

## Envisioning Language Reflective of an Indigenous Worldview

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We begin this paper with a respectful acknowledgement of the Mi'kmaq (L'nu) people—this is their land.<sup>i</sup>

*So gently I offer my hand and ask,  
Let me find my talk  
So I can teach you about me.  
Rita Joe (1932-2007)*

The late Rita Joe, a Mi'kmaw poet, writes of her experiences at the Residential School in Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia where she was robbed of her language and Indigenous worldview, but in the final lines of the poem *I Lost My Talk* (Joe, 2001, p. 17), she writes of building bridges across cultures by first getting to know herself and then educating others. In this paper, we share pieces of the ongoing conversation between Adrian, a Mi'kmaw graduate student, and Mary Jane, a settler professor, who worked together as Adrian engaged in life-writing as part of his master's thesis (Downey, 2017). We begin by articulating our own understandings of ourselves toward creating relational space. We then share and discuss two personal stories from our relationship as graduate student and supervisor. Through sharing these stories, we articulate the linguistic shifts we have made toward creating space within academic writing for our understandings of Indigenous, and specifically Mi'kmaw, worldviews.

## **Creating Relational Space**

My name is Adrian Downey. My grandfather's name was Nolan Bennett. He was a Mi'kmaw fisherman who lived most of his life in St. George's, Newfoundland. He had thirteen children, including my mother. Today, my entire maternal family are status Indians under the Qalipu Mi'kmaw First Nation (QMFN). It is, however, possible that in the coming years several of us, myself included, may lose that status because of complicated political situations (but that is another story).

Through much of my adult life, I have wrestled with what it means to be Mi'kmaw. Though I always had some vague awareness of my heritage, I first explicitly learned of my Indigenous ancestry in my teenage years and later gained status as a result of the formation of the QMFN in 2012. Early in the career as a teacher, I spent two years in Eeyou Istchee, the traditional territory of the James Bay Cree, attempting to learn from those around me what it meant to be Indigenous. After two years, however, I knew I needed to return to my own territory, Mi'kma'ki, in order to answer those questions. Upon my return, I visited with family, made connections with Mi'kmaw Elders and knowledge keepers, and also began my master's work at MSVU. It was there that I met Mary Jane Harkins, who encouraged me to interrogate these issues of identity in my master's thesis.

*My name is Mary Jane Harkins. As a child, I viewed the world from the edge of the ocean on the rugged eastern coast of Nova Scotia. My interconnectedness with my parents' lives was very influential in my early years. We almost always had houseguests, often people who lived too far away to travel each day for medical treatment and would stay with us while they received medical care*

*from my father. At one time, my father's operating room was in our basement as well as my mother's pharmacy. My Mom was always making ointments and pills that she would put in my father's medical bag to take with him on his house calls. In my home community, there were many nested contexts. There was a section of land owned by the Mi'kmaq, with whom my father was very close; however, it is my relatively recent research with Mi'kmaw researchers that allowed me the experiences to begin to learn about Indigenous languages, traditions, and culture."*

We offer these words of introduction as a way for you, the reader, to establish a relationship with us, the authors. Perhaps you knew Adrian's grandfather, perhaps you know Mary Jane's mother and father, or perhaps you are also Mi'kmaw—without knowing us, you cannot know our words. This practice of creating relationship through writing is part of how we have envisioned language that is coherent with our understanding of Indigenous knowledge and, in particular, Mi'kmaw worldviews. "The colonization process, and in particular education, targeted oral tradition—our voice." (Graveline, 1998, p. 28). Indeed, the Mi'kmaw language was robbed from me before my birth and, despite struggles to reclaim it, fluency still alludes me. Thus, this envisioning is something of a quest to find space in the English language for my understanding of an Indigenous worldview; some may refer to this act as decolonization or Indigenization; I prefer to think of it as the journey to find my talk.

Story is a big part of how we envision that language.

## **The First Story**

When Mary Jane and I started working on my thesis, we were still building a relationship. I had finished the majority of my coursework but had not yet met Dr. Harkins. I went to her office one day after class to introduce myself, acting on the advice of another professor. I was immediately struck by how easy it was to talk with her and how much we had to say to one another. Eventually, I asked her if she would be interested in supervising an independent study and potentially my thesis work.

