, or indeed seeks to do this, but the Old Ones such as Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw, Kôkôcis, John Tootoosis and Ernest Tootoosis did. The process of Cree narrative memory is thus intimately linked to individual interpretations and understandings of a tradition. Yet the individual exists in the backdrop of a rich and deep collective memory: it is thus a dialectical process.

Also, part of our tribal identities means the preservation of language. This is absolutely essential if a culture is to survive on its own terms. Nêhiyâwiwin cannot exist only in translation. In ceremonies, prayers are made in Cree. I do not think that ceremonies can survive in any meaningful way if they are only in English. Language is the source and expressions of our Creeness.

Mel Joseph, an elder from the Whitefish reserve in the Prince Albert area, spoke at a recent round dance. I paraphrase him to the best of my memory: he said that language is important for our source of identity. We should speak our languages to the best of our ability, even if we learn only one word a day. He urged his audience to recognize the importance of tribal memory. He said that he was envious of the people who were receiving a formal education because he never had that opportunity. However, he was also pitied them, because they could not speak Cree in the way that he could (Joseph 1997).

“Lived” Narratives

Like language, “lived” narratives, are essential components of oral history. Life histories give us insight into both cultures and individuals. Life histories stress the importance of subjective experience. Indeed, the approach advocated by lived experience maps well with the narrative approach of this paper. The structure of Nêhiyâwiwin is woven from layers of narrative memory and through individual life histories.

A life history approach holds that a culture can be known through the stories of individual members of that culture. Paul Radin was the first anthropologist to use life histories extensively. Watson and Watson-Franke characterize his approach:

... Radin insisted that the only reasonable way to understand a culture was by understanding that a society is composed of specific, not generalized, men and women (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985: 5).

Radin thereby espoused an insider's perspective. Watson and Watson-Franke characterize this as an emic-idiographic approach which “concerns itself with the specific and unique richness of a phenomenon, so that we understand the particular, the individual (the subjective) rather than the general” (Watson and Watson-Franke 1985: 26). I would argue that the stories of Cree individuals are the source of Cree history. Cree narrative memory is best understood through an examination of individual life stories as these show how the individuals negotiated the dialectic between their individualism and their collective tribalism.

Life histories are dialogues between the person talking and the person prompting them. Life history stories, and the corresponding understanding of them, emerge through time. A person thinks about their life over a period of time and different things are revealed. Understanding is a process of emergence and revealing over time, and is embedded within an

interpretative framework. While this has occurred in the process of Nêhiyâwiwin for a very long time, it is also the central insight of Heidegger's *Being and Time* (1967/1927).

It is through "lived" stories that a collective memory emerges. The texts in Cruikshank (1990) illustrate the manner in which people live their lives through stories. One of her informants, Angela Sidney, noted: "Well, I've tried to live my life right, just like a story" (Cruikshank 1990: 146). Indigenous stories are cognitive maps through which Indigenous people try to understand their place in a world beset by change, where some still hold on to the quintessential elements of a worldview we can call Indigenous Being. Instead of a linear narrative pattern, beset with dates and places, Cruikshank encountered a metaphorical, narrative language in her fieldwork. Thus, one can see a connection between the ideas of map and narrative. Cree narratives give us a place in the world and a location to understand reality and experience. Stories are guides, and give us possibilities for our journeys through life.

I remember one particular day very clearly. I remember going to Thunderchild, near North Battleford, Saskatchewan, with my mosôm one day. There was a large gathering of Old Ones, and they were all sitting in a circle. They were smoking a pipe, and they all got up and took turns talking about different things. I remember at my grandfather's funeral the Old Ones sat in a circle and smoked the pipe. I will always remember these things. I will always remember the knowledge held in the words and actions of the Old Ones and their struggle to maintain their Nêhiyâwiwin in the face of the onslaught of English culture.

Nimosôm (my grandfather) struggled to find a balance in "lived" narratives. Nimosôm struggled to find a balance between the two worlds outlined by Mel Joseph - between the old ways and new ways. He struggled to find this space, this place and space of talking through stories. Noel Dyck, a long time friend of my grandfather, noted that it was the stories of his life, and those which he had heard from his grandmother Kêkêhk-iskwêw (Hawk Woman, Betsy McLeod, born in 1866, James Smith Land Register) that he drew upon in "his public acts of remembering" (Dyck 1992: 132). This concept of remembering in a public manner is important because it gets to the heart of Cree narrative history: the point of many of these storytellers was that they remembered because they felt that they had a moral duty to remember. The stories were offered as traces of experience,

like maps, through which the listeners makes sense of their own lives and experiences.

