Circling Stories: Cree Discourse and Narrative Ways of Knowing

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Cree narrative memory is essentially open-ended
—Neal McLeod, "Cree Poetic Discourse"

It's the hottest day Winnipeg has seen in twenty years, and the rivers are swollen, washing away the walking trails that ran beside them through the city. As a non-Native student who is about to begin PhD work on contemporary Cree literature at the University of Alberta, I am keenly aware of my status as a guest on this campus and in this city. Not only am I blundering my way through these buildings, looking for a room in St John's College, but I realize that I don't know the stories behind the names of many of these landmarks: who was Elizabeth Dafoe? Why is the library here named after her? And who was Lagimodière, and why is this boulevard named after him? Why is Chief Peguis remembered in the name of the "trail" that runs through the city? The name of this city, Winnipeg, is a Cree word, meaning "dirty water." With some newly acquired linguistic knowledge I figure that the name comes from the morpheme *wîn* which means dirty, and *nipiy*, which is Cree for water, and the locative or territorial suffix –îhk (put together would be *wînipîhk*), but Arok Wolvengrey's dictionary spells it *wînipêk*. This name, like a story, is one that I will circle for years. Much later I learn from Neal McLeod that the *pê* in *wînipêk* is a stem used to describe water. But, he says, you can never just have a name, just a word. You always need the story behind it. And in the days to come, after that first sweltering day in Winnipeg, I will hear Louis Bird tell us a story about how Lake Winnipeg got that name.

But on this very first day, in a stuffy classroom at the University of Manitoba, we are sitting in a sticky circle, on plastic chairs. However, I forget my sweaty back when Louis Bird begins to speak: "So I, anyway, I have listened to many, many legends in our area. Different kind. Different ways of saying. Different people, different ways of saying."

He pauses and apologizes for his broken English. A graduate student from India studying at the University of Toronto leans forward in his chair, earnest to praise his "subversive syntax" and "resistant use of the English language." Louis is silent. For a moment no one speaks. My bum prickles. Postcolonial theory sounds pretentious at this moment, and only seems to widen the gap between academic discourse and Cree oral literature. That moment, between the graduate student's eager response to Louis Bird's apology and what happened next opened up so many doors in my mind: in this paper I want to linger in the doorway of four of those spaces.

The Doorway between Standard Written English and Good Storytelling

First, I thought of the door between languages, and the power of Standard English. Clearly Louis Bird was not using the English language subversively; he was not making grammatical errors to resist the authority of Standard Written English. However, his speech prompted me to remember that Bird is speaking in a language that is foreign to him, thus reminding me that these stories are told in translation, and that his perspective and his linguistic background are not the same as mine. The graduate student's comments also reminded me that mastering Standard Written English is a key to power. Most academic audiences will only respect your words if they are, at the very least, strung together in error-free prose. Chris Anson explores the tension between good storytelling and correct prose in his narrative essay "Beginnings" where he reflects on his experience as a fledgling teacher reading a riveting student narrative full of glaring mistakes and nonstandard syntax:

> I read the paper avidly, in spite of the many grammatical errors. . . . there was a kind of leanness to the descriptions that seemed almost deliberate . . . But what then to do about all the errors? (63)

Perhaps the graduate student in our seminar felt similarly torn: he respected Louis Bird, and he wanted to learn from him and his stories, but he also respected error-free speech; to relieve this tension, he concluded that Bird must have been using broken English subversively. Or perhaps he felt a clear connection between his experience as an Indian growing up under the dominance of the colonizer's language and Louis Bird's experience as a Cree storyteller speaking in English in a Canadian university classroom.

Mastery of Standard English is a source of power and authority in North American culture (it is also a source of power all over the world: my experience teaching English as a Subsequent Language in South Korea made this clear to me). But Louis Bird filled the room with a dif-

ferent kind of authority. We all listened to him. Why? We listened not because his grammar was perfect or his prose eloquent, but because he was a good storyteller, we respected him, and his stories held wisdom.

Rhetorical Traditions: The Doorway between Nehiyaw and Western Academic approaches to Knowledge and Learning

Despite the awkward silence that afternoon, I found it intriguing that no one intervened or tried to correct anyone. This silence reminded me of the way Dorothy Thunder, my Cree language professor at the University of Alberta, handles disagreement or error in her classroom. There, whenever we answer a question incorrectly, she remains silent. She waits for someone to say the right answer. When she hears it she smiles: "*kwayask*!" she says. "Good job." At first, I felt disoriented by her approach. I *wanted* to be corrected if I made a mistake. But over time I grew to appreciate her nonassertive method, for, as James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson explains, Aboriginal teachers and leaders "seek to persuade through example but not to command" (270). Instead of debating or arguing, Cree teachers are more interested in meeting their audiences and students where they are; they want to establish mutual thinking. Eugene Gendlin analyzes the intricacy of mutual understanding and suggests that this complex process is foundational for dialogue and meaning-making ("Reply to Wallulis," qtd. in Sargent 176). But Cree discourse assumes more than intellectual mutual thinking: there is an ethical element to a Cree understanding of this concept. As Walter Lightning explains, "it is assumed that there will be effort to think mutually with the Elder. The assumption is that active attention, humility of the hearer, and respect for the Elder, will put one in the frame of mind where the minds can meet" (62).

