

# Sāsīpīhkēyīhtamowin<sup>1</sup>

## Nīso Nēhiyaw Iskwēwak

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*L'auteure explore les biographies de l'aînée Stella Blackbird et de la chef Tammy Cook-Searson, deux membres de la tribu des Cris (Nēhiyawak) fidèles à la mémoire de leur tribu. Elles ont invité les intéressées à comprendre le statut des autochtones dans une justice environnementale et de revitaliser Nēhiyawak en vue d'une réconciliation et même à une véritable rédemption des autochtones qui ont subi les effets du racisme environnemental. La lecture des termes reliés à Nēhiyawak nous enseigne que "la langue est au cœur de ce que nous sommes" et que nous sommes liés intimement au bien-être de la terre et aux politiques de ceux qui y demeurent.*

### Nēhiyawīwin as Justice

*Through my language I understand I am being spoken to, I am not the speaker.*

*The words are coming from many tongues and mouths... and the land around them.*

*I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns.*

—Jeanette Armstrong, "Land Speaking"

This storywork of resistance lives in the experiences, spiritual narratives, and the blood memories of two Cree *onīkânīwak* (leaders), and within the bodies of the two *Nēhiyawak* knowledge keepers I have come to know<sup>2</sup> (Archibald 2008b; Anderson, 2000, 2011; Burnouf, personal conversation, 15 March 2016; LaDuke 2004; McCall; McLeod). I am listener, and I pay attention to the *Nēhiyaw* sounds, words, and phrases which Stella Blackbird, Tammy Cook-Searson, and other Cree linguists have shared with me on this journey. On this day, I give gratitude for their land lessons, their life lessons, and most importantly, their heart lessons.

As I accentuate *Nēhiyawīwin* within this storywork, I do so to signify an ontological redemption of Indigenous women's knowledge as environmental justice. Words found in Cree narrative memory or oral histories (McLeod) are tied to ancestral knowings and traditional lands, and as such, *Nēhiyawīwin* (the language of the people) with all its intricacies is entwined by subsistence and survival, ceremony, and spirit. In this revitalization of tribal identity and place, words and phrases reclaim a pedagogical and spiritual space for

what comes alive in Cree knowledge systems. In this context, place is land, spirit, and body, and by using, defining, and re-establishing the nuances within the language and culture, a *Nēhiyaw* worldview is reclaimed, preserved, and elevated within academic discourses. Within the dominant narrative of environmental justice, an adoption of *Nēhiyaw* decolonizes the euro-centricity of such a framework as it creates space for Indigenous voices and Indigenous bodies. The principles of natural laws (Michell) and Indigenous ethics (Brant) within a *Nēhiyaw* worldview help dismantle this dominant narrative, and bring truth to the imparting of colonial histories and the Indigenous resistances that followed.

For many Canadians, the viewing of "land justice" through an Indigenous lens is both foreign and fresh. By moving past a framework of Western justice work, and an analysis of such, to acknowledge the truth of colonialism and to make an effort to truly understand the state of environmental racism, and its antidote, Indigenous environmental justice, one must embrace the counter position of this westernism by reclaiming

*pimâtisowin*: the sustenance, the good life, and the spiritual drive of life for *Nêhiyawak* (Ermine 1995).

Past histories have shown us numerous examples of Indigenous peoples recognizing value in contemporary justice frameworks, those pieces of reconciliation holding up both settler acknowledgments and apologies, and yet many scholars and activists

actively shares historical and contemporary realities of land and body conflicts, its primary function helps to dismantle the systemic defences of environmental racism through truth telling, as it makes way for a return to Indigenization and *pimâtisowin* (Kress; LaDuke 2004, 2011).

Environmental racism discourse has not graced the lexicons of Indige-

lands and territories, their major means of subsistence, their language culture and spirituality all of which are derived from their cultural, physical, and spiritual relationship to their land. (International Indian Treaty Council, 2008, para 6, cited in Kress 35)

The women in this story see justice

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believe these to be watery and thin. It seems an authentic segue, and the recourse necessary, must include the ceremonial and traditional knowledges and languages of First peoples so all persons’ sensibilities, and especially those of Métis, Inuit and First Nations peoples are intact (LaDuke 2011; Sinclair; TRC). In this way, the Cree concept of *Pimâcihiwêwin* (“a giving or a saving of life”) (Solomon qtd. in Kress 250) or in a Western sense, this idea of an Indigenous redemption prompts both settler and Indigenous peoples to become partners in peace, this achieved by embracing the other through sincere acknowledgement, reconciliation, mutual respect, and collective action (Kress; LaDuke 2011; TRC). Within this Canadian salvage, settlers must be first to extend the ‘olive branch’ as they recognize and accept Indigenous peoples are the ones to lead in this renewal; Indigenous peoples will be the ones to set the tone in restoring language, ceremony, oral history, culture, and tradition as an ontology of environmental justice through the harmony of political, earthy, and spiritual acts. This reclaim not only exposes perpetrators’ actions and