My grandfather told stories about what he knew, and he derived his stories from his experience. Furthermore, he told stories in which he, or his ancestors, were participants. Knowledge within this paradigm of knowing comes from what you have seen and what you have internalized. Dyck writes that my grandfather "began telling his listeners that since he had only a grade three education he could only speak about things that had happened to him, things that he knew about" (Dyck 1992: 136). Dyck called this approach a "traditional Cree genre" (Dyck 1992: 138). Furthermore, one of the fundamentals of this approach is an open-ended process. Dyck writes that my grandfather "never said what the point of his stories were; he forced the listeners to discover this for themselves" (Dyck 1992: 138). Indeed, this is one of the traditional Cree, and generally non-western, narrative techniques. People have the freedom to decide what they want to make of the narrative. They have the freedom to decide meaning for themselves. Thus, the paradigm of this process is inherently slanted towards people making up their own minds about what they think about something: they have to decide what they believe to be true about something. The listener is given the chance to internalize the stories.

Keith Basso in *Wisdom Sits in Places* (1996) discusses the dynamic qualities of lived narratives. Basso notes of the importance of narrative memory: "... remembering often provides a basis for imagining" (Basso 1996: 5). The "space between" old stories and contemporary experiences allows for creative possibilities to emerge. Basso adds: "What is often remembered about a particular place guides and constrains how it will be imagined by delimiting a field of workable possibilities" (Basso 1996: 5). Thus, for the Apache, the process of narrative memory is one of possibilities and is always being extended:

These possibilities are then exploited by acts of conjecture and speculation which build upon them and go beyond them to create possibilities of a new and original sort, thus producing a fresh expanded picture of how things might have been (Basso 1996: 5).

Narratives are constantly being reinterpreted and recreated in an organic manner: "... they enrich the common stock on which everyone can draw to muse on past events, interpret their significance, and imagine them now" (Basso 1996: 6).

While telling stories, the speaker generally makes a comment about the relevance of the story, or links the story to the people. An example of this is Francis Michael Harper in his narration of Mistahi Maskwa. “tâpwê miywasin kâhkiyaw ayisiniwak ê-nôhtê-kiskêyitahk tânisi ê-isiiyhkâsoyân”/ “It is truly good that all of the people here want to know my name” (my translation) (Harper 1973). He also mentioned that he was given his Cree name by Mistahi Maskwa. Then, he goes on to tell a story of 1885 (ê-mâyikamikahk, “where it went wrong”), but the story-teller will select the details which he thinks are important, and in the process of editing, edits the past and puts forth a narrative.

Like Francis Michael Harper, Dudley Patterson, a friend and informant of Keith Basso, notes the importance of being connected to a narrative:

Wisdom sits in places. It's like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don't you? Well, you also need to drink from places. You must remember everything about them. You must learn their names. You must remember what happened at them long ago. You must think about it and keep thinking about it. Then your mind will become smoother and smoother. Then you will see danger before it happens. You will walk a long way and live a long time. You will be wise. People will respect you (Dudley Patterson, cited in Basso 1996: 127).

Narrative memory is life-source which gives us ideas and possibilities for how to live our lives. It is a process of living stories and of trying to penetrate new levels of meaning.

Much of the history written about Cree people has been written by people from outside the Cree culture. Sometimes so-called experts really have no appreciation of tribal knowledge. They often write from a secular point of view and in the name of objectivity but often do not reflect how their own viewpoint could distort the emergence of truth. While some songs and other religious matters should perhaps not be talked about directly in the classroom, we should be aware of and stress the importance that they have for Nêhiyâwiwin. Ernest Tootoosis, the younger brother of John B. Tootoosis, also stressed the importance of spirituality in our self-descriptions.

Indeed, David Mandelbaum (1994) and John Milloy (1990) write in a manner that bypasses essential elements of Cree narrative memory. Mandelbaum tries to reconstruct the Plains Cree world of the 1860s, and Milloy tries to reconstruct the world through archival sources. While both approaches are extremely interesting, and the results of their research are immeasurable, one must also note that they do not write about the change

of Cree culture since the 1860s. The approach from which I am trying to write attempts to engage Cree culture as a living, dynamic force. I want to write about the culture from the inside. The narrative approach stresses the importance of worldview and the way in which Cree people picture the world. The paradigms of Cree narrative discourse, the way Cree people tell stories, have to be taken into account in order to get a more complete picture. The paradigm of life histories is the foundation, I think, of how Nêhiyawîwin, Cree narrative memory, has been preserved.

While Cree narrative memory is a collective process, it draws its vitality from moments of remembering on the part of individual story-tellers. There are many kinds of story-tellers: some are old men and old women who might not speak English: others may be young Cree film makers who depict contemporary urban life. Aspects of Cree narrative memory will emerge from Crees who are Christians, and also from those who see the mâtotisân (sweatlodge) as their primary religion (and indeed most mix both aspects). Everyone has a responsibility to remember: we have to move beyond the cult of victimization which has paralyzed organic thought. We have to realize again that we have power, but I think that the only way we can penetrate the depth of Nêhiyawîwin is through intuition and dreams, and by looking into ourselves.