This primary Cree assumption stands in stark contrast to many forms of academic discourse and Western rhetoric. In the weeks prior to Louis Bird's seminar, I took a Linguistics course entitled "The Structure of the Cree Language." There we spent one day looking at different genres in Cree, and for part of that class we also talked about rhetoric. The professor, Jeffery Muehlbauer, contrasted traditional western Aristotelian rhetoric, where the goal is to persuade, with Cree rhetoric. He suggested that the usual goal in Cree rhetoric is not an aggressive persuasion, but rather an establishment of mutual understanding and knowledge (August 6, 2010, lecture). Indeed, as Youngblood Henderson explains, knowledge is gained in traditional Algonquian cultures through "intimate and endless listening to stories and dialogue with

elders and parents. . . . each thematic repetition or spiral add[s] a little. This can be contrasted with the step-by-step, linear progression of an Aristotelian argument" (266).

Relationality: The Doorway between the Speaker and the Listener

In her essay, "Negotiating a Different Terrain: Geographical and Educational Cross-Border Difficulties," Loraine Mayer tells the story of her struggles as an Aboriginal student earning a degree in a mainstream academic institution. She found herself pulled by opposing traditions of education when she tried to write, so that the brutal and competitive nature of her western academic training caused her to write "lengthy and cruel rhetoric" (103). However, when she got "back to her right mind," recalling her No'khum (her Cree grandmother), she would delete the venomous writing and start again (103). She realized that her goal as a writer was to build dialogue, and the vitriolic language she had been using in her competitive frame of mind was only destroying dialogue (104). It seems to me that her story illustrates that establishing dialogue is a core value in Cree discourse, and this value assumes an audience who is willing to think along with the speaker. This brought me back to Louis Bird's storytelling, and prompted me to wonder how Cree speakers, storytellers, and writers go about establishing authority and mutual thinking. Often, in Cree stories and speeches, experiential knowledge is crucial. Speakers use their own experience to explain how they know what they know; this is sometimes established through chains of information: they will identify influential teachers, parents, Elders, and storytellers (Muehlbauer, August 6, 2010, lecture).

Some composition theorists, such as Carolyn Matalene, have suggested that keeping "the personal in one compartment and the impersonal in another is not only bad writing instruction, but also immoral" (223). However, this view is not always respected or understood in mainstream academic discourse. For example, Mayer describes how she felt "continually frustrated . . . having to defend my claims, when all I wanted was to tell a story, especially when the claims were from lived experience" (102). Similarly, Janice Acoose recalls how she "had experiences with readers/critics who too often dismiss[ed] as 'uncritical' or 'romantic/nostalgic' [her] lived experiences, which are rooted in Nêhiyawak-Métis-Nahkawè cultures" (217). Far from being uncritical or romantic, Neal McLeod asserts

> Instead of theory being abstracted and detached from concrete experience, theory (critical poetic consciousness) emerges out of concrete situations and through conversation and storyteller. (117)

These Cree writers' and theorists' emphasis on the importance of personal experience, culture, and conversation supports the writing of personal narrative in the classroom and in academic discourse. Indeed, leading composition theorist Wendy Bishop concludes that "real moments of the writing classroom. . . . [include] . . . the enlivened unwrapping of narratives and histories and tastes and experiences that are shared there—relationships between people, words, places, work, and wonder" (200). Perhaps Bishop's experiences with "real moments" can be understood more clearly if we understand learning as fundamentally relational. Lightning's relationship with the late Elder Louis Sunchild taught him that

> learning is not a product of transferring information between a teacher and a student. It is a product of creation and re-creation, in a mutual relationship of personal interaction, of information. It is not just a cognitive (mental) act, but an emotional—thus physical—act. Learning is felt. It is a sensation. It is something that involves emotions. And as the elder here points out, learning is ideally a spiritual thing, because the compassionate mind is one that is spiritually centred. (64)

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Dear Sondra Perl,

I have heard your voice on your *Felt Sense* CD, but I feel I know you far more intimately now that I have read your piece "Facing the Other: The Emergence of Ethics and Selfhood in a Cross-Cultural Writing Classroom." I had a hard time reading your essay in one sitting; I had to get up twice and grab a Kleenex from the bathroom. My eyes were too blurred with tears to read.