nous peoples until recently (Blackbird and Richardson cited in Kress); and further, the phrase “environmental racism” is not held as a commonality among First peoples, however, these *Nêhiyawak* women recognize, feel, and know the explicit and subtle examples of such infractions and crimes. As Stella and Tammy speak of their ancestors’ endurances, including those of “whipped bodies” and “stolen lands” (qtd. in Kress 68), I am reminded of how environmental racism is

an assault on Indigenous Peoples’ human rights and public health including their right to their unique special social, cultural, spiritual, and historical life ways and worldviews. Environmental racism results in the devastation, contamination, dispossession, loss, or denial of access to Indigenous peoples’ biodiversity, their waters, and traditional lands and territories. Environmental racism is now the primary cause of human health effects of Indigenous Peoples and the forced separation and removal of Indigenous Peoples from their

as an Indigenization of Canadian history, a spirit-filled prophesy, uplifting sacred dialects, nuances, and rhythms of the *Nêhiyawak* in the reclamation of territory, kinship, and *pimâtisowin*. They resist

the pressure to participate in academic discourse that strips Indigenous intellectual traditions of their spiritual and sacred elements. [They] take the stand that if the spiritual and sacred elements are surrendered, then there is little left of our philosophies that will make any sense. (Hart qtd. in Kress 87)

Embedded in the life works of Stella Blackbird and Tammy Cook-Season, is the understanding of *Kanawayhitowin* (the Cree word calling for the spirit in each of us to come forth to protect each other, and in a sense, all living entities) (Kress). The English translation of *Kanawayhitowin* generates an idea that all peoples are responsible to care for each other’s spirit and, in turn, for all life forms and Earth Mother, herself. This concept of caring is central to the evolution of understanding how and why Indige-

nous knowledges and languages are necessary, critical, resistive, and empowering in a spirit of reconciliation and environmental justice. *Kanawayhitowin* is supported by *Wahkohtowin*, (the Cree word meaning kinship); and as an Indigenous pedagogy, *Wahkohtowin* (O'Rilly-Scanlon, Crowe, and Weenie) supports "kindredness" (Anderson 2000) tradition, language,

borders of one knowledge or another, we must support each other through this learning (Kress; Swampy Cree word gifted by Alex Wilson). The foundation of *Kanawayhitowin*, this place of protecting each other's spirit (Kress) not only provides a context of caring when retelling stories, it frames many Indigenous women's concerns for future generations, and at the

That most of us do not speak these languages is irrelevant. Each of them is a passageway into the meaning of this place. Each one lost is a loss of meaning and possible understanding. (Saul 106)

It seems scholars who dilute storywork (Archibald 2008b; Fitznor, 2006) by neglecting to recognize and honour the languages of Indigenous

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and ceremony (O'Rilly-Scanlon, Crowe, and Weenie). This *being in relation*, young and old, learning and living with each other, is integral to *Nêhiyaw* knowledge and the lifeworlds of these women.

Further to this, the ability to open oneself to the Cree language, and to the knowledges of these *Nêhiyaw* women brings one to the place of *Wahkohtowin*. This state of being related is fundamental to Indigenous culture and traditional beliefs (Ermine) and to the redress or Indigenization of environmental justice. Language, land, and love, you see, are at the core of who *Nêhiyaw* are. Through an embracement of the oral, of Cree cosmology and story, and of relationship or *Wahkohtowin*, one moves to a place of understanding, hope, generosity, solidarity, and reciprocity (Senehi; Wilson). I believe this fusing of Cree narrative memory (McLeod) and storywork (Archibald 2008b), shows a collective understanding of justice, reconciliation, and peace generation.

In understanding *kâkinow ni wâgômâkanak*—the degree to which we are all related—I recognize that regardless of where we sit, on the

same time demands the protection of traditional ecological knowledges, cultures, and languages as pillars of survival and environmental justice. As a non-Indigenous speaker, I follow the protocols of Indigenous elders and knowledge keepers (Blackbird, personal conversation, July 18, 2015; Burnouf, personal conversation, 25 May 2012; Fitznor, personal conversation, 14 May 2015; Ratt, personal conversation, April 13, 2014; Wilson; Wilson, A. personal conversation, 18 March 2012) to assert *tâpowakeythi tamowin* (truth), *kisewâtisowin* (kindness), *asakîwin* (sharing/caring), and *tâpwîwin* (honesty) within this work (Michell). By sharing *Nêhiyaw* in the way I have learned, *by* simply offering pieces of the language, I keep the embodied knowings of Chief Cook-Searson and Elder Blackbird alive within this understanding of a critical Indigenous justice:

When one indigenous language slips away, it is as if heavy doors, once open and giving us access to a particular understanding of this place, have slammed shut, shutting us out forever. Part of our shared understanding is gone.

nations fracture the spirit of Indigenization. This action not only signifies the differences in sensibilities between euro-settler identities and discourses, and those of Indigenous knowledge keepers, it accentuates the dominant view of justice or environmentalism, while dulling or perhaps even avoiding the Indigenous and collective history of our nation state. Only with the acceptance of ancestral and contemporary traditional knowledge entwined in territory, language, and spirit, can one come to a complete vision of Indigenous environmental justice, and *pimâtisowin*. An Elder has this to say:

We cannot intellectualize Spirit; allow yourself to live from the heart. You cannot have truth without respect, you cannot have truth without love, you cannot have truth without courage, you cannot have truth without honesty, you cannot have truth without wisdom, you cannot have truth without humbleness.... The mind is concerned with power, control, ownership... but we owe our existence to the land itself....