Critiques of "Ethnic" History

There are many within the Academy who see Cree narrative memory, and indeed other "ethnic" histories, as fragmentation of the larger meta-narrative. Some may question the need for a narrative account of the Nêhiyawak, or some may see the process of trying to document and write a narrative history of the Nêhiyawak as superfluous. With the emergence of urbanized populations, the breakdown of traditional kinship structures, and indeed the gradual decline of the language, some may call my attempts at articulating a Cree narrative history romantic. They may ask: Why not just assume a position within the rubric of Canadian history? Why not simply write from within that location? Why try to articulate a position that attempts to stand outside of it?

Jack Granatstein is perhaps one of the most articulate advocates of such a critique of "ethnic" history:

... Canadian governments ... have been throwing money for years into multicultural education, and, in the process, the history of Canada, where it is even taught, has been distorted out of all recognition. Guilt,

victimhood, redress, and the avoidance of offense – those are the watchwords that rule today (Granatstein 1998: 38).

Central to his argument is the position that the Canadian state is in fact legitimate. Also central to his argument is the notion that there should be only one history, and that more than one history actually distorts meaning – that it takes away from the national discourse.

There is also the general criticism that oral history, which is fundamental to the Cree narrative process, is subjective to a large extent. Some may say that there is no way to verify oral histories of Nêhiyawak. Why, the critics may ask, should we believe the Cree version of events? How do we know that an old person didn't just make it up? How can there be any truth in oral history when it changes so much?

Like other narrative memories, Cree narrative memory challenges the dominant narrative structures of our country. For instance, many Cree narratives challenge the legitimacy of Canada itself (such as the narratives from ê-mâyikamikahk). Because of the historiography of Cree narrative memory, the interpretative privileges of the dominant society, including archival sources, are called into question. The emergence of Cree narrative memory within universities opens up new possibilities for interpreting the “lived” experience of Canada, layers which had all too often been forgotten.

Vansina on Oral History

Jan Vansina pioneered the inquiry into the methodology of oral history research. However, there is an irony in Vansina's defense of oral history in that the stories and oral history he advocates as a response to the critiques of the methodology actually distort the paradigms of oral history. Vansina stresses the stability of oral tradition over time. He writes: “When accounts of events have been told for a generation or so the messages then current may still represent the tenor of the original message, but in most cases the resulting story has been fused out of several accounts and has acquired a stabilized form” (Vansina 1985: 17). This would apply to the narrative of the old man at Sounding Lake for example (see Neal McLeod 1999). However, while there will be an aspect of narrative cohesiveness, there is also the aspect of each teller and listener integrating the story into their own lives. While Vansina's study is very helpful in many regards, he fails to take into account the way in which people internalize the narratives that they have heard.

Vansina's analysis of oral cultures is somewhat limited. He argues that oral traditions remain the same over a period of time and writes: "Once created, a composition to be memorized is supposed to remain unchanged from recitation to recitation, although in fact its actual wording will vary over time" (Vansina 1985: 15). There are certainly contexts in which Vansina's argument of oral history would make sense. Two examples immediately come to mind. One is the condolence ceremonies of the Iroquois confederacy as described by Fenton (1998). Similarly, during the *Midêwin* (a curing and healing ceremony of the Ojibway), people sit by the singer and remind him of the order and structure of the songs if he forgot; this is found in the story of *Mistânaskowêw* that I have heard from a variety of people. Another example of mnemonic devices used to facilitate collective memory are the feasts practiced on the West Coast, where the structures and voices of all of the people are affirmed through the ritual and ceremony of the gathering. In this context, Vansina's position makes sense, but there are contexts (many within this thesis), which draw upon circumstances, wherein the stories are lived and the meaning is generated through a dialogic process with the listener.

Elizabeth Tonkin disputes Vansina's central claim that the tradition is unchanging through time, arguing that there is a link between the past and the present. Using examples from western Africa, Tonkin writes of one of her key informants: "Examples such as Jua Sieh's account show a movement from olden times to the present in one coherently connected performance" (Tonkin 1992: 86). Once again it is important to note that the form of the spoken narrative dictates that a variety of factors have to be taken into account.

Tonkin notes that the use of oral narrative is also accompanied by a worldview which grounds the narrative. This worldview informs how the participants understand and generate meaning in the world. Indeed, the use of what might be broadly called an ethnohistorical approach would be of strong value in that the understandings and the assumptions could help people to understand the motivations of various participants throughout history. Second, Tonkin raises the issue that the use of oral history also helps because it brings to bear a variety of voices which are not heard in conventional sources. Certain voices are allowed to speak which would otherwise go unnoticed.

Within Tonkin's model, the narrative plays a very active role in the shaping of the collective memory. Tonkin stresses the relationship between

the individual and the group: "Jua Sieh, is not subsumed into some 'tribal' collective consciousness, and his narrative interestingly suggests rather how his making of history had been a means of creating a social personality for himself, a sustaining and positive identity indeed" (Tonkin 1992: 44). The stories are not simply records of the past, but also documents of the living present. The stories of Jua Sieh were open-ended and they were narrative maps from which he lived his life. Tonkin characterizes her critique as an "interactionist theory of the soul" (Tonkin 1992: 89), where the self and the community are intertwined in a dialectical process. Communication is understood as a dialogic process wherein the self engages with the audience to generate meaning.

