

Cree Intellectual Traditions in History

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■ **A few years back**, I was nudged by my former MA supervisor to do some expert witness testimony in federal court. A daunting challenge, but I could hardly say no, as it offered a great opportunity to get first-hand insights on how oral history is presented, understood, and evaluated in that context. I learned much. Among other things, I was struck by how ill-prepared the courts are to deal with other ways of knowing. They are challenged in their task of assessing the oral history evidence offered by the Old People because they have few, if any, appropriate tools to help them understand what it is the Old People are sharing with them. So they look to the “expert witnesses” to provide some of the skills they need. In this context, studies of and in indigenous oral histories can have very real implications in the daily lives of indigenous people.

Doing oral history with Old People poses many challenges but is worthwhile because it yields precious experiences and insights into how they understand the world around them. More specifically, it yields insight into the cultural values and laws that they live by and practice in their roles as keepers of community knowledge. Elders are not just repositories of knowledge. They are not official documents; they are human beings and teachers. As the days go by, fewer and fewer of them remain among us, which makes learning

from them, preserving their teachings, and remembering them as best we can in their own contexts all that much more important.

Historians are trained to go beyond the data, to get to know their sources inside and out. This holds especially true when studying with Old People. One does not simply whip in and out of their lives; one develops reciprocal relationships with them.¹ What I want to speak to here is the importance of learning more about Indigenous knowledge keepers and how they understand the world around them. Who are these living sources? What are the tools of their trade and how do they practice it? The overarching goal of this paper is to contribute to the growing studies on the value of Indigenous oral history as source and method in scholarly research. It is intended to add a little bit about other ways of knowing in order to help us along as we carve a space for Indigenous oral history in history, as history, and it takes a momentary path outside the academic framework to consider the nature and quality of Indigenous oral histories from within their own contexts.

By no means am I an expert in Indigenous oral histories. By the standards of my people, I am a fledgling, and my learning will take a lifetime. What I understand so far comes from many intersecting places: from my predominantly *nēhiyawak* (Cree) and *nēhiyawpwātak* (Cree/Assiniboine) family members (immediate and extended) and teachers, from being a guest and student in other Indigenous communities, from academic teachers and critical and post-/anti-colonial scholars, and from First Nations and Métis literary scholars who have been writing in the oral tradition for a very long time.² In the spirit of the subject matter, I ask the reader to “listen” to the words—listen to the teachings shared with us for your own contemplation. What little analysis there is here is derived from my own contemplations and understandings.

The most learned of teachers among us is *kisēyiniw*, “an Elder.” *Kisēyiniwak* are differentiated from *kéhté-ayak*, “Old People,” by their standing in the community as people who have demonstrated throughout their lives their generosity, skills, and wisdom. The word *kisēyiniw* comes from the word *kisēwew*, which roughly translates as “protector.” This information come from the late Alex Bonais from Little Pine First Nation, who left them for us in recorded interviews with him done in the 1970s by the late Wilfred Tootoosis from Poundmaker First Nation.³ In defining *kisēyiniw*, Alex Bonais gave the analogy of a duck beating the ground with its wing to distract a potentially dangerous predator and give its little ones time to run and hide. When the Cree see this, they say, “That bird or animal *kisēwew*, that one is protecting its young. That’s what *kisēyiniw* means—to encircle oneself around or over one’s young. That’s what a true Elder does, they encircle themselves around, or hover around, their children or grandchildren.”⁴ The words *kisēyiniw* and *kisēwew* are closely related to *kisēwatisiwin*, which means “kindness, compassion, empathy.”

Stan Cuthand was born and raised on the Little Pine Cree Reserve in Saskatchewan and was among the first generation of Cree men to receive a high school and university education.⁵ He followed the path of his mentor Edward Ahenakew, a Cree from Sandy Lake First Nation,⁶ into the Anglican ministry and served as a minister and schoolteacher on a number of Indian reserves in Western Canada. For the last twenty-odd years before retiring, Stan was employed in various teaching and research vocations. We first met when I embarked on my undergraduate studies in 1982 at the University of Manitoba, where Stan Cuthand was head of the Native Studies Department. I later had the privilege of working with him until his retirement from teaching.