Tammy Cook-Searson, in Ottawa. Photo: Ruth Thompson.



Stella Blackbird and Margaret Kress (at Stella's home Keeseekoowenin First Nation).



Elder Dr. Blackbird with Elder Audrey Bone, Dr. Margaret Kress and Dr. Laara Fitznor celebrating her Honourary Doctorate in Laws, University of Manitoba, May 2015

We [Indigenous peoples] have stayed here.... We still have memory of the land, a memory, duty and sacred responsibility to our people. (Courchene)

In this justice story of Indigenization, reclamation and redemption, I give you a glimpse of the leadership held by two women *who* embody *Nēhiyawêwin*: Elder Stella Blackbird and Chief Tammy Cook-Searson share a blood memory of territory and language infused within the borderlands and waters defined in Treaty Six. As long living, thriving traditionalists and contemporary visionaries, each is *okimâwiw*, an honest, trustworthy person, a trailblazer, and a worthy provider who consistently thinks about the future and the sustainability of her kinship (Fitznor, personal conversation, November 18, 2015).

### **Sāsīpikēyhtamowin: Strong Women Speak**

*Truth, understood in our language ... is the spirit of grandmother turtle.*

—Elder Courchene (2015)

When Indigenous women speak, they do so in a throng of ways. Old stories become new, ancestors guide words, and reverences and wisdoms, gifted by spirits and children, are deep and wide. Jo-ann Archibald uses the composition of a cedar basket and the symbolism of the basket's strips to help us synthesize an understanding of the knowledges embedded in the peoples and the lands: "the pieces of cedar sometimes stand alone, and sometimes they lose their distinctiveness and form a design" (2008a: 373). And so it is in this knowing with the stories of each of these *okimâwiw*, sometimes they "are distinguishable as separate entities, and sometimes they are bound together" (Archibald 2008a: 373). As I define the position-

alities of Stella Blackbird and Tammy Cook-Searson and re-tell their stories, I reflect on the teachings of *respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy* found within Archibald's *Indigenous Storywork* (Archibald 2008b). With their permissions, I use *Askiwina* to define their personas: "over the years" signifies their history, traditionalism, and resilience (Cuthand, 2007). These women are long living, deep of thought, and grounded within *Nēhiyaw* accessible to outsiders only through the fluidity of blood memory and story.

This understanding of memory as story is vital to understanding *Nēhiyaw* history, governance, language, traditions, ceremony, and survival (McLeod). "Cree narrative memory is more than simply storytelling'. It involves the collective, intergenerational memories of many skilled storytellers. Through the examinations of family, spirituality, identity, and connections through time and space of the Plains Cree people" (Nickels 154). I share the stories of Elder Blackbird and Chief Tammy Cook-Searson, their lived histories, and their resistances of environmental racism as I examine the necessity of *Nēhiyaw* preservation through the context of the language, cultural revitalization, and Indigenous women's leadership.

When I first heard the word *Sāsīpibkēyihitamowin* I understood it as resilience, and at that time, felt it was a fitting word to use for a collective description of the women in my dissertation research. It was also a word of *Nēhiyawitwin* (the Cree language) and the ancestral language of Elder Stella Blackbird, who was first among Indigenous women to recognize my relationality, to acknowledge it and extend her acceptance of me as she showed me how I was "one of them." When Denesuline Elder Marie Adam asked me about the depth of this Cree

word, I put out a query to several Elders, traditional peoples, and Cree linguists including Elder Stella Blackbird, Chief Tammy Cook-Searson, Cree knowledge keeper Joseph Naytowhow, Métis/Cree educator Laura Burnouf, and Elder Stan Wilson. These are their responses:

Strong willed. Nothing can interfere with your actions. (Blackbird qtd in Kress 129)

I have been told that the word means "resilience, great patience, stubbornness even" and a fortitude to keep on trying and never give up. This means a person will have a lot of resilience. (Burnouf qtd in Kress 129)

The person has the ability to see things through and has enough perseverance to make it through times of turmoil and hardship. [It implies that] one has the will to keep on going. (Cook-Searson qtd in Kress 129)

Definitely resilience, patience. One must be strong in character to have this quality. Will power certainly fits as well. Definitely perseverance. (Naytowhow qtd in Kress 129)

It means patience, stick-to-it-ness, persistence, striving, unswerving mind.... *Sasophita* is the not letting go part and the *tabimowin* is the strong mind part. It seems that this word is referring to relationships that are connected to especially women and could mean "to be long suffering" and to be able to overlook slights. (Wilson, S. qtd in Kress 129)

When examining the context of *Sāsīpibkēyihitamowin*, I classify it as a resistance, and place it alongside

the words and phrases describing the resilience and conscientization of Woodland Cree Chief, Tammy Cook-Searson of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band (Treaty Six) and Cree Elder, Stella Blackbird of Beardy's and Okemasis Willow Cree First Nation (Treaty Six) and Keeseekoowenin Ojibway First Nation (Treaty Two). In these threads of story, it seems blood memory instigates a continued protection of place. This form of spatial justice becomes aligned with traditional ecological knowledges these women hold, and their connection to *pimâtisowin* (the good life).

