



Language and the Land

by **RAYMOND SEWELL** /// Community Member

The original languages of Turtle Island are tangled with landscape and philosophy. Indigenous literature holds the worldview that land is sacred and moreover our place in it is amongst the plants and animals. Indigenous oral story literature places people amongst *msit no'kmaq* (all our relations) – which includes everything that lives. Human beings are not separate from or greater than other living things.

You can see this worldview in our stories and in our language. When an l'nu person writes a story, it tends not to be from a human perspective alone. They tell you what the trees were doing, the skies, the wind, what the animals were doing – our stories include the landscape. The stories are sensory: they are of the environment. Our stories are intentional as they are old. They are language and culture invested in land for cultural posterity. They are succession planning. The words are sewn into the fabric of the land, as the land is indivisible from our experience.

In spending time with elders on the land, I experienced that *l'nui'suti*, the language, holds the philosophies of our people. When I would go on medicine walks with my father and identify plants, he taught me that plants with names have medicinal qualities – you learn about the use from the name. We would offer tobacco and pray, always, before extracting a plant for medicinal use. I was taught that when you take from the land you replace or give back as much as you have taken. All of this is present in the language; we encoded so much cultural meaning in the Indigenous names and our articulations of the land. The language roots life in nature and our place in it.

This is why Indigenous languages of Turtle Island have faced constant attack since the onset of the colonial project. In denying us access to our languages, our cultural knowledge was debased, and we lost our nomenclature and data sovereignty. The colonial project relies on land being void of spirit or meaning. The colonial project separated l'nuk from all our relations and synthesized us in a crude binary. In separating the people from the earth mother, the colonial project cultivated the land at will. There was and is unprecedented destruction of ecosystems: it is arboricide, and genocide.

The normative systems embedded in Indigenous language are a threat to this colonial project. This is why languages were systematically stamped out as part of colonization. When Indigenous practices survived, they were mystified – removed from their context on the land and made “other.” Enforcing the use of English and other colonial languages like French and Spanish had the intent of changing our understanding of the world. The syntax and semantics of European languages were used to change the thought patterns in our minds, to make us conform to colonial exploitation.

We have and continue to be measured by an imperial standard that was placed on our society. When European settlers came to Turtle Island, they fancied our languages, societies and technologies as infantile and primitive. We were measured against the beliefs of their worlds, stripped of our own histories and data systems. As French poet Marc Lescarbot writes in 1607:



PHOTO: Raymond Sewell

TAKE ACTION

Support Indigenous language reclamation and land-based learning! Here in Mi'kma'ki, consider donating to a Mi'kmaw-led organization like Reclaiming Our Roots (transfer to info@reclaimingourroots.ca) or Ulnooweg Education Centre (ulnoowegeeducation.ca)

My Reader, ... you will occasion me to provide you with ... the beauties of the said province, on which it has rained to God to extend his blessings abundantly this year, & invite the French to cultivate it, & by this means bring to the sheepfold of Jesus Christ so many peoples who still remain in the world without police or religion, the loss of which accuses our tardiness before God.

Lescarbot represents the thinking that drove the colonial project. Sadly, these ideas still exist today in colonial nostalgia, which is very much engrained in Canadian culture. This nostalgia ignores the reality that colonization is ongoing and seeks to silence any contrary thinking that would criticize its focus on resource extraction. The idea that Canada is somehow “post-colonial” is an attempt to rinse their hands of the brutal violence that is the foundation of this country. Just because the British Empire ended does not mean the effects disappear for us. There is a firmly established rhetoric that modern Canadian ideals are inherently wholesome or benign – but my realization is that they are not. It is colonization with a smile.

Despite the best efforts to stamp them out, Indigenous worldviews are alive and well in our communities. Although our languages have been replaced with English for many of us, we continue to think in our traditional ways. Indigenous people are adept at sharing L'nu ideas in English. L'nu people embrace technology and define ourselves now. We invest plenty of effort in describing our reality in our own terms. We have plenty of intellectuals, elders, storytellers, community members and academics who are usually all of the above. We continue to articulate our experience.

In contrast to today's eco-trendiness, our technology was always “green,” and always supportive of the earth mother's right to flourish. Companies today pride themselves on going paperless; we carry our stories in oral histories. Our technologies go back

to the earth. Our technology worked within the means of the earth's network, without taking more than we needed and always giving back.

And so, the sophisticated languages spoken across Turtle Island continue, despite every attempt to extinguish them. Learning Indigenous languages is an act of re-matriation, as is practicing our cultural rituals. Colonial fronts are still being fought every day. They are fought by Indigenous people who rise and pray with the dawn, fulfilling their role as Pesky Turtle Islanders. Engaging in even the smallest amount of ritual makes us non-conformists and targets of imperial violence. Everyone knows the earth is sacred. The Elder raising their hand and dropping tobacco against the white light of dawn is a big threat to the extraction project. Telling stories of the animals and what they are doing in their environment is resistance. Repositioning ourselves as being of the land is resistance. Speaking our histories is resistance. There are public discussions being had around re-appraisals of history – as though the colonial project is facing injustice. I am from the renamed. Returning the posture of our matriarchs, languages and views is my purpose. A return to form is needed for the protection of the planet.

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