According to Tonkin, the narrative is not simply recited in isolation from other factors, but is shaped and informed by the needs of the present. The past is not an ossified entity that must be recreated exactly every time: thus, there are competing senses of time and space. The position of Vansina objectifies time and space, and essentially draws the narrative away from the speaker. The other line, stressed by Tonkin and Cohen, holds that narratives are connected to the stories, and that the stories are internalized and lived. The past is part of the living present, and narratives are generated by people in order to make sense of their lives.

The problem with Vansina's account is that it tends to take individuality away from storytellers and characterizes the transmission of information across time as a process. With Vansina's account, narrative memory is a process that is passively transmitted from one person to another without change. However, the process of story-telling is not often this way. Vansina is responding to the common critique of oral history by trying to demonstrate that it does in fact remain the same over a long period of time and is not subject to change.

The Old Ones

As I mentioned before, it is important to note that the Old Ones are the key to Cree narrative memory: they have lived the stories and have had a lifetime to reflect upon their significance. Thus, an essential aspect of Cree narrative memory involves its open-endedness. There were stories of old people who counseled the young. They would stick a knife in the ground; then they would say: "If you do not believe me, you can stab me with this knife." I think that there are many layers to this narrative. For one thing, it addresses the freedom of the listener. The listener does not have to listen to

the words of the old person if he or she doesn't want to. There would, however, be consequences to this action: since they were both dwelling in an oral tradition, the refusal of the young person to listen would amount to the killing of the tradition. Thus, the knife was symbolic for the freedom one had in accepting or not accepting the stories. The oral tradition is an organic process and needs young people to continue it. If they choose not to, the tradition fades away and dies. Also, the knife serves as a metaphor for the power of being able to destroy meaning. The listener thus had a great deal of responsibility, with the power to influence and direct the eventual flow of words. The young people had to make sense of the words themselves.

The Old People spoke of the value of trying to maintain Nêhiyâwiwin. Sandy Lonethunder said: "Some people say that it's too late but let's hope not because if we let go of our Indian culture and forget it, then we will be truly lost" (Lonethunder 1974: 3). The destruction of Nêhiyâwiwin and the effects of this destruction amount to shame and being lost. Nowadays, young people in cities are turning to gangs. They are trying to recreate some form of kinship within the urban landscape. However, it must be stressed that while the process of urban tribalism is an interesting phenomenon, it occurs within the context of alienation and poverty, and in most cases is not very successful. While certainly being alienated from the mainstream culture, it is also severed from its tribal roots.

Eli Bear, a man who did a lot of work with the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College, spoke of the importance of cultural transmission:

Now today here, these elders want their young to try and understand about our culture and they are living too dangerously. And I always tell these people who ask me what I'm working at. I always want to explain what we are doing. A lot of people say it's too late but if we don't do anything it will be too late ... (Bear 1974).

The Cultural College attempted to gather stories and preserve knowledge. The thing that I respect most about this effort is that people did not believe in the inevitability of the decline of Cree culture and language. Rather, they did what they could to help preserve them. We still have so much left that we must do our best to try to preserve our Nêhiyâwiwin. It is seldom too late, and there is a value in every effort that we make, even if we think it is insignificant. I remember one Indigenous person saying: "As long as there is still one living member of the tribe, the culture is still there." Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw said: "... I know we are doing something good which will

help future generations. We see our work is doing something good” (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1973: 12).

Nêhiyâwiwin involves seeing the wonder of creation and respecting other beings. In the old days, people knew how to listen to the world. They relied on dreams and intuition for knowledge through spiritual beliefs and practices. Nêhiyâwiwin involves thanking the creator for the gift of life. Part of Cree narrative memory involves the affirmation that there is a tie to other beings. Kôkôcîs said:

êkwa kîsêpâ kâ-waniskâcîk, nikî-pêhtawâwak mâna kêhtê-ayak;
tâpiskôc ôma piyêsisak kâ-kitocik kîsipêpâ k-âti-sâkâstêk ôma mistahi
kâ-takahkihtâkoscîk, êkosi anima kêhtê-ayak misiwê ê-kî-pêhtâkoscîk
ê-nikamocik-ahpô owîkimâkaniwâwa ê-naskwahamawâcîk-iyikohk
ê-kî-miywêyimocik aniki, mîna mistahi ê-kî-miywâsinîyik ita
ê-kî-pimâcihocik.

And in the morning, when they arose, I used to hear the elders, just as the singing of the birds sounds beautiful in the morning, at day-break, so it was with the elders who could be heard all over as they sang – they would even sing in response to their wives – they took such pride in themselves, and their journey through life was beautiful (Vandall 1987: 48-49).

Eli Bear echoes this:

And I used to wonder when at the break of day he used to stand outside and chant, and singing to the sun. He used to do this using the four different directions and put words in the song. While he was doing this, I used to wonder why he did this for ... but now I see what he was getting at (Bear 1974: 9).