Stan has fond memories of growing up among great orators and storytellers. He recalls that storytelling was an integral part of everyday life and that a number of Old Men were well known for their expertise and oratorical skills:

One of the men who told stories was Sakamôtâ-inew, the son of Poundmaker. He lived at Poundmaker but he used to come to Little Pines because that's where his friends were.... And he brought his blankets and he'd place them against the wall and he sat there and sat there and he said, "Once upon a time Wisahkécâhk⁷ was walking....," and my father said, "Well! You make the children happy!"

Sakamôtâ-inew was a teller of "miscellaneous" stories—Wisahkécâhk stories, little stories about situations that happened in early times before Treaty, all kinds of stories "about how a person did something, gave a feast, or gave away horses or was a warrior and how he won a wife." Most stories had been passed on to him. His specialty was Wesakejac stories. One thing about Sakamôtâ-inew, "people would laugh at him. He would forget the details of some stories, or he would forget a word and wonder, 'Now what was that word I was gonna say?' and the men would laugh at him and help him out."

Sakamôtâ-inew was one of those who came to tell stories during hard times. One winter when Stan's brother's child was sick, Sakamôtâ-inew came all the way from Poundmaker and told stories all night. "I often wondered, how did he know the child was sick that he came?" He also showed up at the wakes where his stories "helped the mourners"; his storytelling would "relieve the tension with the mourners." Stan Cuthand continued:

The other storyteller was Night Traveler. He was a real Plains Cree, he spent most of his time south in the early 1920's looking for pronghorn antelope. That's the only thing they could hunt, there was nothing left.... [Night Traveler] was witness to the signing of Treaty No. 6 and

he used to talk about it.... He specialized in the Treaties. And he said, "The Queen said you would be looked after, when you are hungry you would be fed," that's the way they understood it.

"The other storyteller was my father," Josie Cuthand, whose father, Sailing Horse, took part in the Riel Rebellion. Josie had many handed-down stories because Sailing Horse had lived with his Old People, and he had many experience stories from when he lived in Montana after the Rebellion.

Then there was Bonais (the late Alex Bonais's father), who was found as an infant crying among dead relatives in a camp ravaged by smallpox. "He was spoonfed with a little broth. He survived, and when he got older he refused to eat anything that contained milk because he was not raised on milk; then he had the belief that it would make him sick." Bonais told funny life experience stories, such as the time they surrendered at Fort Battleford in 1885 and their guns were confiscated.

We were told to raise our hands, so we raised both hands, we had no choice, and they confiscated all our rifles. And there was a pile of rifles. Some were all tied up with wire, mended over again. And these were the rifles that really defeated them [Canadian soldiers].

Bonais "told funny stories like that." He "was the one, when the soldiers withdrew from Cutknife Hill, he went down the hill and men used to laugh at him, going through the bush he lost his breech cloth, it was hanging on a tree."

Stan recalled George Atimoyoo, who was fond of horses; his "specialty in storytelling was horse racing." They used to race horses across the open country and around the mountains: "My goodness they were hard on horses. But those ponies must have been very, very strong; they had a lot of stamina. Just like the Indians."

He also recalled Cikinásis, who told war stories about the societies and the battles, mostly with the Blackfoot. He had exciting stories to tell and was very entertaining, "but then the women didn't like him because ... he told off-colored stories. The women used to say he swears too much. Dirty stories. But the men liked him.... If I was around and he started telling stories ... the dirty stories, [the men would tell me] 'You go on over there,' so I'd just go away." Fine Day also told great war stories.⁸

Later in life, Stan met Matciskinik and marvelled at his oratorical skills. In particular, Matciskinik told an átayóhkewin, a sacred story, about mistasini, the sacred rock buried under water when the Gardiner Dam was built.⁹ "The four winds play a part in that story" and "the young man rolled four directions and

became a buffalo.” Matciskinik also told the story about Saskoweetoon, the drooling-face man who was magically healed by the sage smudging of a beautiful woman.

Stan explained that not all the storytellers could “attract attention, [where] everybody listens, wondering what’s gonna happen next.” Some storytellers “stop and wonder, they would retrace their steps, and [say] ‘I’m going too far, I’ll go back’ and they would go back again.” But Matciskinik told stories beautifully, “perfect Cree and it was just a beautiful story the way one event leads to another.” Stan pondered, reminiscing: “The way he structured his stories you know, ya ... one word after the other, he doesn’t forget words.”

