**Traditional Teachings and Intergenerational Wisdom in Bernelda Wheeler’s “*Our Beloved Land and You”***

Student’s Name

Course

Institution

Professor’s Name

Due Date

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The poem *Our Beloved Land and You* by Bernelda Wheeler, included in kisiskÂ cacimowin: *Indigenous Voices in Where the River Flows Swiftly* is an evocative thought piece on the strength of traditional teachings that have been passed down through the generations in the face of colonization, religious persecution and cultural erosion. With repetitive structure, changing pronouns, as well as images of rich landscape Wheeler is giving credit to the power of Indigenous knowledge systems and the weight of the land-based teaching as a key fact forming Indigenous identity. The poem is a historical record and a religious contemplation of how those teachings can change, transform and survive notwithstanding the systematic effort to erase those teachings (Wheeler, 2018, pp. 194197).

The poem is organized in terms of the life-course of an Indigenous masculine figure which might either be a personification of the poet himself or an amalgam of a large number of knowledge-holders. The subject experiences each phase of life- boyhood, manhood, teacher and elder, retaining his association with the land and adherence to traditional teachings of his people. These oral/experiential teachings convey a profound respect to community, reciprocity and nature. The speaker looks back in the first stanza:

“In stories we learned of you and yours / Stories of times long gone / That travelled through them that came before” (Wheeler, 2018, p. 194).

These lines underline the oral tradition as a crucial instructional process in which the knowledge is taught not only received but experienced and performed.

Perhaps one of the most eloquent elements in the poem is the repetition of the refrain, in that is the ending of each of the stanzas, the line, “Our beloved land / And you”. The repetition associates the identity to the land as a whole- both are sacred; both are teachers and both have been victimized by colonization. To this end, traditional teachings are not abstract teachings, rather they are ground-based experiences cultivated out of the land. They are also contextual, experienced by such activities as hunting, fishing, providing a shelter and narrating stories. In that sense, Wheeler underlines that land does not only serve as a backdrop to Indigenous life; rather, it can be an educator and the witness to human journey (Wheeler, 2018, p. 195).

Moreover, there is the intergenerational transfer of the knowledge outlined as a responsibility act in the poem. Within the stanza that starts with the lines, “Small Boy”, the speaker is reflecting back to a memory whereby the “was chosen to leave and learn / Then bring your teachings back” (Wheeler, 2018, p. 194). In this instance, the workings of tradition are presented to change: the boy is asked to leave the community to a brief period of seeking extra knowledge (this may be modern education brought by the colonialists) with the assumption that he can come back and use the skills he has acquired to empower his people. The idea echoes the dynamic quality of Indigenous knowledge systems- they are not fixed and can still assimilate the new experiences and still uphold the core values.

Nevertheless, sadness and unhappiness are also imbedded in the poem, especially because it tells the times of colonization. In Wheeler s description of the “Church Man”, there is a struggle between the two different worldview systems, that of the Indigenous way of life and the imported concept of religion and education system by the settlers. The presenter says:  
“Your wife and your small ones / All at home learning a strange new way / From a different world, a way / Those strangers brought” (Wheeler, 2018, p. 195). These lines are connected with the residential school system and the whole colonial project of assimilation. Nevertheless, despite cultural oppression, the subject still manages and upholds the traditional teachings. It is an impressive message to Indigenous survivorship.  
The poem mildly demonstrates the sense in which the conventional doctrines live on in silent subversive behaviors of tending and giving. The object of the stanza which starts with the expression “Giver of all” is explained as providing food and shelter to “the ones who had lost” (Wheeler, 2018, p. 196). He holds to the classic rules of communal responsibility (and kinship) by being generous rather than resentful, since it can never hurt to be nice. This generosity is material and spiritual at the same time-this is the act of teaching, proving that in reality the leadership and strength are in the service of people.

Wheeler also criticizes the colonial institutions that tried to forget Indigenous teachings at the same time as they used the Indigenous labour. The stanza, “Of their faith”, reveals the speaker explaining how the subject was lowly-paid and lowly-valued by settler authorities:  
“They paid you half a wage they did / Then threatened to take the half away” (Wheeler, 2018, p. 196).  
Nevertheless, the subject does not stop working out, as he states,  
“I’m here to do a job for God / My God of the prairie, of valley, berries and birds” (Wheeler, 2018, p. 196).

In this case, Wheeler is categorical that the subject is not a believer of colonial God, but instead, repossesses spirituality with respect to the land. His teachings do not concern obeying things, but serving the people and the land.

The final stanzas intensify the matter of loss especially in terms of signing of treaties. “Spoke the words of a foreign tongue / Signed the papers, the treaty was made / The lands were gone” (Wheeler, 2018, p. 197)  
The lines describe the agony of dispossession and that there was manipulation on the part of treaty negotiations. But even in this case the moment is placed in context by Wheeler, the moment is seen as the step of the subject before it took another step of this journey- a step that was taken in the press of danger, but which still has some residue of dignity and resistance. The speaker does not judge the topic, but she laments with him, considering that he was placed in an impossible situation.

Across the poem such a pronoun shift (our-, you-, they-) points to the collective memory and the combined accountability adopted by those who possess Indigenous knowledge and ancestors. Personal and communal, the speaker is respectful of his subject, yet he brings the reader also into the experience of surviving in land-based teaching. The diction and repeated use of language is used to create a rhythmic basis that represents the continuity of life and how the land develops through a seasonal change, as well as indicating that the words of the teachings are not the only ones, but rather those that happen in the generation after generation experiences.

Without a doubt, *Our Beloved Land and You* is a significant lesson in traditional theory and how it is passed down through generational teaching of Bernelda Wheeler. The poem, with its poetic language, the power of emotion and preservation of history has created a commemoration of strength of those knowledge keepers of the Indigenous people despite the assimilationist pressures who went on to teach, give and love. Traditional teachings are not museum pieces, as is depicted by Wheeler; rather they are living, breathing resistance in which the power of land is in the blood and passing in each generation.

**References**

Wheeler, B. (2018). Our beloved land and you. In J. R. Archibald-Barber (Ed.), *kisiskâciwan: Indigenous voices from where the river flows swiftly* (pp. 194–197). University of Regina Press.