Through prayer and songs the Old Ones were maintaining a tie to the echoes of eternity. This links one people to the discursive memory, the layering of words, of many people and their connection to the rest of reality.

Family Stories

The Old Ones speak through kinship and family networks. Akemi Kikumura in “Family History: A Collaborative Venture”, discusses the advantages and disadvantages of writing family history:

Proponents of the insider perspective claim that group membership provides special insight into matters (otherwise obscure to others) based on one’s knowledge of the language and one’s intuitive sensitivity

and empathy and understanding of the culture and its people”
(Kikumura 1998: 141).

This is thus very different than what people usually think of history. While objectivity may be a laudable goal at some level, an engaged historical perspective offers us certain insights that may not otherwise be possible.

I remember the stories of my nôhkom (grandmother). My grandmother became sick with a bad fever when she was a baby. Many children who had gotten this fever had died. In the middle of the night, Kôkôcîs (my great-grandfather) went outside and prayed to the creator, and asked for help. Nicâpan (my great-grandfather) pledged that if she got well, he would do everything that he could so that she would be well-educated. Her fever broke, and my great-grandfather kept his pledge.

My grandmother was a remarkable woman. She died too young, but I am thankful for the time that I was able to have with her. When she was in her teens in the 1930s she went to see the Queen in England. Throughout her life, it was a source of great pride that she had gone on this trip. Her trip was a milestone as it signaled that her efforts to obtain an education became a reality. Only one other Indian woman went. I remember that my grandmother had a great deal of dignity. She went to Bedford Road Collegiate at a time when very few Indian people went to school in the city. My great-grandfather, who was a successful farmer, paid for her education there. She then went on to begin her university education. While she experienced many difficulties, I never remember her being bitter. I think that what strikes me the most about my grandparents is that they were survivors, and did not believe in the “inevitability” of the decline of Cree culture.

I also remember the stories of nicâpan (Betsy Head – my great grandmother’s sister). I remember a visit I paid to nicâpan (great-grandmother’s sister) in the spring of 1998. I sat with her for the whole day, and I listened to her. She told me stories. She told me about my namesake, Nakanasa (“the one who comes first”, Thunderbird) who was also known by his everyday name of Mahkîyoc (the big one). That is where we got the name of McLeod from. Apparently a Scottish missionary who was handing out names thought that Mahkîyoc sounded like McLeod. Nakanasa was a Saulteaux who came from the Lake Winnipegosis area. However, two of his brothers went further southwest to join Chief Little Pine because they did not want to take Treaty at James Smith.

These stories, and parts of these stories, emerged when I sat with my capân. She asked me to record the words. I sat in her kitchen. The kitchen floor had worn patches scattered throughout it. Paths lay where she had walked. I thought of those paths as being metaphors of her journey through life. The paths in her kitchen were like her stories. The paths on the floor were like the pathways of memory, they were maps of where she had been, which also represented the ways in which she had traveled, and the connection with the land for Nêhiyawak. The mapmaking of culture is also represented in political struggles.

John B. Tootoosis, the visionary Cree leader, also stressed the value of language and land: "Land is life. Land is power" (Tootoosis 1977). Throughout his life, John B. Tootoosis repeated the importance of maintaining Cree language. Without a language, a nation loses its stories and its ability to voice itself. Without stories in the original language, a nation loses an important layer of what it is and begins to forget what motivated its ancestors. Without this collective memory, stories in languages, true self-government will never be possible. Without language, there is really no way of understanding the worldviews of people and to understand the way indigenous people make sense of their worlds. Language, as our Old People tell us and as many people in other cultures have known, is the vehicle for the transmission of ideas.

When I visited her, nicâpan sat there and spoke. She was 93 when I saw her in the spring of 1998. I thought many times and realized how precious was the time that I had with her; I thought about how much information she had. She had lived a rich life, and had always tried to be a good human being. Her life was not merely a series of scratches on paper. Her life was like an organism that linked stories and experience together. She told me about my great-great-great grandfather, Bernard Constant, who had put his name on Treaty Six (in 1876) as a counselor of the James Smith band. She told me what life was like when she was younger. The happiness that she remembered and indeed still lingered in her word was evident. She had lived a long time, but there was still a lightness to her being, and an ease to her manner. She was every open with her stories, and her age gave her a presence to me – a certain type of authority. Cree narrative memory is a living power that Cree people need in order to know who they are.

While the Old Ones are the true carriers of Nêhiyâwiwin, they were very humble about their knowledge. A lot of the old people would begin their stories with "môy mistahi ê-kiskêyihtamân" / "I know not very much."

This simple phrase is important in understanding Cree narrative memory. People did not believe that they had power over the narrative. Rather they believed they were conduits, that there was a balance between individual and tradition. Such statements were also made to show that the young people had the option of maintaining the stories and taking them into their experience if they so chose. Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw wonders whether or not he remembers things well enough:

Â, êwako ôma kâ-wî-tâhkôtamân, matwân cî kwayask nika-kî-isi-tâhkôtên tânis ê-ki-itâcimostawit kâ-kî-oyôhtâwîyan ..." (Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998: 106).