### *Kwakwu* as Reflection

*Let me tell you a story about a revelation.*

*It's not the colour of a nation that holds a nation's pride. It's imagination.*

*It's imagination inside.*

—Andrea Menard (2000)

In the heart of the Métis nation, I was introduced to Elder Stella Blackbird while looking for healing. Here I received new life, recognition from a woman of affluence, and a renewed commitment to *pimâtisowin*. Although Stella Blackbird was a woman of reverence, I did not immediately see the power of this Elder healer. Recently, past Grand Chief, Ovide Mercredi, shared with me that he holds Stella Blackbird in great esteem and that "she is one of the few old-time traditional medicine women practicing today" (Mercredi, personal conversation, March 20, 2015). Since our meeting almost a decade ago, I have come to understand both her and Chief Tammy Cook-Searson through the knowledges of *Kwakwu*—Cree word for porcupine (Lincoln). For you see, "*Kwakwu* is known as the little carrier of the medicines; she is revered in Indigenous culture and her quills are found within their dec-



From left to right: Chief Tammy Cook-Searson receiving an Honorary Doctorate in Laws, University of Regina, May 2016. Stella Blackbird at Washageamee Sages or Clear Lake, on the reclaimed land of the Keeseekoowenin First Nation.

orative symbolisms of strength, trust and faith” (Kress 208). The imagery of *Kwakwu* symbolizes re-emergence; a powerful place one comes to after entering and then separating from a travesty or hardship. Revered among Eastern and Western peoples, *Kwakwu* carries energies of the sacred. As they practice the sacredness of life, these *okimâwiiw* live in the spirit of *pimâtisowin*:

Like *Kwakwu*, they have been begged to listen—*nutoka moo*—and often, they step back from their situations to look forward, *usa puyew usu wapiw*, just as the porcupine does (Lincoln). The recounts of their own histories, the respect for ancestral wisdom and traditional knowledge, and their persistent vision to move forward within a contemporary world is reflected in [their] *Storywork*.... The complexities of

these women emerge as they engage in their work by “reversing and suspending historical time, [and as they] re-enter that protective burrow of tradition looking out on the future” (Lincoln 127). Like *Kwakwu* these women defend their territories in quiet and non-confrontational ways. However, when provoked, they will do everything in their power to protect themselves, their kinships and their territories. Joyful calmness, youthful thinking and open negotiation are among their strongest medicines of defense. Through cooperative and somewhat quiet interactions laced with humour, playfulness and humility, these women exhibit the traits of *Kwakwu*. They are fearless, confident and relaxed, and as they trust in their own abilities to protect themselves, they know others

recognize their strengths. (Kress 208, 209)

Through *Kanawayhitowin*, Cook-Searson and Blackbird protect, love, and understand. Their embodiment of this natural law gifts them power to lead and heal, not only themselves, but also others they encounter. As they look to unearth environmental racism and neo-colonialism, they find solutions to kinship wellness in the knowledges of their ancestors and in the collective. Although it may seem simplistic, Cook-Searson and Blackbird lead through movement, ceremony, listening, and loving. This back and forth from the “burrow” helps them generate a milieu for the sanctity of life; they respect each role, large or minor, and their actions elevate intergenerational respect, interdependence, and equanimity among peoples, other living entities, and the land, waters and cosmos.

Their resistances against injustices impacting both Indigenous lands and bodies are offered by their physical and vocal presences in homes, lodges and community halls, and in the classrooms, assemblies, board rooms, and courtrooms of our nation, through arrangements of the political, cultural, and spiritual. As circumstance presents, they have collectively opposed and often cooperated with governments and corporations on countless occasions; and both have fought personal demons and have endured deep pain. As survivors, they support kinships across the woodlands and plains in addressing issues of mental health conveyed through the abuses of residential schools, intergenerational trauma, environmental racism, and neo-colonialism, and the psychological and physical poverty these elements present. Both women recognize what has to change. Tammy elaborates:

I always feel bad when I see a young man about 18 to 25 or 30 walking downtown or just a young guy walking down because the young men had such an important role in our society, when they were hunters, trappers, they still are, because they have so much potential ... but then maybe they get frustrated and keep running into different obstacles. They want to do something. Then you have literacy [levels] where people can't read or write.... The land ... they've lost the will of how to survive off the land. There is so much violence in our community. So much sexual abuse, it still continues to happen, but how do you control it and minimize it? So you know, you just know, you see the court systems that are still there, our people are filling up the jail system, and it has to do with alcohol, either alcohol or

drugs. We do our best to protect the children, our youth and we try to provide programming for them, try to give them hope. But there is so much to be done. (Cook-Searson qtd. in Kress 210)