Stan Cuthand’s memories of the storytellers and history keepers from whom he learned as he grew up tells us much about the roles of these traditional knowledge keepers in Cree societies. One of the many differences of oral traditions and literate traditions is that the former are as much about social interaction as they are about knowledge and transmission. Peter Nabokov explains:

[The] paradox of memorized history that is spoken and heard is that while it can preserve intimacy and locality over astonishing time depths, it seems to be only one generation away from extinction. It is a fragile linkage of spider strands across time. For it to endure someone somewhere must continue to bear witness, must intuitively resist the demands of media and archive in favor of the interactive, oral narrative.¹⁰

The fear that oral traditions will be lost in this modern age of literacy, cyberspace, and cable television is very real. During the 1960s and 1970s, a number of Elders were interviewed in an attempt to preserve these teachings before they were lost.¹¹ At first many were hesitant and worried about recording oral histories, sacred songs, and ceremonial information but most agreed that recording their teachings might be the only way to retain them for future generations.¹²

The late Cree Elder Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw spoke at a Saskatchewan Indian Cultural College (SICC) workshop in the 1970s and expressed thanks that his teachings about the Treaty No. 6 Pipe Stem were being recorded “so that our relatives might learn by hearing about it in this way.” He explained to all assembled there that “it is better to leave good things for them to use ... that they might listen on this kind [pointing to the audio-recorder] and that the young might thereby remind each other.”¹³

The late Alex Bonais also allowed his stories, knowledge, and songs to be recorded in the early 1970s by the late Wilfred Tootoosis because he feared they would all be lost:

Nobody wants to carry on to replace me, to carry on with these responsibilities across this land. All will stop. Spiritual ceremonies, Sundance, the lodge for smoking the pipe ... they will be no more. And at that time where will the people take their children? ... Only the white man's world will remain.¹⁴

Tyrone Tootoosis translated this interview while I simultaneously transcribed it. As we listened to this old man's recorded voice, a sudden surge of hope broke through his lament. He moved closer, spoke more directly into the microphone. Then, raising his voice slightly, he called out: "In the future you youth try to educate each other with this information." Almost forty years later, he was still speaking directly to us.

The primary tool of Cree Elders' trade is memory. The late Nora Thomas (1885–1982) was my great-grandmother by way of my late stepfather, Colin Stonechild. She was from Peepeepeekisis Cree First Nation in the File Hills, just northeast of Fort Qu'Appelle. She was eighty-seven and I was fifteen when we first met at her home in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Kohkom Nora seemed ancient to me. Her tall, slim, slightly stooped and corporeal presence was sometimes discomfiting. But she told good stories in her broken Cree/English. My late mother, Bernelda Wheeler, spent a lot of time in the 1970s interviewing and recording her stories.¹⁵ I remember how excited my mom was when she learned that Kohkom had attended a recital given by E. Pauline Johnson, a Mohawk poet, at Fort Qu'Appelle:

BW: Kohkom, at that concert, what did she talk about?

KN: She talked about canoes, and the corn huskers, yes, and the moose and the hides and, oh my ... she had us all quiet as mice.

BW: Kohkom, what did she look like?

KN: She looked like, oh, she was fat. Ya. And she had a dark complexion and she had her hair all ribbons and she had a string of bear claws in her throat, oh my!

BW: Kohkom, did she read lots of poetry?

KN: Yes, no, she read, she didn't. She, well, most of her composition was mostly on air. Ya. And she read some too.