*I never accept a student for an independent study or thesis work until I am sure that they have spoken with many people and we have both agreed that we can work together. For the first time, ever, I didn't do this. I said, "yes" but after Adrian left, I wasn't quite sure what had just happened.*

After the first official meeting of our independent study, I was given the task of "writing my story." As a natural storyteller and a person who really enjoys writing (but hates editing), I easily threw myself into the task. I would wake up early every day and start writing, continuing to work late into the night, usually only taking breaks for food and exercise. A few days before our next meeting, I sent a draft of "my story" that was over 17,000 words long and had only been briefly edited.

*The story arrived, and I started reading and reading, and reading—this was an ongoing story. What a memory this writer has for details. I believe the truthfulness of a person is found in the details in their story. Parts of the story were so exciting, but for other parts, I remember thinking, "I don't know if I should be reading this." I'd been handed someone's precious life story—all 17,000 words with very little punctuation! Adrian had put himself out on a thin limb and proven he could write narrative even if he didn't use*

*commas. He was living such an honest life so fully in the moment, but what about the rules of academia? I ruminated over what to do.*

I don't know what Dr. Harkins was expecting, but it certainly wasn't that. A few days before our next meeting I recognized my mistake—this was the first piece of my work Mary Jane would read and it raw and unpolished. I imagined that she probably thought I was as much of a mess as my writing was.

When our meeting finally came, I was nervous, which is quite unusual for me. In our meeting, however, I realized that although Mary Jane was overwhelmed and advised that my work would need to be rewritten, she was the right person to supervise my thesis.

*My recollection is that Adrian's first words at our meeting were that this was **part** of his story, but he still had more to write. I don't quite remember how I reacted, but I was thinking this could be a very long process.*

*I had decided to write reflective questions for Adrian to consider as he reviewed his writing. I proceeded very cautiously before sharing the questions. The words that were to remain in his story had to be his decision as it was and is his story of his relations. I still didn't know where we were heading. There was something very spiritual happening, and I couldn't name it, which is unusual in my world of academia. My office atmosphere still changes with Adrian presence.*

Despite being overwhelmed, Mary Jane saw potential in my work and recognized that writing with such an expansive scope was an irreplaceable part of my process. In short, I didn't feel any

judgement on her part. I felt like she saw the journey and not the product.

*I don't like it when students in my classes keep asking me about the exact number of words for an assignment but, in this case, I was the one asking Adrian if he had some idea of how long the next paper might be. Adrian replied with something to the effect that, as an Indigenous writer, he writes until he finishes. Contrary to what you might be thinking, I was quite impressed and felt this was going to be an intriguing journey. Thus began our authentic collaboration and cultural bridge building.*

The second draft was shorter, and since then we have continued to work and grow together.

*We continue to engage in respectful, reflective conversations about language.*

## **Ongoing Stories**

There aren't always beginnings and endings to our stories. The personal narratives we tell, in particular, are always a segment of a larger narrative arc—our life stories. In our own minds, these stories flow seamlessly together as part of our stream of consciousness. Sometimes, once the stories begin to surge, they cannot be stopped. For some Indigenous students, making connections between content and life narrative, thus forming a relationship between content and self, is a fundamental aspect of the learning process: “A person must first know him-or herself and his or her family line, tribal nation and responsibly to all relations if he or she is to function within an aboriginal identity” (Graveline, 1998, p. 57). Archibald (2008) and Graveline (1998) both articulate the

Indigenous sense of self as relational in nature and situated within one's family, one's community, and one's nation. Likewise, Wilson (2008) articulates Indigenous epistemology as based in relationship. That is to say that we come to know by situating understandings within the context of our relationships and our concept of self—both of which are captured in our life story. In other words, the way some Indigenous people learn is through grounding information in their relationships and their stories. Sable and Francis (2012) articulate this relationality in the Mi'kmaw context: "In Mi'kmaw [language], every thing or every person is spoken of in relation with something or someone else ... everything existed within a network of relationships and could not exist as a separate entity outside those relationships" (p. 32). The Mi'kmaw language is embedded with relational knowledge, making it easier to situate information in relation to oneself. Thus, any language reflective of Mi'kmaw knowledge must allow for the ability to situate oneself through connecting deeply to one's self, community, nation, and thereby, life story.