As *Nèhiyaw* speakers and traditional knowledge keepers, these women are community leaders of men, women, and children. Nomadic and of the land, these *onikànîwak*, manoeuvre in two worlds, as they persist and thrive. In 2005, Cook-Searson was the first woman to be elected chief of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, a portfolio she has held since; and, Stella Blackbird's life, defined by her lineage—the unwavering Chief Little Pine was her grandfather—and her *storywork* and healing actions, shows the significance of her infinite relationship with *pimâtisowin*. Prior to leading others, her personal work came with her own conscientization—critical reflection, critical action, and it seems, critical prayer. She has told me she has been on a healing journey for almost a half century:

And finally going through a healing, lots of healing, I found my name. I was given a name by the spirits. My name is Mihko kihêw iskwêw—Red Eagle Woman. My name Stella is in Latin, it actually means star. And so my colours are here, blue, yellow, white, red, and I have black for the turtle and Turtle is my clan. (Blackbird qtd. in Kress 219)

Although Tammy and Stella continue to live within the limits of the *Indian Act*, they reflect on the intergenerational and familial trauma of residential schools and other limiting reserve policies and confinements, but focus on their resolve to push through those boundaries and protect the *Nèhiyaw* knowledges embedded in their psyches and upon their lands.

Personal acknowledgements of their grandparents show how both women identify with the customs of the Woodland and Willow Cree; and how they preserve even the old parts of their language, *Nèhiyaw*. These *iskwêwak* know the properties of the medicines within their territories distinctly, as well, some might say, as they know the terrains of the boreal and the parklands where they protect, honour, and harvest to sustain their kinships. Both women have fought internalized patriarchy of Indigenous and settler governance, and acknowledge their roles in resisting this entanglement of environmental racism, colonialism, and patriarchy against Indigenous women and children, in particular. One example of this lays in the misogynistic behaviour of men who claimed they spoke for the Elders of Treaty 4 territory. On her first official occasion as Chief for the Lac La Ronge Indian Band, these men challenged Cook-Searson by requiring her to report to the Elders, specifically because her embodiment signified the feminine and she did the unspeakable; she wore her headdress in their territory (Cook-Searson cited in Kress). Cook-Searson removed her headdress in this instance (while male chiefs did not), and learned quickly to redress the continuation of this misogynistic action by what is known as “soft power” (Vizina qtd. in Kress). Firstly by consulting a number of elders from the Prince Albert Grand Council, and by receiving their sanction for the wearing of the headdress while acting in an official capacity she felt redeemed: “Chief Wesley Daniels from Sturgeon Lake ... was very supportive. ‘Nobody, nobody,’ he said, ‘only your people can take that off your head, not anyone else but your people, your people put that on you’” (Cook-Searson qtd. in Kress 243). Following this, she encountered another incident in which she was asked to remove her

headdress and at which she bluntly refused, unless all chiefs did the same; this resulted in everyone's headdress being removed and blessed along with the sacred bundle. With her actions, this type of misogynistic behaviour was exposed, and although it prevails in some territories, it has never reared its ugly head again in her presence. Today she freely and proudly wears

Blackbird's lifework reverberates with the hope of this directive and in her teachings for young peoples (Mihko kihêw iskwêw). This same hope is shown in the actions of Chief Tammy Cook-Searson while tirelessly campaigning for the mental health of her 10,000 plus band members. As I observed her, I see this hope in the respect she extends to all peoples,

breaking work around healing and environmental redemption sees followers around the world revere her traditional ecological knowledge of medicines and her love of all things living. Since the mid-1990s she has filled the role of Elder-in-Residence for the Urban Circle Training Centre in Winnipeg; it was her vision that spurred both it and Makoonsag, the

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her headdress and traditional clothing as she partakes in local and global ceremonial governance as a proud *Nêhiyaw* woman. Like Blackbird, who learned long ago that women are the leaders, she did this in a quiet and strategic manner.

The contemporary Stella Blackbird leads many male counterparts, chiefs, government officials, educators and other spiritual warriors. She muses about the time years ago when she was taught by a male elder to take her place in a circle of men:

...years back women weren't given that voice. But when I received my pipe, not my pipe, the pipe I carry for the people, 'cause I don't own anything. I carry my bundle for the people. But, the Elder told me, "Now, you're ready." He taught me. I did ceremonies with him. He taught me how to do naming and other ceremonies. And he said, "You take your tobacco when you see men sitting in a circle and doing, you take your pipe and go and sit with them, put your tobacco there." (Blackbird qtd. in Kress 247)

western and Indigenous, contemporary and traditional:

I talk to Elders and I learn from them because they have so much experience. I go berry picking with my grandma. My grandma is very patient. That's what I learned from my grandma, 'cause I'm always in a rush, always in a hurry, but my grandma will just be really, really patient. She would have one cigarette a night, that's all she ever had; she would sit on the floor and clear everything, have her ashtray there and have her one. That's all she would have. I learn [also] from the healers. Both my parents do medicine, so they heal people and they pick medicines. They know where to get it and how to mix it and stuff like that. I am always learning and I continue to learn from others. (qtd. in Kress 212)