Then, in deep remembrance, Kohkom lifted her face toward the ceiling and, with eyes closed tight, recited her favourite poem:

“The Corn Husker”

*Hard by the Indian lodge
Where the bush breaks in the clearing
Through the ill fashionable fields
She comes to labor
When the first still husk of autumn
Follows large and recent yields
Ages in her fingers, hunger in her face
Her shoulders stooped with weights of work and years
But rich in tawny coloring ...*¹⁶

Kohkom Nora was in her late teens when E. Pauline Johnson gave her recital at Fort Qu’Appelle more than sixty years earlier, but she could recount her favourite poem word for word, as she had heard it.¹⁷

The veracity and strength of Cree memory is well known; even the early Hudson’s Bay Company folks like Andrew Graham wrote in the mid-1700s: “Their memory is very retentive, and their conceptions ready; for they are apt in learning the manners and employments of the English, and remember instances that have happened many years back.”¹⁸ In *The Plains Cree* (1923), Edward Ahenakew describes the responsibilities associated with the telling of stories by the Old Men he knew in their respective communities. According to Ahenakew, the role of Old Man was

an institution in Indian life through the centuries. The fact that the Indians used to have no written language compelled them to rely upon memory for the recollection of things from the far past, as well as for those of a more recent date. Because of this the accuracy of an Old Man’s memory can be surprising. Two or three Old Men together will recall the minutest details of events that took place in their childhood, sometimes comparing notes, for instance, about the surface markings of a horse that lived forty or fifty years before.¹⁹

Scholarly studies of oral history have demonstrated repeatedly that because non-literate societies have no other mechanisms for recording their past, their oral traditions are especially rigorous. Among the Plains Cree and other indigenous non-literate societies, memory capabilities were nurtured and disciplined from early childhood. The late Chief Abel McLeod of the James Smith Cree First Nation explains that “our ancestors had no other way to keep the sacred

promises [Treaty had] given to them, only by memory. They said then their brains were like paper.”²⁰

The Elders tell us that all our traditions, laws, knowledge, and historical records are preserved in the collective memory through a rigorous and disciplined process that emphasizes “accuracy, precision and procedural protocols.”²¹ The Office of the Treaty Commissioner of Saskatchewan learned through the testimony of more than 160 Elders that “the process of preserving and transferring traditional laws and procedures is a solemn obligation and serious commitment” and a “life-long endeavour.”²²

In oral societies, the education of the youngest living generation is undertaken by the oldest living generation. Children are brought up by grandparents because parents spend most of their days working. Historical studies on the education of children by grandparents in non-literate, rural societies demonstrate a number of points. According to Marc Bloch,

with the molding of each new mind there is at the same time a backward step, joining the most malleable to the most inflexible mentality, while skipping the generation which might be the sponsor of change. And this way of transmitting memory ... must surely have contributed to a very substantial extent to the traditionalism inherent in so many societies.²³

For most of us on the Plains, the last living generation to grow up in this manner was our grandparents although in most cases, their education in the oral tradition was interrupted by the industrial and residential school systems. While a small number of grandparents and older parents were raised by their grandparents in the oral tradition, much traditional and historical knowledge was lost as a direct result of the residential school system and the aggregate social breakdown that hit our communities at the end of the Second World War. Despite these setbacks, their formative years had lasting impacts, and upon their return home, some picked up their learning and some returned to those teachings later in life. Today we are in the process of reconstructing that which has been lost or is in hiding.

There is more to Indigenous oral history than just stories. Neal McLeod explains that “oral consciousness has ways of encoding memory.” For example, body language in the telling is vested with meaning that presumes a shared cultural repertoire with the listeners. Without that cultural context, much could be lost. Numerous studies also document the role of mnemonic devices as aids to memory among Indigenous peoples, and this holds true for the Cree. In the case of the Treaties, the pipe ceremonies memorialized the events.²⁴ The Treaty No. 6 Pipe Stem and the ten marker sticks that Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw refers to above, which represent the Treaty promises made by the Treaty Commission in 1876, serve as

mnemonic devices. Other such devices among the Cree take the form of artistic illustrations and depictions on tipi coverings, clothing, drums, and rock outcrops. Natural phenomena as well as petroglyphs and other artifacts carved on the landscape—trenches dug during warfare, wagon tracks, property boundary markers, even old abandoned cars—contain embedded stories and serve to nudge memory. The land is mnemonic, it has its own set of memories, and when the Old People go out on the land, it nudges or reminds them, and their memories are rekindled.

According to *nēhiyawīhcikēwin*, Cree ways, the spoken word is sacrosanct. The Old People tell us that the Creator gave all People the spoken word and memory to keep their laws, lessons, and histories protected for future generations. While some Peoples have turned away from the spoken word in favour of writing, belief in *nēhiyawīhcikēwin* oral traditions remains strong.