Well, this which I am about to discuss, I wonder if I will be able to discuss it with proper faithfulness, just as my father had told me (ibid: 107).

Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw is linking himself to the narrative of his father, and briefly mentions what he has the authority to talk about. He also mentions that he has the pipestem (oskiciy) (ibid: 106-107) which his grandfather used as a mnemonic device to conclude the Treaty.

The Trickster

An important paradigm used by the Old Ones for the preservation of Cree culture is the Trickster. The Trickster, known primarily as Wîsakêcâhk, but also known as Câkâpîs and Wâyapanas, is perhaps the primordial vehicle for Cree narrative memory. This is neglected completely by Milloy (1990) and Mandelbaum (1994). In Cree culture, the boundaries of reality extend between the dream state and the consciousness state. Dreams play an important role in many of the old stories. The dreams talk about everyday consciousness as being an illusion (the reverse perhaps of the way that we think of things today). Similarly, among Jivaro Indians of South America, drug induced visions constitute the real life. The belief in dreams permeates Cree culture. Hunters speak of having dreams through which they can communicate with other beings. Dreams become a mode of communication - a vehicle for thought and indeed action. Also, dreams like the Trickster speak of the layers of reality and of the illusions of conscious thought. Perhaps one way of thinking about all of this is that the Trickster represents the life of the consciousness: he/she is always testing the boundaries of consciousness and reality. What the dreams do in special states, the Trickster story does in everyday thought. The Trickster, in

everyday consciousness, represents a form of non-linear consciousness, which is the stuff of dreams.

Like the Trickster, dreams played an important role in the shaping of Cree narrative memory. For instance, the horse was an important being in bridging the boundaries of consciousness and reality. I remember one story. My friend Edward Caisse and my dad told me stories about Manito Lake. A horse would come out of the lake, a white horse. Many people saw the horse. The horse came out of the water and met a woman while she was picking turnips. The story speaks of the possibilities of existence which dreams bring forth. It is an attempt to order the past, the present, and all of the interconnections of space and time in an interesting and vital manner.

Irony, satire and contingency permeate Cree narrative memory. This idea has been lost by many writers on Cree history (both Cree and others). The Trickster as a narrative device facilitates organic thought; he/she illustrates the tentative and open-ended nature of Cree narrative action. There are strong currents in western literature that structure narratives in a linear manner; the Trickster, however, strikes at us and challenges our conceptions of things. The Trickster challenges our perceptions of the world and suggests the possibility that everything is not as it seems.

Flux is important to the Cree worldview; this perhaps stands in contrast to the idea of tradition. The Trickster stories are constantly in motion. It is impossible to freeze the Trickster, to copyright the Trickster. To copyright means to freeze, to try to stop the flow of eternity. Trying to copyright the Trickster is like chasing eternity. It is a race that could never be won because the change is ongoing and never-ending. Once you thought that you understood him, there came another moment, another manifestation of him. However, today the open-ended nature of the trickster might find resonance in those who adhere to post-modern ways of thinking.

One of the sites of Tricksterism can be found at the University. I remember once, not so long ago, there was a University symposium, where people discussed the Trickster. The rows of tables stood still as faces looked coldly from the printed page to the vaguely interested gazes of the crowd, all of which were punctuated by people leaving the room. Yet no one laughed that day. I think that Wîsakêcâhk would have been laughing that day at the irony.

The Trickster serves as a bridge across borders, involving a sense of interpretative and narrative. Mieke Bal adds: "Many events are set in vehicles of transportation ... temporarily suspend the social order" (Bal

1985: 45). Indeed, the Trickster is the mediator, the vehicle of perpetual transportation of motion. The key mnemonic phrase: “Wîsakêcâhk ê-pah-pimôhtêt (“Wîsakêcâhk was walking along”) occurs repeatedly throughout the stories. Wîsakêcâhk is always going places where he hasn’t been before. There is one story where he actually goes up to the sky, but he ends up falling to the earth because he does not follow the instructions given to him by eagles. But, at the end, he stares into the sky in wonderment, and thinks about the illusions of borders and limitations.

Wayâpanas and Cākâpîs are related to Wîsakêcâhk. The reason that he is known under these other names is that it allows storytellers to speak of him, to tell of his stories in the summer. There are some taboos in Cree story-telling and one of them is not to tell the stories in the summer. Thus, by not saying his name directly, the power of his name and what he represents is still respected. Perhaps, more to the point, the use of other names is a “legal loophole.” Thus, while the Trickster’s proper name is not being spoken of directly, the use of the other names provides a roundabout way of trying to make the same point.

I wanted to know more about this Wayâpanas and I asked my friend John Quinney from the Onion Lake reserve.

“Have you ever heard of Wayâpanas? Who is he?”

He laughed. “Wayâpanas was a real man.”