Even though this is a library book, I underlined this line: "I know I am starkly naming our differences; giving voice to this leaves me feeling scared, naked, unmasked" (183). This vulnerability reminds me of Gregory Scofield's poem "*astâm pî-miciso*" (translation: Come and eat!). In this poem he calls his readers (or his audience—I heard him perform this poem at the University of Alberta last year) to (metaphorically) consume his body: "I give you my fattest parts / to be chewed like Wihtikiw" (19–20) There is something terrifying about sharing the personal in writing. You feel naked. You feel devoured.

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All that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt (Yeats 522). But the personal remains, and we are drawn to it because stories are powerful and they can control our lives. Nancy Mairs declares, "there is nothing exceptional about our lives" (304). In fact, we might respond to stories of personal disaster by saying "So what?" We've heard worse

stories. Tom King reminds us that the newspapers are filled with disaster stories: "Suicide bombings. Sectarian violence. Sexual abuse. Children stacked up like cordwood in refugee camps around the globe. So what makes [her] story special?" (8). Absolutely nothing. But, he argues, he tells personal stories not to play on our "sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories . . . as long as I live" (9).

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All that is personal soon rots unless it is packed in ice or salt. But the personal remains, and we are drawn to it because "the narrator of personal disaster . . . wants . . . to comfort" (Mairs 304). We read literature to know that we are not alone, and we read literature to understand each other and ourselves more clearly and more deeply.

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All that is personal soon rots unless it is packed in ice or salt. And this salt, this ice, what is it made of? How do we preserve the personal? What will draw readers to some stories and not others? (Mairs 303). Yeats would argue that form and attention to language are the salt and the ice. The stories must be written well; they are never "the bundle of accident and incoherence that sits down to breakfast" (509). If the author is a poet, she must pack her stories carefully into a form that is fitting for the story. Derek Walcott once told me "the shape of the poem must be obeyed, like music."

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All that is personal soon rots unless it is packed in ice or salt. Writers must link their "own experiences with a larger narrative structure . . . to expand one's own understanding and also, in a small way, the larger collective memory" (McLeod 113). Cree narrative memory involves packing personal stories in the ice of the land and the salt of their ancestors.

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All that is personal soon rots unless it is packed in ice or salt. What justifies the publication of a personal story? "It is not enough to feel bad nature's bite: . . . [t]he trick with this as with any genre, is to satisfy its requirements while escaping its confines" (Mairs 306–7). Writers must approach form and genre as "a straitjacket in the way that a straitjacket was a straitjacket for Houdini" (Muldoon 1).

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All that is personal soon rots unless it is packed in ice or salt. But ice and salt cannot nourish a body. There has to be some meat there. James Baldwin says that our stories are "the only light we've got in all this darkness" (63). Leslie Marmon Silko contends they are "all we have to fight off illness and death" (2).

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All that is personal soon rots unless it is packed in ice or salt. The personal is the meat that nourishes. "I am all laid out / for you to see, to taste / the feast of me. Â-ha" (Scofield 45–47). The personal makes us terrifyingly vulnerable.

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All that is personal soon rots unless it is packed in ice or salt. I have packed some versions of my stories tightly, in the salt and ice of strict forms. So when I wrote about the recurring memory of my sister, the one who died when I was eight, I wrote a ghazal because the couplets and the repeated refrain allowed me to explore the circularity and the flow of grief. "The unity of the ghazal flows from both its pattern of rhyme and refrain, and from its tone and intensity" (Braid and Shreve 78). When I wrote about the way my world was altered (and yet remained the same) I wrote a spectral poem because "it reads alike both backwards and forwards. . . . What lends the palindrome its power is the shift in emphasis or meaning when the lines are repeated, which allows the poet to give a different perspective in each half of the poem" (Braid and Shreve 130). The form, I would like to believe, moves my story towards literature.

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In his Master's thesis entitled *Compassionate Mind: Implications of a Text Written by Elder Louis Sunchild,* Lightning asserts that Cree discourse assumes a certain level of intimacy and vulnerability: "The Elder is vulnerable and makes himself/herself open" (62) to the hearer. This vulnerability is crucial for establishing mutual thinking. This openness stands in contrast to many university educators' teaching goals; as Lad Tobin explains, "critics of personal writing [argue] our students desperately need all sorts of things: training in literary criticism, the tropes and conventions of academic discourse, cultural studies, postmodern theory, multiculturalism, grammar, usage, critical thinking, library skills. The last thing first-year students need, apparently, is an invitation to tell us or themselves who they [are]" (74). Contrastingly, according to

traditional Cree discourse, personal experience, family histories, and narrative vulnerability are foundational for learning and dialogue.