As she explores how one creates healing spaces for children, young people, women and men, Cook-Searson expressed interest in meeting Elder Stella Blackbird to learn more. Stella's ground

intergenerational childcare centre attached to the post-secondary learning centre. As an elder, traditional healer, and medicine teacher, Stella has facilitated healing programs throughout Canada and into the United States, and one of her great joys was founding the Medicine Eagle Healing and Retreat Place with Elder Audrey Bone on the sacred and reclaimed territory bordering Riding Mountain National Park. Here at *Wasagaming*, she harvests and prepares medicines and leads ceremonies to heal the hearts, minds, and bodies of many peoples, however, it is the children who keep her most focused. In *Kwakwu* form, her stamina, quiet persistence, playfulness, and humour ground her during sunny days and dark encounters. Like Chief Cook-Searson, Elder Blackbird has endured the loss of family; intergenerational trauma from residential school left residue and her kin, and her children and grandchildren, have succumbed to diseases, accidents, suicide, and even murder. Her trials have hurt, however they've strengthened her resolve—she exudes joy, love, and peace, and each day she continues



to love and to give all that has been gifted to her.

### **Pimâcihiwêwin: Redemption**

*Leadership is just about helping people.*

—Chief Tammy Cook-Searson  
(qtd. in Kress 2014)

By their very presence, these women hold *Kanawayhitowin* as responsibility. This natural law clears a collective pathway to both reconciliation and redemption as it adheres to a foundation of Indigenous justice (Kress). For Cook-Searson and Blackbird, Indigenous governance embodies a landscape of sacred teachings; the laws of love, respect, wisdom, courage, humility, honesty, and truth are a part of their environmental justice. Their protection of traditional lands, waters, plants and animals, denotes more than a Western notion of environmentalism or eco-justice can encompass. And while I understand a Western reconciliation to be atoning for a mistake or clearing a debt to make something better, I also know redemption to be something more. It brings peoples together and allows for testimony and listening, while inching toward settling a difference through the alliance of both apology and forgiveness. Cree knowledge keeper Solomon Ratt shared with me the *Nêhiyaw* word which supports redemption—*pimâcihiwêwin* (Alberta Elder's Cree Dictionary), however, it seems much richer, and deeper, and transcendent in its stance. *Pimâcihiwêwin* signifies a giving of life or perhaps a saving of life (Kress).. Through *Nêhiyaw* eyes, one begins to see how a conscious action associated within the meaning of this word might move beyond a settler's appreciation of reconciliation. *Pimâcihiwêwin* applies the association and infusion of spirit, place and culture within *Wahkohtowin*,

and it instigates a public, physical, intellectual, or spiritual honouring, as this is what gives it life. In fact, "*pimâcihiwêwin is to give life*" (Ratt qtd in Kress 251) and as such it holds close the *Nêhiyawak* understanding of *Kanawayhitowin*, in protecting and honouring the spirit. Elder Blackbird knows full well how one counters environmental racism in the protecting of bodies and spirits, peoples and lands. The following blatant example compels each of us to understand how vast parcels of traditional lands have been stolen from First Nations to cushion the lifestyles of the white settler:

In 1936, the National Parks Branch evicted the Keeseekoowenin Ojibway First Nation from a small reserve 'within' the park boundary in "response to pressure from both local and departmental tourism boosters who hoped to create an attraction for automobile travellers from within the province and from the United States" (Sandlos i). This, however, was not the only motivation. The Department of Indian Affairs supported this move from the Band's rich hunting and fishing territory as "they thought such a move would bolster the department's program of assimilating Native people through immersion in the supposedly more civilized occupation of agriculture." (Sandlos qtd. in Kress 67)

Stella Blackbird has told me personally of the hurting hearts and bodies of her peoples as they were forcibly moved off their lands. In protest, many were whipped while witnessing the burning of their homes. Although Parks Canada acknowledged this wrongdoing and a small parcel of land was returned to the Keeseekoowenin First Nation in 1986, Elder Blackbird

and others took upon themselves the roles of "watchdog" as the colonial effects of racist policies continued to rear their ugly heads. Historically, the Keeseekoowenin members were banned from the Park and punished when they sought to pick medicines or to look for sustenance. This and other historical accounts show how Parks Canada and several provincial park and town authorities within our state country are guilty of environmental racism by the sheer expropriating of lands and the application of police and military force for the leisure needs of settler peoples (Kress; Sandlos; Westra 1999; 2008).