When Mary Jane asked me to tell my story, it made perfect sense to me. Not only was it a way for us to continue building our relationship, it was also a way for me to come in touch with my own history, my understanding of myself, and my relationships to others; it was a way for me to ground the things I was attempting to learn in my own life context and build a relationship with them. The task of writing things down, however, is never an easy one.

Traditionally, stories were told orally, which allowed the storyteller to expand on pieces in one telling and shrink them in another. The transient nature of oral communication gave the speaker the ability to move and shift with their audience, beginning and ending in the most pertinent location for each particular

gathering. As Archibald (2008) notes, “Whenever Indigenous oral tradition is presented in textual form, the text limits the level of understanding because it cannot portray the storyteller’s gestures, tone rhythm, and personality” (p. 17). Personal storytelling is part of the oral tradition and, in writing down stories, whether they be personal or sacred, there is always a burden of permanence.

During the writing process, the weight of selecting stories that lived up to relational accountability, a concept put forward by Wilson (2008) and many other Indigenous writers to articulate the necessity of honouring one’s relations through writing and research, rested heavily on my shoulders. I wanted my stories to be true to my experience and also to be respectful to my relations and the next seven generations. In the end, I told the stories I felt spoke the most truth to my topic and tried to tell them in such a way that reported but did not interpret (i.e. devoid of judgemental language).

Through sharing stories, settlers and Indigenous people begin to build small but sustainable relationships—a major goal of reconciliation according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2015). Perhaps the best thing we can do as educational professionals is to create a space where our students can tell their stories if they choose, encouraging them to form a personal relationship with the subjects we teach. This is the gift Mary Jane gave me when she said at the end of a long conversation, “Write your story.”

### **The Passing Story**

One of the most transformative conversations between myself and Dr. Harkins came early in our relationship. We came together to start thinking about an independent study in narrative



inquiry that would build into my thesis work. In that meeting, I told Dr. Harkins about my interest in storytelling pedagogy. I also mentioned a blog post I had read recently about a young woman who used the term *white-passing privilege* to describe her identity and positionality as a fair-skinned Indigenous woman (Ellingburg, 2015). Dr. Harkins encouraged me to look into this matter—her words still stick in my mind, “... but this white-passing, white-looking, white-seeming privilege; I think there is something there”—and it ended up being my thesis topic. The elements of storytelling were still there but, instead of focusing on teaching through story, I was focused on understanding myself through story.

In our next meeting, we spoke about the term “passing” and the implication it had within some Mi’kmaq communities. Mary Jane reminded me that passing often refers to the end of one’s physical journey and that using the term *white-passing privilege* to describe my experience may not be understood in my community and may not reflect my own understanding. Initially, I had some difficulty around this point. I thought that if I were to use a term other than *white-passing privilege*, the academic community would not understand my writing. After contemplation and conversations with my family and friends, however, I eventually arrived at the term *white-seeming*. Initially, I justified the term as a way of honouring what Margaret Kovach refers to as my tribal epistemology (2009). After reading some of the literature around racial passing and privilege, however, I noticed that passing, which Kroeger (2003) defines as “when people effectively present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be” (p. 7), is often articulated as containing an element of intentional deception (see also Khanna & Johnson, 2010). My understanding of looking white while being Indigenous has nothing to do with presentation—which, to me, implies an intentionality—rather it has everything to do with being

perceived as other than one is, which I have theorized as contributing to what Tuck and McKenzie (2015) call the “erasure” of Indigenous peoples.<sup>iii</sup> Thus, the term began to speak to me much more than white passing.

*“White-seeming privilege” was such a powerful insight on Adrian’s part as it created a sense of agency for him. This is when he began to fully embrace an Indigenous worldview in his writing. He wrote beautiful passages and poetry. For me, it meant more and more time contemplating Adrian’s writing. This had to be done at a time when I had lots of positive energy. My language is grounded in Standard English, so I wanted to choose my words carefully and try to ensure they were supportive and respectful of an Indigenous worldview. There is so much that is implicit in language, how language influences our identity, and the stories we write about our environment and ourselves. Johnston (2004) writes that language is “constitutive” as “it creates realities and invites identities” (p. 9). I needed to be forever mindful of colonization that seeks to rob Indigenous people of their language as well as their land (Paik, 2006). Andrea Bear Nicholas stresses that “For Indigenous Peoples, language is not just a form of communication, but also a priceless archive in which the knowledge necessary for survival is embedded” (p. 19).*