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Cree speakers and writers will often establish their authority by introducing themselves from the start. They usually tell their audience where they come from (one of the first questions I learned fluently was *tân'te ohci kîya*? Where are you from?) and who they come from (I soon learned that *awîniki kinekihikwak*? Who are your parents? is a common question). Indeed, in his book *Research is Ceremony,* Shawn Wilson suggests that relationality is "the shared aspect of an Indigenous ontology and epistemology" and that "relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality" (7). Neal McLeod explains

> Through relations, we are able to create the web of understanding of our embodied locations and stretch it outwards to a wider context of collective historicity and through a poetics grounded in dialogue and an open-ended flow of narrative understanding. A poetics of wâhkôtowin [kinship] and empathy are key to thorough engaging (114)

These foundational assumptions (that authority is built on kinship and empathy) suggest an ethical approach to writing and discourse. The Cree word *wâhkôtowin* is translated in Arok Wolvengrey's dictionary as "relationship"; however, it refers not only to human relationships, but also to our relationships with all of the non-human beings around us (plants, animals, rocks, and spirits). This concept suggests that we must live in a way that honors all of these relationships, and to me it has profound implications for my scholarly writing practice. In order to write ethically, I seek to write in ways that honor my relationships with my teachers, my ancestors, my neighbors, and the land on which I live.

Turning towards the Beginning: The Doorway between Academic Discourse and Oral Storytelling

> *Cree poetic discourse connects to old voice echoes*
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> —Neal McLeod, "Cree Poetic Discourse"

The last doorway I want to linger in is the door between academic discourse and storytelling. How do stories function differently from traditional western academic discourse? Louis Bird suggests that stories allow teachers and elders to address issues that should not be addressed

directly, but he also says they are teaching tools (www.ourvoices.ca, February 17, 2003).

An early draft of this essay was called "A Story and Four Lessons," and my plan was to tell one of the stories I had learned from Louis Bird, pull out four lessons from it, and apply them to alternative discourses and narrative ways of knowing. At first I felt excited and confident in this task: I had heard the story from a respected Cree storyteller, I had worked at memorizing it and telling it correctly, and I had been thinking about the story for several months. I really wanted to explore how Cree intellectual traditions could teach me about discourse and knowledge. But when I went back to the story, I began to feel unprepared. I knew that I didn't totally understand the story. I didn't know what the story could teach me, but I wanted to learn. I took courage from Gian Pagnucci's assertion that "stories connect what we know to what we're trying to understand. They make things personal, give things meaning. They make things matter" (9). But I had a cold hard feeling in my chest, as if there were a metal rod lying there against my sternum. I felt like I sometimes do when I read some of those parables that Jesus told. Sometimes, when we are honest, those stories don't make sense. I also worried that I was making a mistake in Cree protocol: even though Louis Bird had given us permission to re-tell a story if we worked hard at memorizing it, and if we told it to our friends, I wasn't sure if it was okay to bring that story into an academic setting.

I put those nagging feelings behind me because my rough draft was due in a few days. I had four lessons, and in my mind they were clearly connected to both the theories and the story: first, you should be curious—wonder, my grandfatherly uncle is fond of reminding me, is the beginning of wisdom; second, you should listen to your elders, your relations, your sisters; third, you should stay humble no matter how much you learn and no matter how powerful you become; finally, you should leave some things alone. I built my first draft around the lessons that I learned from the story. But this structure was not clear to my fellow classmates or to my professor, and I returned to my computer with a rough draft covered in red ink. When I came across Walter Lightning's dissertation and read the following story, that cold metal rod (that had remained in my chest since I wrote the draft) melted away: I can honestly say that I don't understand the story. Not yet, anyway. I am still too young.

> The Elder than (sic) took a stick about 16 inches long from the ground a few feet away from where they were sitting on the grass. He then scratched a notch at about the middle of the stick, and then indicating one end of the stick and that notched mark said,

> "This is when you are born and this notch is 50 years old. In this area between being born up to 50 years of age, you do not know anything." He then proceeded to point from the notch at the middle of the stick to the other end and stated that from 50 years of age to 100 years of age you can say that you begin to have a hunch, an intuitive feeling, for knowledge. From 100 years of age and on, you then have entered an area, a stage in your life, where you know something. (14)

Lightning's story about the Elder's understanding of knowledge reminded me of one of Louis Bird's lessons on stories. He told us on that first sweltering day that all of his stories have at least four versions: there is the version he tells to children, then there is the version he tells to young adults, next is a version he tells to people who have grown children of their own, and finally there is a version that only old people know. These stories are not meant to be understood all at once. To truly understand these stories takes a lifetime. Perhaps this is the beginning of wisdom: admit that you know nothing. Carry the stories with you. Live. Learn. Remember. Re-imagine.

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