Today, almost thirty years after Parks Canada first issued an apology (1986), this national body has a different kind of relationship with the Keeseekoowenin First Nations, and Elders Stella Blackbird and Audrey Bone, based upon the principles of *pimâcihiwêwin*. Through a policy agreement signed in 1998 between Parks Canada and the Keeseekoowenin First Nation, members and those of neighbouring reserves may enter the park and harvest medicines under the guidance of Elders Blackbird and Bone. In this same year, the Canadian government acknowledged their wrongdoing in the 1936 expropriation of these reserve lands, and they returned all 435 hectares of former lands including the lakefront access lands to the First Nation along with a 12 million dollar compensation package. This historic action sets example for all First Nations and it provides impetus for Parks Canada to continue the work of reconciliation. Cheryl Penny, from Parks Canada, comments on the will of Stella Blackbird and other members: "This would not be happening without the tremendous insight and tremendous good will of Keeseekoowenin Ojibway First Nation, without their commitment, their willingness to let us learn, to

help us learn, and then find ways of working together” (Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada). Recently, Parks Canada contracted a young filmmaker, Christopher Paetkau, to tell the world this story of cultural reclamation and redemption. *Makwa Mee Nuun* tells the story of a dark history and the light of today. In this story, three generations of medicine

way the resources were given to the province in the 1930’s. That [is a] total disrespect of the First Nations people, saying this is all of Saskatchewan’s lands and resources. (Cook-Searson qtd. in Kress 186)

In addressing the social and environmental ills of these colonial

shared her apprehension of federal and provincial park strategies, I heard about the dismissive nature of officials, and the policy which limits her membership’s access to the territory of these ‘protected lands,’ specific to the termination of harvesting rights. At that moment, I shared with her the story of Elder Stella Blackbird and Riding Mountain National Park, the

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**Indigenous governance embodies a landscape of sacred teachings; the laws of love, respect, wisdom, courage, humility, honesty, and truth are a part of their environmental justice. The protection of traditional lands, waters, plants and animals, denotes more than a western notion of environmentalism or eco-justice can encompass.**

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women, one *Nèhìyaw* woman (Stella), and two *Anishinabe* women (Audrey and America), ensure *Washagamee Sagee* or Clear Lake remains a sacred place for the Keeseekoowenin First Nation as they teach people from around the world about the medicines and ceremonies graced on these reclaimed lands.

Cook-Searson has many thoughts regarding land use specifically around resource development, leisure and agriculture. When I met with her she voiced concern over the political process of land distribution, and she spoke of *tipascanikimow*, “those that measure up the land” (Woodland Cree word gifted to me by Cook-Searson, 2012) and the *Saskatchewan Homesteaders Act* as realities which systematically colonize Indigenous peoples:

The ways the permits are issued by the provincial government regardless if we have opposition to it or not, I think that’s environmental racism.... It’s almost like there’s a total disregard of us being the first people here, and having a treaty and agreeing to share the land, and then just the

impacts, she has her own set of knowledges and practical experiences to shy into the circle. She follows the wisdom of Sharon Venne, Cree legal scholar, who is sure the Elders have not “ceded, surrendered, and forever given up title to the lands” (192).

We are always asserting our rights. [Sometimes] you also have the push back. You know, you have Premier Brad Wall saying “No way in my time as the Premier will there be a resource revenue sharing for any special groups.” He refers to us as a special group and we are not a special group. We have a treaty, an inherent right to these lands, and we agreed to share these lands. Somehow, I think our lands have been ‘legally’ taken. Because [the governments] developed the rules and regulations on how to take over control of the lands. (Cook-Searson qtd. in Kress 267)

She expressed concern over the infusion of a euro-centric notion of leisure and the leasing of lands for tourism. As Tammy Cook-Searson

historical infusion of assimilation, the dislocation of a peoples, and land encroachment for white settler privilege and enjoyment. I also reflected on the counter-story of resistance and the redemption found through the efforts of both the peoples of Keeseekoowenin Ojibway First Nation and Parks Canada itself. This retelling functions as a redeeming act. It is this sharing that gives Chief Tammy Cook-Searson hope because it signifies authentic reconciliation encompassed in redemption; for redemption is both an apology and a forgiveness, albeit, one that moves parties to rightful action.

This explicit example of environmental racism within Riding Mountain National Park history encompasses the physical removal and dislocation of Indigenous peoples for settler industry, and although perhaps hidden from settler eyes, it shows the fractured spiritual realm of a peoples. When Indigenous peoples are removed from sacred lands, waters and sites of ceremony, a disembodied spiritual life is left for families of today. In this case, the settler industry of leisure and recreation, and those engaged in it

foisted what is known as a cultural genocide upon this Ojibway nation. This act of environmental racism affected human, plant, and animal life, and moreover, the spirit and biodiversity of the land and living entities within and outside the park boundaries. This story is an important story in of itself, however, it also gives life to current realities, and to the cases of environmental racism Indigenous peoples face and resist today. It resonates with the women across Turtle Island who protect the spirit of *Pimâcihiwêwin* through measures of truth telling, apology, forgiveness, and mutual action and healing.