I looked at him for a moment. “What do you mean real person?”

“He was from the Battlefords area. He was the kind of man who spoke endlessly. He never would stop talking. He would talk and talk. There was an endless stream of words from his mouth. Then, one day he woke up in his bed. He couldn’t talk anymore. He simply wasn’t able to talk.”

Wayâpanas was a product of excessive words. He was, thus, unable to talk because he misused words. It is interesting to note that there was often a reluctance about exaggerating war records. People were careful not to exaggerate what they had accomplished.

Nêhiyâwiwin is a living process through which time links different parts of reality together in a process of perpetual recreation. Indeed, one of the quintessential beings in Nêhiyâwiwin is the Trickster, Wîsakêcâhk, who is always recreating the possibilities of reality by chance and accident.

Goody and Watt's Critique of Oral History

Throughout Goody and Watt's article "The Consequences of Literacy" (1962), they argue that oral cultures cannot "think outside of themselves" as it were. Perhaps, put another way, those people operating with such cultures where information is presented mostly orally, cannot think beyond the context in which they were operating. With their position, the invention of the written word actually affords the possibility of thinking beyond the moment, and the ability to transcend certain possibilities. Goody and Watts write: "In non-literate society every social situation cannot but bring the individual into contact with the group's pattern of thought, feeling and action: the choice between cultural tradition – or solitude" (Goody and Watt: 343). The authors create the impression that individual knowing within an oral culture is only possible when one lives in a written culture.

Goody and Watt envision oral cultural tradition as hindrance to the "self-realization" of people to break free from tradition. Tradition is conceived of as being a context beyond which the individuals cannot move. The process of thinking beyond the cultural horizon is limited within an oral culture according to the authors: "While skepticism may be present in such societies, it takes a personal non-cumulative form" (Goody and Watt 1962: 337). Thus, the people existing within an oral culture cannot (according to this argument) make critiques of social discourse. They are, in a sense, bound by the communal discourse of speech and discursive action. They are participants in a culture wherein meaning and discourse are generated by communal activity. It is not possible, then, for meaning to be isolated within one individual. However, one could argue, is that more possible in a written culture? The individual in a written culture is also connected to the speech and discourse of other people within their society through a hermeneutics of interpretation. Basso shares my critique of their position:

I am aware that aspects of this essay touch directly on current characterizations of differences between "oral" and "literate" cultures, particularly as those differences have been formulated by Goody (1977), Goody and Watt (1968), and Ong (1971, 1982). In the case of the Western Apache, whose culture is still predominately "oral," some of these formulations simply do not apply and are sharply insulting to boot (Basso 1996: 155).

Contrary to the thinking of Goody and Watts, the Trickster allows people to think outside of narratives, and to critique social practices. There is an old story recorded by Bloomfield where Wîsakêcâhk is used a way of questioning social norms. Kâ-kîsikâw Pîhtokâw (Coming Day) told a story

of "Wîsakêcâhk preaches to the Wolves" (Kâ-kîsikâw Pîhtokâw, in Bloomfield 1930): "Wîsakêcâhk mistahi kitimâkisiw" ("Wîsakêcâhk was very poor", *ibid*: 29); he had no money and had to go into debt with the French trader so that he could buy some clothes. In order to pay him back, Wîsakêcâhk had to get hides. He got poison and he got his wife to give him some fat:

Then he put the poison into the fat; and into a small dish he poured the fat. He shaped a great many little lumps of fat and cooled them until they were hard. He took them all, and went out to look for the wolves (*ibid*: 31).

Then he saw a wolf. "Nistês, âstam!" (Come here my little brother!). He then told the wolf that he was going to employ him; the wolf got all of the other wolves together. He then began to preach to them; he gave them the little pieces of rolled up fat and told that they would have eternal life. They all begged him for the gift of life that was found in the little balls of fat. Coming Day said: "Just like a priest was Wîsakêcâhk, as he gave religious instruction to the wolves. Presently, as Wîsakêcâhk sat there, all the wolves leaped up in the air and fell down, poisoned, and they all died" (*ibid*: 32). He then had enough hides to pay off his debts. The Trickster challenges daily assumptions and expectations to revolutionize consciousness.

Like all collectives of human beings, Nêhiyawak have encountered a series of changes, with the French traders representing only one. Indeed, the encounter with the written word and the spoken word is another site of change. Some people today claim that old stories should not be written down. Some say that this takes the vitality out of the stories. However, Native Americans are trying to negotiate the "space" of the university; people are trying to make sense of the shifts around them. One of the shifts is the move to the written word from the oral telling. Some may say that this process simply destroys the tribal tradition; others may say that by writing in English one is also destroying the traditions.

The Trickster story above points to the ability of people living within an oral mode of communication to "think outside" of lived experience, and provide critiques of social life through narratives. Thus, I would agree with Basso (1996) that Goody and Watt are wrong in their assessment of oral cultures, and the alleged inability to think outside of a system.