Words have great power. They can heal, protect, and counsel, but they can also harm. One is advised early in life to speak with care because when words are spoken, they are *manitōkiwin*—the act of speech is tantamount to doing something in a holy manner, making something sacred, making ceremony. So when the Old People accept tobacco from one seeking knowledge and when they share the pipe, they are saying that they will tell the truth as they know it. They are bound in the presence of the Creator as witness to speak from the heart, to speak their truth.

The pipe opened and closed every set of Treaty negotiations in Western Canada. The late Elder Pauline Pelly, whose grandfather Gabriel Cote negotiated Treaty No. 4 on behalf of his *Saulteaux* band, tells us that the ones who negotiated our Treaties used the pipe because “we as Indian people when we want to tell the truth we put it in the hands of the Creator.”²⁵ The Creator gave us the pipe to talk to Him; that is “why when we talk about the sacredness of that ... pipe, if you are going to tell the truth, and if we are going to ask Him to help us, [it is] the ... pipe that is picked up by our people, the pipe holders, when they take that pipe already it is for Him.” The Cree and *Saulteaux* people told the Treaty Commission, “‘We want to tell the truth, we’re going to use the pipe.’ Because if you lie on the pipe you will pay ... because you’re attempting to lie to the Creator.”²⁶

In Cree, this is understood as *pâstâhowin*, a transgression or breach of natural order/law.²⁷ When promises, agreements, or vows are made to the Creator, “they are irrevocable and inviolable.” Breaking these vows can “bring about divine retribution with grave consequences.”²⁸ The use of the Bible by the Treaty commissioners was understood by the Cree as a solemn promise to God, so it was understood in Cree terms that *pâstâhowin* applied. Based on their own understandings, the Cree Treaty makers had faith that the Crown Treaty commissioners were similarly bound to their promises.

Prone as colonial agents are to myopia and cultural arrogance, the Treaty commissioners trivialized and misunderstood the sacrosanct bindings of the

pipe. The late James Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw from Onion Lake First Nation—grandson to Sâkaskôc, a signatory to Treaty No. 6 and one of the inheritors of the Treaty No. 6 oral history and Pipe Stems—tells us that after the Treaty was signed, the Old Man Pâkan picked up the Pipe and made a long speech to Governor Morris about the Treaty promises: “Some day you might go after us for taking this good fish and game, you will some day want to renege on the terms of the treaty. If you are truthful in your promises, hold on to the stem.” According to oral history, Morris replied, “If anyone tries to break these Treaties, see this red coat beside me, I give him to you and he will enforce your rights.” Whenever Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw was asked to speak about the Treaties at gatherings around the province, he would tell us that the Pipe guaranteed that no human being could break the Treaty: “[T]hat’s what was promised to us, [this Pipe] that’s where we get our truth.”²⁹

Among the Plains Cree, there were powerful sanctions against attempting to pass off something known to be untrue. Penalties ranged from supernatural punishment to ridicule and humiliation. The solemn promises the Cree made to the Creator through their Pipes and the promises made by the Treaty commissioner through his Bible during the Treaty negotiations are understood as truths because of the traditional/natural law of *pâstâhowin*—one does not lie to God. *Tâpwêwin*, truth, is also about trust, the foundation of all human relationships.³⁰

Edward Ahenakew reminds us that the Old Men were both historians and legal advisors, and were the ones “who were qualified to speak, for they had passed through most of the experiences of life, and their own youthful fires were burnt out.”³¹

An Old Man dare not lie, for ridicule that was keen and general would have been his lot, and his standing as a teller of authentic events would have suffered. He dared not lie, for there were always other Old Men on the reserve or in the encampment who would contradict him readily.... Of necessity then, this veracity had to be unimpeachable, and this, together with well-developed powers of observation, made him an authentic repository for the annals of his people.³²

The late Smith Atimoyoo envisioned a new order of Indian education—an education system that would balance Cree knowledge, values, and language with Western skills. He was a respected storyteller and purveyor of Cree knowledge and history. One afternoon over a cup of tea at Wanuskewin, Maria Campbell and I asked Uncle Smith about lies. More precisely, Maria asked him in Cree, “What kinds of laws did the Old People have to prevent them from telling lies?”³³ Uncle Smith responded:

The Old People had laws for everything, and the teacher of those laws was *Wisahkécáhk*.... He went around telling lies, in stories, and it didn't matter how many lies he told, they all came out as good teachings. *Māmaskāc ci!* [Incredible, amazing!] How he could do that, make a lie into something good? He was very wise, he knew everything and he shared that wisdom in stories.... We call him *nistāsinān*, our elder brother. He could make stories come alive, even the lies. After he left us, when someone would lie, people would say, "Hmmm, that's what our elder brother used to say." That would force the liar to either tell a really good story or face humiliation. That was the law.

If the storyteller made good, transformed the intent to deceive into a good story, the lie was erased.

According to Uncle Smith, the Old People were polite when they doubted something in a story someone was telling. They never outright accused the storyteller of lying. Sometimes listeners would say, "That can't be," or *āyanwētēman* (I don't believe it), or *ki-tāpwewin* (that is your truth), but they do not outright call the storyteller a liar. What they are saying is that they cannot believe the story, or as Uncle Smith would say, "It is not what I know to be true."

But times change, Uncle Smith explained: "Lies are different today." "A long time ago, *ki-tāpwē-towino*, we believed differently. Things were different then and lies were different then from now."

Nimōsom Willie Bear's father was *Misaskoot* [saskatoon berry bush]. There is a story about him that he was a great runner. He could outrun horses. The people could go ahead of him and he would arrive ahead of them. He was also elusive. He could disappear into thin air. The Blackfoot people once were chasing him and they couldn't catch him 'cause he just disappeared on them, disappeared into thin air. They had power in those days, through their dreams. And they believed in the dreams and so they were true. And I believe these stories of *Nimōsom* because Indian people were given the gift of supernatural. Like the weasel story. *Nimōsom's* *pawakan* [spiritual power] was a weasel, and he carried that weasel skin in his bundle, it was his helper, I guess you would say in English. And I remember when I was a little boy, I used to spend lots of time with him and sometimes when he was going to pray he would take that weasel fur out of his bundle and stroke it gently and sing a little song—the weasel would come to life and run up his arm and around his head and it would play with me. And my *mōsōm* would tell me stories of the things *ēkos* had helped him with

in his life. Nikitāpwētan, I believed. We don't live in a world where we believe in the supernatural anymore, but back then it was all possible.

Uncle Smith lamented that over time our conceptual understanding of truth and lies has changed:

There are so many things today that distort the way we see and believe, that distort human memory, so many old stories, but we start to believe what we are told now. Start to believe what they [non-Cree peoples] tell us to know and we don't believe the old ways anymore. We start to believe we are not alive, what we believe is obliterated.... They will make us believe that black is white, that's how powerful it is. That's how the stories of our Old People get so far away. We just try to grasp it. A person will have to be very strong, like my grandfather. He did turn into an animal, he did turn into a weasel, he did turn into a coyote, to get away from the people who were trying to kill him, to survive. I didn't get that stamina and thinking to make me into something. And so, really, I'm becoming nothing.

Áyanwétéman, I don't believe it, is very different from ékiyastat, to tell lies. Much of what we knew to be true has become lies because non-Cree notions of truth cannot accommodate known Cree realities. In this way, much is being lost.

Cree historians trained in the oral tradition do not assume omniscient authority. The keepers of *âcimowina* strategically build side stories into their oral texts, which serve to establish the original source(s), the teller's relationship to the incident and persons involved, how the teller came to acquire it, and the relevant time referents. It's sort of like a "traditional footnote."