**Seeking *Mamâtowisowin*:  
Resurgence through  
Aniki kê-pimitisahhkik  
pêyâhtakêyimowin**

*Power is in the earth, it is in your  
relationship to the earth.*  
—Winona LaDuke (2014)

Cree philosopher and scholar Willie Ermine describes the depth of these *Nêhiyaw* women in the conceptualization of Earth energy: “*mamâtowisowin* is the capacity to connect to the life force that makes anything and everything possible” (Ermine 110). I argue the embodiment of *mamâtowisowin* is the key to Blackbird and Cook-Searson’s resurgence and vitality. This energy of the *Nêhiyaw* feminine gives hope to kinships as these women believe all living entities have the ability to “be in tune with the universe” (Naytowhow qtd. in Faith 24). The positionality of feminine Indigeneity found in the solidarity of these *Nêhiyaw* women is grounded in the foundation of *mamâtowisowin*, it reverberates for all, and it makes their work a spiritual and peace-giving leadership. Stella has this to say:

One morning I woke up and

realized I was part of this, the creation,” says Stella. “I am related to the grass, the trees, the sky, the water. This was my awakening and that’s when things began to change. (Status of Women Manitoba qtd. in Kress 218)

“Within the energies of *mamâtowisowin*, are *aniki kê-pimitisahhkik pêyâhtakêyimowin*—‘those that follow peace’” (Cree word gifted to me by Solomon Ratt, qtd. in Kress 271). My fresh awareness of Haudenosaunee customary law shows me how women often “carry the burden of peace,” (Gabriel qtd. in Kress 271), however, in *Nêhiyaw* natural law, there is an acknowledgement of women who follow peace (Kress). Upon discovering this distinct difference within Indigenous knowledges, it seemed to me, each experience of coming to *Nêhiyaw* justice is a teaching, a lesson, a coming out, or a resistance, rather than a burden. The value of each person, each mother and daughter, and how Blackbird and Cook-Searson honour and validate roles in a kinship, should perhaps be considered in the ways in which we analyze our experiences when searching for justice, or peace:

Perhaps it is that peace is not a burden at all. Perhaps it is that peace is not carried, but rather, journeyed. Perhaps, in fact, peace is a journey of love, in which a place upon the path is set for each member of a community. (Kress 272)

When I think about the lives of Stella Blackbird and Tammy Cook-Searson, and about how their body politic impacts the consequence of wellness in their communities, and equally for themselves, I see clearly how *Nêhiyaw* is critical to the dignity of a peoples, and the sustainability

of their territories and culture. Alex Wilson references the importance of women’s work through the *Idle No More* movement and their adherence to *sakihiwawin* (Kress). So it is this natural law, the one of *sakihiwawin*, I believe, which validates the positions, the voices, and the actions of these *onîkânîwak*, Elder Stella Blackbird and Chief Tammy Cook Searson. Their peaceful resistances and their attention to the love of what they do for those they serve is a vital piece of redemption and resurgence. The upholding of *sâkîhitowin* by these teachers of peace is critical, timely, and necessary. Their actions have paved the way for all to become *Aniki kê-pimitisahhkik pêyâhtakêyimowin* in this collective journey.

**Conclusion**

As I draw this effort to a close, I reflect on the gift of awakening I have received from Elder Stella Blackbird and Chief Tammy Cook-Searson. I think about my conversations, the questioning and the listening, and the spaces in between. I reflect on the spirit of the land and that of these *Nêhiyaw iskwêwak* as one and the same. I think about their voices, the intonation and softness, and the privilege of listening to their stories, their language, and truly learning to hear. Through *Wahkohtowin*, I believe I have come to understand some pieces of *Nêhiyaw*, what this ancient language means for kinship wellness and for Indigenous women’s leadership. I now see the path ahead to *Pimâcihiwêwin* and what I must do as my part in the search for an Indigenous environmental justice. *Weatoskemitotan mena setoskatotan*. Let’s work together and support each other (Cook-Searson cited in Kress 157).

*Born in Saskatchewan, Margaret Kress, a woman of Métis, French, English,*

and German ancestry, is guided by the words of elders in her quest of a transformative education, and a conscious society. As teacher, advisor, and learner, Margaret works to explore and present discourses encompassing inclusivity, gentleness, traditional knowledges, and justice frameworks to help others see in new ways. She has worked closely with women Elders and knowledge keepers throughout Canada in the area of Indigenous wellness and environmental justice. Currently, she supports students and faculty at the University of New Brunswick in teaching, research, and critical issues associated with Aboriginal education, Indigenous research methodologies, environmentalism, storywork, and decolonizing and self-determining practices.

<sup>1</sup>Sāsīpīhkēyīhtamowin (two Cree women).

<sup>2</sup>I have come to this storywork under the guidance of Elder Dr. Stella Blackbird, *Mihko kihw iskwēw* (Red Eagle Woman) of the Turtle Clan. It is she who propelled my understanding of Nēhiyawak, along with the redemption found within this Indigenous language, and a Cree worldview of *Sāsīpīhkēyīhtamowin*. As I present this story, I do so in her honour, and in the honour of all Indigenous women leaders who have gifted me on this journey. On this life path, I honour all Cree language keepers, and the oral histories and dialects preserved in the Swampy, Woodland, and Plains Cree knowledge systems.

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