Wîsakêcâhk stories are open-ended and point to the dynamic nature of Cree narrative memory. Through narrative play, the present and lived experience of people can be used to think beyond social and political

situations. The Trickster stories create satirical pictures of life which provide “maps” for people. These maps provide people with possibilities to rethink and alter things. Thus, with the rubric of Cree culture, much memory is encoded in satire and open-ended narration. Memory is not a static ossified entity, but rather is an ongoing, organic process.

My friend Joseph Naytowhow told that the stories of Wisakêcâhk go on forever. One could keep telling them until one was gray on the head. My grandfathers told great Wisakêcâhk stories. They told the stories to entertain, to joke and to laugh. They were showmen and reveled in the art of story-telling. The Trickster exists, and will continue to exist, in all forms, including in the written word. The written/oral dichotomy is simply one more barrier for the Trickster to overcome. Indeed, Nêhiyâwiwin is an open-ended, organic process.

Fire and Narrative Memory

The Cree poet-historian Louise Halfe discusses the importance of collective memory, and celebrates the location of her culture. She celebrates her Creeness and the importance of it:

*Tongueless in the earth,
Oh Nôhkomak [my grandmothers- N.M.]
Your bundles I carry inside ... (Halfe 1998: 6).*

A central religious tradition of the Nêhiyawak is the medicine bundle. The bundle holds âtayokanak (spirit beings), and songs and stories accompany the bundle ceremony. Halfe uses the imagery of the medicine bundle to refer to the process of internalizing all of these stories and memories. Stories hold the visceral memories that extend beyond space and time. Stories exist within us and are cognitive maps for us to find our way through the world and our lives. Stories ground us and give us a sense of space. Stories held in language give us voice, and allow us to determine meaning in the world.

I think that the fire of our culture, the fire of our collective imagination, the fire of the possibilities of all things, which exists in dream helpers (pawâkanak) and through the process of mâmatawisowin (“tapping into the source”), is open to us as long as we try to remember. As long as we struggle to keep our minds open, to allow the world to reveal itself to us, we will continue to grow. But once we think that we have mastered our culture, especially if we perpetuate it in books to the exclusion of oral, spoken

memories, then the fire will leave us. Tapping into the fire is what Norval Morrisseau calls the "House of Invention."

Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw (Kâ-Pimwêmêhahk) uses the metaphor of fire:

Mêkwac kîkway kêhtê-aya kisêyiniw, nôtikêw kîkway ê-kiskêyitahk, êkos îsi ka-wîhtamawat ka-kâsisophtêmakahk êwako. Êka êkosi tôtamihko, mêstohtêtwâwi kêhtê-ayak, pêyakwan, ê-âstawêk, êkos ôma k-êsi-kitimâkan kinêhiyâwininaw.

While the elders, the old men and the old women, still know something, they should tell them [the young] about it, so that it might be handed down. If this is not done, then our Cree culture will be miserable once the old people are all gone, like a fire that has gone out (Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw 1998: 130-131).

Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw played an essential role in the revitalization of Nêhiyâwiwin throughout the 1970s to 1990s. Throughout this time period, he was an elder with the Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College. Nimosôm was chosen to chair the Treaty Six Centennial Commemorations in the 1970s. During that time, he became more interested in Cree traditions, spending a great deal of time with "Old Jim" (as he was called). "Old Jim" adopted my grandfather as his own son, and he held my mosôm's hand as he prayed for my mosôm's work on the Treaties. My grandfather sat with that Old Man for many years, and the fragments and strands of memory he found during those days helped him affirm his identity as a Nêhiyaw.

Thunder and fire are primordial symbols within Cree culture. Thunderbirds are considered to be the most powerful beings who are honoured during the sundance. Thunderbirds represented the ability to tap into the power of the universe and indeed the depths of consciousness. Nêhiyâwiwin holds stories and memories of Thunderbirds as a way of affirming not only a relationship to Cree narrative history, but of a universe full of life beyond human experience. My namesake, Nakanasa, had a name that meant "Thunderbird" by metaphor. He, like Old Jim, was a strong link to the past and to the layers of narrative memory.

Cree narrative memory is held in stories and life experiences. The Old Ones, such as Old Jim, dedicated their whole lives to Nêhiyâwiwin. Not only did they remember stories and songs with precision, they also lived the stories and tried to use them to live good lives. Thus, Cree narrative memory is an organic process, which is a collective activity, and is essentially a map for possibilities of existence upon which people can draw to make sense of experience.

Conclusion

Cree narrative memory has been held in "lived" experience and narratives and is transmitted through kinship, language and humour. Cree narrative memory is an organic process that is in a constant state of being negotiated. There is an ongoing dialect between the cultural framework and individuals. The dialect of Cree narrative memory is also manifested in the play between the present and the past. At the foundation of the cultural framework of Cree people are belief in dreams, spirituality, Wîsakêcâhk narratives and oral history, all of which challenge conventional approaches to history. The only way that Cree narrative memory can be properly understood is through the paradigms of Cree people.

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