In Jim Tootoosis' story of the Battle of Cutknife Hill, he spent almost as much time recounting the stories behind the story as he did on the story itself. Toward the end of his story, Jim Tootoosis tells us:

How I come to know, I'm gonna tell you. This story is my great grandfather's brother,³⁴ his name was Wind Walker, Pimohteyawiw. He was only about seventeen or eighteen years at that time and he was here watching the fight.... That old Wind Walker, he's a cousin to our great-grandfather [Sakakweyan] Skunk-Skin and he was very old. He was around ninety years old then maybe older. My [oldest] brother Adam was about twelve or thirteen years old then and that Old Man told that story three times, three times over, so he wouldn't forget. "This is your future, you'll be able to tell the story to other people so he won't get lost." That's how I come to know this story. My brother told me different times.³⁵

In some stories, significant missing pieces are found outside the community and are built into the narrative, along with an aside on its source. In the Battle of Cut-knife Hill story, one Blackfoot warrior survived the battle by hiding in a water-filled cave in the cut bank along the creek. After all the Crees had left, he snuck away under the cover of darkness and made it back to his people. Jim Tootoosis tells us:

Sometimes they'd have a fight and other times they'd make a treaty, smoke together ... make a treaty until they asked stories about different incidents, about different times. And this fella that had hid in the water here, he didn't know when to quit [going on trips into enemy territory].... [At one such meeting between a group of Blackfoot and Cree men] one [Blackfoot] guy asked about this incident when Cut-knife was killed. And, well the [Cree] Indians said they lost one to the Sarcee—"We lost one Sarcee, he got away." [Then this guy stood up and told them] ... "That was me." That's how we come to know that story. And he told the story about how he hid in the water and how he went home and how they come way up into the hills west of here.³⁶

Finding a place in history for Other Ways of Knowing is a challenge. It requires us to develop new ways of learning and understanding, and to step outside of our rigorously trained comfort zones. It requires a willingness to get to know the Elders or knowledge keepers in their own contexts and to be open-minded enough to learn how they understand the world around them, the tools of their trade, and how they practice it. As students or novices, our job is to interpret the teachings, to help us fill the gaps in our current state of knowledge and to apply the methods they teach us. The Elders share their teachings to help us grow as individuals, but they intend for us to put their teachings into practice, not just to fill in the gaps. Thus, our task is not only to create a space for other ways of knowing as an object or subject of study, but also to create a space to apply the teachings that guide the learning, keeping, and transmission of Indigenous knowledge. If we are not willing to step out of our comfort zone, we are culpable for the obliteration of our world. To carry Uncle Smith's words home, we would be responsible for our "becoming nothing." *

Notes

- 1 See Winona Wheeler, "Reflections on the Social Relations of Indigenous Oral History," in *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and Their Representations*, ed. David T. McNab (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 189–214.
- 2 The roman orthography used for Cree terms here varies, reflecting the different sources used and the phonetic spelling used in local transcription.

- 3 Wilfred Tootoosis interviewed and recorded oral narratives from his contemporary Elders starting in the 1960s. His collection is in the possession of his eldest son, Tyrone W. Tootoosis, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.
- 4 Alex Bonais (Plains Cree, Little Pine First Nation), interview by Wilfred Tootoosis, Poundmaker First Nation, Saslatchewan, c. 1974, trans. Tyrone Tootoosis, Wilfred Tootoosis Collection, in possession of Tyrone Tootoosis, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.
- 5 Stan Cuthand was born in 1918. In 1975 he started teaching Native Studies at the University of Manitoba. Throughout his life, he has been committed to preserving Cree oral histories and translation. Ruth Cuthand and Doug Cuthand, "Stan Cuthand," in *Saskatchewan First Nations: Lives Past and Present*, ed. Christian Thompson (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 2004), 47.
- 6 Edward Ahenakew (1885–1961) graduated with a degree in theology in 1910 and spent the rest of his life in missionary service. He also collected oral narratives and wrote numerous articles on the sacred teachings, history, and conditions of his people. He is best known for his book *Voice of the Plains Cree*, which he wrote in 1923. Edward Ahenakew, *Voice of the Plains Cree*, ed. Ruth M. Buck (1979; repr., Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1995). See also Charlene Crevier, "Edward Ahenakew," in Thompson, *Saskatchewan First Nations*, 9.
- 7 Wisahkécáhk is generally known as a Trickster, but the term is inaccurate. In Cree, Wisahkécáhk is also referred to as Elder Brother or Kistésinaw. His primary function is teacher, and his stories constitute átayóhkéwina, or spiritual narratives. Neal McLeod, *Cree Narrative Memory: From Treaties to Contemporary Times* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing, 2007), 97.
- 8 Fine Day or Kamiokisihkwew (c.1847–1941) was a renowned Plains Cree historian who served as principal informant for David Mandelbaum's study on the Plains Cree. David G. Mandelbaum, *The Plains Cree: An Ethnographic, Historical and Comparative Study* (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1979).
- 9 See John Cuthand, "Legend of Mistassini Has Modern Chapter," *The StarPhoenix*, 22 November 1996.
- 10 Peter Nabokov, "Present Memories, Past History," in *The American Indian and the Problem of History*, ed. Calvin Martin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 145.
- 11 Tyrone Tootoosis, "Our Legacy: Ka ke pesi nakatamakiawiyak," *Eagle Feather News* 1, no. 10 (1999): 21.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw, cited in Freda Ahenakew and H. C. Wolfart, eds., *ana kâ-pimwêwêhahk okakêskikhkêwina: The Counselling Speeches of Jim Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1998), 101, 65.
- 14 Alex Bonais, interview by Wilfred Tootoosis.
- 15 Bernelda Wheeler (nee Pratt) was a member of George Gordon's First Nation in southern Saskatchewan. She was a newspaper and radio journalist for most of her professional life and had the opportunity to interview many Elders. See Winona Wheeler, "Bernelda Winona Wheeler," in Thompson, *Saskatchewan First Nations*, 139–41.
- 16 Kohkom Nora Thomas, interview by Bernelda Wheeler, Winnipeg, Manitoba, February 1974. Original and transcripts in possession of the author.