### Meaning in Different World Views

In this brief story, we see the push and pull of writing as an Indigenous academic. In the Western academic tradition, there is a demand to use a standardized language to maintain clarity of meaning and meet the ‘rigorous’ expectations of ‘academic’ work. Students need to be succinct and specific with their use of language; however, for the Indigenous student, these linguistic restrictions

cause a cultural dissonance. As discussed above, the nature of Indigenous knowledge is personal and unique to the lived reality of the individual, their community, and land (Archibald, 2008; Ermine, 1995; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015; Wilson, 2008) and, when we attempt to describe our knowledges in the language of Western academia, something is lost in translation (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008).

Above, my academic training pulled me toward the desire to use a better-known term, despite the fact that it didn't reflect my initial intuition and cultural framework. My academic training has resulted in writing that comes like a surging torrent but is thickly laden with academic terminology. When I am writing in the Indigenous tradition, my tendencies often run directly counter to what I actually want to say. During my undergraduate education, I tried hard to mimic writing of the critical paradigm, particularly the work of Peter McLaren (2007). While there is an incredible power in these discourses in their critique of societal structures, for me, they do not let my heart sing (Kovach, 2010).

To be sure, many Indigenous authors and scholars draw on critical literature to articulate their experience with oppression; I would take nothing away from those writers. I, however, think it is important to highlight the several key differences between critical and Indigenous language that I see. First, is the notion of non-judgemental understanding inherent in many Indigenous worldviews (Wilson, 2008). For many Indigenous people, it is not our place to cast judgement on people or things. This stems from the philosophical belief that there is no right and wrong, only balance and harmony (Cajete, 2000; Wilson, 2008; See also Ross, 2014). Comparatives and superlatives are an inherently Western way of viewing the world, and throughout the thesis writing process,

Mary Jane was always quick to point out words like "better" or "stronger," which indicated the comparative tendencies of my critical training. A second difference is the place of the story. The critical paradigm is steeped in the analytic and philosophical language of Western academia. The rigour of its arguments is often assessed in terms of how well a phenomenon is broken down. As discussed above, in the Indigenous tradition things are appreciated more holistically, often in the form of story (Archibald, 2008; Brayboy, 2005; Cajete, 2000; Kovach, 2009). The critical paradigm, though progressive in its orientation, wants to understand through analysis and through the Western philosophical tradition of logic, rhetoric, and particularly deconstruction and critique (Lather, 2007 as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2008b). The Indigenous tradition wants to understand through direct relationship (Cajete, 2000; Stonechild, 2016; Wilson, 2008), holistic experience (Archibald, 2008) and, thus, story (Brayboy, 2005; Kovach, 2009). Cajete (2000) emphasises the differences through his concept of the metaphoric mind, a way of expressing the holistic nature of Indigenous thought: "When language is developed and used extensively, the holistic experience of the metaphoric mind begins to get chopped up and labeled, until, eventually it recedes into the subconscious" (p. 28). Furthermore, he states, "The metaphoric mind ... communicates and relates to the world in the more holistic structures of oral stories, linguistic metaphors, images, and intuitions" (pp. 28-29). Mary Jane and I inherently understood and agreed on the importance of story and non-prosaic linguistic representation to my work, but I don't think either of us realised how far our attempts to honour the holistic nature of our thinking would take us away from the standard thesis path.

As previously stated, the critical paradigm can and does provide support for Indigenous people. Through it, we can work

toward conscientization (Friere, 1996) and decolonization (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012). Likewise, “[I]ndigenous scholars can show critical theorists how to ground their methodologies at the local level” (Denzin & Lincon, 2008a, p. x) as well as many other truths. Part of envisioning a language that reflects our understanding of Indigenous knowledge, however, is relying as much on our own intuitive and traditional understandings as on critical language to describe our experience—perhaps a version of what Battiste (2013) calls trans-systemic knowledge, or two-eyed seeing in the worlds of Elders Mardena and Albert Marshall (Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall, 2012). Our words are from the heart, not from the mind; they echo the bird-songs and the sounds of the wind and tell stories, beautifully intricate stories that appreciate the interconnectedness of all living things (Graveline, 1998). Our talk is creative the same way the universe is creative, an ongoing dialogue between chaos and order (Cajete, 2000). Creating spaces that respect this talk academia is a challenge, but no one said making 500 years of colonization right would be easy.