- 17 Kohkom Nora's rendition of "The Corn Husker" is almost a precise rendition of the original found in E. Pauline Johnson, *Flint and Feather: The Complete Poems of E. Pauline Johnson* (Tekahionwake) (1912; repr., Don Mills, ON: Paperjacks, 1972), 93.
- 18 Glyndwr Williams, ed. *Andrew Graham's Observations on Hudson's Bay 1767-1791* (London: Hudson's Bay Company Record Society, 1969), 144.
- 19 Ahenakew, *Voice of the Plains Cree*, 10.
- 20 "No. 21, James Smith Band Submission, 7 March 1947," in Canada, *Special Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons Appointed to Continue and Complete the Examination and Consideration of the Indian Act, Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence* (Ottawa: Kings Printer, 1947), 1123.
- 21 *Office of the Treaty Commissioner for Saskatchewan, Statement of Treaty Issues: Treaties as a Bridge to the Future* (Saskatoon: Office of the Treaty Commissioner, October 1998), 12.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Marc Bloch, cited in Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 39.
- 24 Neal McLeod, "Rethinking Treaty Six in the Spirit of Mistahi Maskwa (Big Bear)," *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* 19, no. 1 (1999): 69-89.
- 25 Pauline Pelly "Testimony," *OTC Mock Trial: Special Presentation to the Office of the Treaty Commission of Saskatchewan* (Regina: Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations, 14-16 September 1992), video recording.
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 Christian missionaries understood pâstâhowin (pasta'hoowin) as "vengeance, retribution, an evil spell (Indian idea is the consequent vengeance of offending the Deity)." R. Fairies and E.A. Watkins, *A Dictionary of the Cree Language* (1938; repr., Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1986), 408.
- 28 Harold Cardinal and Walter Hildebrandt, *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our Dream Is That Our Peoples Will One Day Be Clearly Recognized as Nations* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2000), 7.
- 29 Kâ-Nîpitêhtêw, "Testimony," OTC Mock Trial.
- 30 Sissela Bok, *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1978), 31.
- 31 Ahenakew, *Voice of the Plains Cree*, 10.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Smith Atimoyoo (Plains Cree, Little Pine First Nation), interview by Maria Campbell and Winona Wheeler, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 6 May 1996.
- 34 Among the Cree, parallel cousins are often referred to as siblings. There is no error in Jim Tootoosis's reference to Wind Walker as his great grandfather's brother, and later as Skunk-Skin's brother.
- 35 James Tootoosis (Plains Cree, Poundmaker First Nation), interview by Floyd Favel, Poundmaker First Nation, Saskatchewan, c. 1996, trans. Tyrone Tootoosis.
- 36 Ibid.