*I remember so well the day that Adrian shared one of his poems. His poems moved him, ever so smoothly, out of the path of traditional academia and into the calming waters of his Indigenous worldview. He heard the words of his grandfather in the wind and, in that relational space, he didn't need citations and references. His strong Indigenous voice, uniting his body, mind, heart, and spirit, rooted him and gave him the courage to write his stories. In these stories, he valued his mother telling him about the best places to pick blueberries, his family's stories told on the beach, the rhythm of the ocean, the sound of the wind, and the people he loves. In his stories, I saw a strong person, yet ever watchful, caring, and respectful.*

Poetry is the space “where my heart meets my mind and where both are set free from the tyrannical rule of cognitive imperialism” (Downey, 2017, p. 155). Rediscovering poetry enabled me to find my voice as an Indigenous person; it allowed me to momentarily push aside my academic training in critical theory and connect with what it meant for me to be an Indigenous person. In discovering my own creativity, I connected to the universal creativity of all living beings (Cajete, 2000). That creativity is an inseparable part of the language we envision. Throughout the thesis process, Mary Jane and I both relied heavily on our intuitions to guide our writing and thinking.

## Conclusion

In this brief paper, we have shared our stories of building sustainable relationships. We have discussed the importance of relationality to Indigenous peoples, our languages, our learning, and our understandings of the world. We have also discussed several of the differences between Indigenous worldviews and critical worldviews, particularly non-judgemental and holistic understanding, while also expressing the potential for their mutuality. In all these things we have been mindful of time, ensuring that there was always enough time for us to listen to one another and speak our hearts. *Indeed, throughout the writing process, when I became concerned with timelines, Adrian would gently remind me that nothing happens until it is meant to happen.*

From the outside world, academia appears a slow-moving monolith of administrative bureaucracy. For those of us on the inside, however, we know how fast things can move. Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) put forward its calls to action in 2015, there has been a flurry of action in Canada’s

universities as administrators and researchers attempt to respond. We must remember, however, that Indigenous peoples have always, still do, and will always take the long view (Cajete, 2000; Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). In the Mi'kmaw context, our traditional societies existed for more than 13,000 years before colonization. The secret to this longevity is our ability to build and maintain relationships—relationships that stand the test of time. Relationships (and/or perhaps relations) are everything to Indigenous people, and modern scholars have articulated relational understanding as central to the Indigenous way of knowing the universe (Graveline, 1998; Meyer, 2008; Sable & Francis, 2012; Stonechild, 2016; Wilson, 2008). Long-lasting, sustainable relationships take time to build; they do not happen overnight but, rather, over lifetimes. The language we use to discuss Indigenous education and Indigenous knowledge must be reflective of our relationships and seek to honour them. Cajete (2000) mentions that words hold power and, as we speak words, we pray through the wind:

Indian spiritual traditions hold that spoken words and language have a quality of spirit because they are expressions of human breath. Language in the form of prayer and song has, therefore, a life energy that can affect other energy and life forms toward certain ends. For American Indians, language used in a spiritual, evocative, or affective context is "sacred" and has to be used responsibly. (p. 264)

Words do hold power; so do the stories we tell. As we write our stories and our words for others to read, we must remember to take the long view—we must remember our relations. We must heed the advice of residential school survivor Evelyn Brockwood who asks us to think about the words we use and "... go slow; we are going too

fast, too fast... we have many tears to shed before we even get to the word reconciliation" (TRC, 2015, p. 16).

This is the language we envision: a language of respect, hope, love, and story.

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<sup>i</sup> The interactions of which this article tells took place at Mount Saint Vincent University, which is located in Jipuktuk (Halifax, NS) on the unceded and unpurchased territory of the Mi'kmaw people.

<sup>ii</sup> Throughout this text, Mary Jane's voice is italicized.

<sup>iii</sup> A full discussion of the subtleties in my distinction is beyond the scope of this article. For a fuller discussion see my other writing on the topic (Downey, 2017, In Press).